

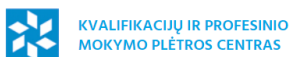


PEER REVIEW FOR
GREEN AND DIGITAL
VET

Digital Peer Review for green and digital VET

WP 4: Impact Assessment & Policy Recommendations

Deliverable: Impact Assessment



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Peer Review Methodology: From Origins to Digital PR

The Origins of Peer Review in European VET

The concept of Peer Review in vocational education and training (VET) was born out of a need for more formative, collaborative, and cost-effective approaches to quality assurance. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, European policy debates highlighted the importance of trust, transparency, and comparability in VET systems. Traditional approaches, such as national inspections or ISO-style auditing, were valuable but often experienced by providers as rigid and intimidating. They focused on compliance rather than learning and improvement. Against this backdrop, Peer Review emerged as an alternative. It drew inspiration from practices in higher education and professional networks, where colleagues observe, analyse, and provide constructive feedback to one another. Applied to VET, Peer Review placed professionals on “equal standing.” Peers from other institutions or countries were invited to review practices, exchange perspectives, and provide recommendations. This collaborative and non-inspective spirit made Peer Review a refreshing complement to existing quality assurance methods.

The **European Peer Review Manual for Initial VET**, published in 2007, marked a milestone. It provided a structured methodology, defined quality areas, and supplied practical tools. Over the following years, Peer Review was piloted widely in Austria, Finland, Italy, Germany, and later in Central and Eastern European countries. Its strengths were repeatedly confirmed: it was low-cost, produced immediate feedback, and fostered professional learning and institutional reflection. The methodology also supported the implementation of the **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET)**, adopted in 2009, by offering a concrete mechanism for self-evaluation and external feedback.

At the same time, challenges became visible. Pilots reported excessive documentation, duplication between tools, and procedural complexity that discouraged participation. Providers sometimes feared that the process resembled inspections, and time pressures often meant agendas were shaped to highlight strengths rather than openly address weaknesses. Moreover, the methodology remained predominantly paper-based, with limited use of digital technologies.

These limitations became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when VET institutions were forced to move rapidly into digital modes of teaching and collaboration. Peer Reviews could no longer be carried out entirely face-to-face, yet the methodology was not fully ready for online or hybrid formats. This experience underscored the urgent need to update and digitalise Peer Review.

The European Policy Context: Green and Digital VET

The renewal of Peer Review cannot be understood in isolation. It is closely linked to broader European strategies that have redefined the role of VET in the past decade.

The **Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (2020)** set out a vision for modernising VET in Europe. It called on Member States to ensure that VET systems are agile, learner-centred, and future-oriented. Two themes stand out as central to this vision: **digitalisation** and the **green transition**.

On the digital side, the **Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)** emphasised the need to develop high-performing digital education ecosystems and to enhance digital skills and competences at all levels. For VET, this meant embedding digital readiness in curricula, teaching methods, and organisational practices. Quality assurance methods also needed to evolve, ensuring that digitalisation was systematically addressed when reviewing institutional performance.

On the green side, the **European Green Deal** and the **European Skills Agenda (2020)** highlighted the role of VET in preparing learners and workers for green jobs and sustainable practices. VET providers were encouraged to embed environmental sustainability in both their operations and curricula. Once again, quality assurance mechanisms had to adapt, with new indicators and criteria that assess the extent to which providers are “greening” their education and training.

Peer Review, originally designed around traditional quality areas such as management, teaching, or guidance, required revision. A renewed methodology would need to integrate these European priorities, asking whether VET institutions are preparing learners for a green economy, whether they are digitally resilient, and whether they can adapt to crises and transformations.

The DIGITAL PR Project: Innovation Through Continuity

It is in this European policy landscape that the Erasmus+ project **Digital Peer Review for Green and Digital VET (DIGITAL PR)** was launched in 2023. Coordinated by the Lithuanian Qualifications and VET Development Centre (KPMPC) with partners in Portugal, Italy, Lithuania, and Belgium, the project builds directly on the established Peer Review tradition while addressing its shortcomings and aligning it with the EU’s digital and green agenda.

The project’s central ambition is to produce an **updated Manual of the EU Peer Review Methodology for a Green and Digital Europe**. This manual revises the structure of quality areas, updates indicators, and embeds sustainability and digitalisation across the methodology. It ensures that Peer Review remains coherent with current European priorities and that VET providers are guided to reflect on their ecological footprint, digital practices, and role in supporting learners for a transforming labour market.

Alongside the manual, DIGITAL PR develops a **digital toolbox**. Past pilots often criticised the excessive paperwork and duplication of tools. By digitising these instruments and ensuring interoperability between them, the project reduces bureaucracy, improves efficiency, and frees peers and providers to focus on dialogue and reflection. The toolbox also introduces new elements, such as an **Improvement Plan tool**, ensuring that the cycle of planning, doing, checking, and acting (PDCA) is completed.

A further innovation is the creation of an **online platform**, where VET providers can find peers, organise reviews, and share experiences.

DIGITAL PR also responds to the lessons of the pandemic. It promotes **hybrid Peer Reviews**, combining the advantages of online preparation and follow-up with the irreplaceable value of face-to-face visits. Early phases such as agenda setting, peer training, and preparatory

interviews can be conducted online, reducing travel and costs. At the same time, the project emphasises the importance of in-person interactions during the review visit itself, when trust, dialogue, and professional exchange are at their most intense.

Finally, DIGITAL PR introduces updated **quality areas** that explicitly address green and digital transformation. Institutions are invited to reflect not only on their teaching and management but also on how they integrate sustainability in operations and curricula, how they support digital literacy, and how they adapt to technological and ecological change. This ensures that Peer Review does not merely assess existing practice but also drives institutions toward the future priorities of European education and training.

Continuity and Cultural Change

The **DIGITAL PR** project represents both continuity and innovation. It builds on a Peer Review methodology that has been tested, valued, and recognised across Europe for nearly two decades. The central features of Peer Review — collegiality, mutual trust, and a supportive approach to quality improvement — are preserved and further reinforced through the project. At the same time, DIGITAL PR transforms Peer Review into a methodology that is lighter, more accessible, and better aligned with the challenges of the 2020s. By embracing digitalisation and sustainability, it ensures that Peer Review is not an exercise in looking backwards but a forward-looking instrument that helps **VET and VET+ providers** — including adult learning and validation institutions — adapt and thrive. In this way, DIGITAL PR serves as a bridge between the early experiments in Peer Review and the future of **European VET+ quality assurance**, positioning the methodology as relevant, efficient, and impactful within a lifelong learning perspective.

The Peer Review Methodology

Introduction

Peer Review is a form of external evaluation that has been adapted and refined over the past two decades to meet the specific needs of vocational education and training (VET) providers in Europe. Its central purpose is to support institutions in their quality assurance and continuous development processes. Unlike inspections or formal audits, which are often associated with control and compliance, Peer Review is characterised by collegiality and mutual learning. The process is carried out by professionals—“Peers”—who work in similar contexts and share professional knowledge with those in the institution being reviewed. Because of this equal standing, the procedure promotes trust, openness, and professional dialogue, which are essential for genuine improvement.

The most recent version of this approach is described in the **EU Digital & Green Peer Review Manual for VET+ (2024)**. This manual represents a major step forward because it aligns the methodology with the broader European strategies on quality assurance, in particular the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET) and the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. It integrates the twin priorities of digitalisation and environmental sustainability, while also addressing the lessons learned from previous pilots, which showed that the procedure sometimes became too bureaucratic and paper-based.



Core Principles and Aims

The methodology rests on several fundamental principles. Participation is voluntary; institutions choose to engage in Peer Review because they see it as an opportunity to learn, rather than as an obligation. The procedure has a formative function, which means that the aim is not to sanction or control but to encourage reflection and development. It is carried out by peers who are regarded as “critical friends”: professionals with relevant expertise, who can look at practices with a fresh and supportive perspective. Transparency, confidentiality, and the avoidance of conflicts of interest are all considered essential to preserve credibility. In addition to these general principles, the updated manual emphasises the importance of diversity, inclusion, and gender equality. The methodology explicitly calls for sensitivity to cultural and social differences, both in the way reviews are conducted and in the analysis of results. It also incorporates the EU’s priorities on digitalisation and greening, ensuring that reviews look at how institutions embed sustainability and digital readiness in their operations and teaching.

The general aims of the methodology are to promote a culture of quality assurance and development, to enhance transparency and comparability across European VET systems, and to encourage providers to engage in a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation, and review.

