



**Peer Review**  
VNFIL Extended

# *European Peer Review Manual for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)*



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# ***European Peer Review Manual for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)***

*Adaptation of the original edition for the use in initial vocational education and training (VET):*

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## Preface

### Quality assurance of VNFIL

One of the issues highlighted in the Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (20 Dec. 2012, 2012/C 398/01) is quality: none of the countries covered by the current update have created a quality assurance framework exclusively for validation yet. In some cases, such arrangements devolve to the awarding body or institution. Alternatively, validation is covered by general quality assurance systems for formal education and training, or only for education subsectors. So far, few countries have established quality codes or guidelines on validation, and little is yet known on whether quality assurance systems and procedures are in fact able to ensure reliable, valid and credible assessments. This area is ripe for further investigation and development, especially since quality assurance and quality improvement as safeguards for trustworthy validation procedures will become increasingly important for institutions providing VNFIL throughout Europe.

### European Peer Review for VNFIL

One particularly promising instrument of quality assurance and development is Peer Review – the external evaluation of education providers by Peers. Peer Review can build on quality activities already in place at an institution, it is cost-effective and it fosters networking and exchange between providers.

The European Peer Review procedure was developed in the years 2000 in a series of European projects for use in vocational education and training. It is in line with the principles of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAVET) and, in turn, also seeks to contribute to the further development of the EQAVET. It takes a formative, development-oriented approach and aims at supporting VNFIL providers in their efforts to offer high quality education and training. The focus lies on the promotion of a culture of continuing quality improvement in an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust that contributes to enhancing transparency and comparability in Europe. Good practice is valued and mutual learning encouraged in a dynamic and motivating process, from which both the reviewed institution and the Peers can benefit.

The European Peer Review Manual was now adapted to the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). The Manual focuses on a practical approach: it offers directly implementable guidelines for VNFIL providers who want to introduce Peer Reviews in their quality assessment and development procedures. The Manual is complemented by a practical Toolbox available from the website of the European Peer Review Association ([www.peer-review-network.eu](http://www.peer-review-network.eu)), providing forms, checklists, additional information and recommendations in electronic format.

We hope that the European Peer Review will live up to our expectations and become a useful and attractive instrument for VNFIL providers all over Europe. Since we are dedicated to the further improvement of the European Peer Review procedure, feedback on this Manual will be very much appreciated!

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## I Introduction

### I.1 What is Peer Review?

Peer Review is a form of external evaluation with the aim of supporting the reviewed VNFIL provider in its quality assurance and quality development efforts.

An external group of experts, called Peers, is invited to assess the quality of different fields of the institution, such as the quality of specific phases or aspects of the validation procedure(s) offered or the quality of the organisation of the VNFIL process as a whole. During the evaluation process, the Peers visit the reviewed institution.

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.

### I.2 Why Peer Review? Advantages and benefits of Peer Review as an instrument of quality assurance and development

European providers of VNFIL can expect to benefit from a Peer Review, as proposed in this Manual, by

- obtaining critical yet sympathetic feedback on the quality of their VNFIL provision from colleagues in the field,
- becoming acquainted with an external perspective,
- ascertaining the quality of their VNFIL provision,
- presenting their strengths and showcasing good practice,
- enhancing accountability towards stakeholders,
- detecting blind spots and weaknesses,
- receiving advice and discovering the good practice of Peers,
- engaging in mutual learning with Peers,
- establishing networks and cooperation with other VNFIL providers, and
- obtaining an external evaluation report on the quality of their VNFIL provision at a comparatively economical cost.

### I.3 What are the aims and principles of the European Peer Review procedure?

#### I.3.1 General aims and principles

The general aims of the European Peer Review procedure are

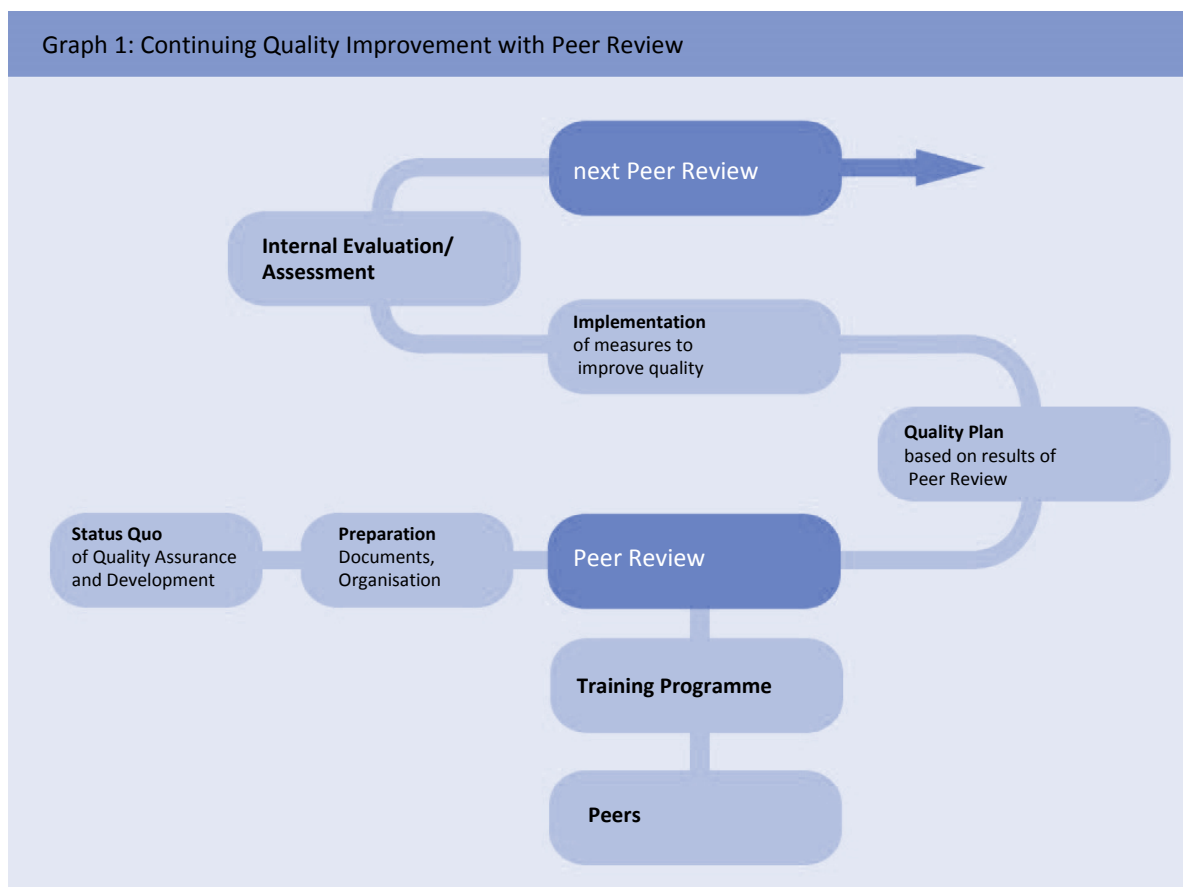
- to promote quality assurance and development,
- to enhance transparency and comparability of quality in VNFIL in Europe through a common European standard, and
- to support equal opportunities.

Important specific requirements and characteristics of the procedure are

- a focus on the people involved and their interests and needs,
- objectivity and impartiality of the Peers,
- transparency of all elements of the procedure to all persons involved,
- rules on confidentiality and on the use of results, to be set up in advance and adhered to by all persons involved,
- avoidance of conflicts of interest and direct competition between Peers (and the institution they come from) and the reviewed institution,
- promotion of openness, integrity and sincerity as a prerequisite for mutual learning,
- awareness of cultural influences both on VNFIL provision and on evaluation, especially in trans-national Peer Reviews,
- promotion of an enquiring and critical attitude both in the Peers and the reviewed institution, and
- the design and implementation of Peer Review not as a technical and bureaucratic procedure but as a dynamic and motivating process, from which both the reviewed institution and the Peers can benefit.

### 1.3.2 The European Peer Review as a voluntary and formative evaluation procedure

The European Peer Review procedure has been developed for voluntary use by VNFIL providers. It has a formative, development-oriented function and puts particular emphasis on the promotion of continuing quality improvement.





The European Peer Review assists the VNFIL provider/institution in determining the status quo in terms of high- quality provision as well as providing valuable suggestions and recommendations for improvement. Thus, the primary addressees of the European Peer Review procedure are the reviewed VNFIL providers themselves. The main focus of the procedure described in this Manual is the stimulation of continuous quality development.

#### I.4 European Peer Review and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)

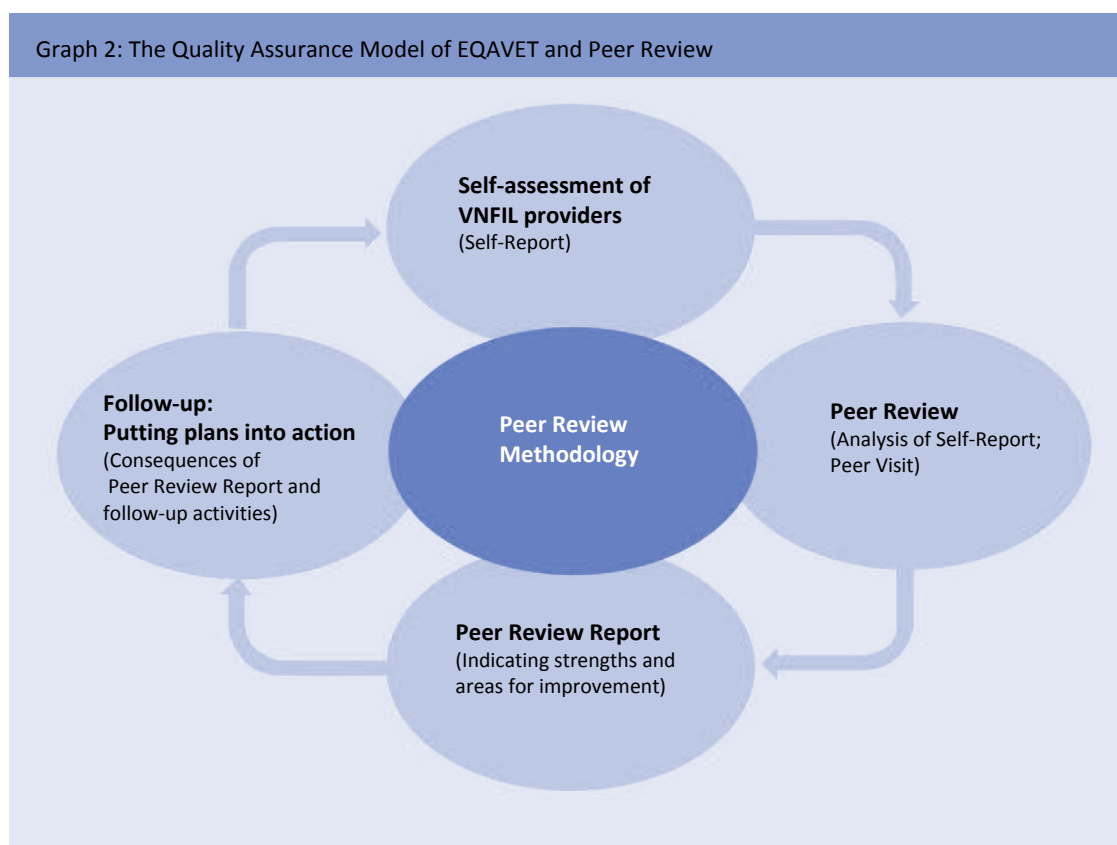
Since the European Peer Review was originally developed for vocational education and training (VET,) the procedure described in this Manual is aligned with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) as defined in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council published in June 2009.

The EQAVET Framework, though geared to VET, in its core provides a general approach to quality assurance that is valid for any kind of education and training context: It comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and review, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators.

The Peer Review procedure described in this Manual thus corresponds with the common quality criteria of the EQAVET. Its elements comprise the quality circle prevalent in state-of-the-art quality management approaches and proposed in the EQAVET framework.

The European Peer Review in VNFIL can be implemented as a new methodology for ensuring and improving quality in VNFIL. It can be used for an extended internal assessment (self-assessment) as well as for external evaluation of the quality of VNFIL. Additionally, Quality Areas with quality criteria and indicators for VNFIL have been proposed to support transnational Peer Reviews (see Chapter VII).

