Report on quality assurance in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)

Introduction

The objective of this report is to summarize the main findings from the national questionnaires that were collected during the period January – March 2016 within the Peer Review in VNFIL Extended Erasmus+ project. The questionnaire was focused on the basic characteristics of the VNFIL provision and quality assurance in VNFIL in 6 partner countries: Austria, France, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia. The main information was synthetized in the form of "country fiches", that provide transnational peers the necessary information about the VNFIL system in the visiting countries, thus facilitating their work as a peer. In this synthesis report we try to make a short overview about current state of the VNFIL provision. The questionnaires were updated in May 2018 to take into account the current development in terms of VNFIL provision in partner countries and in Europe. The structure is based around basic questions and issues raised by the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2015). A good understanding of these guidelines and of the main principles of the validation will facilitate the reading of this report.

The "Synthesis Report of Quality Assurance in VNFIL" is an inventory of current policies, QA systems and good practices in VNFIL in these participating countries. It contains:

- *a description of current policies in VNFIL and its implementation (including good practices) in the participating countries*
- *a description and analysis of QA criteria, tools and systems used in VNFIL in the different countries and other relevant systems identified on European level*
- *the state of application of quality assessment and quality development systems in VNFIL*
- *national needs concerning development of VNFIL and QA of VNFIL taking into account also different types of providers/provision*
- *good practices of experimenting with Peer Review in "old" partner countries.*
- *potential and challenges for implementing Peer Review as a formative external evaluation for VNFIL*
- *potential and challenges for building up a Peer Review Network in VNFIL on the European level.*

1. Quality assurance in VNFIL in European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

Different paths towards the development of validation has also lead to different approaches to quality assurance in validation. Kleef (Kleef, 2010) identifies four pathways of implementation of validation: The first pathway is institutional and legislation-supported development of processes, methods and tools for recognition and validation of prior learning, with educational institutions keeping most of the control over the certification (France, Czech republic, UK and Scotland). A second pathway focuses on assessment and recognition in the world of work, with an important role of employers (Netherlands). The third pathway is professional licensing of immigrant professionals (Canada) and the fourth pathway is focused on personal and social recognition through self-assessment and portfolio, without formal accreditation (bilan de compétences in France, recognition process in the Netherlands).

This diversity of approaches also leads to different mechanisms for addressing quality assurance, each of which has its specificities, advantages and disadvantages:

1. legislation or government policy (France, Czech Republic, Denmark) – the QA aspects of VNFIL are directly or indirectly treated by national legislation or government policies (Netherlands)
2. collaborative mechanisms (UK, Scotland, Austria and Netherlands – currently in development) – QA is managed by via inter-institutional collaboration through more or less formalized bodies
3. institution-based mechanisms (US, Canada) – QA is assured by internal norms and directives of specific institutions, without state intervention
4. indirect stakeholder support (US, EU) – non-governmental organizations play a role in the QA in VNFIL (e.g. CEDEFOP).

The approaches towards quality assurance in VNFIL in European frame documents and guidelines has changed somehow during last years. In the 2009 version of the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP) the underpinning ideas of quality indicators for validation were very clearly described.
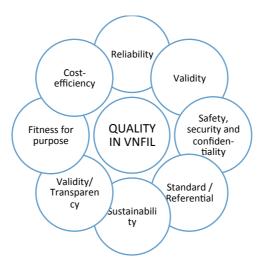

TABLE 3: UNDERPINNING IDEAS OF QUALITY INDICATORS FOR VALIDATION (CEDEFOP, 2009)

However, the most recent version of the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) adopt a much more open-ended approach and instead propose a series of questions relevant to developing and implementing VNFIL. This approach takes into account the diversity of the practice across different European countries and fosters a more participative and bottom-down approach that can be beneficial also for the development of Peer Review. In terms of quality assurance, it guidelines state the following:

"Quality assurance in validation must be systematic, take place on a continuous basis and be an integrated part of the process:

a) systematic quality improvement requires an explicit and agreed quality strategy;
b) a system for feedback from users/customers should always be considered;
c) a quality plan/strategy must be known to the public, including candidates;
d) a quality/plan strategy can prepare the ground for external quality assessment and review."

It outlines four key issues when developing quality strategy for validation:

a) **fitness for purpose**: the choice of method used in validation must be sensitive to the learning form and context;
b) **the safety, security, confidentiality and consistency of the process**: The candidate's initial and continuing engagement with the process must not be compromised by lack of trust;
c) **reliability and trustworthiness of the system**: The evidence documented must be valid and be directly related to the standards used for validation.
d) **Based on standards**: They must exist in a clear and unambiguous form that the key stakeholders support.
e) **Sustainable long-term implementation**: Going through validation is often expensive for individuals and it is important to put in place permanent arrangements which are known to, and valued in, society at large and/or in the particular sector.

2. Key characteristics of VNFIL in partner countries

To understand the context in which the quality assurance in VNFIL is realized, we propose a short comparative analysis of different systems. This analysis is based around main areas discussed in the guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2015):

- Basic validation features (4 phases of validation)
- Information, guidance and counselling
- Stakeholder coordination,
- links to national qualification framework, standards and learning outcomes
- professional competences of practitioners

Quality assurance mechanisms of partner countries will be discussed in the last part of the report.

Basic validation features – 4 phases in validation

Most of the partner countries have a coherent validation strategy based on a clear understanding of the of the main VNFIL principles. The historic, social and economic contexts in partner countries resulted, however, in rather different results: France for example, with its traditionally strong emphasis on holistic diplomas, developed a sophisticated system of VNFIL provision, Netherlands have been experimenting with new and more flexible approaches to validation ("ervaringsprofiel"). The VNFIL system in Portugal has taken good practices from other countries, and managed to adapt it to the national context (high level of low-skilled citizens) through the creation of unified contact points that provide validation, counselling and training for all adults for free (CQEPs). However, this solution seems financially less viable and depends on the current motivations of the ruling government. The remaining three countries advance in the development of the VNFIL system: Austria has elaborated a clear VNFIL strategy that relies on strong involvement of social partners and ongoing initiatives ("Du kannst das" and others) indicate a positive future development – the strategy also contains a set of quality criteria for the VNFIL provision. Lithuania has also developed groundwork for validation, connected mostly to the recognition of the results of non-formal learning and connectedness to a modular VET system. Slovakia is clearly the partner country where the least progress has been done in terms of development of a validation system. Existing approaches are characterized by conceptual and methodological fuzziness, validation is not clearly defined nor understood by national stakeholders. Some progress has been made in the development of a national qualification standards, authorized bodies for some professional fields were identified, but the validation process is planned to be developed through a national project currently in preparation. No clear strategy for implementing VNFIL system exists.