The Peer Review Procedure

The procedure is organised into four distinct phases, which mirror the well-known quality cycle.

The first phase is preparation. This begins with the decision by a VET provider to undertake a Peer Review. The decision must be supported by management and staff in order to be meaningful, since it requires a commitment of time and openness to feedback. During preparation, the institution selects the quality areas that will be the focus of the review. These areas might reflect national standards, organisational priorities, or issues identified through self-assessment. Institutions usually select one or two areas if the review is to be conducted over two days.

The preparatory work also involves carrying out a self-evaluation, the results of which are documented in a Self-Report. This report is the central document of the process, providing peers with essential information about the institution, its context, its strengths, and the challenges it faces. A Peer Team is then selected. Peers are chosen based on their expertise in the selected quality areas and their ability to provide constructive feedback. The team is coordinated by a Peer Coordinator, while a Peer Review Facilitator from within the institution ensures smooth communication and organisation. Preparatory meetings, often held online, allow both sides to clarify expectations and agree on an agenda for the review visit.

The second phase is the Peer Visit, which is the heart of the methodology. During this visit, the peers spend time at the institution, usually for two days, carrying out a structured evaluation. They interview different groups of stakeholders, including managers, staff, learners, and employers. They observe classes and facilities and analyse documents. What distinguishes the Peer Visit is not only the breadth of data collection but also the atmosphere: the aim is to foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and trust. At the end of the visit, the



peers provide oral feedback, highlighting strengths and pointing to areas where further development might be beneficial.

The third phase involves the preparation of the Peer Review Report. Based on the evidence collected during the visit, the peers prepare a written document that reflects the findings of the review. This report is shared with the institution, which has an opportunity to provide comments before the final version is issued. The report is written in a professional but supportive tone, with an emphasis on clarity, evidence, and constructive recommendations. The fourth and final phase is putting plans into action. The reviewed institution develops an Improvement Plan that addresses the findings of the review. The plan is implemented over the following months and becomes the basis for further cycles of improvement. In this way, Peer Review is not a one-off event but part of a continuous process of development.

Quality Areas

One of the unique features of the European Peer Review methodology is the use of common European Quality Areas. These areas serve as a reference point and ensure that reviews across different countries and institutions remain comparable. The updated manual identifies sixteen areas, covering teaching and learning, guidance and assessment, management, staff development, stakeholder involvement, and other aspects of institutional quality. Importantly, the revised framework adds two new areas: one focused on digitalisation and another on environmental sustainability.

This expansion reflects the European policy context, where digital readiness and the green transition are now central priorities for VET. Institutions are encouraged to reflect not only on the quality of their pedagogical processes but also on how they are preparing learners for digital societies and green economies. The inclusion of these areas ensures that Peer Review remains aligned with the broader challenges facing education and training in Europe.

Roles and Responsibilities

The methodology specifies the roles and responsibilities of the people involved. Peers are professionals who bring external perspectives, independence, and expertise. They are expected to act objectively while at the same time providing sympathetic and constructive feedback. The Peer Coordinator has overall responsibility for the Peer Team, ensuring that time is used effectively and that the process runs smoothly. Within the reviewed institution, the Peer Review Facilitator plays a vital role, coordinating preparations and serving as the main point of contact during the review.

Stakeholders also have an important role. Learners, staff, employers, and social partners are invited to share their views, either through interviews, surveys, or other forms of participation. Their involvement adds richness and validity to the review, ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered.

Digital and Green Innovations

The updated manual introduces innovations that directly respond to feedback from earlier experiences. One of the most important is the digitalisation of the process. All documents, from the Initial Information Sheet to the Peer Application and the Self-Report, are now

available in digital form through the Digital Peer Review Platform. The platform allows for automatic transfer of data across forms, reducing duplication and administrative burden. Preparatory meetings and peer training can take place online, saving time and resources. Even parts of the Peer Visit, such as preparatory interviews or clarification sessions, can be conducted virtually.

Alongside digitalisation, the manual emphasises greening. A dedicated quality area looks at how institutions embed sustainability in curricula, operations, and teaching. The review process itself is also expected to minimise its ecological footprint, for example by reducing travel where possible through hybrid models. In this way, the methodology not only examines sustainability but also models it.

Benefits and Conclusion

The benefits of Peer Review are manifold. For institutions, it offers independent, credible, and constructive feedback that can be used to enhance quality and transparency. For peers, it provides a valuable opportunity for professional development and networking. For the wider VET sector, it builds trust, comparability, and mutual learning across national systems.

The **EU Digital & Green Peer Review methodology** thus represents both continuity and innovation. It preserves the collegial and developmental spirit of the original model while updating it to reflect the priorities of a digital and sustainable Europe. With its structured phases, revised quality areas, and integration of digital tools, it provides VET providers with a practical and future-oriented approach to continuous quality improvement.

The European Peer Review Quality Areas

The revised **EU Digital & Green Peer Review Manual for VET+** identifies sixteen Quality Areas that serve as reference points for review and evaluation. Together, they form a comprehensive framework for assessing the quality of vocational education and training (VET) providers in Europe. Each area reflects both long-standing concerns in education—such as strategic planning, teaching, and assessment—and the emerging priorities of **digitalisation and sustainability**, which are now mainstreamed throughout the framework.

1. Strategic Planning and Development

This area addresses how VET providers anticipate change, define their mission, and plan for the future. Institutions are expected to systematically analyse both their internal environment—staff, learners, resources—and the external context of policy, labour markets, and regional needs. A strong provider aligns its mission and values with national and European strategies, involves staff and stakeholders in strategic choices, and sets clear indicators to measure progress. Peer Review in this area typically examines whether strategic plans are updated, monitored, and communicated transparently, and whether improvement plans are actively followed through.

2. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is the backbone of institutional credibility and improvement. In this area, attention is given to how institutions define quality goals, assign responsibilities, and engage staff and stakeholders in monitoring. It is not enough to set up formal systems; the

methodology stresses that quality assurance must become part of everyday work, with clear documentation, open communication, and staff competence in evaluation practices. Peer Reviews often focus on whether self-assessment, external evaluation, and the sharing of best practices are integrated into a coherent cycle of continuous improvement.

3. Knowledge Management

Modern VET systems thrive on the ability to collect, analyse, and share knowledge. This area emphasises how institutions handle information: from storing and processing data, to ensuring its quality, to making it accessible to staff and stakeholders. Knowledge management also includes privacy and data protection, in line with GDPR and national regulations. Importantly, it is not just about systems, but also about culture—institutions are expected to encourage staff to use knowledge for decision-making, to engage in professional learning, and to share good practices across the organisation.

4. Management and Leadership

Leadership is a decisive factor in quality. The Peer Review framework looks at how management inspires and motivates, how decisions are made and communicated, and how staff and stakeholders are involved in shaping priorities. Pedagogical management is included here, recognising that leaders must also create supportive conditions for teaching and learning. Equity, respect, and open communication are stressed, alongside the ability to foster innovation and respond to change. Peer Reviews in this area help institutions reflect on leadership culture, structures of participation, and the alignment between goals, resources, and results.

5. Management of Infrastructure, Facilities, and Finances

Quality education depends on reliable infrastructure and sound financial management. This area considers whether facilities are adequate, safe, accessible, and environmentally sustainable, and whether resources are used efficiently. Institutions are also expected to ensure transparency in financial planning and reporting, to involve staff and stakeholders in decisions, and to anticipate future infrastructural needs. With the green transition in mind, providers are encouraged to demonstrate how their infrastructure and finances support sustainability goals, for example through energy-saving measures or inclusive design.

6. Human Resources Management and Internal Relations

At the heart of every VET provider are its people. This area addresses recruitment, induction, workload distribution, communication, cooperation, and professional development. A strong provider has transparent HR policies, ensures fair opportunities, and promotes staff wellbeing. Internal relations matter as much as structures: institutions are asked to foster trust, respect, and collaboration, and to combat harassment and discrimination. Peer Review teams often provide valuable insights into how organisations can better support staff motivation, career development, and participation in decision-making.

7. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

This area reflects Europe's commitment to social fairness and equal opportunities. Institutions are expected to adopt clear policies and procedures to promote diversity and inclusion across management, HR, pedagogy, and support systems. That includes adapting teaching to diverse learning styles, ensuring accessibility in physical and digital environments, and tackling stereotypes or discrimination according to an intersectional approach. Providers must also offer guidance and support tailored to learners' individual needs. In Peer Review, DEI is both a policy question and a lived practice, visible in how staff, learners, and stakeholders experience everyday life in the institution.