The European Peer Review in VNFIL as a systematic procedure can be depicted as follows:



## I.5 European Peer Review and gender mainstreaming & diversity

Mainstreaming gender and diversity is a guiding principle of the European Peer Review procedure. The Peer Review process should contribute towards the elimination of existing inequalities. It should promote equality between women and men taking into account also other characteristics like nationality, ethnic background, social status, values, attitudes, cultural perspectives, beliefs, sexual orientation, health, abilities and skills and other specific personal characteristics. Gender equity and diversity are intertwined and implemented in a holistic manner: Gender analysis and measures to ensure equal opportunities for women and men always take into account differential needs and interests of women and men from diverse backgrounds (i.e. migrant women and men, low-skilled women and men etc.). Conversely, diversity measures always consider gender as an important factor.

To enhance a more equitable approach to provision of VNFIL, "hard facts" like participation and success rates as well as distribution of resources, benefits, tasks and responsibilities should be considered. In addition, an analysis of the value and attention accorded to "typically" male and female needs, roles, behaviour and interests should serve as a starting point for the investigation of how gender and other kind of stereotypes are socially constructed and reinforced through formal and informal structures and practices. Self-reflection on gender and diversity issues by everyone involved in the Peer Review is a prerequisite for implementing a gender and diversity perspective.

The following gender and diversity criteria and quality standards must be observed:

- Gender mainstreaming and sensitivity to diversity should be integrated at all stages and levels within the Peer Review procedures.
- Gender-sensitive and non-discriminating language must be used in all activities and reports.
- All data collected are disaggregated by sex in order to represent women and men (female and male candidates; female and male VNFIL professionals).
- Data collected regarding candidates in VNFIL are disaggregated by background and different needs in order to represent the diversity of target groups.
- A gender and diversity analysis of the Quality Areas should be undertaken in the Self-Report and in the Peer Review process.
- A Peer with gender and diversity expertise (as an additional competence) should be included in the Peer Review team. The composition of the team should reflect an appropriate representation of women and men. Training needs in relation to gender and diversity must be identified and met before the Peer Review.
- During the Peer Review, gender and diversity of backgrounds and needs must be considered in the composition of groups of interviewees, in the preparation and conduct of interviews and observations (gender-sensitive and non-discriminating formulation of questions and criteria for interviews/observations, gender-sensitive and non-discriminating language and behaviour during interviews and observations) and in the analysis (avoidance of gender and other stereotypes in assessment, etc.).
- If budgets are scrutinised, a gender and diversity analysis of budgets should be included.

Before any Peer Review is undertaken, a gender and diversity analysis should be carried out on

- The VNFIL provider – the rights, resources, participation, values and norms related to gender and diversity (disaggregated by sex and other relevant characteristics, qualitative assessment),
- the Peer Team – composition, training needs in relation to gender and diversity,
- the Self-Report – gender and diversity analysis of areas covered, use of language.

→ A **Gender mainstreaming checklist** for policy indicators can be found in the Toolbox.

## I.6 Who can use the European Peer Review procedure?

The primary target group for the European Peer Review procedure are providers of VNFIL in Europe with experience in quality assurance and development. The minimum experience recommended as a basis prerequisite for conducting a Peer Review is that a VNFIL provider has previously undergone a self-evaluation process at least once.

What is meant by the term "institution of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)"?

In the Peer Review Manual, the terms "VNFIL institution" and "VNFIL provider" are used synonymously. They encompass the organisations/institutions/units or other entities that carry out procedures for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL).

## I.7 Role of stakeholders in the European Peer Review procedure

The involvement of various relevant stakeholder groups in the whole review process is highly recommended. Stakeholders in VNFIL are the primary target group, i.e. the candidates and former candidates, as well as all the people working within a provider of VNFIL: counsellors, assessors, administrative and other staff. Cooperation partners of the VNFIL provider are also stakeholders, amongst whom: institutions of education and training; institutions offering guidance and counselling; employers and the labour market; public and private employment services, NGOs/NPOs working with special target groups; educational authorities and social partners, local and national government and society at large.

Stakeholders can be interview partners both during the self-evaluation and the Peer Review. They may also serve as Peers if their special experience and know-how contribute to the process. Additionally, (groups of) stakeholders may also be interested in the outcomes of the Peer Review (e.g. the Peer Review Report).

## I.8 Documentation of the European Peer Review

### I.8.1 European Peer Review Portfolio

The VNFIL provider should collect all relevant documents of the European Peer Review in a European Peer Review Portfolio. The European Peer Review Portfolio contains the Initial Information Sheet, the Self-Report, the Peer Review Report, and other important documents gathered during the Peer Review process. In the previous European Peer Review projects (cf. [www.peer-review-network.eu](http://www.peer-review-network.eu)), a certificate completed the portfolio.

### I.8.2 European Peer Review Certificate

The European Peer Review Association EPRA ([www.peer-review-network.eu](http://www.peer-review-network.eu)) can upon request issue a European Peer Review Certificate to VNFIL providers who have successfully carried out a Peer Review. The label will be awarded after a careful assessment of compliance with the requirements set out in this Manual.

## II European Peer Review Procedure – Overview

### II.1 Coordination and organisation of the European Peer Review

Peer Reviews can be organised in different ways – depending on 1) the networks available, 2) the resources (personnel and finances), and 3) the needs and requirements of VNFIL providers.

A VNFIL provider who wants to obtain some external feedback from Peers and intends to network with other VNFIL providers in an ad hoc and spontaneous way by making use of existing contacts can carry out a single Peer Review. There is no further cooperation needed between the reviewed VNFIL provider and the VNFIL providers the Peers come from.

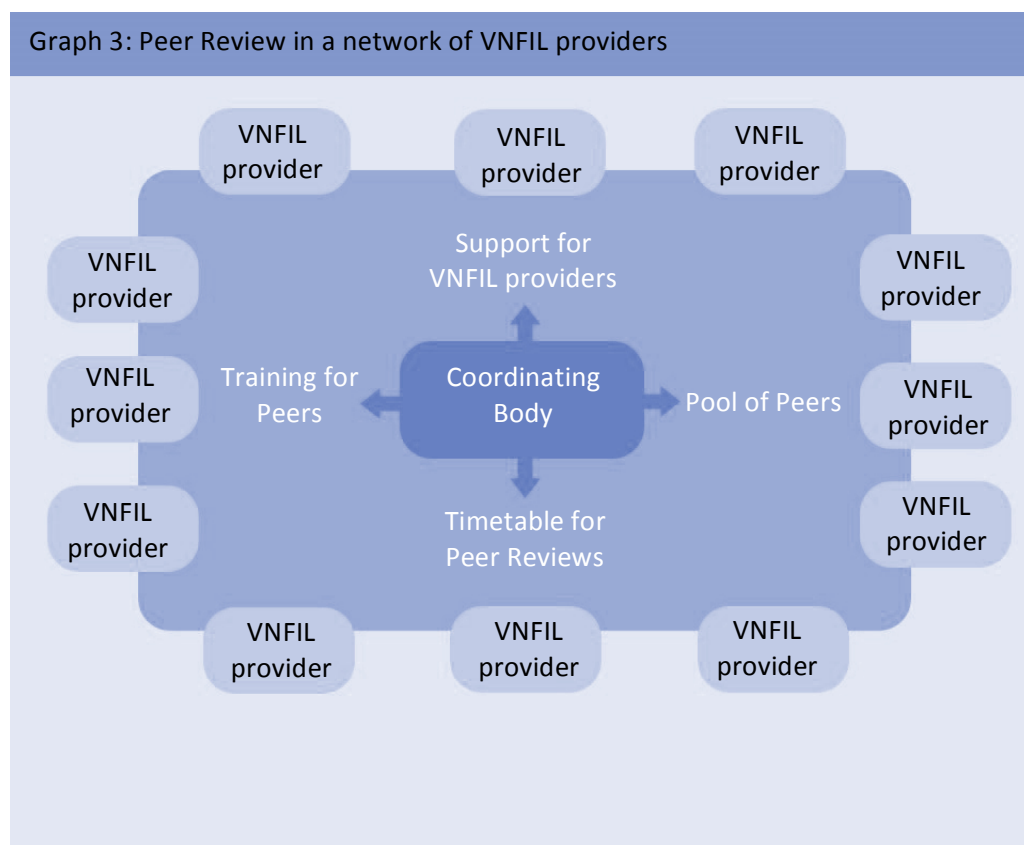
Mutual Peer Reviews between two VNFIL providers are also possible, calling for stronger and steadier cooperation.

For the most part, Peer Reviews are carried out in a network of three or more partners. The networks either already exist or are set up for the purpose of carrying out Peer Reviews. This usually expands the cooperation from a one-off activity to more comprehensive networking: common preparatory activities like selection of Peers, training, matching Peers and VNFIL providers, etc. may be introduced, as well as common reporting and monitoring schemes. A Peer Review network will usually also agree on common guidelines and indicators. All of this involves a more stable network and needs suitable structures and sufficient resources. The added value of the network approach may be

- synergies concerning the conduct of Peer Review between the VNFIL providers in the network,
- an extension of the number and institutional backgrounds of possible Peers,
- a wider external recognition of the Peer Review (which will be fully accepted, at least within the network)
- a higher chance of possible spin-offs in terms of further cooperative activities beyond the Peer Review.

If Peer Reviews are to be carried out in a larger network, a coordinating body (e.g. the European Peer Review Association EPRA or a national/regional coordinating institution) will be needed to ensure high-quality Peer Reviews and effective coordination of the network members. This function can also be assumed by one of the VNFIL providers in the network. The tasks of this coordinating body comprise, for example, managing the network, coordinating the development of common procedures (guidelines and indicators), giving support and advice to the individual VNFIL providers, selecting and training Peers, and coordinating and monitoring the Peer Reviews.

This is why the tasks and responsibilities of a coordinating body are also delineated in the European Peer Review procedure. In future transnational Peer Reviews on the European level, the European Peer Review Association can assume this role.

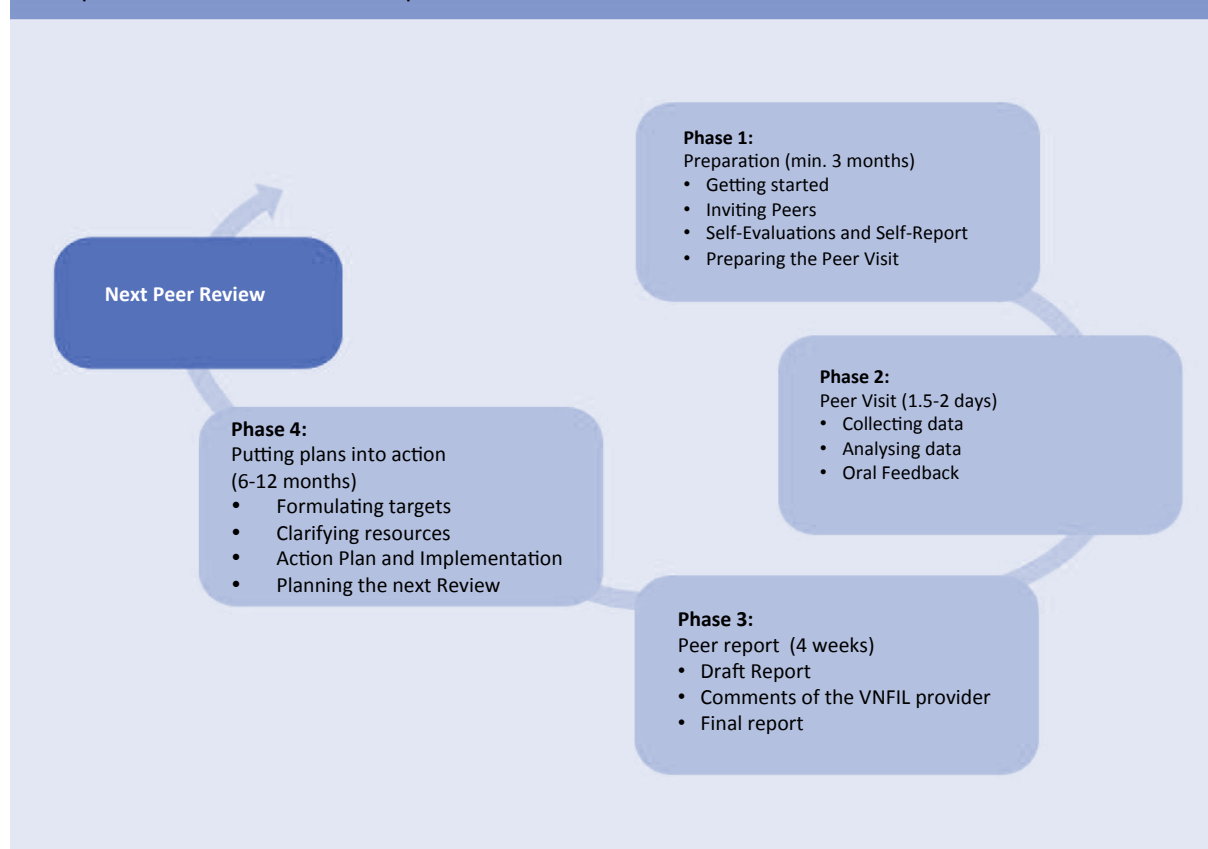


## II.2 Four phases of a European Peer Review

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 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.