The organization of the VNFIL process into four phases (identification, documentation, assessment, certification) is respected in partner countries with implemented VNFIL system (France, Netherlands and Portugal). The identification phase relies on information and counselling services, which can be publicly financed through contracting of non-profit providers of information and identification services (France), or at a well identified centres (Portugal), or provided by private actors (Netherlands). Identification is always carried out by comparing individual learning outcomes to a qualification standard. A portfolio is used for the documentation, although the portfolio approach seems to be less present in Lithuania. No significant differences exist in the assessment phase, however, the countries seem to differ in the degree of usage of practical simulation (mostly used in Netherlands, least used in France). Interestingly,

the role of the assessors and certifiers is completely dissociated in Netherlands (formal education institutions have no obligation to accept the results of the assessment), whereas in France and Portugal the institutions delivering the diploma are part of the jury. Austria seems to be following a similar path, certifications currently delivered through validation are guaranteed by trade unions or professional associations. In terms of the outcomes of validation, delivered certifications in France and Portugal do not differ at all from the qualifications gained through formal education. The outcomes of the validation in Netherlands are more diversified (profile versus certificate of experience), but their social recognition can be uncertain, as the final acceptance depends on the certifying body that is often disconnected from the validation process.

Information, guidance and counselling

Different models for providing support to the individual in terms of information, guidance and counselling exist in partner countries. We can distinguish three separate models for providing this support:

1. Integrated provision of information and guidance (Portugal, Austria): Information, guidance and counselling is provided to all beneficiaries as a part of an integrated package of services provided at one contact place (CQEP). The centres are also publicly financed and have the role of promoting the VNFIL system among potential beneficiaries and stakeholders. CQEPs are usually established at schools, which has an advantage of being close to the educational sector, but this can potentially pose a problem of objectivity and conflict of interest.

2. Separate information and guidance points (France): In France a separate network of publicly funded regional information points specific for the VNFIL exists. These centres provide information and guidance, are active in the identification phase of the VNFIL process and redirect clients to specialized services that intervene in the documentation and other phases. However, this network is costly, the services that are provided are of variable quality and the existence of the separate network reinforces the fragmented nature of the system. In 2015 a reform of lifelong learning and guidance system brought about a unified guidance service available to all citizens (*Conseil en évolution professionnelle)* that should connect all the existing systems and available services.

3. Market-driven system (Netherlands): Information, guidance and counselling are provided by private VNFIL providers as a part of a commercial package in the introductory phase of the VNFIL process. A company or an employer play a major role in the decision of engaging in VNFIL or not. The availability of information on VNFIL as well as guidance is up to private providers, but also other stakeholders.

In other countries where VNFIL system is in development, the availability of information, guidance and counselling is an important issue, but the focus today is on building the fundamental basics of the system and the question of promotion and support to individuals seems secondary for now. The focus on support given to the individual is particularly strong in the Austrian initiative "Du kannst dass", where validation is provided to the low-skilled with a particular focus on the development of their employability.

Stakeholder coordination

There are big differences in the state of the stakeholder coordination between the partner countries, especially between Netherlands, France, Austria and Portugal on one side, and Lithuania and Slovakia on the other side. Whereas in the first two countries the VNFIL system can rely on traditional bonds and sharing of responsibilities of different stakeholders (trade unions in France, educational institutions in Portugal, private sector in Netherlands, employers' associations in Austria), in the former socialist block the stakeholder involvement is less pronounced. It seems that in these countries (Slovakia, Lithuania) the stakeholders that should push for the development of the VNFIL system (trade unions and professional clusters) play mostly a passive role and wait for the initiative from the state through the formal education sector.

In Portugal, France and Netherlands the role of stakeholders are well-defined. The French system seems to be the one, where the roles of different stakeholders are the most formalized as they have their responsibilities clearly defined in every stage of the VNFIL process. In Netherlands and Portugal a strong central authority played a major role in the coordination of the system, but recent political changes put them into uncertain position in both of these countries.

Links to national qualification systems, standards and learning outcomes

All of the partner countries have developed or are in the process of developing their national qualification systems and there is a clear will to make the validation outcomes as close as possible to the formal qualifications and the NQF levels. None of the partner countries fully developed a flexible and modular system of lifelong learning that allows the person to construct his qualification according to his needs and desires. The Dutch profile of experience seems to be the one that is the closest to this ideal, however, there are only informal links between the validated experience in the profile and the capitalization and possible transfer of these outcomes into the educational system is not systematized. Lithuania seems to have achieved the most progress in terms of modularization of their VET system.

In all partner countries the VNFIL system is based on occupational standards that were developed in a cooperation with stakeholders. Portugal uses standards for the validation of a low level qualifications (EQF 2 and 3) and this path has recently been adapted in France as well, with a repository of key-skills that can be used in VNFIL.

Professional competences of practitioners

In none of the partner countries a specialized occupation of VNFIL practitioner has developed. Some countries define a minimum requirement in terms of qualification of the practitioners (Portugal), others put particular focus on the qualification of assessors, given the uncertain on the recognition of the VNFIL outcomes by certifiers (Netherlands).

