

Peer Review as external evaluation in vocational training and adult education: definition, experiences and recommendations for use

Ocena środowiskowa (koleżeńska) jako metoda zewnętrznej ewaluacji edukacji i szkoleń zawodowych osób dorosłych: definicja, doświadczenia i rekomendacje

Key words: quality, external evaluation, peer review, vocational education and training, adult education.

Słowa kluczowe: jakość, ewaluacja zewnętrzna, peer review, edukacja i szkolenia zawodowe, edukacja dorosłych.

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje znaną i uznaną metodę ewaluacji w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego – peer review (ocena koleżeńska) jako nowatorską i obiecującą metodę ewaluacji zewnętrznej w sektorze edukacji szkoleń zawodowych.

Introduction

The last 10 to 15 years have seen the development and establishment of external evaluation for different educational sectors in many European countries. These external evaluation schemes can take on different forms: In general education and initial VET, the most widespread are state-mandated inspections (sometimes also called reviews, external evaluations etc.), in continuing VET and adult education external certification and accreditation procedures are common. An additional methodology that has taken on some momentum through the development and dissemination of a common European methodology in the past years is Peer Review. Though Peer Review was initially adapted to initial vocational education and training, further transfer and use in continuing VET, adult education and even guidance and counselling have proved promising. This article will give a definition of Peer Review – also in comparison to the other forms of external evaluation mentioned – and shortly outline experiences gleaned from (pilot) implementation both on transnational and national levels. Based on theoretical arguments and the results of practical experimentation some conclusions on the use of Peer Review in education and training will be drawn.

Definition: What is Peer Review?

Peer Review as traditional external evaluation methodology in higher education. Peer Review as external evaluation methodology has a longstanding tradition in higher education. With only Peers, i.e. colleagues from the same discipline, capable of judging the intrinsic quality of research, Peer Review is still the most appropriate and most widely used procedure for assessing the quality of scientific articles submitted for publication. From the area of research the use of Peer Review has spread to evaluating the quality of departments or of entire higher education institutions. This is the form of Peer Review that will be the focus of the following considerations.

In the external assessment of higher education institutions (or parts of institutions) certain elements of Peer Review have emerged as good practice: The Peer Review is usually carried out as a step-by-step procedure. It starts with a self-evaluation of the institutions that is documented in a report. The core of the Peer Review is a site visit by the Peers, i.e. colleagues from same or similar

institutions. Typically a team of Peers visits the institution for some days to verify the report and make their own observations and conclusions. The results of the Peers' analysis are laid down in a report.

Adaptation of Peer Review to vocational education and training. The adaptation of Peer Review to vocational education and training was carried out in the course of three European projects between 2004 and 2009¹. At that time, the use of Peer Review in vocational education and training in Europe was marginal. The definition and development of a tailored Peer Review procedure therefore relied on 1) a systematic international review of uses of Peer Review in higher education and other professional contexts (Gutknecht-Gmeiner 2006/2008) and an in-depth analysis of conditions and requirements for the use of Peer Review in VET in the altogether 15 countries that took part. Following the European Peer Review Manual for (initial) vocational education and training (Gutknecht-Gmeiner et al. 2007), the main characteristics and elements are:

- a definition of the European Peer Review as a voluntary, formative, external evaluation procedure within the profession and in a network,
- that follows a systematic procedure and relies on qualitative methods,
- is carried out by Peers,
- and is used to assess institutions (or parts of institutions).

Main characteristics of Peer Review as external evaluation procedure. Contrary to many other mostly mandatory and control-oriented external evaluation schemes, the European Peer Review was developed as a voluntary and formative procedure. Supporting vocational education and training providers in their efforts to improve their provision is its primary aim. It rests on the professionalism of the practitioners in the field and relies on and supports networking between institutions.

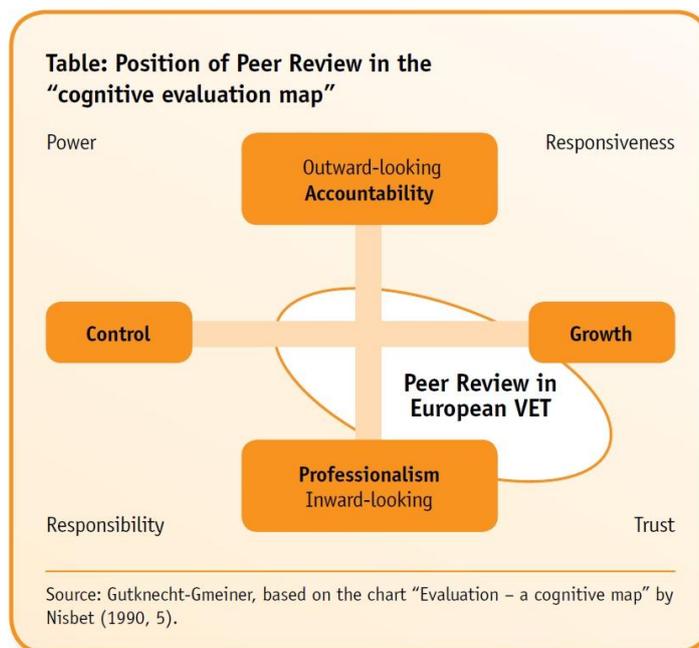


Fig 1. Formative Function of Peer Review

Source: European Peer Review Reader

The procedure. Peer Review combines self-evaluation with a qualitative external evaluation and follows a systematic procedure which covers four phases:

Phase 1 is the preparation phase. It includes a wide range of activities. At the start, the initial decision of the institution is taken to participate in a Peer Review, the quality areas for assessment are chosen and a support structure, including a Peer Review Facilitator as the central coordinator within the institution, is set up. Then a self-evaluation is conducted and documented in a Self-Report. In the meantime, Peers must be invited and, last but not least, the Peer Visit must be organised and prepared – both by the Peer Review Facilitator and the Peer team.

¹ Peer Review in initial VET, AT/04/C/F/TH-82000, 2004-2007; Peer Review Extended, LE-78CQAF, EAC/32/06/13, 2007; Peer Review Extended II, LLP-LdV/TOI/2007/AT/0011, 2007-2009.

Phase 2 comprises the Peer Visit of two to three days. Usually the Peers meet on the eve of the visit to make last preparations. Especially if a transnational Peer is involved, this meeting can also be used to clarify questions concerning the education and training system and specific characteristics of the provision. The Peer Visit is devoted to collecting and analysing qualitative data: Peer Review draws on quantitative data, which is usually supplied in the Self-Report, but at its core relies on qualitative methods to 1) corroborate findings of the self-report, 2) to interpret and attach meaning to findings and 3) to glean new information and possibly detect blind spots. A first feedback session with the reviewed institution is also part of Phase 2.

In Phase 3, the Peer Review report is compiled, commented by the institution in terms of factual accuracy and finalised by the Peer Team. This also marks the end of the involvement of the Peers.

Phase 4 is devoted to working with the findings from the Peer Review within the institution. Since Peer Review is improvement-oriented, closing the quality cycle through follow-up and implementation of improvements is perhaps the most important phase in the Peer Review.



Fig 2. Phases of a Peer Review

Source: European Peer Review Manual for VET

The Peers. The Peers are independent colleagues from other VET Providers who are on an equal standing with those whose performance is reviewed. They work in a team of four that must comprise all competences and expertise necessary, namely experience in education and training (active teachers/trainers must be part of the team), expertise in the quality areas under scrutiny, and some competences in quality management and evaluation. Additionally a “Stakeholder-Peer” from an organisation cooperating with the reviewed organisations, i.e. an enterprise, can be included as well as a transnational Peer, i.e. a Peer from another country.

The Quality Areas. As has been stated above, Peer Review is about evaluating institutions (or parts of institutions) – not about assessment of individual teachers or trainers. Yet, learning and teaching have to be at the centre of a Peer Review: evaluating only support processes will not do. To ensure some degree of transparency and comparability, 14 quality areas were developed for the use of Peer Review in a transnational context, the first four of which deal with teaching and learning: curricula, learning and teaching process, assessment of learners, and learning results and outcomes. In a national or regional context, Peer Review can, however, also be used with existing quality frameworks. Peer Review is a very flexible procedure in this respect.

Experiences and implementation

Piloting Peer Review on the European level. The Peer Review methodology described above has been piloted three times during the European Peer Review projects with a view of testing and improving the procedure. The first pilots took place in 2006 with 15 transnational Peer Reviews, the second in 2007 with four, and the third in 2008/09 with another six Peer Reviews. Altogether, institutions from eleven countries took part. The pilots underwent comprehensive internal and external

process evaluations. Stocktaking of experiences of all stakeholders involved – reviewed institutions, Peers, educational authorities – led to the publication of a European Peer Review Reader in 2009.

In a subsequent project “Peer Review Impact”², an ex-post analysis of the impact of Peer Review on the participating institutions was conducted (cf. Gutknecht-Gmeiner 2010). Findings showed that the Peer Review procedure was fairly easy to implement following the guidelines in the Manual. All stakeholders involved considered it a “humane” and “friendly” procedure for conducting external evaluation resulting in openness and increased usefulness of results and feedback to the institution. Practices of window-dressing and concealment of problems, which are widespread in more control-oriented external assessments, were not detected. In a number of institutions, the non-threatening process, which is based on dialogue, paved the way for acceptance of external evaluation schemes.

Feedback also highlighted that both the institutions and Peers benefited from the Peer Reviews: All institutions (except one) used the feedback from the Peer Review to implement improvements in the quality areas reviewed. They reported that the conclusions of the Peers – even if many were not entirely new to the institution – lent additional weight to findings and buttressed change efforts. One of the major contributions was the further development of quality assurance within the institutions that led to the adoption of qualitative methods and external evaluation. One to three years after the first Peer Review, a number of institutions reported that they were still using Peer Review on their own accord for continual improvement, even without any kind of formal recognition of Peer Review in their national quality assurance systems. A quite high number of institutions still sent Peers to other institutions or were involved in Peer Review activities in another way. Only in one of the 25 institutions, Peer Review activities had ceased.