Graph 4: Four Phases of a European Peer Review



## II.3 Estimated time needed for the European Peer Review

### II.3.1 Time needed for preparation

Ample time is needed to adequately prepare and organise a Peer Review.

If a self-evaluation has already been conducted earlier, the Peer Review process can be started right away. At least three months, however, should be reserved for the preparation and organisation of the review. The Self-Report should be available at least one month before the Peer Review in order for the Peers to prepare adequately for the Visit.

If no self-evaluation has been carried out beforehand, a minimum period of six months should be scheduled for the self-evaluation, which must precede the Peer Review.

### II.3.2 Time needed for Peer Visit and Report

The Peer Visit will usually take 1.5 to 3 days, depending on the size of the institution reviewed and the scope of the Peer Review, i.e. how many Quality Areas are to be investigated. Experience gained in the pilot phases of the Peer Review projects in VNFIL suggests that Peer Visits of 1.5 to 2 days should be scheduled, with another half day of preparatory work in the Peer Team preceding the visit: while less than one day was deemed too short for conducting a comprehensive and meaningful evaluation, Peer Visits of more than two days would put considerable strain on Peers and VNFIL provider alike. Note that the scope of the Peer Review, i.e. the number of Quality Areas investigated, must be in line with this timeframe (see also Chapters III and VII).

Time to write the draft report, to wait for and process the comments made by the VNFIL provider and to write the Final Peer Review Report needs also to be considered in the overall time needed.

Indications on the maximum acceptable time between each of the steps are presented in the Manual (see Chapter V for the detailed time schedule).

### II.3.3 Time needed for the implementation of improvement measures and procedures for change

Within two months of receiving the final Peer Review Report, an action plan should be presented; at least six months to a year should be scheduled for follow-up measures to be implemented and take effect.

## II.4 Overview: timetable and responsibilities in the European Peer Review

Table 1: Tasks of the VNFIL providers, Peers and coordinating body in the European Peer Review procedure, in chronological order

### Phase 1 – Preparation

#### VNFIL provider/institutions

##### Getting started:

- ☐ Decide to carry out Peer Review
- ☐ Decide on external organisation of Peer Review (single Peer Review, Peer Review Network)
- ☐ Decide on internal organisation of Peer Review (responsibilities and tasks)
- ☐ Decide on Quality Areas
- ☐ Send Initial Information Sheet (including a proposal for a rough time schedule) to the coordinating body
- ☐ Optional: organise coordination meeting of the VNFIL providers/institutions in the network and the coordinating body.

##### Peers and Peer Team:

- ☐ Look for suitable Peers with regard to Quality Areas scrutinised
- ☐ Invite Peers to apply to the coordinating body
- ☐ Select Peers in consultation with the coordinating body
- ☐ Conclude contracts with Peers.

##### Self-evaluation and Self-Report:

- ☐ Conduct self-evaluation
- ☐ Write Self-Report
- ☐ Submit Self-Report to Peers and to the coordinating body
- ☐ Make other necessary documentation available to Peers and to the coordinating body.

##### Preparing the Peer Visit:

- ☐ Schedule Peer Visit: Set date and draw up Peer Review agenda
- ☐ Organise preparatory meeting of the Peers
- ☐ Prepare local organisation of the Peer Visit (rooms and equipment, interviewees, lunch, tour of the premises, etc.)
- ☐ Recommended: organise preliminary meeting of Peers with VNFIL provider to clarify review assignments and to answer questions from the Peers ("Question and Answer Session").

## Phase 1 – Preparation

### Peers

Peers and Peer Team:

- ☐ Submit application to become a Peer
- ☐ Sign contract for Peer Review
- ☐ Prepare for Peer Review and undertake Peer Training.

Self-evaluation and Self-Report:

- ☐ Receive Self-Report from VNFIL providers
- ☐ Read and analyse Self-Report
- ☐ Identify areas for investigation and evaluation topics for the Peer Review.

Preparing the Peer Visit:

- ☐ Assist in the scheduling of the Peer Visit, especially in the drawing-up of the Peer Review agenda
- ☐ Exchange opinions in Peer Team on the content of the Self-Report, agree on evaluation topics for the Peer Review
- ☐ Prepare questions for interviews and criteria for observation
- ☐ Take part in preparatory meeting of Peers for team-building and to prepare the Peers Visit
- ☐ Recommended: take part in preliminary meeting of Peers with VNFIL provider to clarify review assignments and to receive additional information, if necessary ("Question and Answer Session")

### Coordinating body

Getting started:

- ☐ Send information on Peer Review procedure to VNFIL providers/institutions
- ☐ Collect Initial Information Sheets
- ☐ Make an initial plan of the Peer Review schedule (master plan) by using the information on the Initial Information Sheets from VNFIL providers
- ☐ Optional: organise coordination meeting of the VNFIL providers/institutions in the network and the coordination body.

Peers and Peer Team:

- ☐ Look for suitable Peers – request, process and access applications
- ☐ Match Peers with the VNFIL providers/institutions (with regard to Quality Areas to be scrutinised)
- ☐ Select Peers (in consultation with the VNFIL providers/institution)
- ☐ Supervise and assist with contract with Peers.

Self-evaluation and Self-Report:

- ☐ Receive Self-Report of VNFIL providers
- ☐ Forward Self-Report to Peers (if not sent directly).

Preparing the Peer Visit:

- ☐ Scheduling of Peer Visit (in consultation with VNFIL providers and Peers)
- ☐ Organise preparation and training for the Peers.



## Phase 2 – Peer Visit

### VNFIL provider/institution

Support Peers in the following activities:

- ☐ Make equipment and rooms available
- ☐ Facilitate interviews and observations
- ☐ Facilitate a tour of the premises
- ☐ Receive feedback from Peers
- ☐ Engage in communicative validation.

### Peers

- ☐ Collect data
- ☐ Visit the premises
- ☐ Conduct interviews and observations
- ☐ Analyse and discuss findings in the Peer Team
- ☐ Carry out a professional assessment and come to common conclusions
- ☐ Give oral feedback to VNFIL provider
- ☐ Engage in communicative validation
- ☐ Carry out meta-evaluation in the Peer Team.

### Coordinating body

- ☐ Optional: involvement in Peer Visits.

## Phase 3 – Peer Review Report

### VNFIL Provider

- ☐ Comment on draft Peer Review Report

### Peers

- ☐ Write Peer Review Report and submit it to the VNFIL provider
- ☐ Receive comments of the VNFIL provider and finalise Peer Review Report
- ☐ End of Peer Involvement

### Coordinating Body

- ☐ Optional: Receive Peer Review Report
- ☐ Optional: Involvement in writing or finalising the Peer review report

## Phase 4 – Putting plans into action

### VNFIL provider/institution

- ☐ Decide to follow up the findings of the Peer Review
- ☐ Plan improvement measures
- ☐ Implement improvement measures
- ☐ Plan and carry out the next Peer Review.

### Coordinating body

- ☐ Optional: involvement in the follow-up.

### III European Peer Review Procedure – Preparation (Phase 1)

#### III.1 Getting started

##### III.1.1 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 the aims and purposes of the Peer Review,
- the distribution of tasks and responsibilities including the appointment of a Peer Review Facilitator and a quality team, and
- the decision on time and resources allocated to the Peer Review.

Effectiveness in terms of quality improvement depends on the cooperation and participation of the people involved. A high commitment by management (director, department heads, etc.) must be ensured from the start, but also by staff (counsellors/assessors and administrative) and other relevant stakeholders. This must also include explicit dedication to implementing procedures for change as a follow-up to the Peer Review Report in Phase 4 of the Peer Review (Putting Plans into Action).

Responsibility for the coordination of all activities concerning the Peer Review should be assigned to a Peer Review Facilitator. S/he, as a member of staff, will be the link between the VNFIL provider/institution reviewed and the Peer Team reviewing the institution. S/he should be carefully selected because of the crucial role of the Peer Review Facilitator.

##### III.1.2 Decision on Quality Areas

The next step is to decide which Quality Areas should be dealt with in the Peer Review. The management in agreement with staff and other important stakeholders should make the decision on the Quality Areas, if possible. VNFIL 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<sup>1</sup>:

- 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?

The overall guiding principle for the selection of Quality Areas is their relevance.

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the issue of obtaining a European Peer Review Certificate may be taken into account. It will only be relevant, however, if suitable structures (e.g. a coordinating body) exist to supervise and monitor European Peer Reviews and to issue Certificates to VNFIL providers who have successfully conducted a Peer Review according to the requirements set out in this Manual (see also Chapter I.8.2)

Additionally, feasibility should be taken into account: the broader the range of Quality Areas to be reviewed, the more time and resources will be necessary for the review. A policy of "small steps" will be suitable especially for VNFIL providers with little previous evaluation experience. (These may also decide to test the procedure for parts of their institution only.) For a Peer Visit of two days, it is highly recommended that no more than two Quality Areas be chosen - only very experienced Peers will be able to deal with more Quality Areas within this time-frame. Note that too many Quality Areas will either lead to a rather superficial evaluation or will force the Peers to narrow their focus to selected topics within the Quality Areas. Experience has also shown that selecting one Quality Area in which improvement is sought and one Quality Area in which the provider has major strengths makes for a good balance between reinforcing good practices and stimulating further development.

Furthermore, it may make sense to include areas, which have previously undergone internal evaluation in order to reduce the self-evaluation effort.

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

### III.1.3 Initial documentation and information

The VNFIL provider should then document the basic decisions concerning the conduct of the Peer Review in written format. The "Initial Information Sheet" serves as internal documentation and as external information for the coordinating body, the Peers, other VNFIL providers in the network, etc. The form should be filled out and sent to the coordinating body in good time, i.e. at least three months before the Peer Review.

The "Initial Information Sheet" includes documentation of 1) contact information, 2) the starting situation and the decision to undergo Peer Review (and by whom it was taken), 3) the aims and purpose of the Peer Review, 4) how it is to be organised, 5) the internal distribution of tasks and responsibilities, 6) an overview of the procedure and a time schedule (which steps will be taken and when), 7) the Quality Areas, 8) further Comments and 9) a list of possible Peers.

→ The **Initial Information Sheet** can be found in the Toolbox.

### III.1.4 Optional: Coordination Meeting

If the Peer Reviews are organised as reciprocal reviews or in a network of VNFIL providers, a meeting between the representatives of VNFIL providers (and, if applicable, also the coordinating body) will improve the whole process.

The following activities can be part of the agenda:

- Introducing each other, short self-portraits of the VNFIL providers,
- Expectations of VNFIL providers, motivation of management and counsellors/assessors,
- Information on and discussion of the Peer Review procedure (purpose, targets, process and activities, resources and work-time for the persons involved),
- Competence profile for the Peers, mode of selection of the Peers,
- Commitment of the management and the staff involved,
- If applicable: information and/or decision on the involvement of authorities,
- If applicable: contractual relations between 1) the VNFIL providers and/or 2) the VNFIL providers and the coordinating body,
- Further steps, time scheduling, questions.

### III.1.5 Recommended: Contracts between VNFIL providers and coordinating body

If Peer Reviews are carried out on a larger scale, it is sensible to put the duties and responsibilities of the different parties into a mutual written agreement.<sup>2</sup> Important issues to be covered by such a contract are:

- Purpose of the agreement,
- Rights and duties, mutual expectations, conditions of network partners (and coordinating body, if applicable),
- Aims of the Peer Review procedure,
- Internal distribution of tasks and responsibilities,
- Costs,
- Data protection,
- Involvement of education authority (if applicable),
- Action plan and responsibility for the implementation of the action plan,
- Procedure, steps, time scheduling.

### III.2 Selecting and inviting the Peer Team

Once the decision on conducting the Peer Review and a selection of Quality Areas has been made, the VNFIL 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 VNFIL providers or stakeholder institutions. The VNFIL 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 VNFIL 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 VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider, etc. If an Evaluation Expert is to guide the Peer Review process, s/he must also be recruited.

Further information on Peers and the Selection of Peers can be found in Chapter VIII.