3. Quality assurance – overview of practices in partner countries

Portugal VNFIL system has a clearly defined quality charter with quantitative indicators, that are measured on annual basis. Similar system was in place in Holland, but current development seems to lead to a more decentralized, collaborative and quality development-focused approach (Peer review). In France the state plays a strong regulatory role – the main rules of QA are embedded in the legislation, but stakeholders and regional governments have a rather free hand for the particular arrangements of the VNFIL provision. Therefore, QA practice can differ considerably between regions and providers. In 2016 a system of quality certification has been legislated, but its implementation in practice remains an open question. Countries, where VNFIL system is currently under development, don't have a proper quality assurance system in place yet, which gives a special opportunity to the Peer review methodology. The data presented in this part of the report were collected during the first phase of the Peer Review in VNFIL Extended in 2016 and then updated again in May 2018. They provide practical information concerning VNFIL provision in the following countries:

- Austria
- France
- Lithuania
- Netherlands
- Slovakia

The proposed country fiches allow the peers to get to know the country specific situation in terms of VNFIL provision. A broad description of the national context, vocabulary and real-world usage of VNFIL is provided. A special attention is given to the analysis of They are structured in the following way:

- National terminology
- Process and vocabulary (description of the four phases of the validation process: identification, documentation, assessment, certification)
- Usage of VNFIL in the country (structure of beneficiaries and targeted qualifications)
- Quality assurance approaches
- Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL: availability of guidance and counselling, stakeholders coordination, links to national qualification framework, standards and learning outcomes, professional competences of practitioners)

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: AUSTRIA

General description of the system

National terminology: *"Validierung nicht-formalen und informellen Lernens"*

There is an educational policy commitment agreed by all the social partners to promote validation in accordance to the Council recommendation from 2012 (including the development of summative and formative approaches), the actual implementation has not yet gained momentum. A VNFIL strategy for Austria is currently in preparation. This should lead to a more coherent and coordinated approach in the future, spanning, if possible, the whole educational system.

As of now, there is no over-arching system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Instead the system is highly fragmented:

- There are legal regulations allowing recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the formal educational system to either give access to formal education or to allow for shortening of participation (school, university). The traditional pathway for validating non-formal and informal learning are external exams esp. e.g. for the apprenticeship leave examination, for access to higher education (Studienberechtigungsprüfung, Berufsreifeprüfung) or other legally regulated educational programmes. New legal opportunities exist for the development of recognition procedures of non-formal and informal vocationally relevant competences, thereby replacing the final apprenticeship examination, either wholly or in part, through initiatives like "Du kannst was". Other procedures lead to the acquisition of qualifications that are not part of the formal system (e.g. Weiterbildungsakademie) or give entitlement to pursue a regulated trade. For the majority of these procedures, the possibility of validation of NFIL is regulated by law, but scope and form of process and methods used for validation can vary considerably. So far, there have been no efforts at alignment of these various methods of recognition.

- There are also quite a number of innovative initiatives and projects carried out that offer formative validation, esp. for very low-skilled and vulnerable target groups, with strong focus on enhancing employability (e.g. "Kompetenz mit System"), but also for general empowerment of these target groups in terms of personal development (mainly developed in fragmented and time-limited projects).

- Validation is also becoming an issue for higher education in terms of giving access or recognising prior learning in order to shorten programmes. Implementation is very fragmented, a common approach does not exist.

Austria published its National Validation Strategy in Nov. 2017. It is embedded in the Austrian Lifefong Learning Strategy.

Process and vocabulary

Identification

Summative approaches: Identification starts with submission of documents by applicants and a first analysis by the validating institution (this is e.g. the case in the Academy of Continuing Education („Weiterbildungsakadamie" – wba). At this stage there can also be contact with the candidates to clarify open questions. In the Weiterbildungsakademie, the accreditation council takes a decision on the application and issues an official response ("Standortbestimmung").

Formative approaches: When lower-skilled target groups are involved, identification is usually supported

in a workshop, coaching or training setting or is carried out at the beginning of a training (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr).

Documentation

Summative approaches (Weiterbildungsakademie – wba - validation of professionals in the field of adult learning): The documentation made by the wba includes the collection of all documents in a portfolio. This portfolio comprises an online and an offline version. As the „Standortbestimmung" (= identification) the wba will confirm the status quo by answering the questions „What is going to be admitted?" an „What is still open?". Phase 1 and 2 are not clearly separated respectively form a cycle. The documentation starts with the portfolio and leads to the „Standortbestimmung" (identification of competences).

*Formative approaches***:** In the documentation phase, formative approaches also use portfolio approaches. Documents (self-assessments/reflections, work examples etc.) are also generated during the process, in the case of low-skilled target groups with the support of counsellors. Different tools can be used, e.g. the ProfilPass.

Assessment

Summative approaches (wba): Several procedures for assessment („Feststellungsverfahren") can be used. The „Feststellungsverfahren" either results in a wba-certificate (basic level) or a wba-diploma (advanced level – reaching this level requires some academic production – writing a diploma thesis and presenting it to a jury of experts). The assessment for the „wba-certificate" is carried out through the „Zertifizierungswerkstatt" (three-day mandatory assessment, which is conducted by the „Bundesinstitut für Erwachsenenbildung" (bifeb). The assessment includes performing practical tasks in small groups (conduct of a training session, group tasks, tasks in pairs) under observation of an assessor; multiple choice test on educational theory or a compilation of a paper concerning theoretical questions

Formative approaches (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr): For the ProfilPass and the Kompetenz-Check the assessment is done by the trainer/coach. For the programme "PC-Start" there is an external online assessment.

Certification

Summative approaches (wba): If the presented documents and the results of the assessment meet the criteria, the certificate is awarded to the professionals in adult learning.

Formative approaches (e.g. Frauenstiftung Steyr): Certification can take the form of a certificate (e.g. ProfilPass), a confirmation of participation (Kompetenz-Check) or an external certificate (PC-Start).

Usage of VNFIL

Target group
There are no specific economic branches or sectors that have started to develop their own validation schemes, perhaps with the exception of the adult education sector which has set up the Weiterbildungsakademie in order to validate the competences of pedagogical personnel in adult education institutions.

