Organised Governmental Learning: vocational education and training practices between peer review and peer learning

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ABSTRACT Peer learning has already existed for a long time, as an informal as well as a formal practice between people from the same professional area. However, peer learning systems on the macro level are relatively newer concepts. Policy learning can be fostered by various types of organised activities, ranging from peer review frameworks, which often have a focus on accountability and learning, to international learning events, which are based on concepts like the 'learning spiral'. This article reviews existing international practices of organised governmental learning on the system level, which are also linked to processes on the micro level. It thereby gives a framework to discuss two different VET peer learning activities across Europe which are organised by the European Union (EU) and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

Introduction

Peer review has existed for a long time as an informal as well as a formal practice between persons from the same professional area. The unifying concept is structured feedback given between individuals of equal standing. Peer review is an expertise-oriented approach carried out by individuals who are usually not trained in evaluation, and whose qualifications stem from the field of practice they work in. Peer evaluation is not much recognised as a separate evaluation approach in evaluation theory. However, there are many different forms which have to be distinguished according to their purposes, the underlying evaluative positions, the organisation, their reciprocity and links to other forms of evaluation (Speer, 2011a).

Peer review, as known from product evaluations and micro-level evaluations, is also applied to the macro level. Still, peer learning systems on the macro level are relatively newer concepts. Peer review as well as peer learning at the macro level aim to achieve horizontal learning from country to country by means of diffusion, influence and naming. While conceptual pluralism exists between the peer review and peer learning approaches, there is a lack of empirical analysis of its effectiveness. Some approaches have the main aim of peer learning; others are defined by primary peer review and evaluation activities, which have multiple goals, including, among others, peer learning.

Knowledge, used by governments for reforms and the conceptualisation of new programmes, often exists outside the country, and can be used for learning from the experiences of others. A government can gain by recognising the use of external knowledge for its own problem-solving capability. Learning from external environments and the re-elaboration of knowledge fosters opportunities for interaction with experts and institutional settings or systems, which in turn favours communication between experts. Hence, governments are faced not only with great opportunities for interacting, but also with making strategic choices regarding forms of interaction. For government organisations, peer learning activities usually include the collection and distribution of knowledge internally across the relevant units, while different incentives prevail.

VET's structure is very fragmented within and between the different European Union (EU) countries, and is organised using various subsystems. Different interests and diverse target groups as well as stakeholder groups – within the relevant subsystems – make learning across countries difficult. Also, national interests might vary across Europe. For instance, within the EU, the Copenhagen process provides a framework for working together in a voluntary way. The Copenhagen process is not very well known to the public and does not receive wide attention from the media. The VET reforms within the framework of the Copenhagen process have had so far a limited impact on the performance of the VET systems, as measured by the benchmarking of the Lisbon strategy (CEDEFOP, 2010). In recent years, four common instruments and two common principles and guidelines have been developed and agreed upon by EU member states. Candidate countries also participate within the accession process. The European reference framework for quality assurance in VET is regarded as an instrument to promote transnational mobility and will help promote common trust between the different VET systems. Instruments of quality assurance in VET have been developed and implemented for many years in several European countries, such as Austria, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK, while other member states have less experience and are newer to the field. Peer learning activities have been established by the EU to support quality assurance in the VET, and the European Training Foundation (ETF) is currently organising mutual learning events on various topics throughout the neighbouring EU countries.

This text is structured in three sections, the first of which is a reflection on organised governmental learning in its various facets; the second is an analysis of the various approaches to learning on the VET system level; and the third is an overview of the spectrum for potential further development. The first section gives an overview on peer review, peer evaluation and peer learning in general. Although this contribution cannot give an overview of all the variants, it will shed light on important forms of *system-level* peer review and learning with its specific structures and incentives, which differ from other levels of analysis. In the following section, five different approaches on the system level will be discussed, two of which are from the VET sector, which can be compared with other possible variations. Most of these approaches have at best been regularly implemented for a only few years, and at worst, more erratically so. The field has seen a push in two directions, calling for both stronger accountability orientation and more activation for learning. Finally, insights from recent developments in peer learning inside and outside the VET sector will be discussed.

