



Peer Review
VNFIL Extended

A synthesis report of VNFIL national strategies

(Austria, France, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and the Slovak republic)



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Peer Review VNFIL Extended

Transnational Peer Review for quality assurance in
Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) Extended
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*A synthesis report of VNFIL national strategies
(Austria, France, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and
the Slovak republic)*

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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)

Foreword

This synthesis report is a team effort and reflects contributions from partners working on Transnational Peer Review for quality assurance in Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning project.

Through the 2012 Recommendation Member States agreed to put in place validation arrangements by 2018, allowing individuals to obtain a qualification (or parts of a qualification) on the basis of validated knowledge, skills and competences. By the end of 2017 the first Member States have presented to the EQF Advisory Group their one-off reports on national validation arrangements implementing the Recommendation.

The Commission and Cedefop have produced revised European Guidelines in 2015 and updates (in 2014 and 2016) of the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. Among the findings of the 2016 Inventory are that validation arrangements are in place in 35 of the 36 countries covered, that increasing links exist between these arrangements and national qualifications frameworks and systems and that there is a significant increase in the number of countries with skills audits in place. On the other hand important challenges concern the development of professional competences of staff involved in validation and reaching disadvantaged groups.

The 'European Peer Review VNFIL Extended' project aims to improve the quality of VNFIL by extending the European Peer Review to further European partners and further countries, establishing Peer Review to complement and enhance the usual quality assurance systems in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL).

Building upon the results of a series of previous European programmes, the project seeks to increase the transparency, relevance, consistency and transferability of VNFIL across Europe. It provides a common standard and tools for Peer Review for different Member State VNFIL systems and VNFIL providers to improve, monitor and evaluate their quality assurance policies and practices in a manner appropriate to their national/institutional context. On European level the project supports mutual trust in transnational use of VNFIL and alignment of quality assurance methods across member states.

Peer Review – the external evaluation of VNFIL institutions/providers by Peers – is a promising instrument for quality assurance and development. It builds on quality activities already in place at a VNFIL institution/provider, it is cost-effective and it fosters networking and exchange between providers of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Transnational peer review in particular supports exchange between member states and VNFIL providers. In the project, this is used to strengthen mutual trust and enhance transnational cooperation, working towards a common standard for Peer Review on the European level.

The Peer Review VNFIL Extended project works with the Peer Review methodology and instruments as they have been developed in previous programmes. Most recently, in the Europeerguid-RVC project, the Manual, Toolbox, and Quality Areas for Peer Review have been adapted to use in 3 countries. VNFIL providers and stakeholders in other countries have expressed a strong interest in adapting and implementing the Peer Review framework and its instruments. This project takes up further fine-tuning and transfer of the methodology to new countries through piloting transnational Peer Reviews and capacity building activities for VNFIL practitioners.

In the project, 15 partners from 7 European countries conduct transnational Peer Reviews on VNFIL. Project partners are adult education and higher education providers, VET organizations, and special-

ized VNFIL centers, companies and NGOs. Also organizations that impact national policies were included, as well as European umbrella organizations for learning.

10 VNFIL providers obtain Peer Review feedback from national and transnational partners. The project enhances the quality and visibility of VNFIL-provision by making a complete inventory of current policies, QA systems and good practices, for all participating countries and on a European level. A reflection report provides in a scientific analysis of the added value of Peer Review, containing good practices and scientific information that can be used by VNFIL providers and national policy makers to underpin their choice for Peer Review in QA VNFIL. National strategy papers will be compiled to advise stakeholders in participating countries and European policy-makers on further development of their (trans) national quality frameworks on VNFIL.

To further disseminate Peer Review VNFIL across Europe, the project provides in a practical peer review reader for interested providers and policy makers, and publishes a policy paper on the outcomes of the project, indicating the added value of Peer Review for VNFIL providers and outlining opportunities for policy-making on a European level.

To ensure long-term impact the project supports the European Peer Review Association (EPRA) in setting up a sustainable network on Peer Review. This network starts up already during project implementation, when national coordinators and stakeholder committees are formed and, through (trans) national meetings and conferences, get involved by discussing relevant Peer Review inventories, national strategy papers and (European) policy papers.