8. External Relations

VET providers do not operate in isolation; they are embedded in networks of employers, authorities, communities, and learners. This area examines how institutions identify and cooperate with external stakeholders, communicate their achievements, and contribute to policy-making. Promotion and outreach activities are also important, as is participation in local, national, and international events. A Peer Review in this area typically highlights how effectively the provider builds partnerships, maintains transparency, and uses cooperation to enhance the quality of learning opportunities.

9. Internationalisation

In today's interconnected world, internationalisation is no longer an optional extra but a core dimension of quality. This area assesses how institutions integrate international perspectives into their strategies, partnerships, and pedagogical approaches. It includes mobility opportunities for learners and staff, participation in transnational projects, and the ability to adapt curricula to global labour market needs. Peer Reviews look for evidence of systematic planning, adequate support for participants, and the embedding of intercultural learning in everyday practice. A strong internationalisation strategy enriches not only those who travel abroad but also the wider institution, which benefits from new ideas, networks, and collaborations.

10. Pedagogical Framework

A clear pedagogical framework is essential to guide teaching and learning. This area examines whether the institution has developed and communicated an overarching vision of pedagogy that is aligned with its mission and learner needs. It involves defining teaching methods, learning principles, and approaches to assessment and guidance. The Peer Review process considers whether this framework is explicit, shared among staff, and regularly updated to reflect new trends, including digital learning and sustainable education. A robust framework ensures consistency, coherence, and innovation in teaching practices across the institution.

11. Teaching and Learning

While the pedagogical framework sets the direction, teaching and learning represent the daily reality of VET provision. This area explores the extent to which teaching methods are learner-centred, inclusive, and innovative. It asks whether lessons are well planned and monitored, whether teachers adapt to diverse needs, and whether they make use of digital technologies and real-life tasks. Peer Review looks for evidence of interaction between teachers and learners, flexibility in methods, and continuous adaptation to changing contexts. Effective teaching is seen not only in classroom outcomes but also in the motivation, engagement, and progression of learners.

12. Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning (WBL) is a hallmark of vocational education. This quality area focuses on how institutions organise, monitor, and assess learning that takes place in workplaces. Effective WBL requires strong partnerships with employers, clear agreements on roles and responsibilities, and mechanisms to support both learners and mentors. Peer Review examines how placements are chosen, how learners are prepared, and how feedback is collected and used. The area also considers equity: all learners should have access to meaningful WBL opportunities, regardless of background or special needs. A well-developed WBL system ensures that learners acquire not only technical competences but also social and professional skills that ease their transition into the labour market.

13. Assessment and Certification

Assessment is at the core of credibility in education. This area examines how institutions design, implement, and monitor assessment methods to ensure fairness, transparency, and alignment with learning outcomes. Certification processes must be valid and trusted by learners, employers, and society. Peer Review evaluates whether assessment strategies are documented, whether criteria are clear and communicated, and whether procedures ensure consistency. It also considers whether learners receive constructive feedback that supports their development. Certification is not only a formal act but also a reflection of the institution's reliability and commitment to quality.

14. Learning Outcomes

This area links directly to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the learning outcomes approach that has shaped European education policy. It examines whether institutions define clear, measurable outcomes for each programme and ensure that teaching, assessment, and certification are aligned with them. Peer Review looks at how outcomes are communicated to learners and stakeholders, how they are used in curriculum design, and how they guide continuous improvement. A strong focus on learning outcomes ensures transparency, comparability, and relevance, making it easier for learners to progress, transfer, or have their qualifications recognised across borders.

15. Green Education

Responding to the European Green Deal, the manual includes a dedicated quality area on sustainability. This area asks how institutions integrate environmental awareness and sustainable practices into their curricula, pedagogy, and daily operations. It involves teaching learners about green competences, reducing the ecological footprint of facilities, and fostering a culture of responsibility toward the environment. Peer Review considers whether sustainability is embedded across subjects, whether staff are trained to teach green skills, and whether learners are engaged in practical projects that promote environmental responsibility. The inclusion of this area signals a cultural shift, making green competences an integral part of VET quality.

16. Digitalisation

The final area reflects the Digital Education Action Plan and the increasing role of digitalisation in education and work. It looks at how institutions adopt digital technologies in teaching, learning, and management. Peer Review explores whether staff are trained in digital pedagogy, whether learners are supported in developing digital competences, and whether infrastructure and resources are adequate. Importantly, this area also addresses digital inclusion, ensuring that all learners—regardless of background or ability—can access and benefit from digital learning. A strong performance in this area demonstrates that the institution is ready for the digital society and economy, and that it prepares learners for the workplaces of the future.

Overview

Together, these sixteen Quality Areas provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating and improving VET provision in Europe. They balance long-established concerns such as leadership, teaching, and assessment with the pressing challenges of sustainability and digitalisation. The framework is flexible: institutions choose the areas most relevant to their needs, but the full set offers a shared European language for quality assurance. Through Peer Review, these areas become the basis for constructive dialogue, mutual learning, and concrete improvement.

Country Piloting Analyses

Introduction

The piloting of the Digital and Green Peer Review methodology in Italy, Portugal, and Lithuania was a cornerstone of the DIGITAL PR project. It aimed to test the revised methodology in diverse contexts, validate its usability, and gather feedback from institutions, peers, and stakeholders. The pilots were conducted under **Work Package 3 (Piloting of Digital PR)**, coordinated by **FORMA.Azione (Italy)**, with **CECOA (Portugal)** and **LESTU (Lithuania)** leading national implementation, and **EfVET (Belgium)** supporting monitoring and dissemination.

The piloting followed a shared European framework but was adapted to national realities. It included the preparation of training materials, training for newcomers and experienced peers, peer review visits, peer learning workshops, and dissemination events. Across the three countries, more than **143 peers were trained**, **15 national peer reviews** were completed, and over **170 stakeholders** directly engaged, surpassing most of the original targets set in the application.

The following analysis looks at each country in turn, combining **quantitative results** with **qualitative insights** on strengths, challenges, and lessons learned.

Italy

Italy has a long history with Peer Review, having been among the first EU Member States to pilot the methodology in the mid-2000s. This legacy was evident in the DIGITAL PR piloting, where FORMA.Azione coordinated the activities and mobilised an extensive network of providers and stakeholders.

Quantitative Results

- **Peer Reviews conducted:** 5 (across VET and Adult Education, formal and non-formal providers).
- **Peers trained:** 32 newcomers and 25 experienced, for a total of 57.
- **Institutions engaged:** 37 VET centres, including diverse sectors and regions.
- **Training materials:** 2 detailed PPT plans (50 slides for experienced peers, 94 for newcomers), translated into Italian and adapted for national use.
- **Training evaluations:** consistently above 3.5/4 in clarity, objectives, and trainer effectiveness.
- **Piloting evaluations:** hosting institutions rated professionalism, transparency, and fairness between 3.7 and 3.9/4.

Strengths

A notable strength in Italy was the **depth of institutional reflection through the close cooperation of the EQAVET NRP throughout the project implementatio**. Providers engaged

seriously with the self-evaluation phase, producing structured reports that enabled peers to prepare thoroughly. The **peer teams were well balanced**, drawing on Italy's established community of reviewers, and feedback was consistently described as constructive, professional, and motivating. Oral feedback at the end of visits was particularly appreciated for its clarity and impact.

The Italian pilot also excelled in **training provision**. By producing high-quality, standardised materials and delivering 12-hour training sessions, FORMA.Azione ensured coherence across regional standards, national and European levels. The integration of green and digital practices into training for experienced peers showed how the methodology could evolve without losing continuity. **Challenges**

Despite these strengths, Italian partners encountered **time pressures** during visits. With only one day and a half two days per review, there was little room for extended dialogue or exploration of unexpected issues. Another challenge concerned the **integration of digital tools**. While digitalisation was well addressed in training content, its practical application during visits needed strong support and guidance was uneven. Some peers still found difficult to navigate in digital environment relied heavily on paper-based notes, and technical problems occasionally hindered sharing of documents online preparatory meetings.

Lessons Learned

The Italian experience demonstrated that the methodology's value lies in its ability to serve as a **bridge between regional standards, national quality frameworks and European priorities**. However, it also showed that to fully exploit digitalisation, clearer guidance and more user-friendly tools are needed. Italy proved that Peer Review can be adapted to diverse provider types, but highlighted the importance of balancing preparation, visit time, and follow-up to ensure depth and sustainability.