Peer Review, Peer Evaluation, and Peer Learning

Peer review is an expertise-oriented approach, in which the peers bring in their knowledge from their field of practice. In this approach, individuals of an equal standing provide structured feedback. One of the older forms of peer review is gate-keeping within scientific publishing. In modern forms of peer review, structured systems for data gathering and feedback have been developed (Speer, 2010, 2011a). Peer review is often based on previous self-evaluations, which are the basis for defining evaluation questions and areas for further investigation by peers. Peer review can be located close to either external or internal evaluation, depending on the evaluative position of the peers and the evaluation criteria. At one extreme, peers are direct colleagues and the evaluative criteria stem from within the same organisation. At the other extreme, peers are from the same field of practice but have a very different institutional background, and additionally might stem from another culture and/or country. Then the evaluative criteria will be more influenced from the outside, and at the same time the influence on ensuring that evaluation results have an impact on future behaviour will be smaller. In international system-level peer evaluations, the latter is usually the case. The terms 'peer review' and 'peer evaluation' are often used synonymously within this text, but the former is more widespread.

Evaluation plays an even more important role at all the various levels within different policy fields. Evaluation systems are set up and streams of information flow in (Rist & Stame, 2006). In recent years, self-evaluations at the organisational level as well as at the classroom level became widespread in education, but are newer to the VET sector in Europe (Di Battista et al, 2009; Speer, 2011b). In many countries they can be seen as interrelated to the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF) (EC, 2008). Peer evaluation might extend to a self-

evaluation or an external evaluation perspective. Sometimes peer evaluation has links to external evaluations on the system level or to benchmarking systems. Peer evaluation can also connect self-evaluation with an external view by incorporating a kind of auditing function for other self-evaluations, especially when the validity of self-evaluation is questioned (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). In that case, peer evaluation can be partly interpreted as meta-evaluation, but is usually not limited to that. The combination of different evaluation approaches is especially useful when they have complementary goals and perspectives.

Level	Peers	Evaluation objects
System level	e.g. public administration, education experts	e.g. curricula, sector-specific education
Meso level	e.g. school directors, teachers,	e.g. schools and other training organisations
Micro level	e.g. teachers, colleagues from the same organisation	e.g. classroom teaching, small-scale programmes
Products	e.g. researchers from the same field	e.g. academic review for publications

Table I. Different levels of peer review.

In education, peer evaluation can be identified at various levels - for example, in the classroom, in individual schools, and also between schools. Peer evaluation is also strongly practised in the field of higher education. Educational programmes are often multi-dimensional, and the impact can often been measured only in the long run. At the same time, in education, increasingly more transparency and accountability is demanded, particularly for consumer choice. Business values and culture are increasingly influencing the public sector. National assessments have been widely introduced, also bringing negative aspects (Fitz, 2003). The education sector in general is not characterised by strong vertical accountability and transparency. In education, vertical relationships as top-down hierarchical chains are scattered. Therefore, peer evaluation might fill gaps by contributing to horizontal accountability in a field where vertical accountability is less strong than in other policy fields.

Although doubts regarding the usefulness of peer review have been raised concerning the acceptance, bias, reliability and validity of such forms of evaluation, larger international organisations regularly implement this approach. Peer review systems are based on general guidelines; however, their implementation may vary (Speer, 2010). In many policy fields, the EU has undertaken coordinated efforts for creating an environment in which information and insights are disseminated through various layers of administration. However, the ETF also has an interest in influencing policies in EU neighbouring countries. The peers are confronted with policies and practices from abroad by discourses and debates pertaining to 'good practices'. However, as is known from research, the way from disseminating knowledge to producing real policy and programme changes is influenced by many factors. As pointed out by Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1999), policy changes may occur during a so-called window of opportunity. The political climate surrounding the relevant issue, as well as the way a problem is defined, influence the policy solution applied to the problem. Peer learning might therefore prepare for such a situation, but is less likely to lead to immediate changes.

