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GUIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEW TO EVALUATE THE INTERNATIONALIZATION IN VET

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Eliane Nguyen (ed.)

Mari Kontturi (ed)

Guidelines development group:

Helena Binderová

Marjut Huttunen

Liisa Metsola

Aurélie Soton

Ivan Toscano

Tiiu Vaher

Risto Virkkunen

Contact Person:

Mari Kontturi, Manager of International Affairs, Luovi Vocational College

mari.kontturi@luovi.fi

Strength from Peer Review – Developing the Quality of International Activities in VET (SEPRI)

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GUIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEW
TO EVALUATE THE INTERNATIONALIZATION IN VET

Seven European organizations from five European counties working in the field of vocational education and training (VET) came together in 2014 to start the evaluation of international activities in four areas: student mobility, staff mobility, international projects and international strategy.

This guide, built on experiences reviewing each other for two years, aims at providing you with practical information and advice on how to organize a transnational Peer Review and what kind of benefits to expect from it.

These guidelines are based on the Peer Review in SEPRI project, Strength from Peer Review – developing the quality in international activities in VET, funded by Erasmus + program. In addition to Peer Review, SEPRI project included creating the criteria for chosen quality areas, testing the criteria and developing them during the process. The example of Peer Review in practice is described in chapter 3.

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why Peer Review?

Quality management and continuous improvement are more and more important for all education, including vocational education and training (VET) across Europe. Peer Review is one of the tools to help your organization to improve the quality of your organization's processes by benefiting from the experience of national and international colleagues.

A transnational Peer Review on international activities will help your organization to:

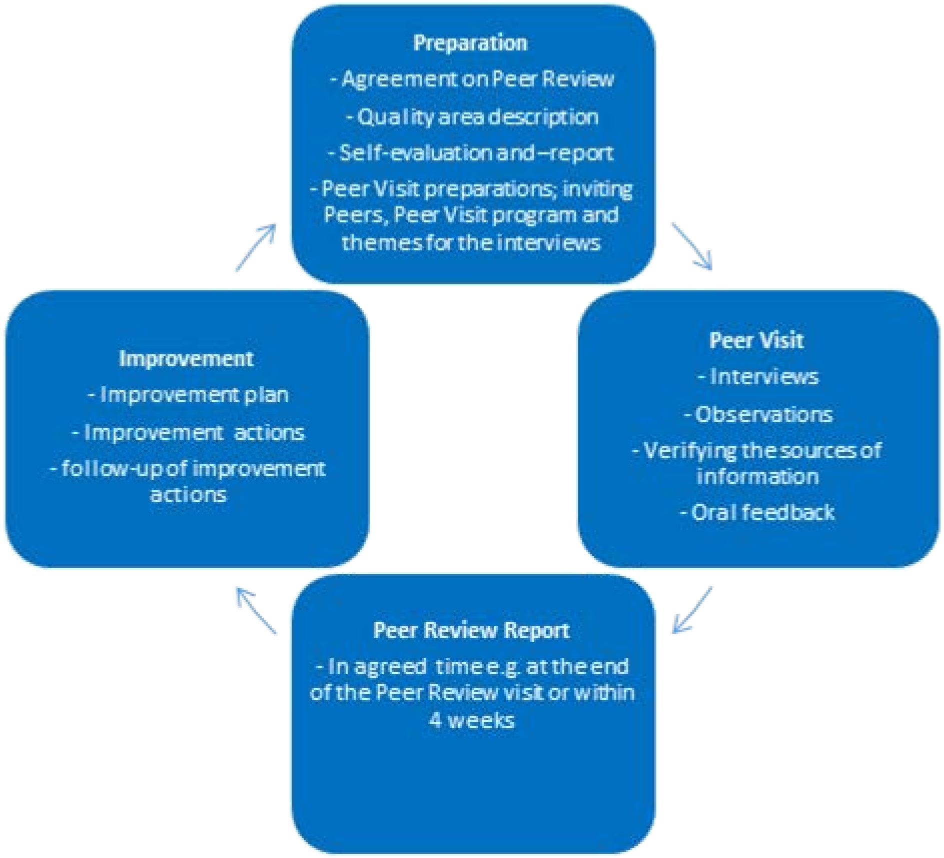
- Clarify the processes of international activities by writing the description of activities and making self-evaluation on the strengths and areas for improvement
- Receive critical but friendly feedback on the internationalization activities from experts in the same field
- Reinforce the strengths and weaknesses of the activities, and share them with the staff, students and other stakeholders
- Exchange practices with European colleagues and observe how things are done in other countries
- Strengthen and build new partnerships.

