

# ETF FORUM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

## PEER VISIT GUIDANCE AND TRAINING MANUAL SUMMARY VERSION



Quality Assurance Forum

# THE ETF FORUM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The European Training Foundation (ETF) established a Forum for Quality Assurance in VET in 2017. This Forum is a transnational collaboration initiative between national institutions with VET quality assurance mandates in sixteen ETF partner countries<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the Forum is to support its member countries to modernise and improve quality assurance in VET by providing the context and means for peer learning through transnational cooperation.



November 2018

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<sup>1</sup> **ETF Forum for Quality Assurance in VET Member Countries:**

Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo (this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of independence), Lebanon, Libya, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine (this designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual position of the EU Member States on this issue), Serbia, Tunisia and Turkey.

# INTRODUCTION

This publication introduces the reader to the contents of the European Training Foundation's (ETF) *Peer Visit Guidance and Training Manual*<sup>2</sup> developed for the ETF Forum for Quality Assurance in VET. The Manual, currently a Working Paper, provides guidance and a training concept for the implementation of Peer Visits that aim to support self- and peer- assessment of VET quality assurance measures.

The *Peer Visit Guidance and Training Manual* is an ETF capacity-building tool that aims to ensure meaningful and sustained learning and sharing of good practices through Peer Visits focussed on quality assurance in VET. The Manual provides a framework for a Peer Visit procedure for ETF Forum member countries. It guides Forum member institutions through the different phases of a Peer Visit referring to roles and tasks of the host, peers and observers. A set of training materials accompanies the Manual.

Peer learning has taken the central stage in the methodology to implement the Forum objectives and work plan. Peer learning in the context of the Forum encompasses a number of different mechanisms that support learning from and with peers. In the peer learning activities, the peers simultaneously learn from other peers and contribute to other peers' learning by sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences. Forum members ensure that their learning outcomes have an impact on quality assurance developments in their national contexts. Peer learning is, metaphorically speaking, a stepping-stone in the Forum members' quality assurance journey.



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<sup>2</sup> ETF Forum for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training – Working Paper, [Peer Visit Guidance and Training Manual](#) (2018). Gramlinger, F., Jonach, M., ARQA-VET in association with Watters, E., ETF.

# PEER VISIT CONCEPT

## Aims of Peer Visits

Peer Visits are intended to support the core objectives of the Forum for Quality Assurance in VET. This means that they are expected to support the modernisation and improvement of quality assurance in VET by providing the context and means for peer learning through transnational cooperation.

A Peer Visit is a form of external feedback from peers, with the aim of supporting a Forum member acting as the host in its quality assurance development efforts. An external group of peers is invited to give feedback on the quality assurance measures selected by the host institution.

ETF Forum Peer Visits take place in a member country of the Forum represented by its Forum member institution. National Contact Persons representing Forum member institutions are the direct target group of this procedure and can take roles as hosts on behalf of their institution, peers or observers.

## Principles of ETF Forum Peer Visits

There are some principles to be taken into account when it comes to the implementation of Forum Peer Visits.

- Participation as a host or a peer is voluntary.
- The interests and needs of the institutions involved are central.
- They take account of cultural differences influencing the process and the feedback.
- The focus is on both the strengths and the weaknesses of the selected quality assurance approach/measure.
- The host Forum member institution is expected to reflect on and work with the results of the peer feedback.

Peer Visits are not intended to be controlling, technical or bureaucratic procedures and should not be misused in the sense of glorifying or marketing organisations, persons, concepts or approaches.





## ETF Forum Peer Visits – roles and responsibilities

Careful preparation is essential for a successful Peer Visit. One of the first things to do is to determine the roles and responsibilities of all actors within the procedure.

**Forum host institutions:** Host institutions are those who get feedback from Forum peers on their quality assurance measures to be reviewed within the Peer Visit. The host institution will have to invest personnel and financial resources. The host institution is also responsible for taking action on the results of the peer feedback.

**Forum peers:** Their role is to give critical but constructive and supportive feedback. Peers are persons who are equal to or are on equal standing with the persons who are given feedback. They work in a similar environment and have a similar expertise. Peers are not expected to act in a judging or controlling way or manner. They should have a clear motivation to engage in a reflective process and are encouraged to think about the transferability of what they have heard and seen in their own national context.

**Observers (optional):** Observers<sup>3</sup> can be nominated. The role of an observer is to reflect on the whole procedure. The main tasks are to observe whether the process is implemented effectively and efficiently and to give advice on areas for improvement.