Portugal

Portugal's pilot, coordinated by CECO, stood out for its inclusiveness and outreach. It mobilised providers from three cities (Lisbon, Tomar, and Braga) and ensured the participation of a broad range of stakeholders.

Quantitative Results

- **Peer Reviews conducted:** 4 (covering pedagogical framework, digitalisation, and green education and training).
- **Peers trained:** 42 (37 newcomers, 5 experienced).
- **Stakeholders involved:** 125, including VET and VNFIL providers, public organisations with responsibilities regarding VET, VNFIL, labour market and youth policies, quality assurance and social partners.
- **Training delivery:** 3 blended editions between November 2024 and April 2025.
- **Training evaluations:** average 3.6/4, with particularly high ratings for clarity of objectives (3.7) and trainer effectiveness (3.8).
- **Piloting evaluations:** peer professionalism, fairness, and collaboration all scored 3.9/4; motivation to implement improvements reached 4.3/4.

Strengths

The Portuguese pilots were praised for their **inclusive design**. By involving institutions from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic regions, CECOIA ensured that the methodology was tested in varied contexts. The engagement of **DGERT**, the national body responsible for VET providers QA and certification, added credibility and policy relevance.

Another strength was the **atmosphere of collaboration**. Feedback from providers emphasised the constructive attitude of peers, the openness of dialogue, and the benefits of exchanging good practices. The pilot also contributed directly to the European agenda by testing **new quality areas**: CEFOSAP and CECOIA focused on digitalisation, while INOVINTER piloted green education and training. This allowed the project to validate the relevance of the revised framework.

Challenges

The main difficulty in Portugal was the **lack of experienced peers**. With 37 of 42 participants being newcomers, some teams struggled with confidence, time management, and familiarity with the PDCA cycle. Training mitigated this, but the imbalance underscored the need to mix new and experienced reviewers.

Other challenges included **tool redundancies** (information repeated across forms), **short visit duration** (1.5 days), and **technical issues** with the digital platform (simultaneous editing problems, navigation difficulties). These issues sometimes reduced efficiency and limited the depth of analysis.

Lessons Learned

The Portuguese pilots highlighted the importance of **rigorous preparation**, simplification of tools, and the value of building a **Community of Practice** to extend learning beyond the project. They also demonstrated the flexibility of the methodology: new criteria were added to Quality Area 10 to reflect the specific processes of VNFIL centres, showing how Peer Review can be tailored to national contexts without losing European coherence.

Lithuania

Lithuania's pilot, coordinated by LESTU, focused on VET schools all over Lithuania. It tested the methodology with findings presented in national workshops and a dissemination conference.

Quantitative Results

- **Peer Reviews conducted:** 6 (across six VET centres in sectors such as agriculture, business, automotive, and polytechnics).
- **Peers trained:** 77 (33 newcomers, 44 experienced).
- **Institutions engaged:** 10 VET schools across multiple fields.
- **Training evaluations:** over 85% of participants rated clarity, trainer effectiveness, and professional relevance as 3 or 4 on a 1–4 scale.
- **Piloting evaluations:** preparation and self-assessment clarity 3–4; usefulness of internal reflection 3.9; overall value of PR 3.9.

Strengths

Lithuanian institutions valued the **clarity of the self-evaluation process** and found it highly useful for internal reflection. Peers provided **empathetic yet objective feedback**, which built trust and made the process feel supportive rather than threatening. Meta-reflection sessions were a distinctive strength: participants used them to reflect not only on outcomes but also on the process itself, generating valuable insights for methodology refinement.

The Lithuanian pilot confirmed that Peer Review is seen as **less stressful and more empowering than inspections**. It fostered self-reflection, encouraged dialogue among staff, and strengthened internal quality cultures. Participants reported that the process motivated both teachers and managers to develop structured improvement plans.

Challenges

Lithuania faced challenges similar to its partners. **Time limitations** constrained in-depth discussions, and some self-reports were either excessively detailed or insufficiently structured, reducing their usefulness. Technical issues with the **digital platform**—including slow performance, inflexible forms, and lack of real-time collaboration—were widely noted. While online elements of the process were appreciated, peers felt that **remote reviews limited their ability to capture non-verbal communication** and the atmosphere of institutions. Training needs were also highlighted, especially for newcomers.

Lessons Learned

Lithuania's key lesson was the importance of **careful preparation**. Institutions that invested in pre-planning produced more effective reviews. Another insight was that **feedback must be both empathetic and realistic**; when balanced correctly, it creates genuine motivation for improvement. Finally, the Lithuanian pilot confirmed that the methodology could be integrated into national QA systems, either as a complement to inspections or as a tool to strengthen institutional self-evaluation.

Cross-Country Comparison

The piloting of the Digital and Green Peer Review methodology in **Italy, Portugal, and Lithuania** provided a comprehensive test of the revised framework under diverse national conditions. While each country had its specific context, several **commonalities and differences** emerged.

Common Strengths

Across all three countries, Peer Review was consistently valued as a **supportive and formative methodology**, distinct from inspections or audits. Participants highlighted the **constructive tone of peer feedback**, the **usefulness of self-assessment for internal reflection**, and the **credibility of results**. Satisfaction scores between **3.5 and 3.9 out of 4** confirmed that providers perceived the process as professional, fair, and motivating.

Training was also a cross-cutting success. In total, more than **143 peers were trained** (32 newcomers + 25 experienced in Italy, 37 + 5 in Portugal, and 33 + 44 in Lithuania), meeting or surpassing WP3 targets. Evaluation forms confirmed that over **85% of participants** rated training positively (3–4 on a 1–4 scale), praising the clarity of objectives, trainer effectiveness, and professional relevance.

The pilots also demonstrated that the revised methodology is **flexible enough** to cover diverse institutional types. Italy applied it to both VET and adult education providers, Portugal successfully tested it in VNFIL centres, and Lithuania validated it across traditional vocational

schools in sectors such as agriculture, technology, and business. In all cases, institutions were able to integrate the methodology into their improvement cycles.

Common Challenges

Three challenges recurred across contexts. First, **time constraints** limited the depth of peer visits. With most reviews lasting only 1–2 days, there was little room for extended dialogue or observation. Second, the **digital platform** faced technical issues: slow performance, lack of real-time editing, and redundancies between forms. While digitalisation was a project goal, its implementation revealed the need for more intuitive tools. Third, the **training and balance of peer teams** was uneven. Newcomers in Portugal and Lithuania often needed more support, while Italy benefitted from experienced peers but still struggled with digital practices.

Divergences and National Specificities

The pilots also revealed significant differences. Italy's main strength was its **experience and institutional anchorage**: FORMA.Azione mobilised 37 centres and produced standardised training materials (50-slide set for experienced peers, 94 for newcomers). Portugal's distinctive contribution was its **inclusiveness and stakeholder engagement**, involving 125 stakeholders and testing new criteria for VNFIL. Lithuania's pilot was particularly strong in **trust-building and meta-reflection**, showing how Peer Review can empower staff and motivate institutions in a national system where inspections are often perceived as stressful.

Impact Analysis

The piloting generated impact at **three levels**: individual, institutional, and systemic.

Individual Impact

At the individual level, the primary beneficiaries were the **peers** themselves. For newcomers, the training opened the door to a new professional role. They acquired competences in quality assurance, peer collaboration, and the new quality areas of digitalisation and sustainability. In Italy, 32 newcomers joined the pool of trained peers, in Portugal 37, and in Lithuania 33. For experienced peers, short training sessions refreshed their knowledge and aligned practices with emerging themes. In total, **74 experienced peers** were trained (25 in Italy, 5 in Portugal, 44 in Lithuania).

Evaluation surveys confirmed the impact: peers reported that training improved their confidence, expanded their networks, and increased their sense of belonging to a professional community. Over **90% of newcomers** in all three countries went on to participate in piloting, surpassing the 85% target, showing strong engagement and readiness to apply their new competences.

Institutional Impact

For hosting providers, the most immediate impact was the **external validation and constructive feedback** they received. Institutions highlighted that the process encouraged critical reflection on their strengths and weaknesses and that the feedback was credible and trustworthy. In Portugal, 4 providers (3 VNFIL and 1 VET) participated; in Italy, 5 reviews were carried out across 37 centres; in Lithuania, 6 VET schools hosted reviews. All providers developed **structured improvement plans**, integrating peer feedback into their quality cycles.

