



# National Strategy Paper Netherlands

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

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

The main lesson learned from the project is that Peer Review works well for Dutch VNFIL providers. It is a valuable tool for learning and improving VNFIL provision for the institutions involved. It is an important addition to the Dutch VNFIL Quality-code that focuses more on compliance. Peer Review, by contrast, is a tailored procedure that allows providers to decide upon the areas reviewed and the Peers to be invited. This leads to motivated learning process and an open way of dealing with successes and difficulties.

The two Dutch VNFIL providers, Libereaux and EVC Centrum Vigor who were involved as a project partner presented their findings with the project during the Dutch National EVC conference on 30 May in the Hague. They have clearly benefitted considerably from the project – most notably through the pilot phase, but also through the Peer Training and the transnational meetings and events held by the project. The learnings stem from the pilot Peer Reviews carried out, but also in general from the exchange with VNFIL providers from the other in the project – especially VNFIL providers from other countries which afforded the Dutch partners the opportunity to profit from other countries. Although in most countries the national implementation of VNFIL as a system for validation is less advanced, there was still a lot to learn. Independent from the development phase of providers it became clear that Peers learn mutually in both roles, as a Peer and also from being reviewed by Peers from VNFIL providers from other countries

The two Dutch providers came into contact with a very broad range of types of validation providers and countries with different implementation levels:

- Austria with formative VNFIL in adult education (Frauenstiftung Steyr) through formal VET qualification provision (Du kannst was, AK Salzburg) to specialised summative offers on higher qualification levels (Weiterbildungs-akademie) to the university sector (Universität für Bodenkultur). On national level Austria there was not a national approach towards VNFIL
- Portugal with summative VNFIL in VET (Citeforma en ISLA)
- France with their broad experience in formative VNFIL, Bilan de Competences and summative approach in Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience
- Lithuania and Slovakia as starting countries in VNFIL

The project has shown that Peer Review works for all of these types and development phases of VNFIL, sectors and levels and that an exchange on VNFIL provision between different institutions, sectors and countries is fruitful, breaking up the traditional fragmentation of VNFIL into adult education and VET on one side and the higher education sector on the other res. between formative and summative VNFIL practices.

On the Dutch national level, the project established a positive experience with Peer Review in VNFIL that will be continued after the project end. Through the large final conference (May 30, 2018) the project has joined forces with the current national developments in the VNFIL labour market route in the Netherlands. The conference has attained high visibility with policy decision-makers, both ministries and social partners and the VNFIL provider community.

During the national conference the added value of Peer Review for the further development of VNFIL and has the potential to boost further developments in Dutch VNFIL.

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

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

The development of professional skills in evaluation in the Peer Training

Self-exploration during the preparation of the Peer Review which uncovered areas of strength and areas of improvement that had not been focused on before

The feedback from the Peers – national and in particular also international Peers, this allowed VNFIL providers to tap into (international and national) best practice, and

Through experiencing other VNFIL practices and systems first-hand as Peers.

The learning effects revolved around the VNFIL offer itself (VNFIL processes and methods) but also on the organisation and market approach from the VNFIL providers. The Peer Review also offered an external view on the institution and impulses for organisational learning. Peer Review generally boosted motivation to engage in quality assurance and improvement and led to new cooperation between providers. The Dutch National Knowledge Centre on VNFIL recognised the added value of Peer Review for the further development of VNFIL in the labour market and has started the preparations to implement Peer Review as a formative method for quality development in the existing summative quality assurance system.

The experiences during the pilot phase with Peer Review have led to concrete outcomes for VNFIL providers. These outcomes which now have been implemented in their VNFIL offer:

Improvement of guidance. Peers noticed in their review that not all clients were aware that they could choose for different standards in validation. Clients are better informed now about the use of different standards for validation.

Stakeholders' involvement. Peers noticed that it was not always clear to candidates what they could do with VNFIL outcomes. The provider established better cooperation agreements with educational institutes about the value of the VNFIL outcomes in education.

Professionalization of staff. Peers noticed that there were differences between the training and knowledge of the assessors. The training of new assessors is improved as well as the guiding of existing assessors during in their work.