A funding and/or a content specialist body may support the host institution in the management and coordination of the Peer Visit and/or the identification of external experts as relevant and appropriate.



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<sup>3</sup> See: Peer Visit guidelines for observers. Manual Annex 1 (M6)

## The four phases of a Peer Visit

- Phase 1. Preparation of the Peer Visit
- Phase 2. Peer Visit in the country of the host Forum member institution
- Phase 3. Peer feedback to the host Forum member institution
- Phase 4. Follow-up: consideration of improvements based on the feedback



Peer Visits offer opportunities for mutual learning for all partners involved. A Peer Visit is a development-orientated procedure, which puts emphasis on demonstrating and analysing the strengths and weaknesses of existing quality assurance approaches and related quality assurance measures.

In contrast to Study Visits, Peer Visits put a strong emphasis on professional feedback by a group of peers within a clearly structured procedure. The core intention of the procedure is that this feedback is valuable and helpful for the host Forum member institution and can serve as a basis for improving the quality assurance in VET measures under review.



# PEER VISIT PHASES

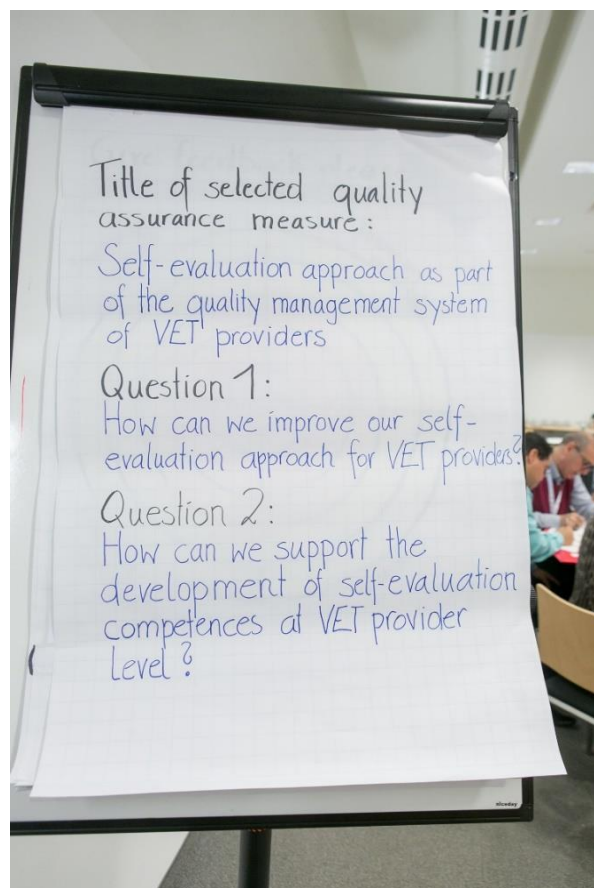
## Phase 1. Preparation of the Peer Visit

The Peer Visit procedure starts with a preparatory phase. The Forum host institutions should reserve a timeframe of normally three to five months to prepare for a Peer Visit.

In this phase, the host institution plans and organises the Peer Visit. Peers must be well informed in order to prepare for their role and their tasks.

The host institution identifies the quality assurance measure in need of improvement. In order to have some orientation and guidance in relation to the selection of a quality assurance measure, reference can be made to ETF's key areas for VET quality assurance<sup>4</sup>.

Basic decisions concerning the Peer Visit need to be documented at an early stage by the host institution. The Peer Visit information sheet<sup>5</sup> serves as an initial information document for the Forum peers. It includes the basic information about the Peer Visit (timeline, quality assurance measure, roles and responsibilities). It should, ideally be sent to the peers two months before the Peer Visit.



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<sup>4</sup> Watters, E. (2015), The ETF Approach to promoting Quality Assurance in VET, ETF Working Paper, p. 19ff.

<sup>5</sup> See: Form for Peer Visit initial information sheet. Manual Annex 1 (M1)

## The National Context Report

The National Context Report<sup>6</sup> is the core document; it provides information on all matters related to the Peer Visit. The host institution prepares the National Context Report in cooperation with relevant national-level stakeholders. The Report has to include: general information on VET and quality assurance in VET in the host country; the measure that is the focus of the Peer Visit and the reasons why it was chosen; the self-assessment of the measure; special assessment questions for peers; first ideas/considerations for utilising the feedback after the Peer Visit. The ETF Forum country fiches<sup>7</sup> may be used to give an overview of the status quo of the quality assurance approach. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats,) analysis<sup>8</sup> for each selected quality assurance measure is recommended.