Most common targeted diplomas

Validation is currently discussed mainly in the context of the education system, where it is predominantly being developed and used within the vocational training and adult education sectors, to

some extent in higher education. The school sector so far has not been very active. Main target groups currently are low-skilled vulnerable groups with education and training needs in the lower levels of the EQF (I – IV).

Quality assurance

The quality assurance/quality development system used depends on the institutional context. Educational sectors -- the school system, higher education, adult education -- e.g. have different quality systems in place which are then also applicable to validation procedures carried out by these institutions. For recognition procedures leading to formal qualification elements of quality assurance are also specified in the pertaining laws. In adult education, common quality assurance systems used are ISO, EFQM, LQW etc.

As of May 2018, a quality criteria catalogue for VNFIL exists in a first version. Is was developed as part of the implementation of the validation strategy and will be piloted in autumn 2018.

Quality criteria catalogue for validation in professional and adult education in Austria

1 General quality criteria
      1.1 Learning outcomes orientation
      1.2 Orientation on qualification standards
      1.3 Equivalence of validation results with formal certification and permeability
      1.4 Accessible for target group
      1.5 Interface management and interconnectedness before, during and after the process
      1.6 Privacy and data protection§
2 Information and promotion
      2.1 Active involvement of the participant
      2.2 Free information in advance
      2.3 Available national portal of validation
3 Intake and agreement
      3.1 Free initial "intake" consultation
      3.2 Validation agreement
4 Counselling and support during validation process
      4.1 Professional guidance and support
5 Identification and documentation
      5.1 Appropriate methods and tools for identification
      5.2 Comprehensible and comprehensive documentation
      5.3 Written and transferrable documentation
6 Assessment and certification
      6.1 Principle of multiple assessors
      6.2 Objectivity and professionalism of assessors
      6.3 Clear purpose and transparent conditions of evaluation
      6.4 Appropriate methods and tools for assessment
      6.5 Documentation of the assessment process and results
      6.6 Rights of the candidate: feedback to the candidate, access to documentation, right of objection and possibility of repetition
      6.7 Meaningful certification document
      6.8 Credible organization and recognition of certificate
7 Results for the candidate and follow-up
      7.1 Benefits for candidates
      7.2 Follow-up information and counselling
8 Staff
      8.1 Competences of counsellors
      8.2 Competences of assessors

> 8.3 Regular further training
> 9 Quality management
> 9.1 Internal quality management system
> 9.2 Documentation of the process
> 9.3 Cooperation and involvement of relevant stakeholders
> 9.4 Feedback from candidates
> 9.5 External evaluation of the service offer
> 9.6 Continuous improvement
> 9.7 Institutional quality assurance
>
> Source: Kriterienkatalog zur Förderung der Qualität von Validierungsverfahren im Bereich der Berufsund Erwachsenenbildung in Österreich
>
> https://bildung.bmbwf.gv.at/euint/eubildung/vnfil_kritkat.pdf?6fa4z6

Role of Peer review: Peer Review has a potential for Austrian VNFIL because of its orientation towards development. The VNFIL "sector" currently needs exchange of (good) practices and learning from each other both on the national level but also in cooperation with other European countries. With existing quality assurance being geared towards education, Peer Review provides a unique opportunity for assessing VNFIL in a focused manner.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

Different ways of supporting candidates were developed within different projects and initiatives. Austria has a strong tradition of career guidance and counselling services for different target groups, however, no coherent system of support and information exists for VNFIL.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

Stakeholders are involved in the development of the global LLL strategy, including the development of VNFIL. One of the main drivers of different pilot projects and initiatives are partners traditionally involved in educational policy (Austrian Chamber of Labour, Austrian Economic Chambers, Austrian Federation of Trade Unions, Chamber of Agriculture Austria). Enterprises and the labour market play a minor role in the development of VNFIL, a part from the system of exemptions in apprenticeship.

3. Links to national qualification framework

The validation strategy is closely linked to the National Qualifications Framework (Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen) which has been established by law on March 15, 2016.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are the "common denominator" of the NQF and validation. Learning outcomes recognised through validation of non-formal and informal learning can lead to formal (and in the longer run also non-formal) qualifications which in turn can be attributed to one of the eight NQR-levels.

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is determined by different organizational context of organizations involved in the provision of VNFIL in different projects. Currently, there is no national QA system in place.

6. Professional competences of practitioners:

In summative approaches, practitioners usually come from the professional field targeted by the validation. In summative approaches, counsellors come from different fields, mostly adult education, social work etc.

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: FRANCE
General description of the system

National terminology: "*VAE – Validation des Acquis d'Expérience*"

The VAE process is long (up to 12 months) and necessitates guidance by a specialist. The process follows the classical format (identification – documentation – assessment – certification) and the outcome of VAE is always a formal qualification – there is no distinction between certificate / diploma gained through formal education and a certification gained through VAE. Partial validation of specific learning outcomes / training units is possible. Since the reform from the end of 2016, partially validated learning outcomes are now valid without a limitation of time – the candidate can gain the missing knowledge, skills and competences to complete the validation and gain a qualification through his whole life. Validation is however not used as an entry for training, but mainly for the labour market. The acceptance by employers of the certification gained through VAE is good, as it is the same diploma as from formal education. From the methodological point of view, a combination of summative (validation of a complete certification) and formative approach is used (mainly through building a personal portfolio).

Process and vocabulary

Identification (*Information et conseil*)

Helping the candidate in their decision process about the type of certification to target and the receivability of their candidature. The role of the counsellor is to evaluate the length and the depth of the candidate's experience and help him/her to make a decision to engage in the VNFIL. This phase is in most cases assured by the counsellors at the information points. The candidate sends the preliminary dossier to the certification organisation that than decides about its validity and whether the candidate meets the required conditions, the certification organisation sends him/her the dossier.

Documentation (*Accompagnement*)

This phase consists of the development of a portfolio (dossier) that links the candidate's experience with a specific qualification standard. Bilan de competences can be used in this phase. Emphasis is put on verbalisation of working experience, but observation or simulation can sometimes be used to complete the portfolio. The length of the portfolio can vary based on the level of targeted certification, but usually is around 70-100 pages.