Within the peer review, peers evaluate the evaluandum; in other words, the evaluated receives feedback either regarding a decision on resources (accountability) or for further development. The peers might also learn from this exercise. In contrast, in concepts of peer learning, the peers receive information on the mostly previously evaluated evaluandum or at least structured presentations or reports on the peer learning object. The peers then learn from the evaluandum. This type of peer learning is also called 'learning from good practice', or 'mutual learning'. Peer learning may also incorporate a social dimension of learning, the social process of transfer from individual learning to organisation-wide and state-wide learning. Therefore, structures enhancing knowledge transfer are designed. Examples include working groups, roundtables, forums, conferences, and virtual platforms. Peer learning is defined by voluntary participation and non-competitive environment, and by approaches for individual as well as group reflection. It is – more or less – assumed that behaviour change cannot be triggered by simple exposure to information.

Different Systems for Governmental Learning

The African Peer Review Mechanism

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) was established in 2002 at the inaugural African Union Summit. It is part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its priorities are on poverty reduction, democracy, human rights and corruption. NEPAD (2003) released a declaration on democracy, political, economic and corporate governance, and these are also the areas to be reviewed. The APRM supports standards and practices that promote political stability, economic growth and sustainable development. However, it does not focus on single policy fields as in other peer evaluation mechanisms. 'The APRM process is designed to be open and participatory. Through a participatory process, the APRM will engage key stakeholders to facilitate exchange of information and national dialogue on good governance and socio-economic development programmes, thereby increasing the transparency of the decision-making processes, and building trust in the pursuit of national development goals' (APRM Secretariat, 2003, pp. 2ff.). This mechanism, as seen in Africa, is unique in that society plays an active role in such a peer review process. By now, 29 of Africa's 53 states have voluntarily joined the governance monitoring system, and 12 of these countries have already undergone all stages of the peer review process (Gruzd, 2009).

The APRM process consists of five steps. The country under review prepares a self-assessment report and a draft programme of action. National stakeholders are included in this process, but there are no detailed guidelines for that. Next, a peer team visits the country and conducts interviews with the widest range of stakeholders. A draft report is written and sent to the APR secretariat. The government of the country under review can comment on it, and then sends it to the APR panel of eminent persons, and then it is presented by the head of state to the APR forum, an AU summit, or a NEPAD steering committee meeting. Due to large differences between the African states, the APRM is not based on direct comparisons and rankings.

Ghana was one of the frontrunners to be reviewed, and is seen as a good example of putting emphasis on societal engagement (Herbert & Gruzd, 2008). The self-assessment process was not led by government officials but was managed through individuals working at independent research institutes. This form of organising the self-assessment mitigated political influence and allowed for strong community involvement. Peer pressure can be exercised during the peer review as well as in the form of recommendations. Grimm et al (2009) describe the APRM having a *'club mentality'*, where pressure is preferably exercised behind closed doors. Boyle (2008) reports that in South Africa there was little community and media involvement, as the government dominated and drove the APR process without broad public participation. As well, Herbert & Gruzd (2008) emphasise the importance of media involvement in the African context. Therefore, as with every other peer review mechanism, the implementation may vary strongly. The APRM works with peer pressure, and also with pressure from the civil society and the media, but without any penalty. Not surprisingly, the APRM is not able to challenge politically oppressive governments. Thus this pan-African body is described as being too weak to lead to political stability, such as in a case like Rwanda (Jordaan, 2007). However, the mechanism can strengthen the self-commitment of more democratic governments, and pressure can also be exercised in the form of summits involving heads of state.

The OECD Peer Review Systems

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) peer review is defined as 'the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a state by other states, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed state improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles' (Pagani, 2002, p. 4). Through the peer review mechanism, transparency, policy dialogue, capacity building and compliance are fostered in the policy sectors under review within the respective country. Since the 1960s, the OECD has been carrying out peer reviews in different policy fields, such as development and the environment, and manages secretariats for the organisation of these reviews. The peer-evaluated country provides the information in the form of a background analysis or some form of self-evaluation. Usually a

peer review team, generally comprising three to four experts from other member countries as well as members from other OECD directorates, undertakes a one-week evaluation mission in the country under review. The team conducts interviews not only with national authorities, but also with NGOs, business representatives and researchers.