Further, the project provides preparatory activities to formally set up a sustainable Peer Review Network. These include Business Model Canvas session(s) to develop a business plan for the Network, a Network database, a Peer Review register and Peer Review label. New and sustainable channels for dissemination and transference of the Peer Review methodology are thus an integral part of the project's outcomes. This enables the project to immediately influence, through the Peer Review Network, an emerging community of VNFIL providers and other stakeholders across Europe.

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1. LESSONS LEARNED / EXPERIENCES FROM THE PROJECT ON THE INSTITUTIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

For over the decade, the dynamic management of people's vocational pathways and transitions has been at the core of activities of different players – education providers, policy makers, social partners and others. In this context, Member states are trying to improve their practices for validating non-formal and informal learning where they exist, and to nurture such mechanisms where they are still in their infancy.

The variety of situations in this respect in the countries, represented in the project is significant. While for example, Slovak Republic still needs revision of the system of recognition and validation of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and Lithuania does not have a national strategy for validation as a separate comprehensive policy, Austria and Netherlands have well established systems for VNFIL. Therefore the lessons learned and experiences gained while implementing the PR in this sector are very different but nevertheless valuable for overall quality improvement in the respective countries.

In **Slovak Republic** the current legislation is not explicit in regard to the recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and consequently there are problems within the implementation of the legislation into the practise. There is only a list of authorised institutions accredited for validation that organise the examination. The Accreditation Body on the department of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport directs all these. It is the ministry, which approves of the qualifications standards, accredited educational programmes and allows the exams to the authorised institutions. Validation procedure is fully up to authorised institutions listed in the information system (ISDV ,<http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleInstitutions.aspx>). The employers and the labour market do not accept the outcomes of the non-formal and informal learning. The level of education in VNFIL is not recognised by the law, neither.

Therefore the potential impact of the project results differs a lot. The lessons learned in Slovak republic, for instance are very valuable and could lead to numerous national developments leading to improvements in VNFIL area.

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

The main lesson learned from the project in **Netherlands** 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.

Among the lessons learned in **France** is the acknowledgment that more investments should be done to “marketing” activities of the VNFIL towards potential beneficiaries. Also experiment with new forms of information sessions for candidates (e.g. group workshops, written validation information) that would allow a more efficient targeting of new types of beneficiaries. There is also become evident a lack of visibility in terms of tracing the drop-outs from the VNFIL process: there should be a

structured feedback system from the certification bodies that would allow tracking these beneficiaries and clarifying reasons for this.

In **Lithuania** the project implementation had a potential impact on several regulations which were amended last year to pave the way for validation of non-formal and informal learning on a more mainstream basis, both at national and sectoral levels.

At national level it has demonstrated how VNFIL could be better integrated into education and labour market policies. National VNFIL policymakers got an opportunity to review an effective VNFIL strategy, supported by activities developed by the project partners, and consequently contributed to improvement of the socio-economic situation of their citizens by providing them better and easier access to VNFIL.

For **Portugal** it becomes evident that Peers Training is gaining more importance. There is a necessity to inform, motivate and engage stakeholders to the importance of this methodology that enables a consistent and continues improvement opportunities, perform self-assessment followed by external evaluation by experts in the field. It is also important to ensure that service providers implement the improvement actions plan and conduct peer review continuously.

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.

2. Added-value of Peer Review (national and transnational) for VNFIL providers in the country

In this project, Peer Review, previously successfully adapted to continuous vocational education and training, adult education and guidance and counselling, has been transferred to explore how Peer Review could be put to further use in VNFIL and what could be the added value for VNFIL providers.

It should be emphasised that, as rightly illustrated by the **Austrian** example: in the project a very broad range of types of validation providers was represented – from formative VNFIL in adult education (Frauenstiftung Steyr) through formal VET qualification provision (Du kannst was, AK Salzburg) to specialised summative offers on higher qualification levels (Weiterbildungs-akademie) to the university sector (Universität für Bodenkultur). The project has shown that Peer Review works for all of these types of VNFIL, sectors and levels.