Assessment (*Jury*)

Jury is always used: Interview with a panel composed by teachers and professionals from the given field. This inter-view touches mostly on points of the candidate's dossier that need to be clarified, but rarely touches upon theoretical knowledge. Sometimes the interview can be supplemented by a work simulation.

Certification (*Certification)*

The jury takes the decision on the deliberation of the certification that is then awarded by the certificating body – the same that delivers formal diploma (ministry of education or other stakeholders).

A certification can be obtained as a whole or only a part of the qualification can be obtained. In the latter case the jury is obliged to propose ways for candidate to obtain the rest of the qualification (through further experience or training). In this way the jury doesn't only assess the knowledge and skills of candidates, but also gives value to the experience of the candidates and help them develop further.

Usage of VNFIL

Target group

In France almost two thirds of the 18,000 different certifications that exist are accessible through VNFIL (called "Validation des acquis de l'experience", or VAE). There is therefore no specific target group for validation, but the general idea is that a person doing the same work has a right to the same diploma – the validation is considered an alternative pathway to formal qualification and an individual right of every citizen. Despite this, only 2% of certifications are delivered through VAE. Around 13 000 diplomas are delivered through VNFIL every year, of which around 24% in lower secondary (ISCED 3C), 24 in upper secondary and 52% in tertiary education.

Most common targeted diplomas

Despite the wide range of diplomas accessible by the VAE, 20 most targeted diplomas represented 70% of all the validations in 2012. Most targeted branches are in social, health and other services sector: childcare, cook (ISCED 3C), commercial or administrative baccalaureate (ISCED 3B), Optician, Hotelier, technician in industry, electro technician (ISCED 5B) and specialized qualifications such as accounting and special education.

Quality assurance

QA is done mainly through national legislation: The 2002 Social Modernisation Act that introduced the current system defines the general process and rules for the VNFIL. There is, however, no quality assurance framework with precise quality standards and no formalised quality control processes.

The first level contact (information) is freely accessible and free of charge for all citizens, afterwards the candidates have the choice to engage in accompaniment or prepare their dossier on their own. The assistance in the documentation phase can be carried out either by the certification bodies or by other organisations (private or public) – every certification body can sign an agreement and delegate the accompaniment to a specific organisation or network. There is no accreditation procedure for the accompaniment organisations. There is no official national standard, but certification organisations can define criteria for external providers of accompaniment. There are several regional quality charts for accompaniment, but they are on a voluntary basis and contain general ethical and methodological principles.

The most sensible point of the process is the phase of evaluation by a jury that takes place in accredited centres. These centres have a lot of autonomy in the organisation of the VNFIL procedure and considerable differences exist namely in the work of the juries, which some experts call "a black box". It is difficult to assure a perfectly objective assessment of a candidate's knowledge and skills acquired through different experiences and compare them to a standardised qualification standard. Also, the majority of the asses-sors come from formal education and have a certain bias towards formal evaluation procedures and are rarely trained for VAE assessment.

Example of a regional quality chart for the information and identification phase (region of Normandy):

Accompaniment is carried out in 6 phases:

1. Reflection about the place of the certification demand in the professional and personal project
2. Analysis of the professional and personal pathway
3. Interview with descriptive analysis of the activity
4. Assistance for describing of activities in the personal dossier
5. Preparation for the interview with the jury or
6. Preparation for the simulation.

Quality engagements for the accompaniment process:

1. **Transparency of the process is assured during the reception**
   - Presentation and assignment of the personal counsellor of the beneficiary
   - Assuring the voluntary participation and informing about the possibility of free choice
   - Signature of an agreement with defined course and dates
2. **Guaranteeing confidentiality**
3. **Delivering quality service with respectable delays**
   - Clear definition of respective roles, responsibilities and methodology
   - Individualised approach is guaranteed in terms of duration, with the maximum delay of response of 30 days
   - Availability of all the necessary information (referential of targeted qualification, assessment procedures)
   - Personal ownership of the dossier/portfolio – the counsellor doesn't substitute the role of the candidate in its completion
   - Monitoring of the feedback of the beneficiaries
4. **Mobilisation of necessary resources**
5. **Continuous training of intervening actors**
6. **Cooperation and sharing of information between different actors**
7. **Guaranteeing equal treatment of candidates and preventing discrimination**

The main challenges of the VAE:
- variable quality of information, counselling and accompaniment,
- the VAE procedure is often very long (1 year in average),
- the VAE procedure relies heavily on the writing skills and self-analysis skills and requires assistance of specialized counsellors – sometimes makes it inaccessible to low-skilled,
- difficulties of finding qualified jury members without conflict of interest, mostly in sectors with high number of SMEs,
- high drop-out rate during the process (in 2007, half of the people who initiated the first level contact with the VAE information points didn't continue in this process) and
- continuing reluctance and resistance of the formal education sector.

In 2017 the government launched two working groups with social partners to focus on two possible areas of development of VNFIL provision:
- 2018-2019: ICT-assisted the selection of targeted certifications (the "identification phase)
- „dematerialization" of juries (the validation dossier will be transferred to the jury in digital form and the jury can use collaborative tools for the preparation of the validation interview)

Role of Peer-review: Peer review is rarely used in France, and usually in cases of international cooperation and development (e.g. OECD policy assessment, nuclear security, employment services peer review). The culture of peer review is missing and most of the quality assurance systems are based on quality standards, audit procedures and certification.

Peer review in VNFIL was used in the regional network of CIBC Bourgogne Sud in 2015. The visit was done by pairs from the neighbour region. The visit was very stimulating for the CIBC Bourgogne Sud, because it revealed strengths and weaknesses from the outsider point of view.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

The information and guidance is readily available through public-funded PRC Centres often with dense territorial presence. With the 2015 reform individual counselling for the elaboration of the portfolio (*dossier*) can be funded from tripartite lifelong learning funds. Moreover, a unique career guidance public service was introduced in 2015 (Conceil en évolution professionnelle) was introduced, that is also used for directing potential candidates towards VAE.