→ A **Peer Application Form** can be found in the Toolbox.

Either the VNFIL provider or the coordinating body should also inform the Peers of their duties and tasks well in advance and conclude a contract. Peers should therefore receive the "Initial Information Sheet" as well as a summary of what will be expected of them during the Peer Review. This information may also be attached to a formal invitation letter that should be sent out as soon as the matching of Peers and VNFIL providers has successfully been carried out and a time schedule for the reviews has been fixed.

→ A **Model Contract Form for Peers** can be found in the Toolbox.

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<sup>2</sup> In the European Peer Review projects, the partner contracts regulated these issues.

To sum up, the selection and invitation of Peers involves:

- soliciting applications from Peers using a standard application form,
- selecting Peers according to their expertise and matching them with VNFIL providers,
- optional: recruiting an Evaluation Expert to guide the Peer Review process,
- nominating a Peer Coordinator,
- setting up a timetable for the Peer Reviews,
- sending out information to the Peers on 1) the Peer Review procedure, 2) the VNFIL provider they are to review, and 3) their duties and tasks, and
- concluding a contract with the Peers and sending out an official invitation to the Peers.

### III.3 Self-evaluation and Self-Report

#### III.3.1 Recommendations for conducting a self-evaluation

A sound analysis of strengths and areas for improvement is a prerequisite for the Peer Review. A systematic self-evaluation of all Quality Areas selected for the Peer Review must therefore be carried out before the external Peer Review takes place and the results of the self-evaluation must be documented in a Self-Report.

The self-evaluation must be an investigation at institutional level (or at the level of departments, branches, etc. of an institution) but may be preceded and supported by individual evaluations of staff, especially teaching staff. For the individual evaluations, a Peer Review procedure between individual counsellors/assessors can be introduced (cf. Gutknecht-Gmeiner 2008, pp. 67ff.).

No specific self-evaluation procedure is prescribed for the European Peer Review. On the contrary, VNFIL providers are encouraged to make use of assessments and evaluations already carried out in order to avoid duplication of efforts. Thus, if a self-evaluation has been conducted within a reasonable time (up to two years) before the Peer Review, the results can be used and need only be filled into the Self-Report. For areas or criteria not yet covered, additional evaluations must be carried out.

#### III.3.2 Quality criteria for self-evaluation

The self-evaluation can be performed in different ways. VNFIL providers may choose a suitable procedure according to their interests, needs, and experience. It is recommended, however, that a clear and structured procedure be employed, which focuses on relevant Quality Areas and evaluation questions. Apart from a clear commitment by management and staff, the responsibilities and tasks involved in the procedure should be transparent.

The procedure should

- be conducted in a transparent and fair way,
- involve all important stakeholders,
- employ suitable evaluation methods, and
- entail adequate sharing of information and results.

Feasibility of the self-evaluation in terms of time and resources must be ensured from the start.

### III.3.3 Self-evaluation profile: assessing strengths and areas for improvement

During the self-evaluation, strengths and areas for improvement should be identified for the Quality Areas reviewed. Actions to be taken for improvement should also be discussed and indicated in the Self-Report. A SWOT analysis, for example, is a well-known, simple and time-efficient procedure for obtaining a profile of performance in the Quality Areas chosen. Strengths and areas for improvement should be identified at the level of the criteria of the individual Quality Areas (cf. Chapter VII).

### III.3.4 Self-Report

The Self-Report is the central document of the Peer Review procedure: it should contain all information necessary to prepare the Peer Review. It must therefore tackle all the topics to be evaluated during the Peer Review.

While VNFIL providers are free to choose their methods and procedures for the self-evaluation, the Self-Reports should be standard and uniform in order to promote comparability. The description of the self-evaluation results must be clear, concise and meaningful. Evidence to buttress the assessments provided in the Self-Report should be furnished in an Annex.

→ A **Self-Report Form**, which should be adhered to, can be found in the Toolbox.

The first part of the report is an update of the Initial Information Sheet, which contains all relevant data on the Peer Review procedure. The second part comprises a description of the VNFIL provider and the VNFIL procedures offered, the mission statement, statistical data, and information on organisational issues. The third part gives information on quality assurance/quality management procedures in place at the VNFIL institution; the fourth part is optional – it can be used to describe and reflect on the self-evaluation process. The fifth part contains the results of the self-evaluation of the chosen Quality Areas. It should provide an assessment of the strengths and areas for improvement and also indicate special evaluation questions for the Peers. The latter will help the Peers in targeting the Peer Review to the topics of particular relevance to the VNFIL provider. Additional documents can be attached in an Annex.

## III.4 Preparing the Peer Visit

### III.4.1 Tasks of the VNFIL 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.

#### III.4.1.1 Recommended: Meeting between the VNFIL provider and the Peer Team

It is highly recommended, that a meeting be organised between the VNFIL 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.

#### III.4.1.2 Drawing-up an agenda for the Peer Visit

The Peer Review Facilitator should draw up a detailed and realistic agenda for the Peer Visit. For this task, the Peer Review Facilitator must 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.

→ Examples of **Peer Visit agendas** can be found in the Toolbox.

### III.4.1.3 Local organisation of the Peer Visit

The Peer Review Facilitator, who is responsible for the smooth running of the Visit, undertakes the local organisation of the Peer Visit.

The local organisation entails

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

Rooms have to be suitable and free from disturbance. The Peers should reserve one room for the Peer Team throughout the whole day for interim sessions. One spacious room should be reserved for briefing and for the final meeting between the whole VNFIL institution and the Peer Team.

### III.4.2 Tasks of the Peers

#### III.4.2.1 Preparing for the Peer Review

To prepare for the review, the Peers need

- to read and analyse the Initial Information Sheet and the Self-Report (and ask for additional information, if necessary),
- to attend a pre-review meeting with the VNFIL provider (recommended),
- to attend Peer training,
- to exchange opinions on the content of the Self-Report in the Peer Team and 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.

#### III.4.2.2 Peer Training Programme

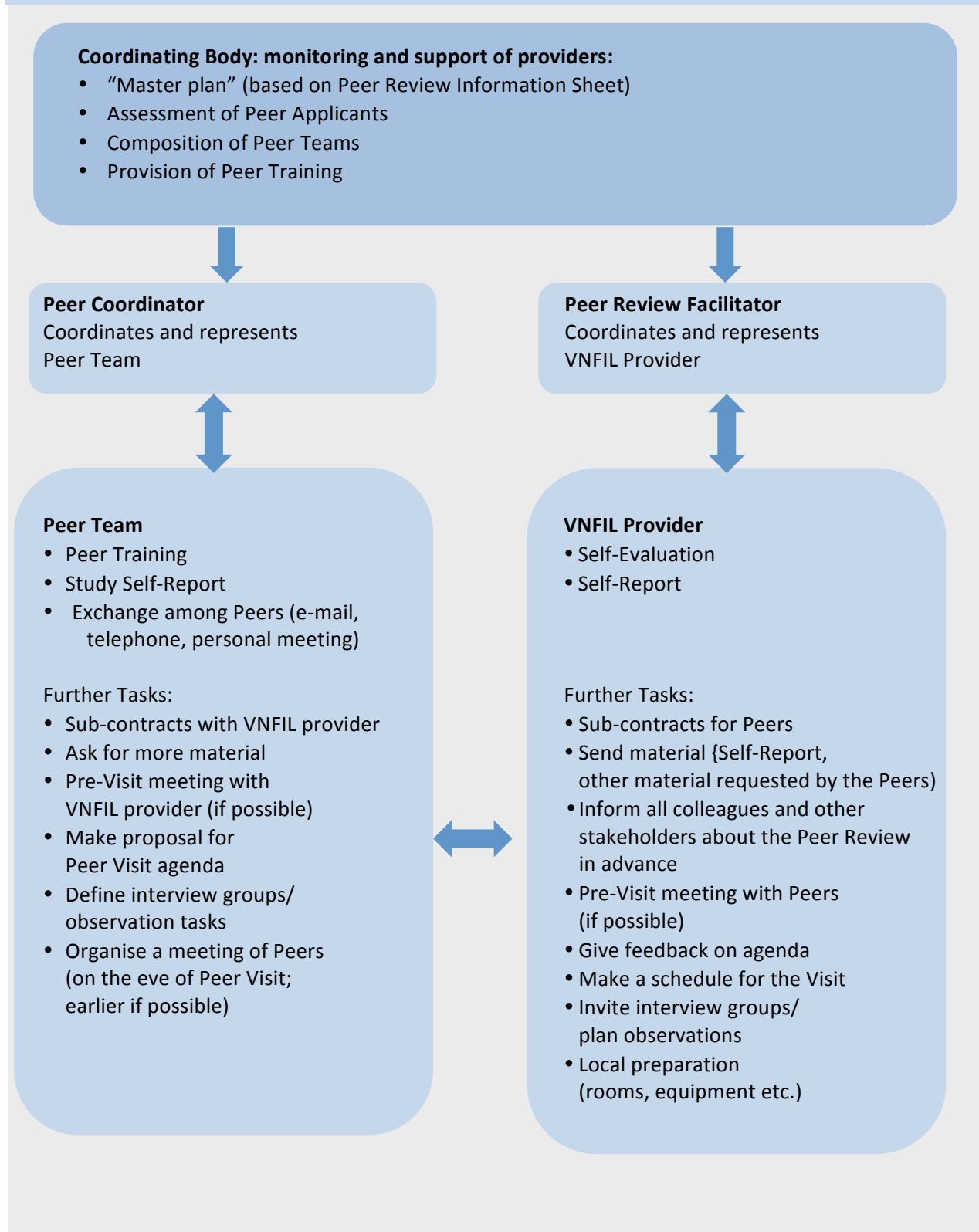
Prior to the Peer Review, the Peers should undergo a "Peer Training Programme" that prepares them for their work as external evaluators (cf. Chapter VIII.7).

#### III.4.2.3 Preparatory meeting of the Peers and preparatory meeting with the VNFIL provider

It is vital that the Peer Team meets before the Visit in order to get to know each other and to prepare the Visit together. This will enhance teambuilding and the efficiency of team cooperation during the review. It will make sense for the Peers to have read and analysed the Self-Report prior to this meeting so that first impressions can be exchanged and specific questions and topics for the Peer Visit can be discussed. If possible, this meeting should also take place on the day before the first day of the Peer Review. Additionally, the Peers may also meet with representatives of the VNFIL provider to be reviewed (cf. above, Chapter III.4.1.1). Providing an opportunity for a "Question and Answer Session" with the VNFIL provider, usually represented by the Peer Review Facilitator, may greatly improve the process.

For efficient organisation of the preparatory activities, both meetings can also be scheduled on the same day and, if possible, be linked to the Peer Training. Ideally, the whole Peer Team attends the face-to-face part of the Training Programme together. The Peer Review Facilitator (and perhaps other responsible staff) may also join the Peers after or during the training to clarify open questions.

Graph 5: Responsibilities and tasks in the preparation of the Peer Reviews





## IV European Peer Review Procedure – Peer Visit (Phase 2)

### IV.1 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 VNFIL provider. The basis for the evaluation is an analysis of the previously furnished Self-Report and other relevant documentation. During the Visit, the Peers check the accuracy of the findings of the self-evaluation 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 VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider, comprising elements of Peer consulting.

### IV.2 Collecting data

The most common methods used for collecting data are:

#### IV.2.1 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 candidates and counsellors/assessors, two independent interview groups can be organised to gather comprehensive feedback.

#### **Who is to be interviewed?**

Usually representatives of all relevant stakeholders should be involved. The relevance of stakeholder groups depends on the Quality Area(s) reviewed. The VNFIL provider will choose the types of stakeholders to be interviewed and can be aided in this decision by the Peers and the Evaluation Expert. Groups of interviewees usually are

- candidates,
- staff (counsellors/assessors and other staff),
- managers (head of institution, head of departments, etc.),
- former candidates, and
- other stakeholders, such as representatives of enterprises, educational institutions, cooperation partners, social partners, employment agencies, authorities, etc.

Invitation of the interview groups lies within the responsibility of the VNFIL provider who – for the sake of validity – has to make sure that a representative choice of interview partners is made within each group of stakeholders. The Peers, however, should furnish clear criteria for the composition of the interview groups and monitor compliance. When composing interview groups, particular attention must be paid to social aspects like formal or informal hierarchies, existing conflicts, diverse interest, etc., which can adversely affect the openness of the interviewees.

→ Forms for **Interview Minutes** and **Interview Analysis** for the Peers can be found in the Toolbox.