As a result, at national level, the project established a network of **Austrian** validation providers that will continue after the project end. Through the stakeholder committee the project has joined forces with the current implementation of the national validation strategy and has attained high visibility with policy decision-makers and the VNFIL provider community. The European perspective of the project – seeing how VNFIL is done in other countries – has provided additional arguments for promoting VNFIL in Austria.

For the **Dutch** 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.

Lithuanian VNFIL providers, which are at the moment developing or improving their VNFIL systems had an opportunity to positively contribute to the quality assurance and improvement. With a proper strategy, developed Programme for training for teachers, with piloting PR in VNFIL, which could be easily adapted and adopted, the project results were of the great help for positive developments at local/regional and national level.

In **Portugal** PR was feasible, however, raised many issues of peer involvement, availability of team members with a limited number of hours spent by VNFIL providers and also raised some questions at the level of indicators. Transnational Peer Review is a potential instrument but a main challenge is to conciliate the different practices VNFIL in several European countries. Another main challenge is also different languages.

In **France** the benefits of the Peer Review are perceived very clearly, namely the following: focus on quality improvement and professionalization, integration into quality cycle, formalization of the procedure and its outcomes. However, the stakeholders also came to the conclusion, that Peer Review is currently very rarely used in France, and usually in cases of international cooperation and development (e.g. OECD policy assessment, nuclear security, employment services peer review). The culture of peer review is missing and most of the quality assurance systems are based on quality standards, audit procedures and certification. At the same time the benefit of the Peer Review in France is a valuable instrument to be used within regional networks of bodies working in the field of information and identification in the VNFIL process.

Providers in **Slovak Republic**, however, cannot consider PR as a complementary assessment and vali-

dation due to several reasons. The validation process covers only restricted area of applicants, the processes reflect insufficient quality assurance standards, and the certification basically leads to trading licence, but not to general acceptance of certificates. National Lifelong Learning Institute proposed legislation corresponding to the implementation of the VNFIL agenda.

To conclude, the Peer Review offers ample opportunity for mutual learning and transfer of innovative practices among providers. Transnational Peer Reviews afford the possibility of learning from other countries and systems and are therefore particularly beneficial. 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. Yet its role in a future quality assessment system in VNFIL should be further defined, acknowledging that the current process of quality assurance in some countries is rather complex and at times too mechanistic but at the same time strongly embedded in legislation.

3. POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTING PEER REVIEW AS A FORMATIVE EXTERNAL EVALUATION FOR VNFIL INTO THE QA SYSTEM FOR VNFIL IN THE COUNTRY

3.1. BASIC VALIDATION FEATURES

Almost all partner countries agree on high potential for implementing the Peer Review in VNFIL; the implemented activities had high visibility and many providers felt compelled to “test” it to improve their performance. In several countries, it contributed to political debate on introducing Peer Review as a formative external evaluation for VNFIL into the QA system for the whole VNFIL sector. Across countries, new policies have been issued for increasing the transparency, coherence as well as the status of the VNFIL sector; however, in some countries, processes are not well coordinated. At the same time, investments are still insufficient to meet needs, and it is not clear that even current levels of funding will be sustained over time.

For instance, in **Netherlands**, 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 lifelong 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.

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

With the Austrian National Validation Strategy published and implementation activities going on since spring 2017, the current situation seems conducive for further use of Peer Review: Quality as-

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

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

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

In **Slovakia**, there are distinct arguments for future implementation of Peer Review. National Lifelong Learning Institute underwent a unique experience of practicing Peer Review on the international level. This cross-country experience equipped all with information to be used for lining up the strategy, if not the action plan, for implementing VNFIL in the Slovak Republic. If Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport will take the outcomes of the project (particularly the Peer Review outcomes) into account, in the near future it can be expected several subjects being challenged by the Peer Review.

For instance, Peer Review could have recognised its progress on the level of guidance. Adult Guidance Centres, could practice Peer Review in order to develop mutual development and growth on the quality assurance level. In this case, Peer Review could have been examined as a tool to counselors’ skills, knowledge, competence renewal and improvement, as well as tool for exchange counselors’ field experience within the network deployed in all regions of the Slovak Republic.