In 2017 the number of citizens undergoing validation has declined slightly. Several measures were taken to improve the general knowledge of validation with general public:

- Employers are obliged to inform about validation possibilities during professional career interviews. These interviews are carried every two years and their objective is not to evaluate the performance of the employee, but to help him in his career development. This is a new measure introduced with the reform of 2014 and the obligatory information about validation options was introduced in 2016. Employers are bound by the law to show the progress in employers' competences and qualifications.)
- A new public service of career guidance for citizens was launched and it can orientate them to validation without necessarily passing through PRC VAE.

The reform also made it easier to obtain the financing of accompaniment and validation financing is included as one of the possible options in mandatory outplacement of employees.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

The main lines of the VNFIL system are drawn on the national level through the legislation, that clearly defines the roles of different stakeholders. Every organization delivering a formal professional qualification must be able to deliver it also through validation process. Regions are responsible for the financing and the coordination of information and counselling points (PRC VAE).

3. Links to national qualification framework

All diplomas are referenced to the national qualification framework with a clearly defined level, that is equivalent to the formal certification.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

All qualification standards registered in the national register of certifications (RNCP) contain a repository of professional activities, that serve as a base for the VAE dossier. Qualification standards are elaborated and updated by committees where all the stakeholders are represented.

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is done on national level through legislation, that defines the basic rules of the VNFIL system. Some regions have regional quality standards for the work of information and counselling points.

6. <u>Professional competences of practitioners:</u>

The professionalization of counsellors is also the responsibility of regional networks of information and counselling points. In some regions regular meetings and training activities are held, in others, however, this aspect is neglected. Counsellors usually come from multidisciplinary background, often with a longtime experience in the *bilan de competences.* Counsellors responsible for the documentation often come from the targeted field of activity. Little attention is paid to the training of the members of the jury.

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: LITHUANIA

General description of the system

National terminology: "*Validierung nicht-formalen und informellen Lernens*"

Lithuania does not have a national strategy for validation as a separate comprehensive policy document; however several laws were amended in recent years to pave the way for validation of nonformal and informal learning on a more mainstream basis, both at national and sectoral levels. VNFIL is integrated into education and labour market policies.

The Law on Non-formal adult education and continuing training, provides 3 cases of validation: competences can be recognised as a part of finalised formal education programme, as a competence to perform a regulated job or function and as a qualification, corresponding to a certain Lithuanian Qualifications Framework level. In higher education sector procedures for VNFIL are established by higher education institution, in other sectors – by the Minister of Education and Science.

The most common case is that competences can be recognised as a part of training programme (qualification), thus validation is rather an entrance instrument for the education. There is no special certificate that would evidence the recognition outcomes – for example, in VET, a final result of validation would be profesinio mokymo diplomas (VET diploma).

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in the areas of adult education and the labour market remain relatively basic, but these areas are taken into account in the new strategic documents for the period 2014-2020, and are expected to be developed in the near future.

In terms of validation and recognition of vocational competences gained through non-formal and informal learning, VET standards are being used for validation purposes for the time being. Once the development of sectoral qualifications standards is complete, they will be linked with education and training standards for validation purposes as well.

In order to ensure quality and transparency of the assessment process, the competence assessment and validation process has been separated from the system of formal vocational education and training and can be undertaken by an accredited social partner or another legal entity of the Republic of Lithuania or other member state of the EU, or an organisation/its unit not holding the status of a legal person. The list of accredited competence assessment bodies is published on the website of the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre under the Ministry of Education and Science. The main providers of VNFIL are VET and higher education institutions.

The VNFIL system remains fragmented and the society in general is little aware about validation possibilities and benefits. There is a lack of available analysis about the acceptance of the outcomes of the VNFIL procedure with the relevant stakeholders.

Process and vocabulary

Identification

VET and HE institutions can assess non-formal study achievements and recognise the competences acquired on their basis.

Documentation

VET: Person can apply to any vocational training institution, which has a license to carry out a training program in which the person can formalize their non-formal acquired competences.

HE: Institutions recognise only these non-formal study achievements that can be justified by the applicant and proven to be included into study outcomes of a relevant study programme.

Assessment

VET: Non-formal or informal learning acquired competencies can be recognized and formalized assessing the referring person's knowledge (test) and having analyzed the documents (available various certificates).

HE: The assessment of non-formal study achievements and recognition of competences is performed in accordance with the study programme or subject by an expert assessor or a group of expert assessors. The assessment abides by the assessment criteria prescribed by the HEI. The applicants are introduced to the criteria.

The methods of the assessment of non-formal study achievements of an applicant are based either on a single assessment method or combined models integrating several assessment methods. The assessment methods are chosen to indicate the study achievements of the applicant and to identify their level.

Certification

VET: If the result of the test and evaluation of certificates held of his knowledge being recognized as sufficient (that is equivalent to a person who has completed a certain training program), it is being recorded in the register of students and passes the qualifying exam, leading to a diploma issued to a student.

If the assessment shows that a person's knowledge is not enough sufficient, it is possible to attend a certain course, continue learning and then take a qualification exam and get a diploma.

HE: Institutions can assess non-formal study achievements and recognise competences to:

- designate acquired study achievements as the basis of competence(s);

- endorse them in a certain study area/field and acquire a higher education qualification/ qualification degree in the area/field.

Usage of VNFIL

Target group
The main target group for VNFL is students in VET and higher education institutions (EQF 1-7 levels).

Most common targeted diplomas

Information about numbers of validation participants, branches, sectors is not accumulated.

Quality assurance

There is no common QA/QD system for VNFIL in Lithuania and each institution sets out its own procedures and foresees quality assurance measures.

For example, HE providers themselves are responsible for quality assurance framework. At Mykolas Romeris University, for instance, the regular validation procedure includes internal and external audit components providing quality checks on validation procedures: where internal audit reviews appeal

applications and assesses qualifications of assessors, assessment methods used and other procedural aspects and external audit looks at overall quality in HE.