Organisation of VNFIL provision. Peers noticed that the responsibility in the organization was centralized with a few people. Management decided to decentralise responsibilities to their professionals with the effect that guiding, digital support, internal training and guiding of assessors is improved.

The pilot experiences also lead to positive feedback:

Organisation of VNFIL provision: Peers noticed that the VNFIL provider is organised as an open network organisation with a strong mission and vision and clear processes and procedures

Professionalization of staff: Assessors have a broad and elaborated experience in their field

Organisation of VNFIL provision: VNFIL is client and quality driven organised

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

VNFIL providers get their strengths confirmed.

Peer Review offers a chance for organisational learning.

Peers, people who are doing the same job, present the challenges they see in your organisation respectfully in a very accessible and convincing way.

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

You get informed about your blind spots (johari window).

Peer Review provides you with answers on questions you have about your own organisation.

Peer Review is mutual learning. Whether you are the requesting party or the Peer, both sides learn from Peer Review.

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

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

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

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

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

Peer Review supports and enhances cooperation and networking between validation providers. Besides the formal meetings with the National Knowledge Centre Dutch VNFIL providers are hardly connected to each other. A Peer Review offers the possibility of professional exchange of practices, alignment of outcomes and therefore strengthening of the trust clients can have in VNFIL

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

#### Potential

Quality assurance has been an important issue and field of development for the Dutch VNFIL provision for many years. Social partners urged the National Knowledge Centre in 2002 to come up with a method of quality assurance. Until that moment the Dutch VNFIL provision was described as ‘thousand flowers blooming’. All provision was beautiful in itself but it was not clear what the general value of the outcomes was.

After an elaborated period with stakeholder consultation on all levels the VNFIL Knowledge Centre came up with the Dutch quality code and a summative quality assurance system with awarding bodies. Two years later the standard for the ‘Experience Certificate’ was presented. Both measures led to the fact that VNFIL provision was aligned to the VNFIL quality code and that the outcomes were presented in a recognisable way. Employers and educational institutes recognised the outcomes of VNFIL. People got jobs based on their outcomes and adult students got exemptions in their educational programmes for vocational and higher education. The use of VNFIL grew every year. The ministry of Education decided in 2008 that government would not fund VNFIL provision, so the sector was privatised. Private VNFIL providers developed a market driven VNFIL provision. Candidates, their employers and/or employment agencies paid for their provision. Costs were covered by collective labour agreement funds, funds for unemployed and (national, European, and regional) project funds. In 2016 the ministry of education changed their attitude towards VNFIL, mainly driven by the vision that formal education should take up a greater role in life long learning. In their VNFIL policies they decided that VET and higher education should offer VNFIL to validate prior learning of their students and that the provision of education should be customised towards the individual learning needs of their students. This is a massive operation that is started since 2016. Formal education has started developing educational programmes with validation and customised learning since 2016 under the responsibility of the ministry of Education. This development is called VNFIL in the educational route. Quality assurance is no longer under the Dutch Quality code but is carried out by the education inspection.

Next to formal education standards people could and can validate their prior learning also in standards that are developed in the labour market by social partners or private organisations. This VNFIL provision is since 2016 called ‘the VNFIL Labour market route’. The Dutch Labour Foundation (umbrella organisation of social partners is responsible for this VNFIL provision. The Labour Foundation decided in 2016 to continue the work of the National Knowledge Centre and maintain the Dutch quality code for quality assurance.

#### Challenges

The VNFIL labour market route has its own challenges. The awareness for validation in the labour market is growing, proved by the fact that 36 providers still earn money enough for their existence. It has found its right to exist in offering validation for career development, finding new jobs and reorganizations. In all these cases employees benefit from validation proving prior learning during work experience. The labour market route for validation needs further development in quality, trust and branding.

First issue is trust. At the moment quality is guaranteed by an official recognition as VNFIL provider by the National VNFIL Knowledge Centre. This recognition is based on an assessment by an awarding body. The role of these awarding bodies in quality assurance is to assess the VNFIL provider against the Dutch National VNFIL code<sup>1</sup>. The work processes and quality of actors in validation are assessed. There is no assessment on the outcomes of validation. Since these providers work independent from education there is no guarantee that the outcomes of different providers maintain to be aligned.