VNFIL systems are very diverse in different countries and in **France**, for instance, the main characteristics of the process are managed centrally by the ministries. Therefore potential of national impact is quite limited. The Peer Review, however, can have impact on the quality of the first phases of VNFIL (information, identification), where the process is less legislated and some flexibility can be found due to regional funding and piloting.

The only providers of VNFIL in **Portugal** are CQs. They can be promoted by public schools of primary and secondary level, vocational training centres from IEFP, local authorities or private training providers. The VNFIL system is financed by public budget in the case of the public schools and vocational training centres from IEFP. Local authorities and private training providers need to assure their own budget. It is possible to present a candidacy to European funds in the program Portugal 2020.

Lithuania does not have a national strategy for quality assurance in VNFIL; however several laws were amended in recent years to pave the way for quality assurance validation of non-formal and informal learning on a more mainstream basis, both at national and sectoral levels.

The experiences gained during the project in **Lithuania** tell us that peer review can work well if key components are in place: professional VNFIL counsellors, clear performance guidelines, explicit instructional standards, ongoing training, and effective supervision.

The benefits of peer review, however, depend on the professionals, providing not only evaluation

but also guidance and support. The assistance component of Peer Review is crucial in raising all providers sense of professional responsibility as they strive to meet high standards, and discuss their practice with others.

3.2. Conditions for developing and implementing validation

Validation is a complex process that requires the involvement of many different actors with different responsibilities and functions. It also depends on the education system, whether it centralised or decentralised.

Validation is a relatively well established procedure in **France** and the centralistic organization of the system limits the potential impact of Peer Review on its further development.

In Lithuania, there is ongoing debate about the appropriate locus of decision making within the education sector in regard to validation process. The debate remains unresolved because the process requires that policy makers rationalize and harmonize a complex set of complementary functions in VNFIL. The country has developed an action plan for non-formal adult education and continuing training for 2016-2023. The Law has a special chapter on VNFIL and provides 3 cases of validation: competences can be recognised as a part of finalised formal education programme, as a competence to perform a regulated job or function and as a qualification, corresponding to a certain Lithuanian Qualifications Framework level. In higher education sector procedures for VNFIL are established by higher education institution, in other sectors – by the Minister of Education and Science.

In the **Netherlands**, 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 Dutch 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.

A working group headed by the Austrian ministry developed In **Austria**, in the past year, a Quality Criteria Catalogue. The catalogue has met with high acclaim from the validation community and piloting of the quality criteria is planned for autumn 2018.

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

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

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

For **Portugal** the list of challenges remains open:

- Disseminate the activity developed by VNFIL providers to the main stakeholders
- Guarantee that the financing of VNFIL providers not depends on the public budget
- Ensure the credibility and recognition of VNFIL processes
- Extend VNFIL processes to higher education
- To attract candidates to the RVCC process, defining a centralized strategic policy of divulgation
- Ensure there are consistent training offers for candidates who obtain partial certification
- Attract employers to engage their employees in VNFIL processes
- Ensure the availability of resources so that the VNFIL service is available in a comprehensive manner, for anyone wishing to improve their qualifications. This involves stabilizing the network CQs and respective teams

As mentioned above, in **the Slovak Republic**, the conditions for developing and implementing of validation need to be enhanced by new legislation. According to the latest statement of the Slovak minister of Education Martina Lubyova, there is a plan to establish an independent agency for validation of VNFIL in the near future. In addition to that, Slovak ministry of education aims at new national project to implement VNFIL system in the Slovak Republic.

3.3. VALIDATION CONTEXTS

The VNFIL process in **France** is long (up to 12 months) and necessitates guidance by a specialist. The process follows the classical structure (identification – documentation – assessment – certification) and the outcome of VNFIL is always a formal qualification – there is no distinction between certificate / diploma gained through formal education and a certification gained through validation. As mentioned previously, the potential impact of Peer Review is mainly limited to the identification and documentation phase, as well as on guidance and counselling.

In **Portugal** VNFIL providers are structures of the National Qualifications System that play a key role in building bridges between the worlds of education, training and employment, in a perspective of learning throughout life.