Role of Peer review: Observation of VNFIL quality assurance frameworks and tools; familiarisation with QA procedures at different levels – VET and HE institutions, employers.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

No information available.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

The Ministry of Education and Science (MES) developed and is implementing a national life-long learning strategy, including VNFIL. It accredits upon the approval of the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre, institutions that seek to gain the right to assess individual competences. Social partners are members of national VET Council and Adult Learning Council – advisory bodies on VET /AL strategic issues to the Ministry of Education and Science. Stakeholders are legally obliged to participate in shaping VET policy, initiate the development of new qualifications, occupational standards, VET curricula, provide content contributions and support for the development of VET standards and training programmes.

3. Links to national qualification framework

The NQF exists and the qualifications targeted by the VNFIL are referenced according to its levels.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

Assessment/recognition (validation) of qualifications is an integral part of the NQF. Nevertheless the system of standards is still incomplete and only VET standards are in place. VET standards are used for validation purposes in the case of validation of competences that have been previously acquired by VET learners, and for the unemployed (as a labour market policy measure). Sectoral qualifications standards (profesiniai standartai) are being developed further and it is the responsibility of the Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre to manage this process within the ESF programme for the formation of qualifications and development of modular VET system.

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is determined by different organizational context of organizations involved in the provision of VNFIL in different projects. Currently, there is no national QA system in place.

6. Professional competences of practitioners:

In summative approaches, practitioners usually come from the professional field targeted by the validation. In summative approaches, counsellors come from different fields, mostly adult education, social work etc.

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: NETHERLANDS

General description of the system

National terminology: "*EVC – Erkenning van Verworven Compenties*"

VNFIL is an instrument that validates learning outcomes against national standards. VNFIL is introduced in the Netherlands based on the analysis that almost 20% of the working population had no formal qualification related to the job, almost 15% of them had no so called 'start qualification' (EQF/NQF level 2), which is regarded as the lowest qualification one should have in order to be able to get a job).

Based on these figures VNFIL provision in the Netherlands is developed as an open system that is accessible for anyone who wants his or her learning qualified. Any formal and non-formal standard can be used, as long as the VNFIL provider is qualified to do so. VNFIL providers can be educational institutes, but also private providers who operate independent from the public educational institutes.

Dutch Government funded the Dutch Knowledge Centre on VNFIL from the year 2000 until 2015. During these years a comprehensive system for VNFIL provision was set up, with a quality Assurance system for a 150 providers. Currently (2016) there are still 70 providers active in the market that provides VNFIL according to the Dutch Quality code for VNFIL.

Two distinct validation paths exist:

1.   Ervaringscertificaat (EVC)

Validation is offered against national standards in formal (VET provision and universities of applied science) and nonformal (standards defined by social partners and/or sector). These kind of VNFIL procedures lead to an 'Ervaringscertificaat' (Certificate of Experience) comparing the competences of the candidate with a (non)formal standard (diploma or certificate).

2.   Ervaringsprofiel (EVP)

Next to validation of learning also 'recognition of learning' is offered. In these kinds of VNFIL procedures the use of national standards is not necessary (they can be used, but any other standard can also be used). Focus is not on formal validation, but on self-recognition of competences. Recognition of learning leads to an 'Ervaringsprofiel' (experience profile). This profile describes all competences of candidates that are relevant for career and/or personal development. For EVP are no national standards agreed.

Process and vocabulary

Identification:

The system is mostly demand based, where the initiative is usually on potential beneficiaries (individual or institutions). Identification leads to the choice of a validation paths (EVC or EVP) and standard (can be tailored for the need of an organization in case of EVP, social and labour market recognition is the key element). *"Intake of the individual and making individual arrangements linked to the individual's defined career goals. The candidate decides on the choice of qualification and whether to start the EVC procedure or not..."* (Duvecot et al., 2014)

Documentation:

Preparation of the portfolio with the support of a trained coach. The client creates a portfolio of proofs

for every learning outcome.

Assessment:

Assessment is usually held directly at companies. Assessment leads to the development of a report that contains descriptions of the learning outcomes that match the specific certification. This report also contains advice on further professional development of the candidate in regards to his/her career goals.

Certification:

The certification or exemption is given by the awarding body (school, university…). The awarding body can decide whether it will accept the certificate or not, based on the quality of the information it contains.

Usage of VNFIL

Target groups:

In the Netherlands are no specific target groups defined. Research shows that people use VNFIL for career development, meeting qualification standards or finding new jobs. VNFIL is a private provision mostly paid by employers and/or employers' organisations. There is no public funding available for VNFIL. Result of this is that the classical target groups one finds in other European countries (members of disadvantaged groups) are hardly represented in the Dutch VNFIL figures.

In the years 2011-2014 the National Knowledge Centre researched the market for VNFIL and found out that candidates motivation for VNFIL is:

Aim of VNFIL	Percentage
Career development	55%
Meeting the qualification standards of the job	43%
Outplacement / finding new jobs	31%
Validation of learning of unemployed	17%
Partial qualification for exemptions in education	15%
Other reasons	16%

There is no public funding for VNFIL, per candidate a procedure costs at least 700 Euro's. In most cases employers and/or employers' organisations pay for these procedures. A fiscal bonus is applicable to compensate for the higher cost.

Outcomes of VNFIL:

VNFIL is offered against standards for VET (EQF/NQF levels 1 -4/5, with standards for Universities of Applied Science (EQF / NQF level 5/6 and with sector specific non formal standards (estimated EQF/NQF levels 1-4).

Total of VNFIL procedures in NL

year	total	VET (1 – 4/5)	Universities (5/6)	Sector
2011	17.700	57%	11%	22%
2012	14.654	27%	6%	67%
2013	30.514	17%	3%	80%

2014 (expected)	16.801	-	-	-

Top 4 of used standards in VNFIL (2012 & 2013):

	VET (1 – 4/5), n=31	Universities (5/6) n=7	Sector n=14
1	Healthcare and welfare (34%)	Social sciences (16%)	Forklift & reach truck (35%)
2	Chemical & Manufacturing Industry (27%)	Economy / management (14%)	Disability care (29%)
3	Transport, shipping & logistics (23%)	Health care (14%)	Youth care (21%)
4	Finances, accounting and administrative (16%)	Education (8%)	Retail (21%)

Quality assurance

The VNFIL system in Netherlands is currently undergoing a change: Providers can get awarded as 'certified VNFIL provider' by the ministry of Education (until 2017) after review by an awarding body, based on the Dutch Qualiy code on VNFIL. Providers have to pay the awarding body for their work. Until 2015 the ministry of Education funded a national knowledge centre VNFIL. Starting 2016 this role is a private role, funded by the VNFIL providers.

