

## Feasibility Study Peer Review

### *Executive Summary*

#### **Objective and Method**

The objective of the feasibility study commissioned by ARQA-VET was to explore how the European Peer Review Procedure (cf. the European Peer Review Manual, Gutknecht-Gmeiner et al., 2007), which was developed through European cooperation and which has already been successfully tested at Austrian pilot schools, could be introduced at Austrian VET schools and which preconditions, preparatory work and support structures are necessary for this introduction.

For this purpose, the Austrian Institute for Research in Vocational Education and Training (öibf) involved all stakeholders of the Austrian VET school system between March and November 2008 in this study by means of workshops and/or in depth interviews. Among these were school representatives as the primary target group, the QIBB (quality initiative VET) steering group, the DG VET in the Austrian ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture, the regional school inspectorates of all school types, the regional quality project managers, and the colleges for teacher education. Experiences from current Peer Review pilots in the context of QIBB were taken into consideration too.

Based on the feedback of the different target groups, specific recommendations concerning the implementation of a Peer Review procedure that is tailor-made to Austria are now available.

#### **Results**

##### *Basic principles and definition of Peer Review*

The European Peer Review Procedure was defined as a qualitative, formative and external evaluation procedure that should serve the internal school development and not the control through the school inspectorate. Basic principles are the voluntary participation as well as professional exchange and networking between schools. This definition was confirmed by the prevailing majority of the interviewed persons as meaningful. The voluntariness goes hand in hand with strengthening the self-responsibility of the schools. Thus, the schools' competence to decide should encompass all phases and cycles of the Peer Review - from the decision to participate over the selection of quality areas and the recruitment of peers up to the implementation of improvement measures as a follow-up of the Peer Review.

##### *Peers*

Concerning the definition of peers, the interviewed persons - except for one minor linguistic change - agree with the definition contained in the European Peer Review Manual (cf. European Peer Review Manual, p. 38ff): Peers are thus colleagues from other schools, who are of equal standing with the persons whose performance is being evaluated. The possibility of including stakeholder representatives, particularly persons from business, into the peer teams consisting of four people, was appreciated. Likewise, especially the interviewed schools explicitly wished for peer teams that would be overarching over school types and federal regions.

Following the European Peer Review Manual, the knowledge and experience of the peers concerning the questions of the respective Peer Review were seen as an important selection criterion for peers. By contrast, the evaluation competence of peers as a further important quality criterion for Peer Reviews needs to be guaranteed by peer training according to the opinion of the interviewed persons.

Besides the professional qualifications, competences in communication and moderation are of significance as well as a professional attitude of the peers. The confidentiality of the data needs to be guaranteed through corresponding agreements too.

### *Embedding and contextualization of Peer Review in QIBB*

The introduction of Peer Review in QIBB was appreciated by the interviewed persons as an important and meaningful addition to the existing instruments and procedures. In general, Peer Review is judged as a very well suited procedure of external evaluation for VET schools.

Precisely, the relationship between Peer Review and the QIBB principles and instruments looks as follows:

- The core elements of QIBB (mission statement, quality matrix, internal evaluation, quality report, management and performance review, quality handbooks) are very well suited as starting points for Peer Review.
- In particular through the introduction of the internal evaluation in the framework of QIBB, the foundation is laid for external institutional evaluations like Peer Review.
- The quality matrix (processes, indicators) serves as a basis and reference for questions of Peer Reviews.
- The quality report constitutes the core of the self report, which is supplemented by the specific questions addressed to peers.
- Peer Review as an additional instrument is included into the quality handbooks, and the QIBB instruments are respectively complemented by a method handbook - based on the European Peer Review Manual.

The inclusion of evaluation results into the Peer Review seems to make sense, but the condition is the protection of the QIBB agreements concerning the data ownership. The obligatory inclusion of the Peer Review results into the management and performance reviews, however, is rejected by the majority of the interviewed persons, because this runs counter to the principles of self-responsibility and voluntariness. The possibility of international Peer Review, in which a peer from abroad is also invited to be part of the peer team, should continue to exist.

### *Need for adaptation of the European Peer Review procedure to QIBB as well as to the situation in the Austrian VET school system*

The Peer Review procedure as suggested and described in detail in the European Peer Review Manual suits the implementation in Austria very well. Thus there is currently no need for adaptation.

In the pilot project "Peer Review in the framework of QIBB", the öibf as project coordinator revised all necessary Peer Review sheets and manuals for the use within the framework of QIBB - both as far as terminology is concerned as well as administrative-organisational conditions are concerned. It was taken care to avoid doubling in the documentation and to consider the requirements of the European procedure in order to guarantee the international comparability and to make it possible to carry out transnational Peer Reviews.

### *Structures, competences, and responsibilities*

For the implementation of Peer Review the involvement of all important stakeholders of the Austrian VET school system is of central importance. The exceptionally high participation of regional school inspectorates and regional quality managers in the feasibility study shows the high interest of these target groups in Peer Review.

In particular, the school inspectorate has an important role to play in the dissemination and establishment of Peer Review. The regional school inspectors see themselves primarily as multipliers and promoters. Not completely clear is the feedback concerning the question of a possible quality assurance function of the school inspectorate: Whereas most of the interviewed persons regard such a function as incompatible with the basic direction of Peer Review as a development oriented procedure that is decided by the schools themselves, some of the interviewed persons argue for engaging the inspectorate in the preparation of Peer Reviews as well as in

the implementation of improvement measures after the Peer Review. In this respect, a clarification of roles is necessary. There is wide agreement concerning the necessity of informing the school inspectorate of carrying out a Peer Review. The regional quality project managers can also function as multipliers if their resources allow it.