#### IV.2.2 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.

#### IV.2.3 Peer observations (during all phases of VNFIL)

During a Peer Visit, observations can also be carried out. 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), the persons who are observed need to give their consent 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 VNFIL provider as a whole and not on individual counsellors/assessors<sup>3</sup>.

Observations of specific counselling and assessment activities can be linked to the tour of the premises, which will then take more time.

#### IV.2.4 Other methods

A wide repertoire of methods is possible in order to be able to align the process to the aim and content of the review. Apart from the most common central elements of a Peer Visit described above, other methods, such as (short) questionnaires and surveys, collection and analysis of relevant documents, shadowing, photo, video or picture evaluation, role play, etc., may also be employed.

### IV.3 Analysing data

The Peers must make a preliminary analysis and assessment based on the Self-Report 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 – if possible with candidates, as the ultimate beneficiaries, or otherwise with the counsellors or with the responsible management – can also help to challenge earlier judgments 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.

#### **European Peer Review in practice: reserve time for analyses**

The experience of the Peers in the pilot phases of the Peer Review projects indicates that ample time for analysis is crucial: if the Peer Visit agenda focuses primarily on collecting large quantities of data, too little time is left for analysing and making sense of this data. Peers feel overwhelmed, stressed, and frustrated and experience difficulties when they have to come to a final assessment. Thus, a balance must be found between the requirement to glean comprehensive data from different stakeholders (cf. below, "triangulation") and the need for a thorough analysis and discussion of the findings.

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<sup>3</sup> If serious problems are detected which concern a single counsellors/assessors, feedback should go directly to person concerned (and perhaps also the director) but must not be mentioned in the Peer Review Report.

## IV.4 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 VNFIL provider. In this meeting, the collected data are reviewed and matched for relevance and representativeness. Important issues may be selected and visualised on flip charts so that they can be presented to the VNFIL 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.

→ A **Quality Area Assessment Form** can be found in the Toolbox.

### IV.4.1 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. The latter will usually be the case in European Peer Reviews<sup>4</sup>.

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 VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider and cause conflicts.

Representatives of the VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider must collaborate in the constructive handling of feedback. It is helpful if the staff of the VNFIL 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.

→ A **Checklist for the Peers** on reflective and constructive feedback can be found in the Toolbox. (See Ground rules for Peers).

<sup>4</sup> Descriptive feedback will be given if 1) the VNFIL provider explicitly asks for this kind of feedback or 2) cultural attitudes towards feedback and/or the lack of or negative experience of the VNFIL provider in the field of external evaluation suggest a cautious procedure.

#### IV.4.2 Final assessment

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

#### IV.4.3 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 VNFIL providers that action should be taken in these areas.

The Peers should only give recommendations beyond this indicative assessment if the VNFIL provider asks for them. If the VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider. Such a discussion should then focus on mutual exchange and learning from good practice.

#### IV.4.4 Peer advice

As has been pointed out before, useful feedback is the central agent for quality improvement and mutual learning in the Peer Review process. Feedback can be a one-way communication but may also develop into a dialogue between the Peers and the reviewed institution. In a discussion of strengths and areas for improvement, the Peers may also suggest advice on certain topics. This must be done carefully, though: Peers should focus clearly on the situation at hand and not try to "proselytise" the reviewed VNFIL provider to adopt solutions successful in their home institutions. Again, Peers should only assume the additional role of consultants if the VNFIL provider expressly asks them to.

#### IV.4.5 What happens if the Peers make important findings that were not called for?

Although the Peer Review should focus primarily on the Quality Areas chosen, it may happen that important findings by the Peers concern issues that are not covered by the (chosen) Quality Areas. In this case, the Peers and the VNFIL provider should decide jointly on how to deal with these results. Although digressions from the agreed topics should be limited, essential feedback should not be suppressed automatically if it does not fit into the previously agreed scope. Additional findings can be presented merely orally (e.g. in the feedback session) or, if all parties agree, could also feature in the Peer Review Report as an addendum.

### IV.5 Meeting quality standards

#### IV.5.1 Triangulation

Using different methods and different sources of information in the collection of data contributes to the quality of the evaluation in terms of objectivity, reliability and validity. Soliciting diverse points of view from different stakeholders during the Peer Visit will enable the Peers to gain a more accurate and complete picture.

#### IV.5.2 Communicative validation

Communicative validation is also used in qualitative social research to enhance the validity of results: feedback on findings is systematically solicited from different stakeholders to challenge the data collected as well as its interpretation. A communicative validation can be carried out whenever necessary in the Peer Review process, in most cases it will be used in the final stages of the Visit, e.g. shortly before, during or after the feedback session with the VNFIL provider.

#### IV.5.3 Ground rules for Peers

Professional behaviour of the Peers is an essential quality requirement. They must assume a critical stance while remaining open and sympathetic.

→ A list of **Ground rules for Peers** can be found in the Toolbox.

#### IV.5.4 Time management

Good time management is essential 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 observation situations 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.

#### IV.6 Duration of the Peer Visit

The duration of the Peer Visit depends on the size of the VNFIL 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 VNFIL provider and 2) Peers will not be able to take leave for an extended period of time. Peer Visits of 1.5 to 2 days at the most are recommended for VNFIL providers.

#### IV.7 Elements of the Peer Visit

→ Model **Peer Visit agendas** can be found in the Toolbox.

##### IV.7.1 Optional: "Question and Answer Session"

If the Peers still need information or clarifications from the VNFIL provider – concerning the Self-Report, the evaluation topics or other relevant issues, for example – some time should be reserved for a "Question and Answer Session" with the Peer Review Facilitator and/or other representatives of the VNFIL provider. Ideally, this session should take place before the Peer Review, either in the meeting between Peers and VNFIL provider when the agenda is discussed or, alternatively, before or after the Meeting of the Peers on the eve of the Peer Visit (if it is held at or near the VNFIL provider). If this is not possible, sometime should be reserved for questions and answers at the beginning of the Peer Visit, for example during the welcome session.

#### IV.7.2 Welcome and first session with the VNFIL provider

The Peer Review Facilitator welcomes the Peer Team and makes sure that organisational preparations have taken place. The Peers introduce themselves to the VNFIL institution. The Peer Review Facilitator gives a summary of the purpose and target of the Peer Review process and the time schedule. Directors/department heads may be present to welcome the Peers.

#### IV.7.3 Interviews, observations, on-site visit and analysis in Peer Tandem

The interviewees (stakeholders, such as candidates, former candidates, counsellors/assessors, representatives of stakeholders, etc.) are interviewed in groups of about 5 people for 45-60 minutes. Do not prepare more than 5 or 6 interview questions for each group. If more people are included in interview groups, either the number of interview questions must be reduced or not everybody will be able to answer all the questions due to time constraints.

To support the smooth running of the different activities during the Peer Visit, it is advisable to plan the organisation of the interviews and the other activities and draw up a chart showing who is to be interviewed/observed by whom, when and where. This organisation chart can also be included in the Peer Visit agenda.

If observations are being carried out, observation guidelines should be filled out, and analysed and summarised after the end of the observation session.

Sufficient time should be reserved for the analysis of the interviews/observations. For an hour of interviewing, at least half an hour will be needed for a first analysis. Breaks must also be taken into account in order to draw up a realistic agenda.

##### IV.7.3.1 Meeting of the Peer Team to carry out a first internal analysis of the findings

During the internal analysis, the Peer Team aims to get an overview of the main results in order to prepare the final meeting with the VNFIL provider. A structured discussion takes place, monitored by the Peer Coordinator or the Evaluation Expert. Concise and meaningful feedback to counsellors/assessors, other staff and management is prepared. In a two-day Peer Visit, at least three hours should be reserved for this task.

#### IV.7.4 Feedback session

As has already been pointed out, the final meeting at the end of the Peer Visit is a vital element of the Peer Review. Its main purpose is feedback to the VNFIL provider and communicative validation of the findings.

All Peers should take part in the feedback session. They may all be active in communicating the feedback (taking turns talking) or one person may be selected to present the feedback – usually this is the Peer Coordinator. The Evaluation Expert may chair the final meeting.

On the VNFIL provider's side, management and the Peer Review Facilitator, at least, should be present during the final meeting. Participation can be extended depending on the internal strategy of the VNFIL provider. Presenting the evaluation results to a large number of counsellors/assessors and other staff of the reviewed VNFIL provider can be helpful since it makes the whole process very transparent for all those involved and there can be immediate reaction. It probably also raises awareness of problems in an even more efficient way than a written report alone ("paper is patient"...). Furthermore, dissemination of results within the VNFIL provider is ensured. Yet such a large meeting is expensive and may be an organisational challenge to the VNFIL provider. Therefore other routes for disseminating the findings within the organisation may be pursued.

The Peers present the distilled findings and assessments for every evaluation area (e.g. through visualisation in a PowerPoint presentation, on flip charts, etc.). Counsellors/assessors and management are invited to comment. If Peer consulting is one of the principal aims of the Peer Review, the meeting of the Peers and the VNFIL provider should be extended to encompass further discussions.

#### IV.7.5 Reflection on results and meta-evaluation of the process

After the communicative validation, the Peers meet to revise their findings and assessments. The Peer Visit ends with the Peer Team looking back on the Visit. There are two aims for this final session of the Peers:

- Comments and questions of the final meeting have to be reflected upon and discussed again. Peer Teams revise their assessment of the Quality Areas.
- In a meta-evaluation, the members of the Peer Team reflect on their experiences, thus providing indications for further development of the Peer Review procedure.

→ A sheet for documentation of the **Meta-evaluation of the Peers** can be found in the Toolbox.

## V European Peer Review Procedure – Peer Review Report (Phase 3)

The Peer Review Report is the final document. All Peers should contribute to the report. One or two persons, however, can do the writing, 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.

### European Peer Review in practice: writing the report

The pilot phases of the Peer Review projects clearly showed that the report should to a large extent be written during the Peer Visit: once the Peers are back in their usual working environment, finishing the report may be postponed for weeks and even months. In addition, direct communication between the Peers is usually not possible after the Visit.

It is therefore highly recommended that the Peers arrive at common conclusions during the Peer Visit and that the main results of the Peer Review are already inserted into the forms during the analysis phase (Quality Area Assessment Form; Peer Review Report). Should any (usually minor) adaptations be necessary after the communicative validation with the VNFIL provider, they should also be made immediately so that – apart from some finishing touches – the draft Peer Review Report is ready at the end of the Peer Visit.

A draft report is issued, on which the reviewed VNFIL provider should have the opportunity to give feedback. The final report should take these comments into consideration. In the European Peer Review, the final Peer Review Report is addressed primarily to the VNFIL provider. All relevant internal stakeholder groups (counsellors/assessors, candidates, other staff etc.) should have access to the report.

Additionally, the VNFIL provider may also pass on the Peer Review Report to relevant external stakeholders and/or Recognition/Validating/Certification authorities. Often, parts of the report (usually the summary) are also made accessible to a wider public, e.g. over the Internet.

### V.1 Structure of Peer Review Report

For reasons of consistency and transparency, the Peer Review should have the same kind of structure and format as the Self-Report. It should indicate strengths and areas for improvement and possibly – if asked for by the VNFIL provider being reviewed – recommendations.

#### The Peer Review Report contains:

Title, table of contents (glossary and abbreviations, if necessary)

1. Data sheet
2. Short portrait of the VNFIL provider (about 1 page)
3. Peer Review procedure
4. Assessment of Quality Areas
5. Annex: e.g. agenda for the Peer Visit, interview guidelines, observation guidelines

→ The **Peer Review Report form** can be found in the Annex.



## V.1 Principles for writing the Peer Review Report

After the Peer Coordinator (with the assistance of the Evaluation Expert) has written the report, the Peers revise it.