The Agenda for the Peer Visit is also prepared. The Agenda should be aligned with the sections of the National Context Report and allocate time for sessions that cover all the elements it contains. The Agenda allocates time for: discussion of the assessment questions for peers formulated by the host institution; site visits, when appropriate, of relevant institutions; a peer group reflection session and for the final feedback session.

The host institution is also responsible for the invitation of national stakeholders, briefing of presenters and the organisation of site visits as relevant.

The National Context Report and the Agenda should be sent to the peers about four weeks before the Peer Visit takes place.

To prepare for the Peer Visit, the peers<sup>9</sup> need to be acquainted with the Peer Visit purpose and procedure; read all information provided by the host institution; reflect on the special assessment questions in relation to the situation in their own countries; reflect on areas for investigation during the Peer Visit; consider additional questions.



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<sup>6</sup> See: Form for National Context Report. Manual Annex 1 (M2).

<sup>7</sup> ETF Forum country fiches are short descriptions of the status quo of quality assurance in vocational education and training in the member countries of the ETF Forum.

<sup>8</sup> See: Example for a SWOT analysis. Manual Annex 1 (M3).

<sup>9</sup> See: Guidelines for peers: Preparation for Peer Visits. Manual Annex 1 (M4).



## Phase 2. Peer Visit in the country of the host Forum member institution

During the Peer Visit, the host institution and other national stakeholders or experts present the national quality assurance approach and the chosen quality assurance measure. Visits to relevant organisations, bodies or VET providers can take place.



Peers check the accuracy of the information provided in the National Context Report and conduct their own investigation, by gathering and assessing additional data related to the selected quality assurance measure. Peers gain a deeper understanding of the quality assurance measure selected by the host institution and the related issues, by active listening, asking questions and analysing all information and evidence provided.

### Peer Assessment: Active and effective listening, observing and questioning

During the Peer Visit, the peers listen to presentations and discussions and take part in site visits to relevant institutions. Giving valuable feedback requires active and effective listening to, observing and questioning those who are presenting the information and issues during the Peer Visit<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> See: Peterson, S. (2012), "The labour of listening", *International Journal of Listening*, 26:2, 87-90

A peer who is practising active and effective listening, observing and questioning is:

- **Knowledgeable:** familiar with the focus of the Peer Visit, specifically with the quality assurance measure described in the National Context Report.
- **Focused:** stays on the topic (selected quality assurance measure), does not ask questions on topics that are not central to the Peer Visit.
- **Clear:** asks simple, easy and short questions and uses an appropriate language that fits to the person providing the information (e.g. policy maker, teacher, student).
- **Gentle:** lets people finish, gives them time to think; tolerates pauses.
- **Sensitive:** listens attentively and carefully to what is said and how it is said, is empathetic in dealing with the presenter or interviewee.
- **Open:** responds to what is important to the presenter or interviewee and is flexible.
- **Steering:** knows what he or she wants to find out.
- **Critical:** is prepared to challenge what is said, for example dealing with inconsistencies in presenters or interviewees replies.
- **Remembering:** relates what is said to what has been previously said.
- **Balanced:** does not talk too much and does not talk too little.
- **Ethically sensitive:** is sensitive to the ethical dimension of questioning.
- **Interpreting:** clarifies and extends meanings of presenters or interviewees' statements, but without imposing meaning on them.

### Application of questioning techniques

Peers should be familiar with the core rules of questioning techniques. In general, questions should be simple and easy to understand. If possible, no more than one question should be asked at a time<sup>11</sup>.



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<sup>11</sup> Source: Guidelines for Developing Interview Questions, online:  
[https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview\\_strategies.pdf](https://sociology.fas.harvard.edu/files/sociology/files/interview_strategies.pdf)

## Phase 3. Peer feedback to the host Forum member institution



In phase 3, peers give feedback to the host institution during a moderated final feedback session. In this feedback session, the peers deliver their feedback on and ideas for the improvement of the quality assurance measure to the host institution. Depending on the decision of the host institution, peers can give feedback individually, as single persons, or as a group of peers (Single Peer Feedback versus Joint Peer Feedback of the peer group). The host institution documents the Peer Visit including the peers' feedback.

### Tasks of host Forum member institutions and peers in the final feedback session

The final feedback session of the peers, which is the last core activity on the Peer Visit agenda, marks the transition of the Peer Visit procedure from phase 2 (Peer Visit) to phase 3 (Peer Feedback). Its main purpose is to deliver the peer feedback to the host institution and come to a common understanding of the findings.