Guidelines for preparing the peer review report have been agreed upon by the relevant OECD committees. The final report is generally approved by consensus of the OECD and the reviewed country. The key concept is *mutual accountability*, and peer reviews are expected to exert their influence by using 'peer pressure', which is a mechanism for soft persuasion or coercion. Dialogue with peer countries, comparisons, public scrutiny and sometimes rankings exert pressure on public opinion, national administrations and policy makers (Pagani, 2002). Since most countries rarely want to be blamed publicly, peer pressure might be a powerful tool in promoting compliance. The peer review, as carried out by the OECD at country level, has no direct implications for the evaluated country, and no budgetary decisions are connected to it. But the country may be blamed, and the indirect effects may be strong in some exceptional cases. Thus, politicians might then have to justify the policies they pursued or adapt them according to the results of the peer review.

At the OECD level, a large amount of knowledge is accumulated, such as information about national aid agencies and their respective evaluation systems (Liverani & Lundgren, 2007). However, peer review may only lead to learning through public debate in cases where the peer review initiates a policy debate at the national level. There are some reasons why the pressure is often rather weak. The written reports may be cumbersome, the recommendations often relatively soft. Additionally, as Lehtonen (2005) remarks, the frequency of the peer reviews in question may be too low. Furthermore, the OECD peer reviews are not well known outside the community; they do not attract as much public interest as the OECD's 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA), for instance. However, referring to the OECD can be a strong way for politicians to justify policy changes.

The Learning Spiral

Governmental learning can also be organised with interactive learning processes such as those based on the idea of the 'Learning Spiral' (Blindenbacher & Nashat, 2010), which is an eight-stage concept. The conceptualisation, triangulation, and accommodation stages are part of the preparation phase. After a needs assessment, the knowledge to be learned is selected and then distributed to the peers. The internalisation, externalisation, reconceptualisation and transformation stages are the core for adapting new knowledge. A group of selected participants adopts that knowledge according to the respective countries' needs and context by intra- and interpersonal procedures. Ideally, the output of such iterative learning processes will be behavioural change and the implementation of new knowledge. The configuration stage is organised within a follow-up of the learning activity, in which a wider audience might be included.

Learning spiral processes have been applied so far in the following fields:
- Federalism, with sub-topics such as foreign policy, decentralisation and conflict management in multicultural societies, and assignments of responsibilities;
- Global dialogue on federalism;
- The Iraqi judiciary system and the second chamber of Parliament;
- Lessons of a decade of public sector reform;
- The role of public-private partnerships.

The nature of peer learning events is applicable to different types of settings. They can range from international conferences, multi-year international roundtables, study tours and workshops to e-learning. These different formats vary in the intensity of linking individual learning to group learning, and in the intensity of linking broader learning with action in the single countries. Of course, these different forms of application will not be able to produce similar effects. Future medium-term evaluations of the learning spiral and its applications could perhaps highlight this.
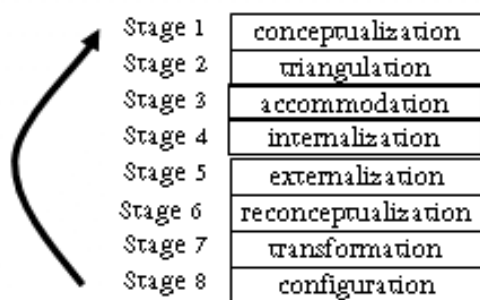
Stage 1	conceptualization
Stage 2	triangulation
Stage 3	accommodation
Stage 4	internalization
Stage 5	externalization
Stage 6	reconceptualization
Stage 7	transformation
Stage 8	configuration

Figure 1. Learning spiral.
Source: Blindenbacher & Nashat (2010, p. 84).