1.2 How Peer Review goes on?

The idea of the Peer Review is simple: experts working in the same field evaluate each other's´ organizations and help them to identify their strengths and areas of improvement.

The process of Peer Review can be broken down in four phases based on the quality cycle (Deming cycle or EQAVET cycle):

1. Preparation (Plan/Planning)
2. Peer Visit (Do/Implementation)
3. Feedback and Peer Review Report (Check/Evaluation)
4. Improvement (Act/Review)



Picture 1: The phases of Peer Review.

1.3 How to start Peer Review?

First task is to find like-minded organizations who are committed to carry out Peer Review. It is important that the organizations involved have things in common, for example they all work in vocational education and training and carry out international activities and projects. Once you have decided to work together you need to agree on the Peer Review to be carried out, like objectives, scope and length of the process, resources needed and quality areas evaluated.

Peer Review requires both time and money resources. It is crucial to think about how to find these resources and to decide if you carry it out by your own funding or external project funding.

Peer Review is based on trust. This means trust between the organizations and trust among the Peers. The organization to be evaluated will open its doors and show others its processes. It needs to trust the Peers in order to show them its performance and encourage the staff members to share their opinions.

It is necessary that Peers are trained and you train those who are not. The training material produced in SEPRI can be found in the annex 1.

TIP:

We suggest that you make Peer Review in a network of maximum four organizations from four countries. The ideal number of trained Peers in one Peer Team is four.

Too many organizations make the planning and implementing of the Peer Review more complicated. If you have more than four Peers, e.g. those who are Peer Trainees, make sure that everybody has a clear role in the Peer Team.

2 TRANSNATIONAL PEER REVIEW

2.1 Be prepared

Good preparation is important for a successful Peer Review. Both the Peer Reviewed organisation and the Peer Team have several tasks to do before and during the Peer Visit.

2.1.1 Things to be agreed on

It is important to agree on several things before you start. It is possible, but not necessary to make a written and signed agreement on Peer Review between the partners. First of all, you have to agree on the quality area or areas to be Peer Reviewed and also the criteria to be used. If there are not suitable criteria already in use, you can agree on making them together.

Examples of criteria can be found in annex 2.

You also have to agree on the Peer Teams. The competences of the Peers should be based on the areas you plan to evaluate. A good Peer is a person who has expertise in the domain you want to evaluate, who can commit to Peer Review and who has the language skills to communicate independently in the group.

The organizations involved in Peer Review can decide who are going to be the Peer Team Coordinators or the Peer Team itself can choose the coordinator among the Peers.

To secure the smooth preparation and implementation the Peer Reviewed organization has to name the contact person who is responsible for the practical arrangements in her or his organization. He or she acts as a link between the Peer Team and Peer Reviewed organization.

Because Peer Review is based on trust and confidentiality all Peer Team members sign the confidentiality agreement. See the model of confidentiality agreement in annex 3.

The scheduling of the Peer Visit should be done in good time before the Peer Visit. Allocate at least two days plus travelling to the Peer Visit.

If the interpretation services are needed choose people who have no stake in the process so they will simply translate and do not add information while translating. They don't have to be professional interpreters but they should know the language and preferably something about the quality area to be reviewed.

You should also pay attention to sharing information among each other during Peer Review. You will need to communicate regularly among each other during the process:

- to define the list of criteria used to evaluate quality area or areas
- to share documents for the Peer Visits,
- to organize the logistics of the Peer Visits,
- to evaluate the Peer Visits etc.

In order to keep the process on track, you might want to set up regular videoconferences to keep each other updated.

2.1.2 Tasks of Peer Reviewed organization

The Peer Reviewed organization has to write the description of activities of the chosen quality area. It should include also the basic information of the organization and the educational system of the country. It has to be sent to the Peer Team Coordinator a month before the Peer Visit.

The template of description of activities is in annex 4.

In addition, the Peer Reviewed organization has to carry out a self-evaluation and to provide a self-evaluation report. It has to be sent to the Peer Team Coordinator at the same time as the description of activities. Have a look on the model of self-evaluation report in annex 5.

Organizing Peer Visit takes time and preparations have to be started in good time.