The international aspect of the transnational Peer Review also led to increased European cooperation and prompted projects in other areas, i.e. student mobility and exchanges for instance.

Congruence with requirements of the EQAVET and recognition on European level. The European Peer Review was developed to meet the requirements of the “European Quality Assurance Framework for vocational education and training” EQAVET (before 2009: the “Common Quality Assurance Framework” CQAF). Its contributions to the further development of the EQAVET have been highlighted at various instances, the most important being that Peer Review adds a new procedure to the methodological repertoire. It carries a special promise since it complements existing approaches on European and national levels, especially the widespread use of self-evaluation but also other forms of external assessment. If used on a transnational level, i.e. with one Peer at least coming from another country, Peer Review also contributes to transparency and mutual trust between education and training institutions from different member states.

In 2008/2009, an expert group for the European quality network ENQAVET (now EQAVET) developed a structure and procedure for the sustainable implementation of Peer Review on the European level. In 2009, the European Peer Review Manual also won the Lifelong Learning Award for best product³. Since 2011, the European Peer Review has been included in the yearly priorities of the call for proposals for Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation projects, thus recommending broad further use of Peer Review throughout Europe. Since its first transfer to initial vocational education and training, Peer Review has also spread to other educational sectors/activities, notably to continuing VET/adult education and to guidance and counselling. At the beginning of 2013, a “European Peer Review Association” was founded to further promote Peer Review in different educational sectors on a European scale.

Adoption and national implementation. Following the European projects, Peer Review has found its way into several national quality assurance systems in the past years: In Finland, the use of Peer Review has been included in the Quality Management Recommendations for Vocational Education and Training in 2008. The Recommendations are the main instrument to implement EQAVET. They support and encourage VET providers to pursue excellence. Peer Review will not replace existing quality assurance/quality development tools used by VET providers but will complement them. In 2008 and 2009, a project was carried out in Finland in which the European Peer Review procedure and criteria were tailored to Finnish initial and continuing VET. Furthermore, pilot Peer Reviews were conducted on a national level in initial VET and a structure for the support of Peer

² LdV Transfer of Innovation Project „Peer Review Impact“, 2009-1-FI1-LEO05-01584

³ <http://www.oead.at/index.php?id=1325>, last accessed on 4.2.2013

Reviews was developed – including Peer Review training. Peer Review has since spread to many different types of vocational education and training activities.

In Austria, a feasibility study on implementation of Peer Review within the national quality framework QIBB QualitätsInitiative Berufsbildung was carried out in 2008/2009. At the same time, the procedure was adapted and tested in a first national pilot. Starting 2009, Peer Review has been established as the external evaluation component on the institutional level within QIBB⁴. As in Finland, an organisational structure and support measures like training and mentoring have been introduced.

Peer Review has also been put to further use in other European countries/regions, including Italy, which has piloted Peer Review on national level in a network approach, Hungary and Spain/Catalonia. In Slovenia, Finland and Portugal, Peer Review was adapted for guidance and counselling services.⁵

Conclusions

Formative function of Peer Review. Establishing Peer Review as an improvement-oriented procedure has proven to be a sensible strategy. First of all, Peers as colleagues from other institutions experience role confusions if they are to act as inspectors or reviewers in assessments mandated by educational authorities. Also, the opportunity of engaging in an open dialogue among equals is greatly reduced if Peers are vested with superior authority and if the Peer Review may lead to considerable external consequences for the institution. Above all, Peer Review builds on the institutions' own interest to improve their services, the formative function therefore constitutes the motivational core of the methodology.

Enhances bottom-up quality development and networking. Ownership of evaluation processes promises high use of evaluation results. Networking and exchange between professionals from different institutions leads to transfer of good practice and a discourse on what constitutes high quality provision in education and training. Both parties – the reviewed institution and the Peers – benefit from the experience and all the expertise gained remains within the educational system.

Flexibility and adaptability. Peer Review builds on quality assurance activities already in place at the institution. It is not a new system but is inherently flexible and can be used in combination with existing quality assurance frameworks, practices and procedures.

Peer Review as stand-alone, external procedure or as complement. Most of the time, Peer Review is established as one possible way of conducting external evaluation complementing other, more control-oriented, schemes. If quality assurance builds on institutions' own commitment to quality assurance and development, Peer Review can also be introduced as the main methodology for external evaluation – as has been the case in Austria.

Support and continuous development. Peer Review has shown a high practicability and acceptability in implementation. It is also a comparably economic procedure since it does not require consultants and experts as reviewers. Yet, for introduction of Peer Review on a wider scale, some training of Peers and institutions, coordination, expert support, and evaluation is called for to ensure high-quality Peer Reviews, dissemination and continuous development of good practices in Peer Review. This is what the European Peer Review Association will endeavour to provide and support.

Further transfer. In pilot projects, Peer Review has been transferred successfully to continuous vocational education and training, adult education and guidance and counselling. Further projects could explore how Peer Review can be put to further use in other educational setting like general education, work-based learning, accreditation of prior learning and so forth. In addition, geographical transfer to those countries who have not been part of the “Peer Review experience” would extend implementation across Europe.

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2. Website of the European Peer Review Association www.peer-review-network.eu

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