Quality is the next issue. Quality maintenance is well organized. Each provider does further development of validation in terms of fit to their own market. The National VNFIL Knowledge Centre has also a role in quality development in consultation with the Labour Foundation. The labour market is changing from a market with a surplus in supply of people into shortages in many sectors. Validation will be one of the instruments that can help employers to attract people from other sectors. For this purpose the National Knowledge Centre has developed the possibility to validate people for a certificate of professional competence. This certificate describes the competences of people in terms of a profession. The challenge here is that for each profession new assessment standards need to be developed.

Last issue for validation in the labour market is branding. Not many employers and employees are aware of the existence of validation for professional competence. It needs to become more visible and regulated in sectors to use validation based on standards for a profession.

Overarching the both routes there is now the challenge to keep both systems connected. No one wants a situation wherein a candidate has been validated in one of the routes and finds a closed door for his certificate of experience in the other route.

During the National conference on May 30 2018 (in the Hague at the home of the Labour Foundation) the added value of Peer Review is presented to government, social partners and VNFIL providers. Partners recognised that Peer Review can have a role in quality development, alignment and exchange between VNFIL providers and, in this way, strengthen the VNFIL labour market provision.

The National Knowledge centre will take up further implementation of Peer Review in close cooperation with VNFIL providers who actually want to try out Peer Review and whether some minimal structure of coordination and support is available.

Reaching VNFIL providers can be done via the VNFIL providers network of the National Knowledge Centre. Communication will need to clarify the characteristics and added value of Peer Review and how it can be entangled with the summative Dutch quality code. Peer Review can be used as a method for further quality development, which is required in Code 5 of the Dutch quality code. Some concrete offers will need to be made (e.g. workshops, training, network meetings etc.) to get things going.

Coordination and support will be necessary. The Dutch National Knowledge Centre who already coordinates quality assurance can assume these tasks and responsibilities. Alternatively, the Project Coordinator ErikKaemingk could assume this role. Erik Kaemingk can be of assistance in any case – be it as main coordinator or as support for another coordinating institution.

All of this ties in with the availability of resources. Even though Peer Review is a relatively low-cost procedure (for the conduct of Peer Review only travel costs will need to be covered if Peers are exchanged between institutions), but it will require some funding for training, support and network

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nationaal-kenniscentrum-etc.nl/images/English/APL-qualitycode-Netherlands.pdf>

activities (which are central to Peer Review). Funding can be integrated in the contribution that VNFIL providers pay for quality assurance. Maybe for a good start additional funding can be found (European funding, ESF, national/regional funds?).

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

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

As mentioned above the current rollout of the labour market route could be a good chance for the further use of Peer Review in the Netherlands. And since two providers (Libereaux and EVC Centrum Vigor) were partners in the “Peer Review VNFIL Extended” project and the National Knowledge Centre represented the Dutch National board and hosted the Dutch National Peer Review Conference on May 30, 2018 in the Hague in the home of the Labour Foundation there is a likelihood that Peer Review will be part of the Dutch quality maintenance system as Peer Review would be ideally fit for completion of code 5.

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

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

### Potential

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

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

Some Austrian partners showed interest in the portfolio instruments that are developed by the Dutch partners. Exchange of instruments can go together with further cooperation and the need for mutual learning and alignment.

### Challenges

The main challenge on European level is funding.

Funding would be required for the extra costs (travel, but also extra time/staff resources) needed for transnational Peer Reviews. In counterpart of national Peer Review is not cheap. The costs and extra time are a serious obstruction for Dutch providers.



In addition, a stable coordinating body (e.g. EPRA) would be needed which also requires some elementary funding for its tasks.

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

### Dissemination of Conference on Quality in Validation (30.5.2018)

Outcomes of the National Conference will be published on two websites:

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

[www.nationaalkenniscentrumevc.nl](http://www.nationaalkenniscentrumevc.nl)