The pilots also had a motivational effect. In Lithuania, institutions stressed that Peer Review felt less stressful than inspections and more empowering, as it promoted self-reflection rather than judgment. In Portugal, the high satisfaction scores (3.9/4 for usefulness and professionalism) confirmed that institutions found the process valuable. Italian providers demonstrated how Peer Review could complement existing quality assurance systems, bridging national and European priorities.

Systemic Impact

At the systemic level, the involvement of **stakeholders and policy actors** ensured that piloting resonated beyond the individual institutions. In Italy, cooperation with **EQAVET NRP** and **regional authorities** linked the project to national QA frameworks. In Portugal, the engagement of **DGERT** added policy relevance and credibility. In Lithuania, dissemination events involved school leaders and local stakeholders, highlighting the methodology's potential integration into the national system.

The project also produced a pool of **more than 130 trained peers** across three countries, strengthening the sustainability and transferability of the methodology. The inclusion of diverse sectors—from agriculture to business, from VNFIL to polytechnics—demonstrated that the Digital & Green Peer Review can serve as a flexible tool across lifelong learning.

Comparative Analysis of Piloting Across QAs and Policy Contexts

(Italy, Portugal, Lithuania)

The three national strands of DIGITAL PR show a methodology that is recognizably the same—self-assessment, structured peer visits, evidence-based reporting, improvement planning—yet lived differently in each place. Those differences emerge most clearly when you watch how teams choose and work with **Quality Areas**, and when you place those choices inside national QA traditions and institutions. Italy's thread is density and breadth; Portugal's is inclusiveness and formal anchorage; Lithuania's is cultural change through reflective practice. Together they sketch a coherent European picture of “peer review for digital and green VET,” but with distinct accents.

How the QAs were chosen and worked

Italy's five onsite reviews spread across VET and adult-learning providers and gravitated toward **Digitalisation (QA16)**, **Teaching & Learning (QA11)**, **External Relations (QA8)** and **Learning Results and Outcomes (QA14)**. That constellation is revealing. With External Relations and Learning Results paired twice (SKILL FACTORY; MTU Campello), the Italian pilots push on two classic levers of value: how the provider is networked and how clearly it can surface outcomes; the other pair—Digitalisation with Teaching & Learning—keeps the work anchored in the classroom and workshop, where technology becomes pedagogy rather than platform. Providers consistently rated clarity, structure and usefulness of reports highly (mostly 3–4 on a 4-point scale), and peers were praised for professionalism and collaborative stance; where criticisms appeared, they were practical (more concrete examples in some phases, more time). In short, the Italian pattern reads like a methodological “stress-test” across organisational–pedagogical interfaces, with digital as a means to improve teaching, and external relations as the route to relevance and recognition.

Portugal deliberately distributed its four reviews to **Pedagogical Framework & Planning (QA10)**, **Green Education and Training Processes (QA15)** and **Digitalisation (QA16)**. The triptych tracks two Portuguese policy truths: first, that **VNFIL** (validation of non-formal and informal learning) has a distinctive pedagogy and documentation culture; second, that “digital

and green” are not add-ons but axes that cut through provision. Portuguese teams explicitly added criteria to QA10 to capture VNFIL’s portfolio-based recognition logic, an editorial move that both respects European commonality and makes it **usable** in national specificity. It is also the strand where stakeholder involvement is strongest: **125 stakeholders** were drawn in across VET/VNFIL providers and public bodies (including **DGERT**, QA/certification authority), and peer professionalism, transparency and collaboration all scored **3.9/4**; motivation to implement improvements was even higher (**4.3/4**). That emphatic endorsement sits comfortably with a training programme that blended editions over several months and scored **~3.6/4** overall, with trainers at **3.8/4**. In Portuguese hands, QA work is a hinge between classroom, validation centre and regulator, and the pilots treat that hinge with methodological care—clarity of objectives, rigorous preparation, and structured tools—while acknowledging practical pressures (time, tool redundancies, platform usability and the confidence gap when most peers are new).

Lithuania comes through as a study in **quality culture**: schools and VET centres react positively to clear self-assessment instructions and report that the process aids internal reflection; oral and written feedback is experienced as **empathetic yet objective**, reducing the “inspection anxiety” that formal evaluation often triggers. Meta-reflection—the act of looking at the looking—becomes a distinct Lithuanian contribution: sessions about time, preparation, and the limits of remote observation help participants name where the process works and where it frays (e.g., when online elements conceal the “informal atmosphere” you can only sense onsite). Technical constraints feel concrete: slow platform performance, rigid forms, and the inability for several people to work simultaneously. Yet these never eclipse the core: a shared belief that well-planned peer work, supported by documents and guiding questions, produces better dialogue, clearer feedback, and stronger improvement planning.

The numbers as practice, not only outputs

Across the three strands, **training totals** tell you where energy sits: Italy trained **57** peers (32 newcomers; 25 experienced), Portugal **42** (37 newcomers; 5 experienced), Lithuania **77** (33 newcomers; 44 experienced). Those distributions matter. Italy’s larger experienced cohort is visible in review fluency and feedback structure; Portugal’s predominance of newcomers creates a learning curve—addressed by blended training and close coordination—that makes visits feel at once “highly rewarding” and time-tight; Lithuania’s near-parity between newcomers and experienced peers is probably one reason its meta-reflection has such nuance. In that sense, the numbers describe not only outputs but **texture**—how conversations go, how confidently peers triangulate evidence, how far feedback can travel in 1.5–2 days.

Institutional participation patterns reinforce the same picture. Italy mobilised a **broad network (37 centres engaged)** and completed **five** reviews; Portugal completed **four** reviews with **42 peers** and a deliberately wide stakeholder net; Lithuania mounted **six** reviews across **ten** VET schools and sectors. Where providers rated phases numerically, the centre of gravity sits high (**~3.5–3.9/4**), with the **lowest early score** unsurprisingly tied to improvement-planning feasibility in Portugal—not because suggestions lacked value, but because surveys were taken **immediately after** visits, before feasibility could be tested; the same instruments show **high motivation** to implement. When such patterns appear in three systems with different histories and legal frames, you are watching a method that travels.

QAs in dialogue with national policy frames

One reason the pilots “read national” without losing their European line is that the QAs selected map onto live **policy anchors** in each place.

In **Italy**, the presence of **EQAVET NRP** at events and in the network creates a clear institutional tether: providers are used to operating against national QA requirements and European reference points. FORMA.Azione’s design choice—two training curricula (50-slide advanced, 94-slide newcomer), Italian translations, and a common capacity-building strategy—makes the European methodology talk in Italian, but without diluting its structure. The review pairs (QA8 with QA14; QA16 with QA11) also mirror key Italian concerns: relevance through partnership, and observable outcomes linked to pedagogy and digital practice. Put differently, the QA pattern aligns with a policy climate where external visibility (networks, outcomes) and pedagogical modernization (digital teaching) are explicit expectations of VET providers.

In **Portugal**, the QA cluster and the addition of criteria to **QA10** are impossible to read without **VNFIL** in view. Validation in Portugal has formalised pathways, documentation and roles; a quality area that ignores those specifics cannot truly be “applicable.” CECO’s strand therefore operationalizes the European framework through a national lens: DGERT’s participation confers regulatory legitimacy; the city spread (Lisboa, Tomar, Braga) ensures socio-economic and organisational diversity; peers exchange across reviewed organisations to thicken the community. Where numbers are strongest (3.9/4 on peer professionalism; 4.3/4 motivation to implement), they correlate with a QA use that illuminates **how** work is done (planning and pedagogy), not just **what** is produced. The green/digital tandem (QA15, QA16) sits naturally within national and EU recovery/transition agendas; the methodology becomes a vehicle for aligning provider practice with those agendas in ways staff can recognise and act on.

Lithuania presents a complementary policy picture. LESTU’s coordination places a **social-partner voice** at the centre, and the Kaunas-anchored school strand shows how peer processes can **soften** the evaluation climate while still insisting on evidence. The conference and meta-reflection outputs point to a potential integration track: peer review not as a substitute for external inspection but as a **formative counterpoint** that enhances self-evaluation capability and staff ownership. In that climate, QAs are lenses staff can actually look through—teaching/learning, guidance, assessment, and the cross-cutting digital/green dimensions—rather than lists to comply with. The explicit attention to time, preparation, and platform usability reads as system-level feedback: tools and pacing need to match how Lithuanian institutions can realistically work and learn together.