Peer Learning ENQA-VET

The EU has institutionalised the open method of coordination (OMC) in several policy fields to achieve greater convergence towards commonly agreed objectives. The OMC has four mechanisms at its core: commonly agreed indicators; national action plans; joint evaluation of results; and peer reviews. The OMC has been inspired by benchmarking and has been transferred to multilevel governance, where it is a newer instrument of problem-solving and involves participation of different stakeholders as well as different levels of government. For the OMC, two main objectives can be identified: policy learning and goal setting. There are some critical voices concerning the OMC. Scharpf (2002) characterises it as 'mere talk', and Barbier (2011) sees the role of evaluation as having been marginalised in the process.

The OMC is differently institutionalised and organised in the various policy fields. Within the EU VET sector, peer learning activities have been set up. Peer learning in ENQA-VET is defined as 'a process of cooperation at European level, whereby reform agents from one country learn, through direct contact and practical cooperation, from the experience of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe in implementing reforms of shared interests and concern' (Education and Training 2010 work programme, cited in ENQA-VET, 2009a, p. 2). It is based on modern constructivist learning principles, in which 'learners actively develop new knowledge by giving sense to what they observe, discuss and share with others, the roles of experts and learners are interchangeable – learners are experts and experts are learners - and a review of participants' policy context self-representation occurs as a result of the dialogue with other communities and/or cultural/political paradigms' (ENQA-VET, 2009a, p. 2). Host countries invite and present findings with a great potential for dissemination and relevance for other EU countries.

OMC VET topics are:

- Impact of the European Quality Assurance Framework;
- Quality assurance procedures for evaluation;
- Quality assurance procedures for accreditation;
- Quality assurance procedures for student assessment;
- Role of social partners in quality procedures in VET;
- Quality assurance procedures for work-based learning.

As an example of this process, the EU might suggest topics, then the presentations would be mostly based on previously undertaken evaluations. The participants (peers) would take part in learning from the information presented and from the resulting discussions. Most frequently, countries learned from the best performers, and from countries facing similar challenges (Casey & Gold, 2005; Nedergaard, 2006). However, no follow-ups were organised, and any further action in the home country was left to the participants. This kind of peer learning activity is not being continued.

After years of implementing peer learning frameworks and activities within ENQA-VET (see 2009b), there seems to be a shift towards more benchmarking. The ENQA-VET has been removed by the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), which is not organising peer learning any more. Instead, in each member state, national reference points have been founded, and the work towards strengthening quality assurance in European VET is organised through working groups. There are no official statements on the reasons for this shift from peer learning towards more monitoring and benchmarking – that is, on whether this was due to budget cuts, small traceable impacts, or both.

	APRM	OECD peer review	ENQA-VET Peer Learning	ETF Mutual Learning	World Bank Learning Spiral
Objects	Peer review encompassing various policy fields	Separate peer review systems within different policy sectors	Selected topics within 'Quality in VET'	Selected topics within 'VET'	Selected topics within various policy sectors
Goals	Accountability and learning	Accountability and learning	Learning	Learning	Learning
Obligation	Voluntary for AU members, mandatory once joined in the APRM	Mandatory for OECD countries	Voluntary case by case	Voluntary case by case	Voluntary case by case
Structure	Handbook	Handbook	Guidelines	(no data)	Open: according to learning spiral

Table II. Different peer review and peer learning approaches.

ETF: Moving from Peer Review to Peer Learning

The ETF is working with EU neighbouring countries and potential EU candidate countries, which differ immensely in terms of political organisation, economic development, social and civil conditions, demographics and culture, with the greatest variances in the MEDA [1] countries and in Eastern Europe. However, these countries share common problems and challenges in vocational education and training. The ETF is working with countries which are under higher pressure for VET reforms compared with the EU countries. So on the one side, structured learning for VET reform might create more interest in these countries, and on the other side, the VET environment is even more heterogeneous. The capacity for VET policy analysis, institutional settings, structures for implementation, and education infrastructure in general might need improvement. In some countries, stakeholder partnerships - for instance, with social partners - are not very well established. Finally, large parts of labour markets can be identified in the informal sector. In circumstances where many problems can be found at the level of primary and secondary education, vocational education and training does not receive priority on the agenda or adequate funding. At the same time, most programmes urgently need modernisation and adaptation to the current needs of the labour market, and adult training needs to be developed (Masson, 2007). Additionally, bridges between various occupational areas as well as between vocational, general and higher education have to be created, and co-ordination between the ministries and the involved actors at all levels, including social partners, needs to be organised. In many countries transparency of the VET systems is lacking. Most partner countries have introduced reforms of their VET systems, often in the framework of general education reforms. Between 2002 and 2004 the ETF organised several peer reviews (see Box 1).

