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Peer counselling

A new element in the ET2020 toolbox

Information Note

Main characteristics of the peer counselling tool

Peer learning in the context of the education cooperation at EU level is a method of observing both positive and negative examples of policy reforms adopted in other countries in order to draw lessons from them. Its strength lies in the contextualisation of policies, broadness and flexibility of discussion themes, qualitative nature of information and low levels of politicisation based on mutual trust between the Member States.

The 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) adopted on 23 November 2015 introduces peer counselling into the ET2020 toolbox. It states:

ET 2020 peer learning activities, usually conducted within Working Groups, will be strengthened and enable Member States sharing similar policy challenges to work in clusters. **Peer reviews** organised in implementation of the 2012 Joint Report on a voluntary basis and focusing on country specific challenges, have proved useful in the context of the informal DG meetings but require more preparation and interactive dialogue. Tailor-made **peer counselling** can also be used to support a particular national reform agenda.

Objective and added value

Peer counselling is an instrument which brings together professional peers from a small number of national administrations to provide external advice to a country in the process of a policy development. It is intended to go beyond information-sharing and provide a forum for finding solutions to national challenges in a participatory workshop.

The distinctive features of peer counselling compared to other parts of the ET 2020 cooperation toolbox are:

- Peer counselling is **tailor-made to the policy needs of a country** as it takes the specific policy challenges of one particular Member State as the starting point for discussions
- The instrument is **highly responsive** to the needs of a country as it can only be launched at the request of a Member State. It has to be closely linked to an ongoing policy development in the Member State.
- It has an **EU knowledge-sharing** element by bringing together members of national administrations with direct experience from working on similar projects.

The value added for the host Member State is the direct contact and networking with peers working on equivalent projects in other EU national administrations, the information about best practices from other Member States received on the spot during the seminar and the final report which can be used to advance the implementation of a reform or to generate political commitment.

The value added for the international peers is the opportunity to exchange views with colleagues from other national administrations and benefit from mutual learning in the process, to positively influence a policy development in another Member State and export good practice.

Which topics are covered by peer counselling?

ET2020 strategic framework is the thematic frame for the type of policy questions to be addressed in peer counselling. The work of ET2020 Working Groups and Country-focused workshops, where a number of Member States share their models of policy responses in a particular policy area, is a useful precursor to peer counselling, which can take those topics further and look at implementation challenges in one particular Member State.

What is the role of the host Member State?

The host Member State is responsible for **taking initiative** and making the initial request for a peer counselling event. The next stage is the **formulation of the challenges** and concrete policy questions that the Member State seeks advice from peers on. These questions then form the basis for the programme of the event. The hosts are entirely in charge of **setting the agenda** of the event and they chair meetings on the day. Finally, hosts are asked to contribute to the draft final report prepared by the European Commission.

What is the role of the peers?

Peers are **policy makers from other national administrations** and, optionally, **independent academic experts**, who provide policy advice and expertise. The involved policy makers and experts have typically already had experience in dealing with comparable policy challenges.

The involvement of independent experts in addition to policy makers from other countries is a choice of the host country. When choosing, it is important for Member States to consider that, on the one hand, the involvement of independent experts provides an opportunity for a more in-depth analysis, as independent experts can be mobilised (and financed) for writing up the report. On the other hand, such additional steps take more time. Which approach is best suited depends on individual country situations, concrete needs in terms of the type and speed of analysis needed, and alignment with the timing of national decision making processes.

What is the role of the European Commission?

The EU supports the process through **coordinating the preparation for peer counselling, identifying most relevant peers, partly financing the event and preparing a draft final report in cooperation with the hosts and peers**. The identification of partner countries and peers will proceed thanks to the contacts with participants in activities of the ET2020 framework (working groups, peer reviews and others) and the Commission's country analysis work. However, the host Member State is free to suggest and choose peers as well.

Practical implementation

Light version

The light version, 3-6 months in length, takes the form of a seminar targeted at the needs of the hosting country and involving experienced colleagues from other Member States. It is especially flexible and adaptable to the needs of the hosting Member State, in particular the need for technical advice from other Member States within a short timeframe.

- *Preparatory phase*

- (1) Request by an interested Member State to the Commission (DG EAC), providing a description of the rationale behind the request
- (2) Feasibility check by the Commission in cooperation with that country on the topics for the peer counselling and accordingly, the available expertise at EU and Member State level;
- (3) Formal request endorsed by the national Director General of the relevant policy field
- (4) Definition of a roadmap between the country concerned, the Commission, and, if applicable, independent experts.
- (5) Selection of suitable peers and, if applicable, experts; and
- (6) A self-assessment of the hosting country and its policy challenges (based on an agreed structure and methodology), possible solutions and detailed policy questions for peers. At this stage, the hosts also prepare an agenda for the event.