Portuguese VNFIL providers are accompanied by the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP), which is responsible for coordinating the implementation of education and training policies for young people and adults and ensure the development and management of the system of recognition, validation and certification of skills.

The CQ aims to provide young people and adults an information service, guidance and referral in order to obtain an academic and/or vocational qualification. The **Portuguese** Centre also develops recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) acquired by adults throughout life by formal, informal and non-formal means, in their school or professional dimension.

In **Slovakia** it is important to remind that there is still an urgent need to regulate the funding of further education in the legislative, which has an impact on VNFIL. Furthermore, the costs-burden of the validation process (in its limited policy and approach manner) is borne by the participant in the education. The state regulates the maximum amount of fees a learner can pay by determining the amount of the fee. The current law on lifelong learning determines the amount of the fee up to max. EUR 300 for the test of professional competence.

In case we understand that performing the exam of professional competence (allowed by the year praxis) is in fact the only outcome and goal of validation process in **Slovakia**, instead of establishment

of use of successful evaluation methodologies that usually combine multiple techniques, although the most important and key role plays the portfolio; we have to admit that **Slovakia** is not even in the beginning of the assessment and validation process as understood by CEDEFOP (identification, etc.) and years of experience with validation in other EU countries.

In **Lithuania** Programme for increasing employment for 2014-2020 (2013) includes an objective for the development of the system for competences assessment and recognition. To implement this objective it is foreseen to restructure and develop the system for the recognition of qualifications and competences, so as to allow persons to quickly gain the desired education or to acquire the proof of qualification for a faster integration into the labour market.

However, the VNFIL system in **Lithuania** remains fragmented and the society in general is little aware about validation possibilities and benefits. There is a lack of available analysis about the acceptance of the outcomes of the VNFIL procedure with the relevant stakeholders.

A stimulus to boost bottom-up initiatives of validation in the third sector in **Lithuania** is yet to be identified. However this remains a priority mainly because non-governmental organisations are in need of this type of intervention. In many cases, these organisations have developed their own internal procedures to facilitate recognition validation within their own areas of work, although they may have limited knowledge in terms of the implementation of validation in practical terms.

The validation context in **Netherlands** seems much stronger. Next to formal education standards people in **Netherlands** 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.

However the VNFIL labour market route has its own challenges in **Netherlands**. 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.

Austrian validation context remains strong but further implementation of Peer Review depends on whether VNFIL providers actually want to try out Peer Review and whether some minimal structure of coordination and support is available.

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

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

3.4. Plans for further use of Peer Review for VNFIL in the country

Peer Review for VNFIL in **Slovakia** can be used for both formatting and summarizing purposes. The

aim would be feedback, obtaining information as learners / peers, revelation of difficulties and mistakes while diagnosing deficiencies. In terms of patterns regularity, it could be an excellent tool to monitor means of success:

- diagnosis (prevention, control) of employers'/company determination to apply knowledge, skills, habits, attitudes, direction; identification of strengths and weaknesses,
- prognosis: possibilities of their further development, what can happen and under what conditions,
- motivation: maintaining and increasing the interest in taking action
- learning: process of learning is obvious on all levels of Peer Review; every participant of Peer Review learns, through this process of learning naturally in the work place environment; it also forms lots of positive qualities and attitudes (eg honesty, autonomy, diligence, reliance on oneself and others....) and removes many negative qualities (fear, mistrust, lack of self-assurance...),
- information - documentation of results and their continuous notification; insight into data shows different perspective in handling the same information; balance of bringing and receiving information makes Peer Review a good deal for all participants,
- developing – development of staff/company/systems/policies....Peer Review can help to set more precise and realistic goals to be reached step by step; Peer Review helps reading and limiting obstacles before they occur
- feedback: internal feedback- on the individual level, external feedback- on the level of peers, colleagues, etc.

Lithuanian project partner, the LETU, has applied to run an international project, which will further promote PR for VNFIL by improving the existing tools and the competencies of professionals.

Objectives, aims:

Ensure the professionalization and well-functioning system of VNFIL

1. Development of self-evaluation and self-analysis tools for candidates
2. Professionalization of the VNFIL process – training programme for trainers and for guidance counsellors
3. Advocating in society and establishing strategy for VNFIL

Target groups: VNFIL providers and candidates in VET sector, professionals (trainers, guidance counsellors), stakeholders, policy advisors.