If the coordination, quality assurance and monitoring of Peer Reviews should not become the tasks of the school inspectorate, it is recommended to entrust an independent coordinating body with this task - like in the higher education sector, where quality assurance agencies have taken over this function. In the view of the QIBB steering group, by establishing ARQA-VET, the Austrian Reference Point for Quality Assurance in VET, an institution was created that would be suitable to fulfil this function. If Peer Review is implemented in the framework of QIBB, the coordinating body will have reporting duties (still to be defined) to the responsible persons in the school system - Ministry, inspectorates - and will be encouraged to work closely with the persons responsible for QIBB at the different levels.

Following the experiences from the European Peer Review projects, in which the öibf had this supportive, coordinating and quality assuring function - the spectrum of tasks of this coordinating body could encompass the following areas: coordination of Peer Reviews, providing information and networking services to schools and other stakeholders, guidance, support of schools, recruitment of peers and provision of a peer register, documentation, monitoring, reporting, quality assurance and further development of the process as a cross-section task.

#### *Support of schools and peers*

On the part of the schools and the potential peers there is in particular a high need for information. It is important for the information and dissemination strategy that multipliers in place can inform schools adequately about Peer Review.

In carrying out Peer Reviews there is also the need for guidance offers and for support in the process. Besides the peer trainings, there should also be trainings or workshops for the persons responsible at the schools. The schools themselves have also identified a need for coordination. This concerns the support in the selection of peers in particular, i.e. the placement of suitable persons as well as offers for exchange of experience and for the networking of schools among each other.

It is recommended to have a coordinated procedure that is agreed upon by the different stakeholders both in the introductory phase of Peer Review as well as in the regular procedures in order to avoid inconsistencies and double tracks.

#### *Quality management*

In developing the European Peer Review procedure, both the elements and criteria of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF), which also forms the basis for QIBB, were taken into consideration, and the "Standards for Evaluation" (Joint Committee 1994, DeGEVal 2004) were kept as professional (and internationally acknowledged) rules. The present Peer Review procedure (European Peer Review Manual) thus corresponds to the state-of-the-art of evaluation.

The interviewed persons emphasised a number of areas as particularly critical and/or decisive for the quality management of Peer Reviews: This concerns for example the selection of peer teams (here schools partly need support, and a coordinating body can also offer suggestions and recommendations), the training of peers, the training of the responsible persons at the schools as well as the drawing up of the time plan and the preparation of Peer Reviews. For the efficiency of Peer Reviews, in particular the follow-up phase at the school after receiving the Peer Review report is decisive.

As overarching activities of quality management an appropriate documentation and the monitoring of Peer Review activities were identified. Likewise, a meta-evaluation is asked for in order to guarantee the assurance of results and support the further development of the procedure.

### *Peer Trainings*

First and foremost, the teacher training colleges should be responsible for the training of peers as they are the most important providers of further education in the school system. It is important to have a consistent offer of trainings throughout Austria and for all school types in order to be able to carry out also Peer Reviews that are school type and regionally comprehensive - as was desired by the schools.

Peer Trainings should, according to the interviewed persons, roughly encompass the following aspects: methods of data investigation/finding, questioning techniques, agreement finding, condensing data, giving feedback, time management etc. Likewise, the particular role of peers as "critical friends" should be a subject-matter in the training.

So far, peer trainings have been provided both by external experts (for example in the Tandem Peer Review of the HTL Lastenstraße Klagenfurt and the HTL Kuchl) as well as by different teacher training colleges (PH Wien, PH NÖ, KPH Wien, PH OÖ).

### *Human resources and material costs*

There exist fairly exact estimates for the direct need of human resources and material costs per Peer Review, which were also the basis for funding the pilot project "Peer Review in the framework of QIBB". It needs to be differentiated between the costs for the peers / the human resources, and the material costs which schools need.

For a two-day long Peer Review, the two days of the peer visit are to be assessed for the peers (including the costs resulting from substitute teachers, if necessary) as well as a time for preparation and post-processing of one to two days (depending on the function in the peer team). In addition, there is the training of peers, which can however also be incorporated into the preparatory phase. The material costs entail the travel and hotel costs as well as allowances for peers coming from outside.

Schools incur only very low material costs. Particularly in the preparation of the Peer Review, however, it needs at least one person (Peer Review Facilitator), who coordinates and/or drafts the self-report and who is in charge of the organisational preparation of the peer visit. This person should also be permanently available during the two-day visit if possible. Since both the range as well as the intensity of the activities can strongly vary in the preparatory phase, here it needs to be pointed to the results of the evaluations from the pilot project, which will be available at the end of the project in autumn 2009.

### *Building networks and further implementation steps*

Peer Review as a development-oriented, "friendly" external evaluation constitutes an enrichment of the QIBB instruments, which will in this initial phase primarily appeal to schools experienced in evaluation. It is, however, to be warned against overburdening schools in this current phase by introducing the procedure too quickly. In the further implementation of Peer Review it needs to be progressed cautiously and in small steps. The schools' voluntary participation is a precondition. Information and awareness-raising are in the focus of the approach: schools should be convinced and motivated to participate in particular through good practice examples.

As next steps, extensive information activities for all stakeholders were particularly mentioned - starting with the information (and possibly training) of multipliers, followed by further pilot studies. At the same time a sufficient peer pool needs to be built up. For this, further peer trainings are necessary too. The (positive) experiences from the pilot studies should then be played back to the relevant stakeholders (like for example interested schools) and thus support the further implementation of Peer Review by way of a positive reinforcement.