TIP: Planning a Peer Visit- Checklist:

- ✓ **Logistics:** if you decide to visit many sites in a big organization make sure you have enough time in your program for transportation, delays, rest etc.

- ✓ **Accommodation:** it is recommended to have all the Peers stay in the same hotel so they can work together also in the evenings and it is easier for logistics.

- ✓ **Booking of the facilities**: you will need one interview room for each group interviewed. It is best that Peers don't move and rather have interview groups come to them. Don't forget to plan for snacks and refreshments as interviews are very intensive and it is a long day for Peers! You will also need a room for the final debrief and writing the Peer Review Report. If possible, provide a video projector so the team can write the report together.
  You will need a room for the oral feedback session. If you have interviewed people in different sites, you may arrange a videoconference so everyone can attend the feedback session.

- ✓ **Selection of the people to be interviewed**: after receiving the preliminary program from the Peer Team Coordinator invite the people to be interviewed. It is recommended to have groups of maximum 4 to 6 people in each interview, with one Peer interviewing and the other one making notes. If feasible in order to cross-analyze information, you should interview two same type groups, e.g. two different teacher groups.

- ✓ **Scheduling:** Follow the agreed timetable and don't forget to leave time for preparation. Leave breaks between interviews. Plan for a debrief after each interview, during which the criteria grid is used to collect information on strengths and weaknesses. Plan for collective debrief at the end of the interviews.

2.1.3 Tasks of Peer Team

Peer Team has to have a coordinator as stated before. The Peer Team plans the Peer Visit program and make suggestions on the groups to be interviewed. The Peer Team Coordinator sends the draft program to the contact person for comments.

The Peers familiarize themselves with the criteria of the quality area, the description of the activities and the self-evaluation report. The team shares the tasks and decide who is going to interview who and who is going to take the notes. When preparing yourself you can use the evaluation grid in the annex 6.

It is essential that the Peer Team thinks about the questions for the interviews in advance. For preparing the interviews, the Peer Team needs to get together e.g. by phone, email or skype and prepare questions for the interviewed groups. Normally, an interview lasts between 45 minutes to an hour. It is suggested to prepare 8 to 12 questions. You can plan for more questions in case there is extra time but don't leave the important questions at the end. For your line of questioning, start with an icebreaker question. Always use open-ended questions.

Each Peer should come prepared to the Peer Visit. Usually there will be some time at the beginning of the Peer Visit to gather all the questions and make sure the questioning is coordinated but it is more efficient if the Peers prepare their questions beforehand.

Based on the self-evaluation report, you can also ask for additional documentation on site if you need more information about the subject. However, this might be difficult because of language barriers and time and other resources needed to translate the documents you would like to see. One solution is to plan for time with an interpreter or translator to go over the document during the Peer Visit.

2.2 Conduct a successful Peer Visit

Careful planning is the basis for a smooth running of the Peer Visit. It is advisable to have a Peer Team meeting before the actual Peer Visit starts in order to get to know each other better and to check the Peer Review plans for the visit. It is also recommended that the representatives of the Peer Reviewed organization give a short presentation on their organization.

The Peer Visit includes interviews and observations. It is crucial to respect the time table of the program. An example of a Peer Visit program is in annex 7.

TIP: Social program

- ✓ **Meals and social visits**

Meals and social visits are a way to build trust among Peers and among organizations. It is also a way to showcase the Peer Reviewed organization's activities e.g. VET training restaurant and encourage future partnerships.

2.3 Give constructive feedback and write a useful Peer Review Report

The feedback session is organized at the end of the second day and people interviewed are welcomed to attend. The Peer Team Coordinator presents the report to the audience. The feedback consists of general observations, strengths and areas for development. The feedback should be positive, concrete and constructive. It is advisable to use Power Point presentation in the feedback session but the Peer Team is expected to provide a report in written format, too.

The written Peer Review Report should include:

- A short introduction to the Peer Review in question
- A short introduction to the project and its objectives, if Peer Review is carried out in a project
- Quality area reviewed

- Peer Team members
- Interviewed groups with a referring to the Peer Visit program
- General remarks on the Peer Reviewed organisation
- Strengths
- Areas for development

Normally Peers do not make suggestions for improvement, as it is the role of the organization to come up with improvement measures based on the Peer Review Report and other relevant sources of information e.g. self-evaluation report. However, the Peer Reviewed organization can request in the beginning of the Peer Review process that the Peers make also development suggestions.