### Types of peer feedback

The Peer Visit procedure offers two different forms of peer feedback: Single Peer Feedback or Joint Peer Feedback. In phase 1 (preparation of the Peer Visit) the host Forum member institution decides about the type of feedback it expects to receive. With Single Peer Feedback the host institution receives feedback from single peers<sup>12</sup>. With the Joint Peer Feedback the host institution receives joint feedback comprising the common conclusions from the entire peer group agreed during a preparatory meeting<sup>13</sup>.

### Rationale and moderation of the final feedback session

The final feedback session, during which the main observations are presented, should be guided by a moderator with expertise in assessment, review and feedback. The aim of this session is to come to a common understanding regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the selected quality assurance measure between peers and the host institution. If necessary, misunderstandings can be clarified; and supplementary details about certain facts or questions can be provided<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See: Peer guidelines and form for peer feedback. Manual Annex 1 (M7).

<sup>13</sup> See: Guidelines for moderators. Manual Annex 1 (M8).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

### Characteristics of reflective and constructive peer feedback

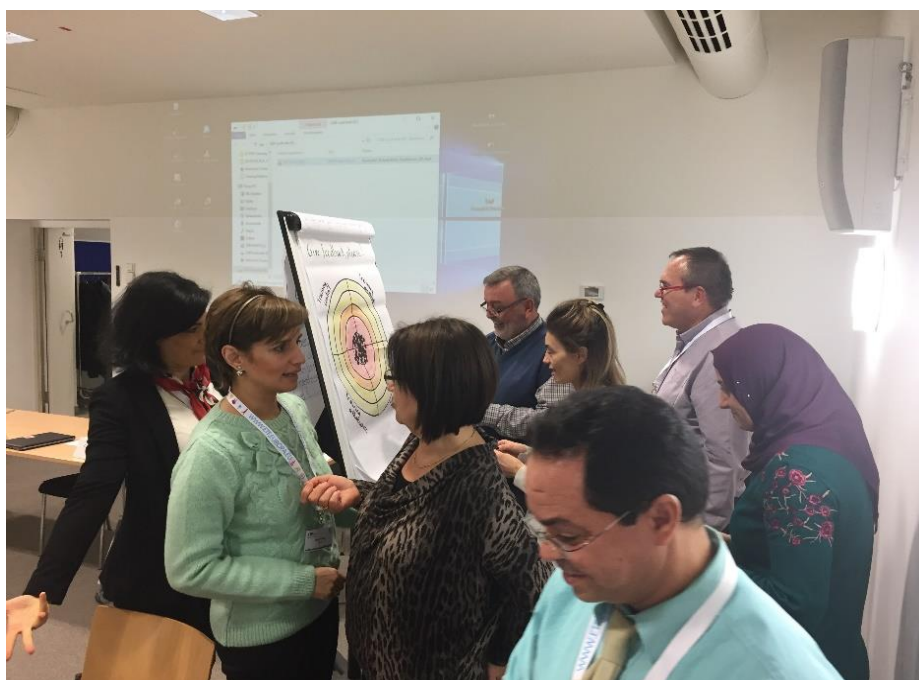
In both cases (Single and Joint Peer Feedback) peers have to be aware, that they have to identify strengths and weaknesses (areas for improvement), when it comes to giving feedback to the host institution. Strengths and weaknesses should be balanced. Peers can also provide suggestions for improvements, if appropriate. The presentation of feedback by the peers follows a certain structure<sup>15</sup>.

Feedback and conclusions from the peers must be based on facts and evidence e.g. from the National Context Report, observations and information delivered to peers during the Peer Visit. It is very important, that peers try their best to give reflective, constructive and motivating feedback to the host institution.

Reflective and constructive feedback:

- promotes reflection as part of a dialogue between the giver and receiver of feedback;
- is descriptive rather than judgmental;
- is specific rather than general;
- is directed toward aspects which the receiver can change;
- considers the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback;
- is requested rather than imposed;
- involves sharing information rather than giving advice;
- considers the amount of information the receiver can use, rather than the amount the observer would like to give;
- requires a supportive, confidential relationship built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern<sup>16</sup>.

The final feedback session marks the end of phase 3 (Peer Feedback). Coming to a full understanding of the feedback should be the focus of this oral exchange.



<sup>15</sup> See: Peer guidelines and form for peer feedback. Manual Annex 1 (M7).