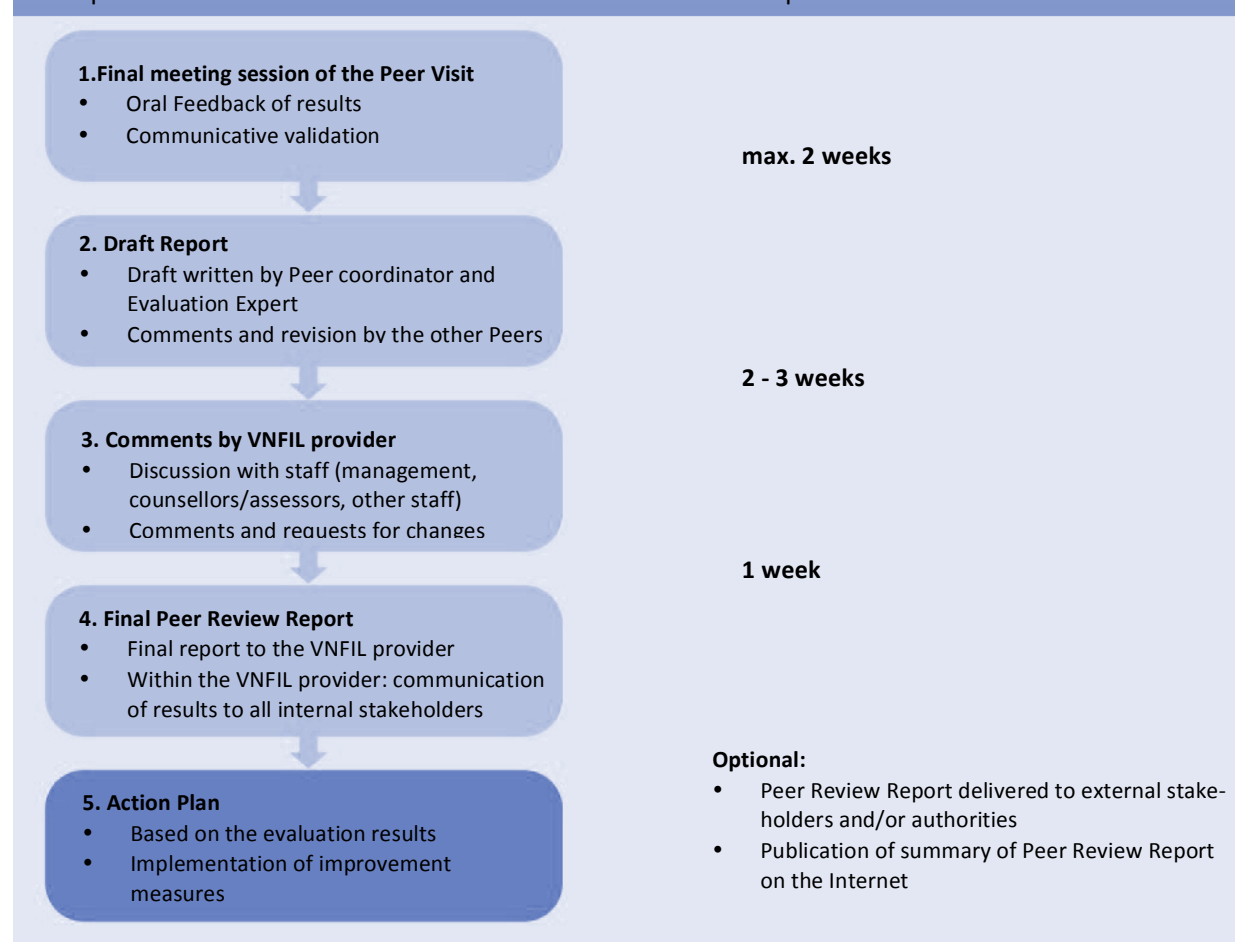
The report should provide a description of the findings of the Peer Review and an assessment of these findings given by the critical friends (the Peers). Strengths and areas for improvement are pointed out and conclusions are presented. If the VNFIL provider agrees, recommendations can also be part of the report.

The report should only include results that have been presented to the VNFIL provider (i.e. during the communicative validation). The report should not contain any surprises for the VNFIL provider. Nor should the report include comments on individuals.

The draft report is read and validated by the VNFIL institution, which may comment on it.

## V.2 From the Peer Visit to the final Peer Review Report

Graph 6: Procedure and time schedule for the Peer Review Report



## VI European Peer Review Procedure – Putting Plans into Action (Phase 4)

Evaluations should always have an effect on practical work: conclusions must be drawn and procedures for change must be implemented in order to justify the time and effort invested in the review process. Putting the results of the Peer Review into action is thus the critical element for the success of the Peer Review in terms of systematic, continuous and sustainable quality improvement. It lies within the responsibility of the management to ensure that the results of the Peer Review are used consistently (cf. also Chapter III.1.1).

### VI.1 How to make sense of the results of the Peer Review

Making sense of evaluation results is usually one of the main challenges of systematic improvement at the VNFIL provider level. In the European Peer Review, several elements of the procedure directly enhance the definition of suitable goals and measures.

Areas for improvement will be indicated during the feedback session and in the Peer Review Report in an open and understandable manner; the communicative validation of the findings and the possibility of a dialogue between the Peers and representatives of the VNFIL provider further deepen comprehension and appreciation of the feedback. If deemed appropriate, the Peers can also furnish recommendations for the follow-up procedure.

Additionally, the Peer Review process itself supports the qualitative interpretation of the self-evaluation data as well as of data collected during the Peer Visit: the feedback of the Peers should provide the VNFIL provider with easily understandable and meaningful information as to the future course of procedures for change.

### VI.2 How to prepare procedures for change

For putting results into action, a systematic process is proposed, based on the quality circle. A candid and comprehensive information policy ensuring that all relevant stakeholders have access to the results of the Peer Review should support it. If possible, an open debate within the organisation should precede the implementation of procedures for change. All of this will improve the quality of the decisions made and enhance motivation and commitment within the VNFIL provider.

### VI.3 How to proceed - a systematic approach to procedures for change

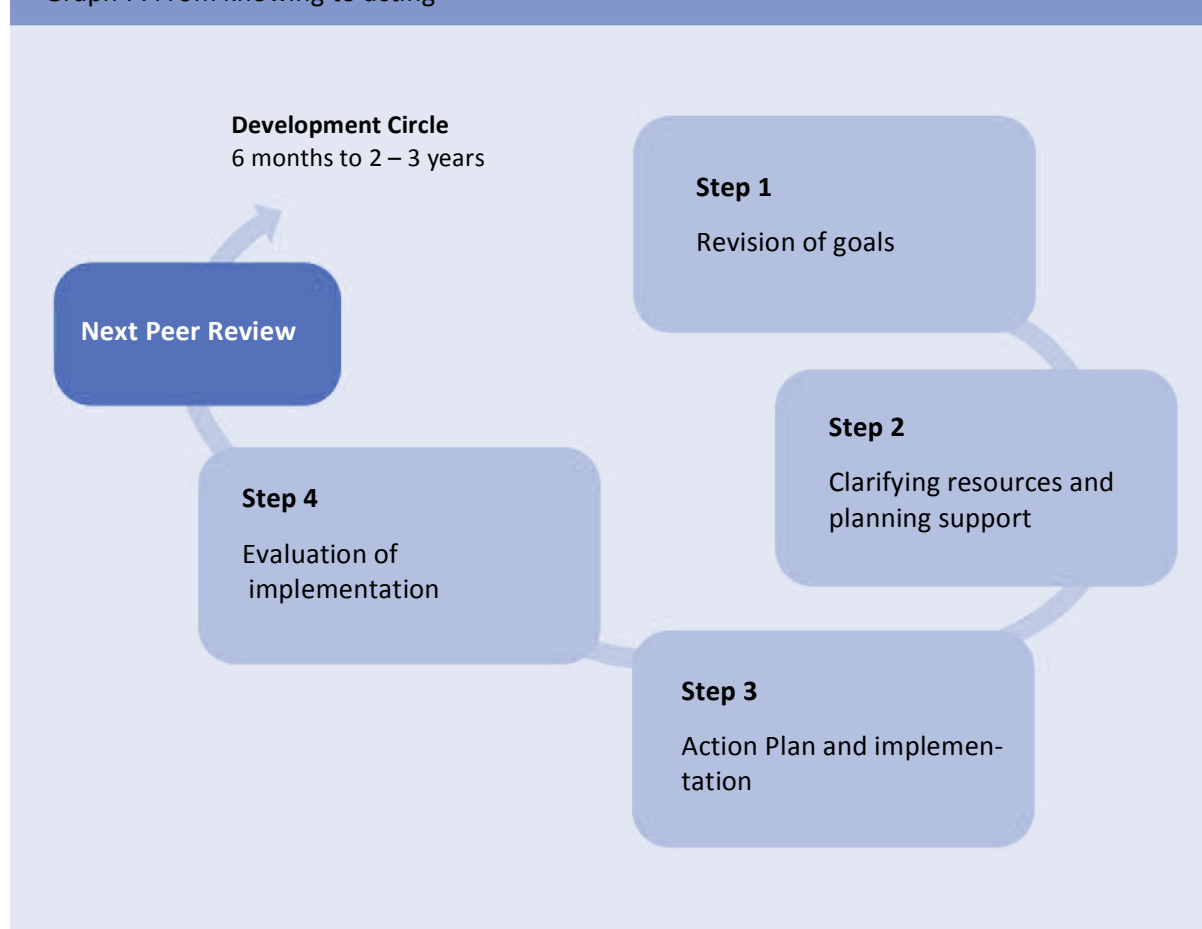
#### VI.3.1 Revision of goals

If possible, procedures for change should be planned cooperatively within the VNFIL provider. This should start with the revision of quality objectives and planning based on the results of the self-evaluation and the Peer Review.

The revision should encompass the strategic and the operational levels, which should be interlinked. Attainment of operational targets should be possible within a realistic time frame of 6 months to 2-3 years. It is recommended that they be defined as **SMART targets**:

- S** Specific
- M** Measurable
- A** Attractive
- R** Realistic
- T** Time-related

Graph 7: From knowing to acting



### VI.3.2 Clarifying resources and planning support

For putting a plan into action, it is necessary to clarify the available resources and integrate the plan in the whole development process of the institution. Individual and institutional needs have to be considered when doing this:

- Which supporting forces exist and can be used? (E.g. networks, counsellors/assessors)
- Which supporting structures can be activated? (E.g. quality groups, mutual VNFIL observations, mentoring, supervision, peer coaching, project groups, etc.)
- Which financial, personnel (internal and external) and time resources are available?
- To which hindrances and stumbling blocks must attention be paid?
- How can we manage challenging situations?
- How do we deal with resistance?
- Do we need consultancy? Why? What for? Who could do it?
- Do we need educational training, new methods or new action models?
- Are training programmes for counsellors/assessors suitable and sufficient?

A realistic and motivating action plan and schedule are drawn up, based on the information on resources and support.

### VI.3.3 Action plan and implementation

The following guiding questions can be used when setting up an action plan:

- How do we start? What are the next steps? What are priorities?
- What do we have to do to reach the aim?
- Are midterm aims and milestones adequate?
- What resources (financial, personnel, time) are available?
- Who is involved or takes responsibility?
- Would it be convenient to appoint a steering group?
- Who has to approve the action plan?
- How can we communicate the action plan?

Development steps can be recorded in an action plan:

<b>Table 2: Action Plan</b>				
<b>Activities</b>	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Responsible Person</b>	<b>Resources</b>
What should be done?	What is urgent	By when?	By whom?	What do we need?

### VI.3.4 Evaluation of implementation – planning the next Peer Review

All development plans at an individual and institutional level call for another feedback loop. The evaluation must include the assessment of the achievement of the targets defined. Guiding questions to determine the success of the improvement measures may be:

- How do we know if we have made progress? How do we work out whether we have reached our aims? What criteria and indicators of success can be formulated? Which feedback methods do we apply?
- To whom are we held accountable? To whom do we have to report? Who reminds us to follow our aims and our plans if we neglect them?
- What positive consequences do we expect if we reach our aims? How do we reward ourselves if we reach our aims? What consequences are there if we do not reach our aims?

A self-evaluation of the implementation of procedures for change can again be complemented by external feedback through Peer Review – starting the next cycle of a continuous improvement process.

## VII Quality Areas

### VII.1 Quality of VNFIL provision and the definition of Quality Areas

What is the "quality of VNFIL provision"? The term "quality" is a generic term. Quality is context-dependent, i.e. the concrete context has to be known in order to define quality. A useful specification) is to relate quality to the fulfilment of goals connected with VNFIL provision, i.e. to analyse reality against expectations:

**Quality = Experience (reality) / Expectations (goals)**

Thus, in order to determine what kind of VNFIL provision is high quality and what is not, it must be clear what the context-specific goals of VNFIL provision are. Goals can be found at different levels of the VNFIL systems and vary to some extent from country to country and from VNFIL provider to VNFIL provider. As a consequence, there is no generally accepted definition or description of the key quality issues in VNFIL.

The success of a Peer Review, however, depends on whether meaningful and relevant Quality Areas are being reviewed or not. In addition, transparency and comparability between different Peer Reviews can only be ensured if a common framework serves as the point of departure.

As a consequence, a framework of Quality Areas has been defined for the European Peer Review procedure, which

- comprises the crucial areas of a high-quality VNFIL provider in a clear, practical and workable form, and which
- covers the quality criteria used by the partners res. in the partner countries (if some kind of framework exists), thus facilitating its use at a European level.