After the Peer Team has presented its findings, the Peer Reviewed organization can respond, providing additional information and asking questions to clarify the conclusions of the Peer Team. If needed the Peers correct possible misunderstandings in the report.

2.4 Don't forget development

The idea of continuous improvement is included in the Peer Review process. Peer Review without a development plan and follow up can easily be waste of money and time.

After receiving the Peer Review Report, the Peer Reviewed organization should develop an action plan to improve the process, the follow up and plan to re-evaluate.

After the feedback session, it is strongly recommended that Peers take some time to discuss the Peer Visit in order to develop the Peer Review process and their performance as a Peer.

Some questions for discussion:

- What worked well during this Peer Visit?
- What did not work?
- Was the Peer Visit useful?
- Did we find new elements that were not in the self-evaluation report?
- Did we have enough time for our interviews?
- Did we interview the right people?
- Do we feel we asked the right questions?

- What could be improved for the next Peer Visit and how?
- Were the criteria we used relevant? Can they be improved for the next Peer Review?
- During the Peer Visit, did we learn about good practices that we would like to share when we get back to our organizations?

3 WE DID IT LIKE THIS – CASE SEPRI

In this chapter we share our experiences on the Peer Reviews we carried out in SEPRI project.

3.1 Kick off meeting

The SEPRI project and Peer Review process were launched in a kick off meeting in Helsinki, Finland in October 2014. The meeting was organized in the premises of Keskuspuiston Ammattiopisto, one of the Finnish partners in SEPRI. The purpose of the first transnational meeting was to build the project team and to carry out the Peer Training.

Before the kick off meeting all the seven participating organizations chose two to three staff members to be trained as Peers. The project teams in participating organizations started to work already before the kick off meeting.

Planning the kick off meeting agenda carefully is very important. We included the following aspects in the program of our first face-to-face meeting.

- Each organization presents its activities
- Each Peer introduces him/herself and his/her areas of expertise
- Peer training (if possible, include a mock Peer Review for practice)
- Presentation of project schedule and agreement on dates and deliverables
- Discussion on format of Peer Visits and budgeting
- Discussion on evaluation, dissemination and impact
- If this is an externally funded project, clarification of funding guidelines

TIP: If possible, agree on the dates of the Peer Visits at the kick-off meeting. Since there are so many people involved, it might be difficult to find dates that work for everyone later on in the project. Beware of holidays and vacations when planning the Peer Visits.

SEPRI Kick off meeting agenda

14th October 2014	
09.00 – 12.00 Coffee	Kick-off the project *Introduction of the participants and their organisation (maximum 15 minutes/organisation) * Introduction of the project
12.00 – 13.00	Lunch
13.00 – 17.00 Coffee	What is Peer Review
19:00	Dinner in the city centre
15th October 2015	
09.00 – 12.00 Coffee	Planning and implementation of Peer Review, working together *Peer Visit program *Questions and interviews
12.00 – 13.00	Lunch

13.00 – 17.00 Coffee	Example of Peer Review *Student mobility –project, Keskuspuisto
16th October 2015	
09.00 – 11.30 Coffee	Planning and implementation of Peer Review, working together *feedback and questions from day 2 SEPRI *Peer Review programs: timetable, Peers
11.30 – 12.15	Lunch
12-15 – 14.00	SEPRI *next steps *finance and reporting

Picture 2: Kick off meeting agenda

3.2 Peer Training

Marjut Huttunen, quality manager of Luovi and Mari Kontturi, manager of international affairs and coordinator of SEPRI project acted as trainers in the first meeting and Peer training. The Peer Review of Keskuspuisto's student mobility projects was included as a practical example of the training and the participants had a chance to practice at the very first beginning of the project.

The Peers have prepared themselves for the Peer Visits individually, working in pairs and in common meetings.

Training was an ongoing activity in the project and Peer Visits during the project in each organization were an essential part of the training.