Digital and green as cross-cutting, not decorative

When you follow **QA16 (Digitalisation)** and **QA15 (Green)** through the three strands, you don’t find ornamental add-ons. In Italy, digital appears where it matters pedagogically—paired with Teaching & Learning—or organisationally—paired with External Relations, where communication, visibility and partnership infrastructures increasingly depend on digital systems. Feedback sought more concrete examples in some phases, but where the pairing is strong, digital is less a tool than a **practice**.

Portugal’s QA16 reviews were anchored in providers whose digitalisation is inseparable from their mission and regulatory environment; staff praised the **clarity of objectives** and the structured nature of instruments, while also flagging that initial preparation can feel “exhaustive” and that **PDCA literacy** is not evenly distributed (stronger in management than in pedagogical roles). That asymmetry is a real insight: for digital and green to be “institutional,” the QA language has to be graspable by teachers and tutors, not only QA

officers. The same strand's QA15 review shows green pedagogy as content, method and operations: from projects learners can touch to dematerialisation of processes.

Lithuania's materials don't foreground a single green/digital case but **normalise** them: staff understand digital affordances and constraints (not least the platform); they see the value of hybrid elements but name what online can't do (sense climate, capture non-verbal dynamics). Green is present less as a slogan than as practice linked to planning, resourcing and teaching, folded into the same "prepare well, talk well, feedback well" cycle that structures everything else.

Stakeholders and legitimacy

A consistent through-line is the **role of public bodies and networks** in lending weight and continuity. Italy's connection to **EQAVET NRP** and regional authorities means providers see peer review not as a side-project but as something that can count in their quality story. Portugal's inclusion of **DGERT** makes that even clearer; it anchors the pilots in the system that certifies providers and oversees QA, and explains why stakeholders turned out in such numbers. Lithuania's use of union networks and open events creates visibility and discusses the method as a **cultural resource** for schools, not merely a reporting exercise. Those different modes of legitimacy, each accurate to national context, are why the same European manual can feel so "local" in practice.

Training ecosystems behind the visits

Pilots are only as strong as the **training ecosystems** that feed them. Italy's two PPT curricula (50 slides for experienced peers, 94 for newcomers), Italian translations, and a capacity-building strategy co-crafted with partners set a high bar for coherence; training volumes (32 newcomers; 25 experienced) show real throughput, and evaluation forms back the quality claim (scores mostly above 3.5/4). Portugal's three blended editions and careful role-mix (managers, VNFIL staff, QA coordinators, trainers) speak to inclusiveness and system coverage—useful when peer teams are newcomer-heavy. Lithuania's balanced training cohorts (33 newcomers; 31 experienced) and high satisfaction signal a **maturing** peer community, one that can underpin repeat cycles rather than one-off visits. The methodological effect is visible: where training is dense and contextualised, visit conversations dig deeper into QA criteria and indicators and triangulate evidence more naturally.

Reading the platform through practice

All three strands surface the **digital platform** as both enabler and constraint. Italy uses it to reduce duplication and structure workflow, but some peers default to paper habits under time pressure; feedback asks for more examples and smoother transitions between phases. Portugal's detailed meta-evaluation goes further: redundancies across the Initial Information Sheet, Self-Report and Report; limited real-time collaboration; navigation hurdles; a wish for **interactive flowcharts** tailored to peers vs providers. Lithuania names the same friction points—form rigidity, lag, concurrent use limitations—while acknowledging the platform's value as a common space. If you step back from complaints and look at what participants are asking for, it isn't gadgetry; it's a platform that **matches the method**: a living PDCA with role-specific paths, fewer re-entries of the same data, and feedback loops that are visible to teams as they work.

Convergence without flattening

Placed side by side, the three pilots converge on a shared European grammar—peers as "critical friends," triangulation of evidence, PDCA framing, and digital/green mainstreaming—

without flattening national colour. Italy privileges a broad provider network and seasoned peer craft, Portugal ties the method into VNFIL and regulatory circuits with high-trust multi-actor work, Lithuania foregrounds the human texture of evaluation and the craft of feedback. The **QA selections** embody that: QA8+QA14 and QA16+QA11 in Italy; QA10 with added criteria and QA16/QA15 in Portugal; a Lithuanian balance that keeps teaching/learning central while normalising digital/green as cross-cutting. The net effect is a methodology that **travels as a conversation**, not a checklist.

Policy Recommendations

Institutional Level (VET providers, schools, validation centres)

At the institutional level, the Digital and Green Peer Review methodology should become an integral component of quality assurance and development strategies within vocational schools, training providers, and validation centres. The following recommendations outline the main directions for embedding peer review as a sustainable, structured, and value-adding process aligned with European and national quality frameworks.

1. Integrate Peer Review into Institutional Quality Assurance Cycles

Institutions are encouraged to formally embed peer review within their regular self-evaluation and planning cycles. This integration ensures that feedback from peers is systematically linked to the institution's quality management system, rather than implemented as an isolated activity. Such an approach is consistent with the Council Recommendation on VET (2020, Article 15), which calls for continuous improvement and evidence-based quality development. In Lithuania, peer review should be recognised as part of the procedures established under the *Order of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport on Quality Assurance in VET (V-15, 2017)*. In Italy, it should align with regional quality assurance frameworks coordinated by the EQAVET National Reference Point (NRP), and in Portugal, it is recommended that it complement the Portuguese System of VET Providers Quality Assurance and Certification run by DGERT, ensuring coherence between institutional and national evaluation instruments.

2. Establish Dedicated Peer Review Leadership Teams

To guarantee sustainability and professional coordination, each institution should establish a dedicated peer review steering group or leadership team. This team should oversee the full review cycle—from self-assessment and preparation to follow-up and improvement planning—reflecting the EQAVET principle of stakeholder participation. In Portugal, such teams could include, depending on the type of qualification via and services offered, teachers/trainers, pedagogical coordinators, managers, mentors, tutors, instructors, assessors, counsellors reflecting, also the principle of stakeholders involvement.. In Lithuania, school-based quality teams should follow the participatory approach prescribed in the *General Education Quality Assurance Framework (2020)*,



involving representatives of management, teachers, learners, and local community stakeholders.

3. **Narrow the Scope of Each Review to Ensure Depth and Focus**

Each peer review cycle should concentrate on one or two Quality Areas to allow for thorough analysis and meaningful feedback. The *EU Peer Review Manual* (Cedefop, 2015) recommends this focused approach to enhance the depth and quality of reflection. In Italy, institutions could prioritise teaching and learning, or partnerships with external stakeholders, in line with *Regione Umbria* guidance on dual VET. A limited scope ensures that reviews are feasible within realistic timeframes and that feedback is actionable, evidence-based, and aligned with institutional improvement priorities.

4. **Strengthen the Role of the Self-Assessment Report**

The self-assessment report should serve as the central reference document throughout the peer review process. Institutions are advised to develop concise, well-structured, and evidence-based reports that clearly outline strengths, challenges, and planned improvements. This approach is aligned with EQAVET Indicator 1, which emphasises the relevance of systematic self-evaluation to quality assurance. In Portugal, DGERT requires explicit links between evidence, pedagogical practice, and organisational management—these should be reflected in the structure of institutional self-assessment reports. In Italy and Lithuania, reports should similarly be grounded in factual data and linked to measurable outcomes, providing a robust foundation for peer dialogue.

5. **Embed Digitalisation and Sustainability Across Pedagogical and Organisational Practice**

Embedding digital and green principles in pedagogy and management is essential to align with both the *Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)* and the *European Green Deal (2019)*. In Italy, VET providers should align their digital teaching strategies with the *Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale* and promote the use of blended learning environments. Portuguese training centres should demonstrate progress in the dematerialisation of administrative processes as part of the *Plano de Ação para a Transição Digital*. Lithuanian schools should systematically integrate sustainability principles and green competences into curricula and daily operations, in line with the *National Education Strategy 2021–2030*. By integrating these dimensions, peer review contributes not only to institutional improvement but also to environmental responsibility and technological readiness.

6. **Invest in the Professional Development of Staff as Peers**

Institutions should recognise participation in peer review as a structured form of professional development for teachers, trainers, and managers. This aligns with the





Council Recommendation on Teachers and Trainers (2019), which identifies peer learning as a key method for professionalisation and competence enhancement. Providers are encouraged to allocate specific time and resources for staff to participate in peer training, both at national and European levels, and to formally acknowledge peer reviewer roles within professional appraisal systems.

7. Ensure Active Stakeholder Participation

Effective peer review depends on inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders, including employers, learners, and community representatives. The *Council Recommendation on VET (2020)* highlights such partnerships as essential for improving quality and relevance. In Italy, peer reviews should include input from regional employer associations and local training networks. In Portugal, DGERT and VNFIL policy makers (example: ANQEP, I,P) are encouraged to participate as external observers or peers to ensure methodological coherence. In Lithuania, learner councils and representatives of local labour-market institutions should be systematically involved, promoting shared ownership of outcomes and decisions.