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

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

In **the Netherlands** 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 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.

Peer Review in **France** is planned to be used on the regional level in the Burgundy – Franche-Comté region. In terms of a larger scale impact, the peer review was implemented within the regional network of PRC VAE centres in this region. The merger of the two previously separated regions led to organizational changes in VNFIL provision that necessitated a harmonization of the practices. The peer-review will be first used as a first approach, but in a less formalized way (shorter duration, use of different documentation etc.) since September 2018.

In **Portugal** the further steps are planned:

- Create connections with ANQEP
- Involve remaining partners and stakeholders. Promote mentoring activities.
- Disclose the potential of using the Peer Review methodology.
- Integrate this methodology into the current quality management systems of the VNFIL provider.

3.5. POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES OF BUILDING UP A PEER REVIEW NETWORK IN VNFIL ON THE EUROPEAN LEVEL.

All in all, partners are very optimistic in terms of the future potential of PR in VNFIL. According to **Lithuanian** partner, PR network could introduce some measures to improve awareness of validation amongst guidance practitioners, so that they can direct individuals to validation systems as appropriate. It could provide specific information, advice and guidance networks/institutions involved in delivering/developing validation. A systematic approach towards the issue should be further developed.

Further harmonisation at EU level is needed. Though modularisation of curricula in vocational education and in labour market training is ongoing, the modules are not harmonized and do not allow for a flexible implementation of PR. There is very little mobility between labour market training and vocational education. The same situation is observed through all levels of education.

The sustainability of validation approaches and systems should be insured. A significant part of the activity related to validation has been taken forward through projects and limited duration programs.

According to **French** partner, an attractive accreditation/labelling procedure of Peer Review could increase the recognition of the process. However, there is currently little recognition in **France** of foreign quality awards – mainly given the linguistic barriers. Individual providers of VNFIL are motivated by transnational experiences in Peer Review, however, there needs to be a financial support that would cover the necessary costs of such enterprise. A possibility of organizing structured Peer-Review was invoked by stakeholders within the Erasmus+ mobilities (KA1).

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.

The **Austrian** partners see optimistically at the existing Peer Review Network.

There are also some ideas for continuing European cooperation through future Erasmus+ projects: i.e. in the area of health (around the validation of competences of health professionals) and in higher

education. The latter could further investigate the needs and conditions for further development of VNFIL in the European Higher Education Area and explore the potential of Peer Review for contributing to coherent quality standards in VNFIL across institutions and countries.

The **Dutch and Austrian** partners believe that 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.

In **Portugal** with the change of government, it is possible that there will be a strengthening of learning policies throughout life. Therefore Portuguese partners believe that it is necessary to ensure the fulfilment of Europe 2020 objectives, as well as guarantee the existence of standards for all professions and continue to develop tools to support VNFIL teams.

The **Slovakian** partners believe that it is important to make it visible and usable! It has to have a common feature, though each country can use it for its own purposes. Usability, worthiness and trustworthiness must be visible, or obvious to all participating units cross sectors. Potential of Peer Review can grow when well fitted within cause and effect gadget. There are several causes where Peer Review could provide effect on the EU level.

The Princeton University Human Resources Department study shows that people acquire 70% of their skills in the workplace, 20% coaching and only 10% training. Training must also be immediately tested in practice otherwise it will be unnecessary.

Having considered the validity of these data, the **Slovakian** partners are confident to say that Peer Review already guarantees bring high percentage reason to become effective while being set at a workplace already (and in fact, that is the only way to carry the Peer Review). Peer Review in fact validates the cause and effect of implementation of wide range of skills, knowledge and competences and at the same time, asks all Peer Review participants to apply, acquire and improve theirs.

Secondly, Peer Review uses questions as a tool of re/research. Peer Review is very attentive to avoid making framed conclusions, suggestions, advices, etc. So its professionals ask coaching questions. It unlocks the potential and makes the Peer Review receivers to open doors, even the *thirtieth chamber*, if it finds the key and will for opening.