Training of Peers was very interactive and included following aspects:

- individual preparation before the face-to-face training, reading Peer Review materials and answering questions
- working in pairs and in groups
- discussions on expectations, tasks and required competences of Peers
- lectures on Peer Review principles and Peer Review phases
- Peer Review practice
- self-evaluation after Peer Visit

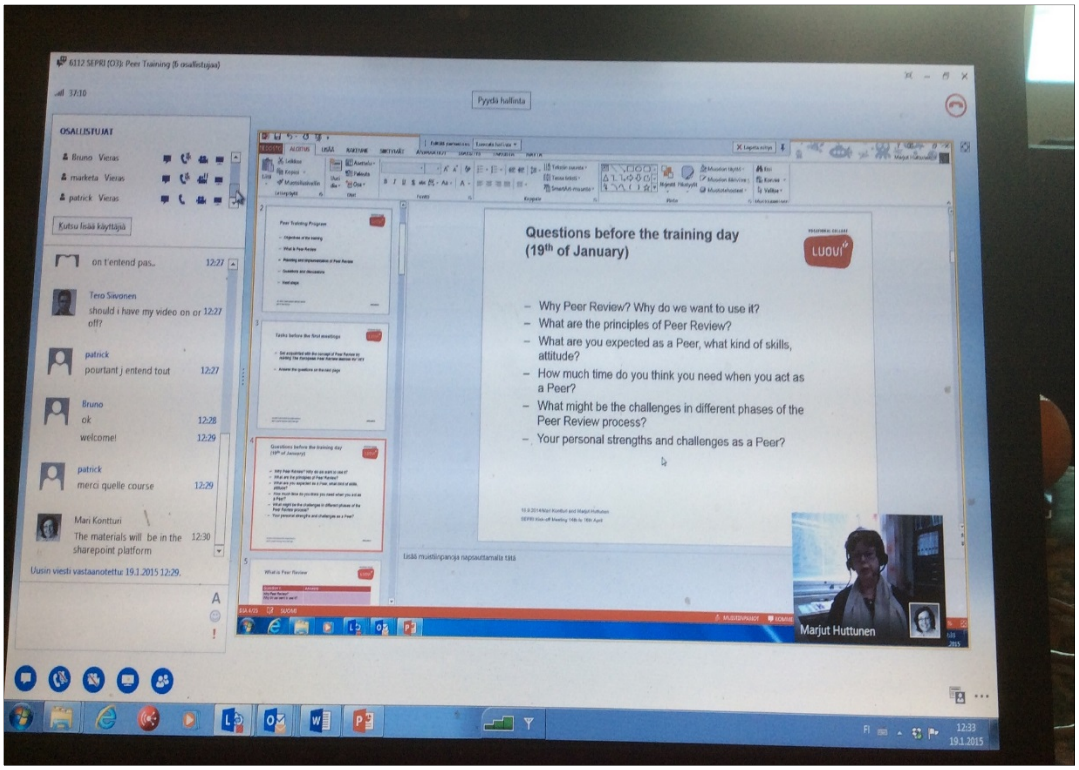
What is Peer Review

VOCATIONAL COLLEGE LUOVI

Question 3.	Answers
What are you expected as a Peer, what kind of skills, attitude?	Be friendly and polite General knowledge about VET One person in the group should have experience in quality management Constructive Being a mirror, helping people to see the issues themselves Not giving answers, not comparing with your own organisation Listen Stay neutral Analysing skills Collaboration and open-minded Time management Be patient Group facilitation skills Be prepared for the different phases of the process

Picture 3: Example of the findings of the group discussion on expected skills of a Peer.