<sup>16</sup> Adapted from: Ground rules for Peers, in: European Peer Review Toolbox. Online: [www.peer-review-education.net/index.php?class=Calimero\\_Webpage&id=12781](http://www.peer-review-education.net/index.php?class=Calimero_Webpage&id=12781)



## Phase 4. Follow-up: consideration of improvements based on the feedback



In the last phase of the Peer Visit procedure, the focus is on the usage of peer feedback as a source for improvements in the host country. As an important additional learning outcome, Forum peers are also encouraged to think about if and how they might adapt/ transfer good practice observed during the Peer Visit in their own countries.

The follow-up process consists of two parts.

### Follow-up part 1. Analysis and dissemination of peer feedback

Peer Visits are only meaningful and worth the time, efforts and resources invested, if the host Forum member institution reflects on and takes account of peer feedback on the quality assurance measure when working on its enhancement. As a first step, the peer feedback is analysed and reflected on, by the host institution and disseminated, as appropriate, to relevant stakeholders. For systematic information of relevant stakeholders, a dissemination plan can be helpful.



### Follow-up part 2. Implementation of improvement processes

Procedures for improvement should be planned carefully and implemented efficiently. After the implementation phase the newly introduced improvements should undergo a feedback and evaluation procedure again. Finally, improvements based on feedback and evaluation should be introduced. A systematic procedure based on the 'quality cycle' (Plan, Do, Check, Act,) is proposed.

### Plan – Planning of the improvement processes

Implementation of improvement processes needs to be planned carefully and to take into account peer feedback, as appropriate, as a source of evidence. All relevant stakeholders should be involved in the planning<sup>17</sup>. Development plans, including target definitions for improvements, following the rules of SMART objectives setting<sup>18</sup>, measures to reach objectives and indicators to measure if the objectives have been attained, can be drawn up. If indicators alone cannot assess the achievement of objectives, other evaluation means should be foreseen in the development plan.

### Do – Implementation of change processes

In the Do-phase of the 'quality cycle', measures based on the development plan need to be implemented professionally and efficiently with the help of project management instruments. It is likely, that action plans have to be adapted during implementation because certain circumstances might have changed in the meantime or the developed action plan did not take into account all relevant influence factors. Also, timelines might have to be changed. In these cases, action plans need to be monitored and revised/adapted during implementation. In some cases, objectives in development plans might have to be changed due to changes e.g. in the regulatory and political framework.

### Check – Monitoring and evaluation of improvement processes

In the Check-phase, stakeholders and/or institutions who are responsible for the development and implementation of improvement plans, have the task to review whether the intended goals have been reached and the new measures have been implemented successfully and are working efficiently. In many cases, monitoring by indicators might not be enough, because additional information is needed to assess whether improvement processes have been successful. Evaluation results feed into evidence-informed policy. To ensure validity and impartiality of results, evaluation should be carried out by independent institutions that have the necessary competences.

### Act – Improvements based on evaluation and feedback

To close the 'quality cycle', data and information coming out of monitoring and evaluation processes have to be analysed carefully. Results of analyses lead to the preparation of the next Plan-phase, which means the 'quality cycle' starts anew, fostering improvements constantly and systematically.



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<sup>17</sup> Tools for stakeholder analysis can be found here: [www.eqavet.eu/Aligning-with-EQAVET/Aligning-a-QA-approach/Modules/Module-3](http://www.eqavet.eu/Aligning-with-EQAVET/Aligning-a-QA-approach/Modules/Module-3)

<sup>18</sup> SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time based; see: Bogue, R. L.: Use SMART goals to launch management by objectives plan. Online: [www.techrepublic.com/article/use-smart-goals-to-launch-management-by-objectives-plan/](http://www.techrepublic.com/article/use-smart-goals-to-launch-management-by-objectives-plan/)

## MAIN 'TAKEAWAY' POINTS

- Peer learning through Peer Visits is a potentially powerful way of sharing knowledge, practices and experience about VET quality assurance. Peer Visits are expected to result in valuable feedback to be used as an information source for VET quality assurance improvement.
- Peer Visits are based on well-established needs and objectives, a detailed context analysis, a relevant agenda and clear and agreed roles for all.
- Peer Visits need to be carefully organised by the host organisation and well prepared for by the visiting peers to ensure learning and exchange on VET quality assurance. The application of the 'quality cycle' (Plan, Do, Check, Act,) approach provides a basis for a structured procedure. Expert moderation is essential.
- The Peer Visit procedure can be applied at different levels: trans-national, national, regional, local.
- Knowledge and experience derived from peer visits should be disseminated back to the host's and the visiting peers' institutions and beyond through, for example, internal 'debriefing' meetings or regional/national workshops and conferences.



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