In 2006, the ETF shifted its strategy from conducting more traditional peer reviews to implementing peer learning. Grootings et al (2006) explain that the peer reviewers profited from participating but that the impact from recommendations on VET policy reforms within the reviewed countries was considered to be small. So, instead of learning from peer review reports, the emphasis was then on learning in order to strengthen the peers' capacity to transfer new knowledge and implement policies. The peer learning is based on issues which are decided upon in cooperation with the respective countries. Each participating country prepares a background paper

on its own situation and the ETF provides a thematic concept paper. Peer learning events are organised and a cross-country synthesis report is written on the basis of these events. For dissemination, publications as well as country-specific workshops and regional conferences take place. The ETF peer learning thereby fosters the 'engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions' (Nikolovska & Vos, 2008, p. 42). It is assumed that peer learning is a mix of individual and social learning. The learning process is ideally embedded into comprehensive policy learning within the partner countries. This is even more relevant for the VET sector than for peer learning in some other policy fields. The VET stakeholder environment is especially complex at the various levels, and the ministries of education do not operate in isolation. The stakeholder environment also has an impact on the choice of evaluation designs and learning (from evaluation) in the field (Speer, 2011b).

Objectives of the ETF peer reviews:
- Provide an external assessment of VET reform policy initiatives to national policy makers
- Improve mutual knowledge and understanding of VET systems, issues and developments in South-Eastern European countries
- Promote regional networking, exchange of experience and co-operation among VET experts, stakeholders and policy makers
- Increase awareness and facilitate transfer of VET reform experience from EU member states and candidate countries
- Contribute to the EU aid programming cycle
- Intensify co-operation between ETF and national authorities / experts from the region.

Mutual learning processes should be enabled by:
- Feedback from interested neighbouring countries on a particular national policy …
- Reflections on the potential relevance of the policy for transferability
- Exchange of views between South-Eastern European country officials and independent specialists from EU and / or Candidate Countries outside the region.

Box 1. The ETF peer reviews 2002-2004.
Source: Grootings et al (2006, pp. 7, 10).

The ETF peer learning activities are more interactive and more encompassing than the other OMC peer learning events. They aim more at networking and creating more opportunities for learning. As for all the peer evaluations and peer learning events, it is difficult to estimate their impact. The ETF VET financing policy issue is quoted as having increased the awareness of including financing into the full chain from design to implementation, especially in Albania and Kosovo (Nikolovska & Vos, 2008). In addition to the international peer learning as such, the ETF fosters the institutionalisation of learning and knowledge sharing through, among other things, the creation of national action points, as well as the organisation and stimulation of discussions between national stakeholders. In doing so, it pays more attention to the phase after the peer learning events and attempts to foster continuity. In an ideal case, this would lead to the development of new 'epistemic communities' or 'policy communities' (Sultana, 2008).

Outlook

Organised peer review and peer learning systems are just one way of triggering the diffusion of good practices and policy changes. It is especially difficult in the EU to differentiate between the effects of different mechanism for policy learning and other measures for horizontal as well as vertical policy diffusion. In education, the causal chain is particularly long, and it takes a considerable amount of time from implementation until the point where the impacts become obvious. This is even truer in the field of quality assurance in VET, which was the focus of the ENQA-VET peer learning. But according to economic theory, politicians and bureaucrats favour fast results.