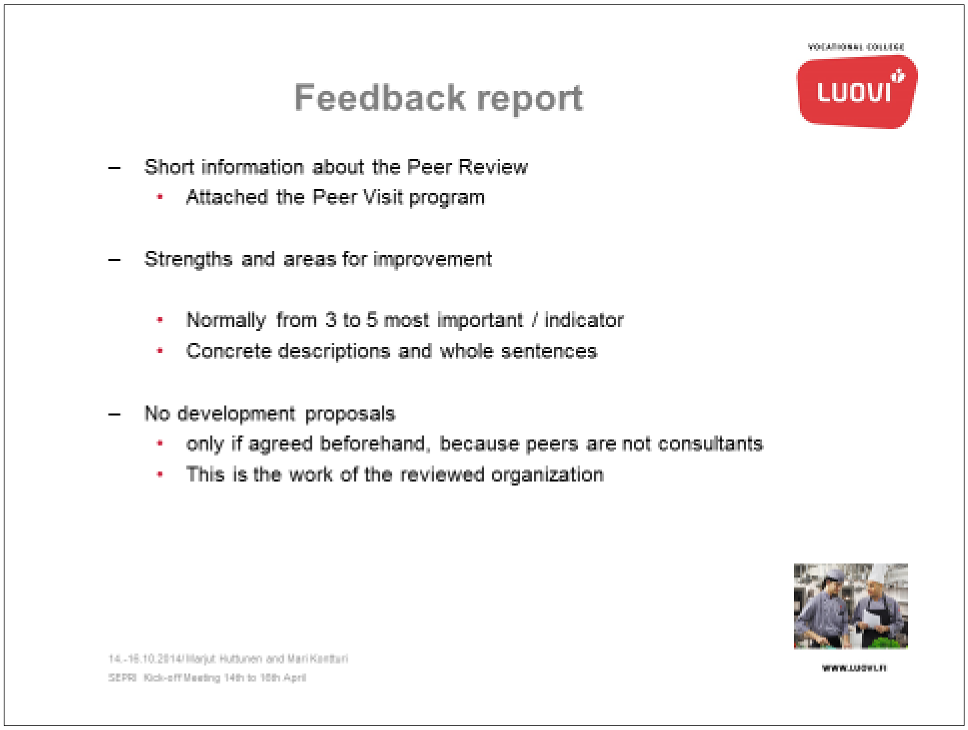
Before acting as a Peer everybody had to think about the competences required from a Peer. Since all the Peers could not attend the first meeting in Helsinki we also organized on-line training sessions for Peers.



Picture 4: On-line training session by Marjut Huttunen.

The best way to learn how to act as a Peer is to take part in a Peer Visit and practice it. During the training the Peers got a lot of tips how to make the questions, how to prepare for the interviews and how to make a Peer Review Report.

During SEPRI project we have further developed Peer Training program. After each Peer Visit we had feedback sessions at site and after returning home the Peers filled an electronic questionnaire on evaluating the Peer Visit and lessons learnt from it.



Picture 5: The structure of Peer Review Report was discussed in the training.

3.3 Planning the time table for Peer Visits

Planning the Peer Teams and time table for Peer Visits may be challenging if there are many partners and many countries involved. You also have to pay a lot of attention to the times of holidays and school seasons. You also need to talk about the locations if the Peer Reviewed organization like CNOS FAP, Apprentis Auteuil and Luovi in SEPRI case have different locations all over country.

We also agreed on the Peer Team Coordinators and the contact persons in the Peer Reviewed organization at the same time. We had to make some changes in our planning later on, but the plan made in the kick off meeting was a good basis for implementation of Peer Visits.

Peer Review in SEPRI								
		Peers organisations						
		Apprentis Auteuil	CNOS FAP	SOU SOS	VIKK	Kainuun ammattiopisto	Keskuspuiston ammattiopisto	Luovi
Peer Reviewed organization	Quality Area							
SOU SOS March 2015	Student mobility	X	X		X	X	X	X
CNOS FAP September 2015	International activities	X		X	X	X	X	X
Auteuil December 2015	Staff mobility		X	X	X	X	X	X
Luovi February 2016	Staff mobility	X	X	X	X			
Kainuu February 2016	Partnership projects	X	X	X			X	
VIKK May 2016	Student mobility	X	X	X		X	X	X

Picture 6: Peer Visits plan is SEPRI.

3.4 Peer Review in Znojmo, Czech

To make Peer Review concrete we want to share our experiences from the first Peer Visit.

Helena Binderová and Hana Hanzalová

The first Peer Review was held in Znojmo. The dates were agreed to be from the 9th to 13th March 2015. Peer Visit working days were 10th – 12th March and Monday and Friday were travelling days.

3.4.1 Choosing the quality area

In Znojmo we chose student mobility to be the quality area. The reason was that it is the most important area of internationalization in the College. We wanted to find our strengths as well as areas to develop. The decision was made together with the coordinator and school management straight after the kick-off meeting in October 2014.

3.4.2 Preparation

We informed the owners of the school in Prague, teachers, other staff members and students about the decision immediately. We explained the main idea of Peer Review, its objectives and benefits for the school. We also informed about their roles before and during the Peer Review.

We started with the paper work. We collected all the documentation such as student application form, agreements to be done, written parents agreement, offer for internships for students, study plans and other information needed in writing the description activities and doing self-evaluation.

After writing the description we did self-evaluation. The participants were international coordinator, teachers and school management. We found seven strengths and five areas to develop. Self-evaluation report was written by international coordinator and English teacher. It was discussed and approved by the school management.