In the future, it might also serve as a tool for cross-reading different national quality frameworks, thus enhancing transparency and comparability within Europe.

### VII.2 Relation between the European Quality Areas for VNFIL providers and institutional/national frameworks

The set of Quality Areas (specified by outcomes and examples of criteria, see below) should therefore by no means replace existing national or institutional frameworks. Instead, it is intended to support European cooperation in evaluation at VNFIL provider level: a framework with common Quality Areas can be used for facilitating transnational Peer Review and/or can serve as a point of comparison for reviews carried out in a national context.

Further national/institutional quality elements can, of course, be added to this framework depending on national and/or institutional demands. For purely national use of the European Peer Review procedure, national frameworks can substitute the Quality Areas proposed below.

### VII.3 European Quality Areas for VNFIL institutions

The European Quality Areas for VNFIL are structured in two chapters: basic validation features and conditions for developing and implementing validation.

The 9 Quality Areas proposed are:

#### **Basic validation features (core Quality Areas)**

Quality Area 1: Identification

Quality Area 2: Documentation

Quality Area 3: Assessment

Quality Area 4: Certification

#### **Conditions for developing and implementing validation (supporting Quality Areas)**

Quality Area 5: Information, Guidance and Counselling

Quality Area 6: Stakeholder Coordination

Quality Area 7: Professional Competences of Practitioners

Quality Area 8: Quality Management

Quality Area 9: Organisation

#### VII.3.1 Core and Optional Quality Areas

Quality Areas are divided in “core” and optional “supporting” areas.

The first 4 Quality Areas for VNFIL comprise the four Quality Areas that relate directly to the “core business” of VNFIL institutions: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification. They are thus called “Core” Quality Areas. For a European Peer Review, it is recommended that at least one of the four “core” Quality Areas be tackled. In order to highlight their importance, these Quality Areas are positioned as the first four areas.

The remaining 5 Quality Areas – “supporting” Quality Areas – relate to the processes that support the ‘core business’ of a VNFIL Centre and determine the conditions for developing and implementing validation. They are optional in a European Peer Review. They include: Information, Guidance and Counselling; Stakeholder Coordination; Professional Competences of Practitioners; Quality Management; Organisation.

It must be noted that not all VNFIL providers in Europe are free to make their own choices. Some are part of larger institutions others are government regulated. It is not advisable to choose a Quality Area if the reviewed VNFIL provider is not in the position to act on the results of external assessment on that area (cf. chapter III.1.2 Decision on Quality Areas).

The European Peer Review Association can only issue a “European Peer Review Certificate” if a minimum of two Quality Areas have been reviewed successfully, at least one of which is a Core Quality Area. The Certificate indicates all Quality Areas and outcomes/criteria dealt with in the Peer Review.

## VII.4 The Quality Areas and the Quality Assurance Model of the EQAVET

As has been pointed out in the Introduction to this Manual, the European Peer Review procedure is based on the Quality Assurance Model of EQAVET<sup>5</sup>. Peer Review is proposed as an innovative methodology for external evaluation at the provider level (cf. I.4).

Furthermore, within the European Peer Review procedure, all elements of the quality circle will be considered in an integral and systematic manner in the assessment of the Quality Areas. Planning, implementation, evaluation and assessment, and review and procedures for change must be part of self-evaluation as well as the Peer Review. This is to ensure that there is a coherent and comprehensive quality strategy and a systematic link between evaluation and improvement. Since Peer Review should promote continuing quality improvement, special emphasis lies on the follow-up process.

## VII.5 How the Quality Areas are specified

The Quality Areas are further specified by outcomes, examples of criteria and sources of evidence.

### VII.5.1 Outcomes and examples of criteria

Each Quality Area has its own outcome(s). The outcomes are described through examples of criteria, which support a criteria-based evaluation: During self-evaluation (Phase 1) as well as during the evaluation conducted by the Peers (Phases 2 and 3) an assessment of the findings against the criteria should be carried out. If the criteria of a Quality Area (res. outcome) are met fully or to a large extent, this would point to an area of strength, if they are scarcely met or not met at all, this would suggest an area of improvement.

The list of criteria for each outcome is indicative and not exhaustive. This means that in a European Peer Review the criteria can be adapted, exchanged or complemented by other criteria and indicators, if necessary.

### VII.5.2 Sources of evidence

This category is considered to be an additional support for both the VNFIL institution and the Peers. The sources of evidence indicate examples where to look for data for 1) conducting the self-evaluation or 2) buttressing the findings of the Peers. Data can be either “hard” quantitative data, e.g. statistics, results of surveys etc., or “soft” data, e.g. from qualitative interviews, focus groups, observations, qualitative assessments etc.

→ The **Quality Areas** with outcomes, elaborated examples for criteria and sources of evidence can be found in the Toolbox.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.eqavet.eu/>

## VIII Peers

### VIII.1 Who is a Peer?

A Peer is a person

- who is an equal of or is on equal standing with the person(s) whose performance is being reviewed
  - who works in a similar environment (and/or in a similar institution)
  - who is external (i.e. from a different institution) and independent (has no personal/institutional "stakes" in the evaluation process)
- and
- who has specific professional expertise and knowledge in the field (shares values, professional competence and attitudes, language, etc.)
  - who can thus bring a degree of "inside" knowledge of the object of review into the process and combine it with the external view of somebody coming from a different organisation ("external insider").

Peers are sometimes also called 'critical friends'.

### VIII.2 Core task of the Peers

The core task of the Peers is to come to an understanding of the particular situation of the reviewed VNFIL provider/institution and to give critical feedback. Recommendations and solutions to problems should only be given if expressly asked for by the VNFIL provider.

### VIII.3 Composition of the Peer Team

Teams of at least 2 Peers should carry out European Peer Reviews. It is recommended that the overall size of the Peer Team is an even number, because sets of two Peers (Peer Tandems) should be formed to conduct the interviews with the different stakeholder representatives. Depending on the context, Peer Teams of 4 can be employed. This was, e.g. necessary for the transnational Peer Reviews conducted in the project "Peer Review VNFIL Extended".

The composition of the Peer Teams depends on the subject of the Peer Review since, first and foremost, Peers should have extensive expertise in the Quality Areas reviewed. It is important to note, however, that the team as a whole must cover the expertise and experience required and not necessarily any single team member. In detail, a Peer Team for a European Peer Review should consist of experts with the following occupational backgrounds:

At least half of the Peers should be "real" Peers, i.e. colleagues from other VNFIL providers, counselors/assessors, managers, quality experts, etc. These VNFIL professionals should have the following expertise:

1. in the review topics under scrutiny,
2. in validation of non-formal and informal learning (at least 5 years of experience), and
3. in quality assurance and quality development procedures (i.e. quality management approaches, evaluation methods, etc.).

It is also recommended that half of the Peers currently work as counsellors/assessors.

Additionally, a stakeholder peer can be included in the Peer Team. This Peer can come, for instance, from educational institutions, enterprises, labour market institutions, social partners, etc.



It is recommended that one member of the Peer Team be able to assume the role of an "Evaluation Expert" with expertise in evaluation, moderation and communication. This Peer may also come from an institutional background other than VNFIL (e.g. evaluation, research, consulting, etc.). This person should, however, also have sufficient experience in VNFIL since s/he will fulfil both the function of a "normal" Peer and the function of Evaluation Expert. The Evaluation Expert need not be recruited from outside VNFIL, a "real" Peer from another VNFIL provider, who has the required qualification and expertise may also assume the role of the Evaluation Expert.

#### VIII.4 Roles within a Peer Team

Within a Peer Team, the following roles can be filled:

- counsellor/assessor Peers
- a Peer Coordinator<sup>6</sup>
- an Evaluation Expert
- a gender mainstreaming expert
- a transnational Peer (if applicable).

##### VIII.4.1 Peers

The Peers analyse the Self-Report, draw up an evaluation plan (who is to be interviewed, interview guidelines) and carry out the Peer Review (e.g. collecting information, interviewing, analysing findings, giving feedback, etc.).

##### VIII.4.2 Peer Coordinator

In addition to the tasks of a Peer, the Peer Coordinator is the leader of the Peer Team. S/he is the primary contact for the VNFIL provider, coordinates and plans the activities of the Peers and is concerned with the moderation of the review process and time management. S/he is also responsible for the writing of the Peer Review Report.

The Peer Coordinator thus assumes a central role. S/he needs a high level of competence in evaluation, team- leading, communication, moderation, and time management and must therefore be selected carefully.

##### VIII.4.3 Evaluation Expert

The role of the Evaluation Expert should also be covered in the Peer Team to make sure that at least one person has comprehensive expertise in evaluation, moderation, and communication. The Peer Coordinator or one of the other Peers in the team can assume this role.

If the Peer Team is not very experienced in evaluation, the Evaluation Expert will guide the Peer Team and support the Peer Coordinator in her/his tasks. In this event, the Evaluation Expert can be responsible for moderating the internal analysis meeting(s) of the Peer Team where the findings of the various Peer Tandems are discussed and the feedback to counsellors/assessors, other staff and management is prepared. Furthermore, the Evaluation Expert may moderate the final meeting. S/he may also assist the Peer Coordinator in the writing of the Peer Review Report. If possible, the Evaluation Expert will also support the Peers with special evaluation expertise in the preparation phase by assisting them in the drawing-up of interview guidelines, for example.

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<sup>6</sup> The Peer Coordinator can be appointed either by the RVC institution itself or by the coordinating body organising the Peer Review.

#### VIII.4.4 Gender mainstreaming expert

It is highly recommended that one Peer with special expertise in gender mainstreaming be included in the Peer Team. The gender-mainstreaming expert ensures that gender aspects are duly considered throughout the process, i.e. from the planning of the review through data collection and assessment to feedback and reporting.

#### VIII.4.5 Transnational Peer

Employing a transnational Peer is optional. For a transnational European Peer Review, though, recruiting a transnational Peer is a requirement.

On the one hand, inviting a Peer from another country can be a very enriching experience for all parties involved – the transnational Peer, the VNFIL provider and the other Peers. Confronting one another with different systems and practices can enhance mutual learning and innovation transfer. Additionally, the independence and evident distance of a transnational Peer often stimulates a special atmosphere of openness and critical reflection.

On the other hand, including a transnational Peer requires careful preparations and certain conditions on the part of the VNFIL provider and the Peers. First of all, all parties involved must be aware of the additional efforts necessary: the language question, in particular, needs to be considered carefully as must the diversity of VNFIL systems and cultural differences. Inviting a transnational Peer usually also calls for extra funding, for travelling, for example, or for translation costs.

**Table 3: Composition of Peer Team: occupational background and competences**

Number of Peers (2-4 Peers)	Occupational Background	Required Competences
1-2 “Real” Peer (minimum)*	<b>Professionals from other VNFIL providers</b> (counsellors, assessors, managers, quality experts etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of Quality Areas under scrutiny</li> <li>• Experience in VNFIL</li> <li>• Experience in quality assurance and quality development procedures</li> </ul>
1 “Stakeholder” Peer (optional)	<b>Representative from other stakeholder groups</b> (educational institution, enterprises, social partners, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of Quality Areas under scrutiny</li> <li>• Experience in QA and QD procedures</li> </ul>
1 Evaluation Expert (optional)	<b>Professional evaluator/quality assessor</b> (e.g. from research institute / university, independent auditing/accrediting body, may also come from VNFIL provider)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expertise in evaluation, moderation and communication</li> <li>• Knowledge of the VNFIL system</li> </ul>
1 Gender Mainstreaming Expert	<b>Any of the above</b>	Additional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expertise in gender mainstreaming</li> </ul>
1 Transnational Peer (optional)**	<b>Any of the above, usually a VNFIL professional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of Quality Areas under scrutiny</li> <li>• Experience in VNFIL</li> <li>• Experience in quality assurance and quality development procedures</li> </ul>

\* half of the Peer Team must be “real” Peers in a European Peer Review

\*\* required for a transnational European Peer Review

### VIII.5 Required competences and expertise of Peers

Peer Teams as a whole should thus have expertise

- in validation of non-formal and informal learning,
- in quality assurance and development, and
- in the Quality Areas under scrutiny.

In addition, one Peer should have expertise in gender mainstreaming and one Peer should have the competences to fulfil the role of Evaluation Expert. As the Peer Review procedure presented in this Manual is designed as a transnational instrument, it is recommended that at least one Peer from abroad be engaged. For the selection of a transnational expert, transnational experience, intercultural competences, and language skills are essential. Thus, additional requirements are

- expertise in gender mainstreaming,
- expertise in evaluation, and
- transnational experience.