The third part could definitely stand for training part. Now, it is up to the company/individuals to train their experience from Peer Review in practice.

As far as Peer Review, **Slovakia** can go even little further. Re-taking Peer Review in periods don't prove company's failure or weakness, contrariwise, it supports determination to seal the progress and dust off the goals previously forecasted. _____

4. Further dissemination of Peer Review in the country

The further dissemination of PR depends very much on all stakeholders but mainly on the government.

The **Slovakian** partners believe that if ministry of Education starts to implement the national project on VNFIL in the **Slovak Republic**, the counselling and training of those who manage and implement validation processes should include the training of peers in order to participate in Peer Reviews and gain knowledge of the tool as such. It could enhance their professionalization, EU VNFIL practices and the overall transparency of validation processes to be later launched in SR.

In the near future, Peer Review will be hopefully recognised by

- professional organisations, networks,
- organisations founded by the ministry to provide or fulfil tasks in lifelong learning, guidance professionals (e.g. public employment services....)

Lithuanian partners are of the opinion, that there should be no obstacles what regards peer review in HE institutions, however VET providers may be reluctant to participate in peer review, since they are less involved in these processes. The Ministry of Education and Science, which could encourage them, therefore plays here a crucial role.

The National stakeholders committee established via project: Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre, Ministry of Education and Science, The Education Exchanges Support Foundation, Lithuanian Education Trade Union, Lithuanian Association of Adult Education, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, VET providers will continue to promote PR.

Among the aims of the Action plan to develop non-formal adult education are some measures directed to VNFIL:

- to increase the proportion of public VET institutions which evaluate and recognise competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
- to increase the proportion of public higher education institutions that have implemented systems for recognising and validating competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning and implement the systems for recognition and validation of skills and competencies acquired through non-formal or informal learning.

By involving European social partners (ETUC, ETUCE, BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME and CEEP) into dissemination activities, the project partners aim to ensure the proper participation of all interested parts in the insuring quality of VNFIL, which should be supported by strong social dialogue.

In **France** the main focus of the dissemination efforts was on the regional level: the regional information and identification centres PRC VAE were targeted. Elements of Peer Review were integrated into the network during the merger of the Burgundy region with Franche-Comté region. The newly created regional network is currently composed of 20 counsellors from PRC VAE. The experience of CIBC Bourgogne Sud in Peer Review approach was presented during the meeting in October 2017.

The Peer Review experience will also be presented to representatives of the regional committees for lifelong guidance in Burgundy and Franche-Comté, so that the practice can be integrated in the quality assurance practice of the region. First regional Peer Reviews are planned for September 2018.

The Peer Review approach was disseminated to the National Federation of CIBCs, representing more than 250 centres of bilan de compétences. The current quality assurance system developed by this network is based on a quality chart and an audit process and applied only to the provision of lifelong guidance. However, in order to stimulate the quality development of the practice, the network con-

siders organizing pilot Peer Review experiences between regional centres of career guidance and bilan de compétences. The real spread of the practice will depend on the perceived usefulness of this practice by the regional providers. The practice will be used in its simplified form: for example, given certain homogeneity of the context and of the practice, the initial self-evaluation will be made simpler.

Portuguese partners are planning to use the National Stakeholder Committee to disseminate the project results to their networks. National meetings and training given by ANQEP will be privileged moments to attract and engage other providers

The participation of ANQEP the national committee will be essential to ensure the dissemination of peer review with the entire national network.

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

The Frauenstiftung Steyr as award winner of the Austrian National Adult-Education Award has created a lot of interest in and visibility for Peer Review. They disseminate mainly to adult education and labour market institutions, in particular also the Austrian Employment Service as a key player in validation in Austria. They have engaged in external mentoring with another institution providing training for the labour market. They are planning to continue with presentations, PR and media work. As chamber of labour, AK Salzburg has access to different players in validation and will continue dissemination through different channels. Most notably, AK Salzburg with its leading role in the roll-out of „Du kannst was“ will strive to continue to use Peer Review within the Chamber of Labour networks.

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

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

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

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

European Peer Review Association (EPRA) has over the past 2.5 years spent a lot of time and energy

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

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