Self-report and self-evaluation was sent to Peer Team Coordinator and Peers.

3.4.3 Building the programme

We started building the programme together with Peer Team Coordinator. She proposed the target groups to be interviewed and we selected the persons. Most of them had participated in student mobility processes. In addition, we also selected teachers and students who had not participated in mobilities. We invited groups of management, financial department and receiving partners, too. Altogether, it was eight interviews. We also organized interpretation for the groups that needed it. We planned the logistics, accommodation, social activities, meals and rooms.

3.4.4 Peer Visit

On Tuesday morning we had the opening session of the Peer Visit and presentation of the organization and the school. In the afternoon the Peers had time to prepare the interviews and plan the questions.

On Wednesday the Peers had one-hour time to prepare and interviews began at 9 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. Altogether we had eight interviews. After the interviews the Peers had one-hour time for the summary.

On Thursday the Peers continued to prepare the final report. It was presented to all the persons involved in interviews. We got positive feedback and we got to know which were the areas to develop.

3.4.5 After the Peer visit

We made a meeting with school management and we made a development plan. It has been followed up carefully.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Is Peer Review worth it? Would we do it again?

The Peer Review was definitely worth it although the process requires staff, time and financial resources. SEPRI project has enabled the participating organizations to allocate necessary resources to carry out the whole process that would have been more difficult to conduct otherwise.

The awareness of quality in connection with international activities in VET has increased. The method and purpose of Peer Review has become clear all the parties involved. The Peer Review process has enabled more people to get involved in the international activities. The process has increased transparency and visibility of international activities in all the participating organizations.

The criteria will be used also in the future to evaluate the quality of various international activities in the organizations. The criteria can contribute to the international strategy of the organization. The Peer Review methodology is transferable and can be used to evaluate also other activities.

The timeframe between the self-evaluation and the actual Peer Visit was sometimes slightly challenging. It should be long enough for the Peers to get familiar with the report and the other documentation.

The common platform SharePoint made it easy for the partners to contribute and complete the tasks allocated to them. The platform made it possible for all the partners to monitor the project progress.

All in all, the experiences and knowledge gained were valuable and will be utilized in further development of quality of the international activities in VET. All the partner organizations benefitted from the Peer Review process since it gave them a structured framework for development.

5 SEPRI TEAM

Luovi Vocational College, Finland

Marjut Huttunen, Quality Manager, trainer of SEPRI
Mari Kontturi, Manager of International Affairs, coordinator of SEPRI-project
Marjut Mommo, Assistant of International Affairs
Soile Röppänen, Development Manager
Anne Tornberg, Development Director
Eija Holma, Teacher and International Coordinator
Tero Siivonen, Teacher

Střední odborné učiliště a Střední, Czech Republic

Hana Hanzalová , Teacher
Helena Binderová, Deputy Headmaster, Project coordinator
Marketa Sramková, Teacher
Michaela Trojanová, Teacher

Viljandi Kutseõppekeskus, Estonia

Tiiu Vaher, Coordinator of Project Work and Foreign Affairs
Karmen Selter, Quality Manager
Marge Soonets, Development Specialist
Katriin Orason, Teacher

Kainuu Vocational College, Finland

Virpi Kaasinen, Teacher
Riitta Turpeinen, Teacher
Risto Virkkunen, Manager of International Affairs

Keskuspuisto Vocational College, Finland

Liisa Metsola, Development Director
Pia Haarala, International Coordinator
Sari Aulilo, Teacher

Apprentis D'Auteuil, France

Giacomo Baldin, European Projects Manager
Eliane Thao Nguyen, European Projects Manager
Aurélie Soton, European Projects Manager
Patrick Masellucci, Teacher
Bruno Poncon, Responsable Mécénat et Philanthropie

CNOS-FAP, Italy

Ivan Toscano, International Project Manager
Michele Marchiaro, Trainer and Project Coordinator
Magdalena Rdultowska, Teacher
Federico Valletti, Teacher

6 ANNEXES

Annex 1: Peer Training material

Annex 2: Peer Review Criteria on the quality areas

- 2A: Student Mobility
- 2B: International Activities
- 2C: Staff Mobility in VET
- 2D: Erasmus + and Partnership Projects

Annex 3: Confidentiality agreement

Annex 4: Template of description of activities

Annex 5: Template of self-evaluation report

Annex 6: Evaluation grid

Annex 7: Model of Peer Visit Programme