8. Reduce Duplication and Streamline Documentation

Institutions are advised to simplify documentation procedures and ensure that information provided during peer review is directly transferable to internal and national quality assurance tools. This recommendation reflects the EQAVET principle of efficiency and the digital transformation goals of the *Digital Education Action Plan*. Lithuanian schools may align their peer review templates with KPMPC's existing online QA instruments; Portuguese providers are encouraged to harmonise peer review documentation with DGERT certification procedures and templates and QUALIFICA Centers Quality Charter guidelines (for VNFIL providers); and Italian regions could integrate peer review reporting formats into regional QA databases.

9. Translate Feedback into Concrete Improvement Plans

The results of peer reviews must lead to measurable change. Institutions should translate the feedback and recommendations received into concrete, *SMART* improvement plans (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound), ensuring that actions are realistic and progress is monitored. Cedefop's *Handbook on Peer Review (2015)* provides a model for drafting such plans. In Lithuania, improvement actions derived from peer review should be integrated into annual school improvement documents; in Portugal and Italy, they should be reported to the relevant regional, national or sectoral quality authorities as evidence of continuous development.

10. Promote Reflective Practice Through Structured Follow-Up

Sustained impact depends on regular reflection and follow-up. Institutions should schedule structured follow-up meetings three to six months after each review to



assess progress, share experiences, and document lessons learned. This practice corresponds to Phase 4 of the EQAVET quality cycle—review and evaluation. Lithuanian pilots under the DIGITAL PR project have already demonstrated the value of meta-reflection sessions for developing a deeper culture of trust and learning. Italian and Portuguese providers are encouraged to adopt similar approaches, using reflection sessions to consolidate learning and to ensure that peer review becomes a permanent feature of institutional quality culture.

National Level (ministries, agencies, national reference points, regional authorities)

At the national level, the successful mainstreaming of the Digital and Green Peer Review methodology depends on the commitment of ministries, quality assurance agencies, and national reference points to formally recognise and support its use. The following recommendations aim to ensure that peer review becomes a stable, regulated, and well-resourced component of national quality assurance ecosystems across participating countries.

1. Recognise Peer Review within National Quality Assurance Systems

National authorities should officially embed peer review in legislation, strategic frameworks, and procedural guidelines governing quality assurance in vocational education and training. This formal recognition ensures that peer review is acknowledged as a valid and complementary method of formative evaluation alongside inspections and accreditation/certification mechanisms. In Lithuania, this would entail incorporating peer review into the national VET Quality Assurance system under *Order V-15* and subsequent regulations of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. In Portugal, recognition could be granted through the Portuguese System of VET Providers Quality Assurance and Certification Framework or through the QUALIFICA Centers Quality Charter (for VNFIL providers), while in Italy, peer review should be referenced EQAVET NRPs actions, regional quality assurance decrees and training standards aligned with the *EQAVET* principles. Such institutionalisation reinforces credibility and promotes consistency across providers and regions.

2. Develop National Registers of Trained Peers

To build sustainable capacity and professionalise the practice of peer review, national authorities should establish and maintain national registers of trained peers. This recommendation directly responds to the *Council Recommendation on VET (2020, Article 17)*, which emphasises capacity building for quality assurance. In Lithuania, the *National Reference Point (KPMPC)* could host and update the register as part of its QA coordination mandate. In Portugal, EQAVET NRP could be mobilised to make available a list of certified peers, while Italian regional authorities could maintain corresponding registers through their EQAVET NRPs. The creation of such registers ensures

transparency, enables systematic matching between peers and institutions, and supports ongoing professional recognition.

3. Accredit Peer Review Training Programmes

National frameworks for continuing professional development should formally accredit training programmes for peer reviewers and facilitators. This ensures that peer training meets recognised quality standards and leads to certified learning outcomes, consistent with the *European Approach to Micro-Credentials (2022)*. In Italy, the *Legge 107/2015* framework on teacher training provides the appropriate structure for recognising peer review courses within CPD portfolios. In Portugal, integration with the offer of continuing training for trainers run by *Centro Nacional de Qualificação de Formadores* would allow VET trainers to acquire certified competences linked to peer evaluation. In Lithuania, peer training should be included in the *Teacher Professional Development Programme*, granting participants recognised certificates or micro-credentials. This approach strengthens the quality and consistency of national peer pools and ensures the long-term sustainability of the methodology.

4. Provide Financial and Workload Support for Implementation

The long-term success of peer review depends on adequate financial and administrative support. National authorities should ensure that institutions and staff participating in peer reviews have access to dedicated funding and workload flexibility. This recommendation reflects *Article 22 of the Council Recommendation on VET (2020)*, which calls for sufficient resources to ensure quality assurance effectiveness. In Italy and Portugal, funding could be drawn from *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)* allocations for continuous quality improvement. Lithuania could allocate national improvement grants via the Ministry of Education. Recognising peer review participation as eligible for official workload time ensures that it is seen not as an additional burden but as an integral part of quality development.

5. Publish National Templates and Guidelines for Peer Review Documentation

To promote coherence, comparability, and transparency, national agencies should provide standardised templates and guidance for peer review documentation. These templates should follow the EQAVET principle of transparency and allow adaptation to national contexts. In Portugal, the alignment need to be with the Portuguese System of VET Providers Quality Assurance and Certification and the QUALIFICA Centers Quality Charter (for VNFIL providers). In Lithuania, templates should be compatible with existing school self-assessment formats to ensure integration within national QA tools. In Italy, national authorities should harmonise templates with regional QA reporting systems. The adoption of unified formats ensures clarity, reduces duplication, and facilitates the aggregation of data for national and European reporting.



6. Invest in Interoperable National Digital Platforms

National digital platforms are essential for managing peer review processes efficiently and ensuring alignment with the *Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)*. Each country should invest in the interoperability of its existing QA systems with the Digital Peer Review Platform developed under the DIGITAL PR project. In Lithuania, this could be achieved by linking peer review tools with *KPMPC* databases and existing institutional QA portals. In Portugal, the interoperability could be feasible by linking DGERT certification platform with peer review functionalities, and in Italy, regional EQAVET systems should be upgraded to include digital peer review modules. Interoperability promotes data coherence, reduces administrative workload, and supports the transition to fully digital quality management processes.

7. Integrate Peer Review Results into National Monitoring and Policy Feedback Loops

National monitoring systems should incorporate the results of peer reviews as a valid source of evidence for assessing institutional quality and informing policy development. This aligns with *EQAVET Indicator 10*, which calls for the use of feedback and results in policy-making. Peer review findings and improvement plans can provide valuable qualitative insights that complement quantitative indicators, allowing policymakers to identify emerging trends and capacity-building needs. In this way, peer review becomes not only a local developmental tool but also a strategic mechanism for national policy learning and system improvement.

8. Support and Finance National Communities of Practice

National authorities should actively promote and fund the creation of peer review communities of practice, thereby strengthening collaboration, networking, and continuous professional learning. The *Council Recommendation on VET (2020, Article 19)* encourages such communities as vehicles for innovation and mutual support. In Italy, sectoral and regional associations could serve as conveners of peer networks. In Portugal, VNFIL centres could function as hubs for peer learning and exchange, while in Lithuania, teacher associations and VET provider networks could take on similar roles. These communities enhance sustainability, maintain engagement among trained peers, and create mechanisms for sharing good practice beyond project frameworks.

9. Link Peer Review to Teacher and Trainer Professional Standards

National teacher and trainer standards should explicitly include competences related to peer review and quality assurance. In Lithuania, the *Teacher Professional Standards (2022)* should be updated to recognise peer evaluation skills as part of professional growth and leadership. In Portugal, trainer profile is defined under *Ordinance n.º 214/2011* and foresees different ways to assure the development and continuous update of trainers' competences, one being the continuing training of trainers where peer evaluation competences could be incorporated, reinforcing that peer learning is



acknowledged as an element of professional excellence. In Italy, the Ministry of Education and regional education authorities should integrate peer review participation within the continuing professional development (CPD) obligations set by *MIUR* regulations. By embedding these competences in formal standards, peer review becomes a mainstream component of professional identity and teacher quality culture.