Different peer evaluation and peer learning systems have been discussed. All of them are oriented towards shared goals, implicit standards, and learning through good practices. Instead of

sanctions, the peer review will generate improvements in policies and institutions. The OECD peer review is partly exerting peer pressure, perhaps more in the circle of peers than in the public debate. The OMC peer learning activities open learning opportunities from good practices, which then can be transferred to the home countries. However, the prerequisites for a transfer are a 'window for opportunity' and political entrepreneurs who are willing to introduce new policies by convincing others that the status quo policies are not optimal. The ETF peer learning activities are partly raising awareness on chosen topics. The African Peer Review Mechanism could show success as long as the community is strongly involved. This involvement may lead to process use of the peer review and to empowerment of the stakeholders, and is strengthened by sharing information with the public. For all cases, it is difficult to attribute causality to changes, because many other factors will always largely influence policy shifts. However, some incentives could be identified.

The success of peer evaluation at the system level can be highly influenced by the peers during the process as well as afterwards, and also by the participation of stakeholder groups and media coverage. Peer evaluation leads then to learning through public debate and can even increase pressure from within the country (vertical accountability). However, external peer pressure may also be highly influential in shifting policy (horizontal accountability). Peer pressure can occur either in the form of formal recommendations, comparisons and rankings, or from other stakeholders – as illustrated in the case of APRM. Self-commitment is strengthened by these forms of peer pressure. Hence, the weakest form of peer evaluation is peer learning, which only relies on the transfer of single peers. These peers are dependent on other actors in their home country, and cannot be seen as independent agents for transferring good practices. The failure of learning from peer review and peer learning is – among others – linked to the governance systems in the home countries. Future research should further analyse links between peer review and other forms of evaluation, which can strengthen knowledge utilisation and prevent peer review from merely being a symbolic activity. In this regard, it should ask the following questions: In what ways can system-level benchmarking and system-level peer evaluation be combined? In which ways can system-level benchmarking and meso-level peer evaluation be combined?

VET governance can be characterised as being very heterogeneous across countries, which holds true within the EU as well as outside the EU. Peer learning has to recognise national circumstances instead of borrowing concepts, which Chakroun (2010) has illustrated with examples from 'exporting' National Qualification Frameworks (NQF). In the EU a lot of experimentation takes place, either at local levels or within programmes, which allows for discovering. Whereas the imitation of policies from other countries bears the risk of being inappropriate for the home country context, the concepts of organised policy learning explained in this text vary substantially, from a rational point of view to a more interactive one, from individual to more interactive learning. However, it is common to all that they depend on a careful selection of participants and that the political, cultural and institutional environments will be instrumental to the ultimate success of many governmental learning activities. Up to now, no research exists that comparatively analyses the success of the different formats, which would be a very difficult endeavour, because some of the concepts are implemented only anecdotally and not regularly. Second, the fields and topics of their application differ as much as the national or cultural contexts themselves. Third, measuring the impact of organised governmental learning is extremely difficult because the causal links are difficult to trace and the number of alternative explanations is very high.

As discussed within this article, the EU VET peer learning scheme lies in between the peer review model and some versions of peer learning featuring stronger collective learning elements. After the abolition of European VET peer learning activities, current developments indicate a drive towards more accountability, such as through monitoring and benchmarking. The work of the EQAVET has just recently started, and it might be too early to draw any conclusions from this newer approach. However, the elements of peer review or peer learning do not yet seem to be foreseen so far. The process is therefore marked by a more central/top-down approach from the EU, with the involvement of national representatives. Consequently, it remains somewhere in between peer review and peer learning, because elements of stronger accountability with in-depth-reviews are not part of European soft mechanisms, and peer learning is not practised any more. The peers further meet, they have a common agenda, but neither peer learning nor peer review is fostered, unlike in other policy fields, where benchmarking and peer learning are complementary

activities. So, after years of more horizontal activity, the diffusion of policy is again oriented more vertically and is less network-governed.

In recent years the spectrum has broadened, and variations of peer reviews are being practised, as well as variations of pure peer learning activities. The ETF has moved from peer review to peer learning, whereas the ENQA-VET peer learning activities have not been continued. Perhaps the practices having weak learning or weak accountability elements are too indeterminate, and the ones at the ends of the spectrum are better suited to reaching their respective goals.

Note

[1] The MEDA region consists of the following 10 countries: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank & Gaza, Israel, and Turkey.

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