### VIII.6 Applying to be a Peer

The Manual also provides an application form for persons who are interested in becoming a Peer and have the relevant expertise. Peers who want to take part in a European Peer Review are required to fill out and submit this application form.

→ A **Peer Application Form** can be found in the Toolbox.

### VIII.7 Preparation and training of Peers

Peers are obliged to analyse the VNFIL institution's Self-Report and contribute to the preparation of the Peer Visit by attending meetings with the VNFIL provider and the other Peers, by setting up an agenda for the Peer Visit and by formulating evaluation questions for the Peer Review.

Prior to the Peer Review, Peers should also undergo a "Peer Training for VNFIL Programme" that prepares them for their work as external evaluators. The training programme should introduce Peer Review as an evaluation methodology, explain in depth the different phases of the Peer Review, and clarify the role and tasks of the Peers. Additionally, training in quantitative and qualitative data analysis and in qualitative evaluation methods (e.g. interviews and observation) may be provided if needed. Training in soft skills, i.e. social, communicative and moderation skills should complete the training programme.

If face-to-face training is possible, the Peer training may also be used to support the Peers in the preparation of the Peer Visit, i.e. to provide guidance in the analysis of the Self-Reports and/or counselling in the preparation of the review design and the Peer Visit agenda (e.g. which methods to use for which topics, who to interview/observe, how to prepare questions for interview guidelines or grids with criteria for observations, etc.).

### VIII.8 Liaison with the Peer Review Facilitator

The primary contact person for the Peer Team during the whole process is the Peer Review Facilitator. S/he should make additional documentation accessible upon request and is responsible for the organisational preparation and conduct of the Peer Review (invitation of persons to be interviewed, reservation of rooms and other facilities needed, logistics during the review, etc.). Thus, the facilitator's core role is to ensure that the channels of communication between the VNFIL provider and the Peer Team (mainly in the person of the Peer Coordinator) work effectively.

The facilitator is not a member of the Peer Team and will not make assessments about the topics under scrutiny. S/he should not be present during interviews or during internal discussions of the Peer Team.

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## IX.4 Websites

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

[www.peerreview.works](http://www.peerreview.works)

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

[www.eqavet.eu](http://www.eqavet.eu), 31.05.2018

[s1.teamlearn.de/b-1-eiver](http://s1.teamlearn.de/b-1-eiver), 31.05.2018

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CEDEFOP general information on validation: [www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning), 31.05.2018

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EuroPeerGuid (2012): European Peer Review Manual for Educational and Vocational Guidance for Adults.

## X Glossary

### Candidates (of VNFIL)

The term "candidates" is used to denote the participants in the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences and skills. Synonym is 'participants'.

### Communicative Validation

Communicative validation is used in qualitative social research to enhance the validity of results: feedback on findings is systematically solicited from different stakeholders to challenge the data collected as well as its interpretation. A communicative validation can be carried out whenever necessary in the Peer Review process; in most cases it will be used in the final stages of the Visit, e.g. shortly before, during or after the feedback session with the VNFIL provider.

### Coordinating Body for Peer Review

If a suitable structure and sufficient funding is available, the coordination of the Peer Review network can be carried out by a competent organisation/unit. For the purpose of this Manual, this support structure will be called the "coordinating body". Establishing such a body is recommended for the management of complex (transnational) Peer Review networks.

The coordinating body can be central to the coordination and organisation of Peer Reviews. It can be either a coordination unit set up by a network of VNFIL providers, the staff of a (publicly funded) pilot project on Peer Review or an independent Peer Review agency established by education authorities.

The degree of influence and the scope of the tasks of the coordinating body may vary, depending on its set-up: it may process applications from Peers, select the Peers according to a predefined profile, match the VNFIL providers with suitable Peers, draw up a timetable for the Reviews, collect and forward information, organise Peer training and provide consultation for the VNFIL providers throughout the whole process.

On the European level, the European Peer Review Association functions as coordinating body for transnational Peer Reviews.

### "Critical Friends"

Synonym of "Peers".

### Formative Evaluation

Formative Evaluation<sup>7</sup> is an on-going evaluation that serves the purpose of improving ("forming") the evaluation object, which may be, for example, a Quality Area, an entire organisation, a programme, a project, a product, an intervention, a policy or a person. In the case of the European Peer Review, a formative evaluation is carried out of certain areas or departments of VNFIL providers/institutions.

The main focus of a formative evaluation is to support further improvement and sustainable development (whereas a summative evaluation is geared towards quality assurance and control). It can be used to exchange and share information and to provide feedback to staff, candidates, participants and other persons involved. In the European Peer Review, the results of the formative review are addressed primarily to the reviewed institution, to be used for internal quality development.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Glossar wirkungsorientierte Evaluation, Univention-Institut für Evaluation Dr. Beywl & Associates GmbH, Köln (2004) res. Eval-Wiki: Glossar der Evaluation ([https://eval-wiki.org/glossar/Eval-Wiki:\\_Glossar\\_der\\_Evaluation](https://eval-wiki.org/glossar/Eval-Wiki:_Glossar_der_Evaluation)) and Nancy Van Note Chism: Peer Review of Teaching (1999).



### **European Peer Review Association (EPRA)**

The European Peer Review Association is an international society. It was founded as a non-profit association under Austrian law in 2013. The association evolved out of the European Peer Review projects that were conducted between 2004 and 2009: the Leonardo da Vinci Projects „Peer Review in initial VET“, „Peer Review Extended“ and „Peer Review Extended II“.

The European Peer Review Association aims to disseminate, support and further develop Peer Review as evaluation by colleagues in education and training institutions in the whole of Europe. It coordinates a European Peer Review Network and facilitates, monitors and assesses Peer Reviews, especially transnational Peer Reviews. It provides European trainings and seminars on Peer Review, maintains a European Peer Register and delivers a Peer Review label. [www.peer-review-network.eu](http://www.peer-review-network.eu)

### **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAVET)**

EQAVET is a reference framework set out in 2009 through a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (2009) to help Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement of their VET systems based on common European references.

The Framework:

- comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by a model of common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators,
- recommends a monitoring and quality improvement process, including a combination of internal and external evaluation mechanisms, review and processes for improvement, supported by measurement and qualitative analysis,
- supports the use of measuring tools to provide evidence of effectiveness,
- is due to be applied at the VET-system, VET-provider and qualification-awarding levels,
- gives a strong emphasis on further development based on a solid cooperation at European, national, regional and local levels,
- gives a strong emphasis on the exchange of best practices not only at national but also at local and regional levels in all relevant networks, including the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework Network (EQAVET), which shares its acronym with the EQAVET reference framework.

### **Evaluation Expert**

The Evaluation Expert is a Peer with additional knowledge and expertise in evaluation. In addition to the activities of a Peer, s/he will support the Peer Team in preparing interview questions for the Peer Visit, s/he will moderate the internal discussion sessions of the Peer Team during the Visit and also the communicative validation session with representatives of the VNFIL provider at the end of the Visit. S/he may also coach/assist the Peer Coordinator in the writing of the Peer Review Report.

### **Management of a VNFIL Provider**

Person(s) responsible for managing the institution: these can be the directors, principals, general managers, etc. plus department heads and other managers (i.e. quality managers, HR etc.).

## **Peers**

Peers are mostly colleagues from other VNFIL providers/institutions (counsellors/assessors, managers, other staff). They 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.

Peers are sometimes also called "critical friends".

## **Peer Review**

Peer Review is a form of external evaluation with the aim of supporting the reviewed vocational education and training institution in its quality assurance and quality development efforts.

An external group of experts, known as Peers, is invited to judge the quality of different fields of the institution, such as the quality of counselling and assessment provision of individual departments or of the entire organisation. During the evaluation process, the Peers usually visit the reviewed institution.

## **Peer Review Facilitator**

The Peer Review Facilitator is the person responsible for the organisation and the smooth running of the Peer Review at the VNFIL provider/institution. S/he will see to it that the Peers are selected and invited in due time, that the Self-Report is ready and forwarded to the Peers and that the Peer Visit is prepared. S/he will be also the primary contact person for the Peers during the whole Peer Review procedure.

## **Peer Review Report**

The Peer Review Report is a written documentation of the Peer Review. The Peers draw it up. Usually the Peer Coordinator, with the help of the Evaluation Expert, will write the report on the basis of notes taken by the Peers, internal discussions among the Peers and the outcomes of the communicative validation. All Peers will contribute to the report and the Peer Team, as a whole, is responsible for the Peer Review Report.

## **Peer Tandems**

Peer Tandems are pairs of Peers. For all activities concerning data collection it is recommended that two Peers be present at any given time. This is an important precondition for a fair and equitable process since, with two peers involved, the probability of subjective and arbitrary judgements can be reduced substantially (principle of dual control). Two persons will also be able to take in more than one person. In practice, this means that the Peer Team splits up into pairs – Peer Tandems – and carries out different activities at the same time, thus making the process more efficient.

## **Peer Review Network**

Peer Reviews are very often carried out in networks of VNFIL providers/institutions. This network may have been established for the purpose of conducting Peer Reviews or, alternatively, an existing network may have decided to carry out Peer Reviews. Peer Review Networks can prove a valuable means of exchanging good practice and working jointly on the improvement of the whole sector of VNFIL. The European Peer Review Association maintains a network of institutions and professionals interested in Peer Review across Europe.

## **Provider/Institution of VNFIL**

Throughout the Manual, the terms "VNFIL provider" and "VNFIL institution" are used synonymously.

## **Quality of Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)**

"Quality" is a generic and context-dependent term. It can be equated with the fulfilment of goals. In other words, quality is the experienced reality measured against expectations (goals). For the European Peer Review procedure, important Quality Areas have been defined to give an indication of what quality in VNFIL is about.

## **Self-evaluation of a VNFIL provider**

Self-evaluation is an evaluation carried out by the VNFIL providers themselves. It is an important approach for fostering quality assurance and quality development at an institutional level throughout Europe. For a Peer Review to take place, a self-evaluation must first have been carried out. Results of the self-evaluation are an important basis for the Peer Review. They are usually documented in a Self-Report.

## **Self-Report**

The Self-Report comprises the findings of the self-evaluation of the VNFIL provider carried out prior to the Peer Review. It is the basic document for the Peer Review.

## **Stakeholders (in VNFIL)**

Stakeholders in VNFIL are

- candidates,
- staff (managers, counsellors/assessors, and administrative or other staff),
- enterprises (as cooperation partners in the provision of VNFIL, as prospective employers in VNFIL and as main beneficiaries in career development and/or education after VNFIL),
- educational institutions validating the outcomes of VNFIL or taking in graduates from VNFIL,
- social partners,
- authorities, etc.

The inclusion of various relevant groups of stakeholders in the whole review process is highly recommended. First of all, high-quality evaluation calls for the involvement of stakeholders in the process<sup>8</sup>. Secondly, the importance of stakeholders in quality assurance and development has repeatedly been emphasised as an important aspect of European and national VNFIL policy.

## **Summative Evaluation**

Summative evaluation<sup>9</sup> aims at arriving at final conclusions concerning quality and usefulness of the evaluation object, which may be, for example, a Quality Area, an entire organisation, a programme, a project, a product, an intervention, a policy or a person. Summative evaluation is geared towards quality control and external accountability. It often uses quantitative and comparative information to make recommendations on possible actions, such as retaining, enlarging or reducing the evaluation object. Summative evaluations thus also support the process of decision-making by political authorities and funding bodies.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the Standards for Evaluation of Educational Programmes of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Glossar wirkungsorientierte Evaluation, Univention-Institut für Evaluation Dr. Beywl & Associates GmbH, Köln (2004) res. Eval-Wiki: Glossar der Evaluation ([https://eval-wiki.org/glossar/Eval-Wiki:\\_Glossar\\_der\\_Evaluation](https://eval-wiki.org/glossar/Eval-Wiki:_Glossar_der_Evaluation)) and Nancy Van Note Chism: Peer Review of Teaching (1999).

**Triangulation**

In social research, the approach of including different methods and sources is called triangulation. Using different methods and different sources of information in the collection of data contributes to the quality of the evaluation in terms of objectivity, reliability and validity. Soliciting diverse points of view from different stakeholders during the Peer Visit will enable the Peers to gain a more accurate and complete picture.

**VNFIL**

VNFIL is the acronym for “Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning” res. Validation of Learning Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

There are many synonyms:

RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning

APL: Accreditation of Prior Learning

APEL: Accreditation of Prior Experimental Learning

VPL: Validation of Prior Learning

RVC: Recognition, Validation and Certification