10. Publish Annual National Synthesis Reports on Peer Review Outcomes

Finally, national reference points and quality agencies should compile and publish annual synthesis reports based on anonymised peer review data. This practice aligns with EQAVET's system-level evaluation principles and ensures the circulation of knowledge and experience gained through peer review. It would be beneficial that Italy's EQAVET NRP, Portugal's DGERT and/or EQAVET NRP, and Lithuania's KPMPC prepare national summaries highlighting trends, common challenges, and examples of good practice. These reports would inform both national policy and European-level cooperation, serving as an evidence base for future reforms, training needs, and strategic planning.

European Level (European Commission, EQAVET, Erasmus+, networks)

At the European level, the *Digital and Green Peer Review* methodology represents a tested and transferable model that supports EU strategies on quality assurance, sustainability, and digital transformation in vocational education and training (VET). To ensure its long-term impact, the following measures should be undertaken within the European policy framework, promoting coherence, scalability, and recognition across Member States.

1. Endorse the Digital and Green Peer Review Methodology as a European Reference

The European Commission is encouraged to formally endorse the revised Digital and Green Peer Review methodology as a European reference tool within the framework of the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET)*. Integration into official EQAVET guidelines and documentation would ensure its visibility and encourage adoption across Member States. This endorsement would also contribute to the implementation of the *Council Recommendation on VET (2020)*, which calls for innovative, collaborative, and developmental approaches to quality assurance that foster trust, transparency, and mutual learning in European VET systems.

2. Publish European Guidance on the Organisation of Peer Reviews

The European Commission, in cooperation with EQAVET and Cedefop, should prepare a concise set of European guidance notes on the organisation and implementation of peer reviews. These guidelines should build upon the lessons learned from the *DIGITAL PR* pilots and earlier European peer review projects, ensuring consistency of standards while allowing national adaptation. The guidance should be aligned with the *European Education Area Strategic Framework (2020)* and include examples of good practice, recommended quality areas, templates for documentation, and indicators for measuring impact. Such a document would provide Member States with a clear and coherent reference point for integrating peer review into their national quality assurance policies.

3. Establish a European Peer Academy

The creation of a European Peer Academy would strengthen the professionalisation of peer reviewers, promote mobility, and ensure the sustainability of the methodology across borders. This initiative could be embedded within the *European Skills Agenda (2020)* and linked to the *Council Recommendation on Teachers and Trainers (2019)*. The Academy could coordinate training courses, workshops, and certification programmes for peers, provide opportunities for international exchanges, and support mentoring between experienced and new reviewers. It would also serve as a resource centre for research, innovation, and dissemination related to peer review, fostering a genuine European community of practice in VET quality assurance.

4. **Develop a Common European Digital Platform**

The European Commission need to invest in the development of a centralised, open-access digital platform for peer review, interoperable with national systems and consistent with the *Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)*. This platform should enable institutions across Europe to find peers, manage review processes, and share improvement results securely and efficiently. It should be based on open-source standards to ensure flexibility and sustainability, and include user-specific dashboards for providers, peers, and national authorities. A European platform would facilitate cross-border cooperation, support multilingual access, and reinforce transparency and comparability across Member States.

5. **Support Thematic Cross-Border Clusters of Peer Reviews**

The European Commission and Erasmus+ National Agencies should promote the organisation of thematic, cross-border peer review clusters focusing on key policy areas such as digitalisation, green competences, inclusion, or innovation. These clusters would operationalise *Erasmus+* priorities on cooperation and peer learning, allowing VET institutions from different countries to jointly analyse and improve specific aspects of provision. Clustered reviews could also serve as pilot initiatives for new European quality indicators and contribute directly to the *European Year of Skills* objectives, deepening mutual understanding and creating tangible European added value.

6. **Link Peer Review Findings to Micro-Credentials and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**

Peer review outcomes need to be connected to the broader European frameworks on skills recognition and professional development. This includes establishing links between peer review competences and the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)* and recognising peer reviewer training as certified learning in line with the *Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials (2022)*. Such integration would allow teachers, trainers other pedagogical staff and QA professionals to receive formal recognition for their engagement in peer learning and review activities, contributing to professional mobility and the creation of a transparent European skills ecosystem.

7. **Incorporate Peer Review Findings into EU Policy Cycles and Monitoring**

The European Commission, through EQAVET and Cedefop, should integrate synthesised peer review findings into annual and multiannual reports on the state of VET in Europe. This practice would provide qualitative insights to complement statistical indicators and inform EU policy guidance on digitalisation, sustainability, and inclusion. Regular analysis of anonymised data from national and cross-border reviews would strengthen evidence-based policymaking and support the alignment of national QA reforms with European strategic goals.

8. Promote the Inclusion of Smaller, Remote, and Less-Resourced Providers

European-level funding instruments, particularly within *Erasmus+* and *ESF+*, should explicitly support the participation of smaller, rural, or less digitally advanced VET providers in peer review activities. This measure aligns with the *Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (2021–2027)*, ensuring that the benefits of peer learning are equitably distributed and that no institution is excluded due to size, location, or limited resources. Targeted support for these providers would contribute to territorial cohesion and enhance the representativeness of the European Peer Review community.

9. Align Peer Review with the European Green Deal and the Council Recommendation on Learning for Environmental Sustainability

Finally, European-level guidance should require peer review processes to explicitly assess and promote sustainability across all aspects of VET provision. Reviews should examine how institutions integrate environmental awareness, green competences, and sustainable operational practices into their teaching and management. This aligns directly with the objectives of the *European Green Deal (2019)* and the *Council Recommendation on Learning for Environmental Sustainability (2022)*. By embedding sustainability indicators within peer review frameworks, the European Commission would reinforce the commitment to a climate-neutral Europe and ensure that quality assurance contributes actively to the green transition of education and training systems.

Conclusions

The Digital and Green Peer Review project has demonstrated remarkable impact at multiple levels, proving that a methodology originally designed as a formative quality assurance tool can evolve into a catalyst for institutional change, professional development, and policy innovation. By embedding digitalisation and sustainability into the very fabric of the peer review process, the project has aligned itself not only with the priorities of participating institutions, but also with the wider European policy agenda.

At the **institutional level**, the project has helped schools, vocational training centres, and adult learning providers build stronger cultures of reflection and trust. Teachers, trainers, and managers reported that the process transformed evaluation from an external control mechanism into an opportunity for professional dialogue and learning. Improvement plans generated after reviews were not abstract documents, but concrete roadmaps for enhancing pedagogy, integrating digital tools, and embedding sustainability into everyday practice. Learners and employers were also brought into the process, ensuring that peer review contributed to a wider ecosystem of collaboration.

At the **professional level**, more than one hundred and thirty peers across Italy, Portugal, and Lithuania acquired new competences in quality assurance, digital methods, and green education. For newcomers, the project opened pathways into a new professional role; for experienced peers, it provided a valuable opportunity to update their skills and engage with emerging European priorities. The sense of belonging to a professional community of practice was consistently highlighted as one of the greatest achievements, contributing to motivation, confidence, and long-term engagement.

At the **system level**, the project made significant progress in linking peer review to national quality assurance frameworks. In Italy, collaboration with the National Reference Point strengthened regional recognition. In Portugal, the involvement of DGERT brought peer review into the mainstream of certification and validation processes. In Lithuania, the National Reference Point facilitated integration with school self-evaluation frameworks and supported the spread of reflective practice. In each case, the project demonstrated how peer review can complement inspections and accreditations, while remaining focused on developmental improvement.

At the **European level**, the project has validated a common methodology for digital and green peer review that is flexible enough to adapt to national contexts, but robust enough to provide a shared identity across borders. The development of training programmes, digital tools, and shared quality areas has created a European framework that supports transparency, mutual trust, and comparability. The project has also contributed directly to the implementation of major European initiatives, including the Council Recommendation on VET (2020), the Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027), and the European Green Deal.



Most importantly, the project has delivered evidence that peer review is not only a technical exercise, but a driver of cultural change. Institutions involved in the piloting reported increased openness, greater willingness to share both strengths and weaknesses, and a deeper commitment to continuous improvement. These cultural shifts are critical for building resilient, innovative, and inclusive vocational education and training systems in Europe.

In conclusion, the Digital and Green Peer Review project has had a transformative impact: empowering institutions, professionalising peers, enriching national frameworks, and advancing European cooperation. It has shown that when digitalisation and sustainability are woven into quality assurance processes, they cease to be distant policy ambitions and become part of everyday educational practice. The project's legacy is therefore not only a validated methodology, but also a strengthened community of educators and institutions committed to shaping the future of VET in Europe.