- *Counselling*

The role of the peers is to then:

- (7) Study the country's self-assessment of policy challenges and fully understand the background of the thematic area chosen by the host country. To that aim, there is a possibility of a presentation of the current system by the host country via a webinar hosted by the Commission.
- (8) Prepare information about actions undertaken in their respective Member States on similar challenges and participate in the actual event in the hosting country to discuss the hosting country's challenges and offer insight into successful and/or less successful policy solutions that they have experience with.

- *Reporting*

- (9) The Commission (if necessary supported by an expert) draws up a final report summarising the discussions during the event. It contains the hosting country's description of its policy challenges and questions, a description of related experiences and policy solutions put in place in other Member States, and finally a list of conclusions for the hosting country drawing on the contributions of the peers from the seminar. The peers have the possibility to comment on the final report, but effort will be made not to overburden peers. The relevant ET2020 Working Group and the Education Committee are informed about the main results.



Full version

The full version provides a more in-depth analysis and a more continuous support to the host Member State than the light version. The full version takes approximately 6-12 months from preparation to reporting.

- *External independent experts*

The role of external experts is to:

- study qualitative and quantitative information, made available by the national authorities and stakeholders and draw on well-documented information and studies from other countries;
- visit the country during one preparatory visit and one review visit, to refine the desk research and deepen their understanding of the country's specific situation. During the visits, the experts hold workshops with both national policy makers and stakeholders to make the counselling most effective.

- *Report type*

The group of experts draws up a final report, making use of the country's self-assessment, all qualitative and quantitative information gathered on the field

and the findings from the workshops. The final report is drafted in close co-operation with the country representatives and certain priorities could be agreed upon early in the process. Like in the shorter version, the report includes the hosting country's description of its policy challenges and questions, a description of related experiences and policy solutions put in place in other Member States, and finally a list of policy options and recommendations for the hosting country. The latter are limited in numbers, specific, and feasible to implement and monitor.

- *Visibility*

The process and in particular the final report should receive visibility in the country. National stakeholders should be made aware of the findings, including possibly the national parliament's education committee and relevant interest groups. The report's presentation should have coverage in the national media. The Commission Representations in the capitals can provide help with raising awareness with the public and the stakeholders, if requested.

Life after peer counselling

The implementation of peer recommendations and the follow-up to the event remains the full responsibility of the Member State which launched the project. The definition of the scope of follow-up activities is also at the discretion of Member States.

On request, regardless of the version of peer counselling chosen, peers and independent experts may be requested to review the implementation of the recommendations 12-18 months after the preparation of the final report.

For the hosts of the light version of peer counselling, there is an option of repeating a light peer counselling event or opting for a full peer counselling version to accompany further policy development or implementation.

To continue exchanges and cooperation after the event, contacts made during peer counselling events can be preserved also via the Yammer platform, administered by the Commission.

To submit an informal request for peer counselling

Please send an email to the functional mailbox of the Country Analysis unit within DG Education and Culture (EAC-UNITE-A2@ec.europa.eu) or call +32 229-58148 indicating the thematic focus and the approximate timeline for the peer counselling.

FAQ

How is peer counselling different from other peer learning activities organised by the Commission?

Peer counselling differs from Country-focused workshops in that it is entirely tailored to the needs of one particular Member State. Not only does the host Member State set the agenda and define the discussion points, but the event also physically takes place in the host country, which makes attendance of a broader number of national policy makers and stakeholders possible.

Peer counselling differs from similar externally available services by OECD and private consultancy companies in that it is free of charge for the hosting Member State. In the area of VET, the possibility to use Cedefop's capacities for external policy reviews continues to exist albeit without the element of knowledge sharing between national administrations.

Who is paying for the event?

The European Commission is funding travel and accommodation costs of peers and if needed, services of external experts, translation of documents and possible in-situ visits. The meetings may take place in the Commission Representation free of charge, but the host country has the option of organising a venue at their own premises.

Summary: 4 Cs of peer counselling

1. Clear focus and objective

- Peer counselling requires a clear identification of the scope of the exercise and thorough preparation. There must be a clear focus on a specific policy area and only a limited set of key issues on which the discussions will be based.

2. Commitment

- The country must be willing to invest time and resources into the process. Senior policy officials and policy managers need to support the process at national level, by co-organising and facilitating meetings, providing access to data sources and documentation.

3. Careful timing

- Peer counselling should be organised at the right time in the policy / political cycle. The topic of the peer counselling should be a political priority for the national government.

4. Complementarity

- Peer counselling should complement a national policy effort and provide added value to the ongoing work at the national level.



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