Since 2015 a new policy divides VNFIL in two different environments: in the labour market and/or in an educational route. Higher Education Institutes can experiment with VNFIL in pilot projects, where the quality is assured by the Education Inspectorate and the NVAO (accrediting authority). The ministry of Education retreats its directing role on the quality assurance on VNFIL, focusing on the introduction of partial qualifications into VET, in order to make the system more flexible and accessible to adults.

The division in VNFIL between an educational and a labour market route effects also quality assurance. The support and quality assurance of VNFIL in the educational route is integrated in the lifelong learning policies of HE and VET. The ministry of Education retreats its direct role on the quality assurance on VNFIL. The Dutch VNFIL council wherein the social partners and the ministries of Education, Social Affairs en Economic Affairs) are represented takes responsibility for sustainable provision of VNFIL in the labour market route. This also includes quality control.

The Dutch quality code contains the following criteria:

1. The goal of VNFIL is to define, evaluate and accredit individual competencies.

The accreditation of prior learning has a value in and of itself and contributes to employability. In many cases, VNFIL can be a benefit to further career-related personal development.

1.1 A goal is explicitly linked to the VNFIL procedure.

1.2 The VNFIL-supplying organization and each individual reach consensus on the use of the results of VNFIL.

2. Individual entitlements: the VNFIL process answers to the need of the individual. Entitlements and arrangements with the VNFIL-offering organizations are clearly defined.

2.1 The accessibility of the VNFIL procedure for participants is documented.

2.2 Participation in the VNFIL procedure is generally on a voluntary basis.

2.3 The VNFIL-offering organization and the participants make arrangements on the optimal course of the VNFIL

procedure.

2.4 The participant decides whether he/she will participate in the VNFIL procedure and will receive all relevant information needed to do so.

2.5 Time frame for the entire procedure is realistic, feasible and known in advance.

2.7 The privacy of the participant is guaranteed and the results of the VNFIL procedure are the property of the participant unless agreed otherwise in advance.

2.7 The participant is entitled to appeal, and there is a system in place for this option.

3. Procedure and instruments are reliable and based on solid standards Trust is the key issue. Trust has to do with civil effect, properly defined standards, and clear information on the way in which assessments are conducted and the arguments on the basis of which conclusions are drawn.

3.1 Tasks and capacities of all parties involved in all phases of the procedure are known and are functioning.

3.2 A standard coordinated to the relevant working area and which leads to the civil effect is used.

3.3 The equivalence of the VNFIL procedure with an initial vocational training programme must be demonstrated.

3.4 The reliability and validity of the assessment instruments and procedures used is guaranteed, even if

procured externally.

3.5 The assessment instruments make use of any available evidence, no matter what the source.

3.6 The participant is entitled to a concluding meeting to be informed of the result. This result, including the civil value of the result, is set out in an VNFIL report.

4. Assessors and supervisors are competent, independent and impartial Independence and impartiality are crucial factors in the evaluation and are rooted in the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the process. It is of major importance to avoid unnecessary confusion of roles. Impartiality can be reinforced by training and the use of networks.

4.1 The independence of the assessors is guaranteed.

4.2 The roles of supervisors and assessors are separate.

4.3 The supervisors have a proven track record of competence. They are able to present procedures and to interview, coach and give feedback to individuals; they are professionals in the fields in which their coaching specializes.

4.4 The assessors have a proven track record of competence. They are able to interview, give feedback to individuals and evaluate competencies; they are able to communicate assessment results; they are professionals in the fields in which they conduct assessments.

4.5 Supervisors and assessors keep their professional skills up.

5. The quality of VNFIL procedures is guaranteed and is being improved on an on going basis

The quality of the VNFIL procedure and the set of instruments used is guaranteed. Evaluations are conducted regularly. The results are incorporated into improvement actions.

5.1 The VNFIL procedure is open.

5.2 Targets, procedure, assessment framework, assessment instruments, quality of assessors and supervisors, and VNFIL administration are all evaluated regularly.

5.3 Evaluation of the participants is a standing component of quality control.

5.4 The organization lives up to the quality standard of VNFIL.

> 5.5 The evaluation and the VNFIL procedure improvement policy that follows from the evaluation is embedded into the organization's existing quality control system.

Role of Peer-review: On March 22nd 2016 partners in the VNFIL-council signed a new covenant that regulates the labour market route. This covenant provides among other things an agreement on quality assurance and a private knowledge centre on VNFIL. The covenant provides the continuation of the existing framework with the current Dutch quality code and awarding bodies. The National Dutch Knowledge Centre became responsible for quality assurance. November 2017 the Dutch VNFIL Knowledge Centre recognised the added value of Peer Review. Peer Review is going to be integrated in the discussion on the future of quality assurance in the VNFIL Labour market route in the Netherlands.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

The VNFIL system is driven at least partially by market forces. The competition for potential clients drives information campaigns and assures the information. Local governments integrate VNFIL to labour market integration programmes.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

The VNFIL system is open and based on mutual trust of stakeholders: government defines the national strategy, local governments through employment services assure the availability of VNFIL to disadvantaged groups, educational institutions share the VNFIL provision with private companies. Employers are often involved in financing VNFIL to particular groups of employees. Stakeholders are coordinated through VNFIL council and providers are united in the Dutch Association of VNFIL providers. The bottom-up approach is very strong for the steering of the system.

3. Links to national qualification framework

The Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF) provides transparency between qualification in the educational and labour market route. With NLQF the relation between labour market qualifications and formal qualifications becomes transparent. NLQF is related to the European Qualifications Frameworks (EQF) and VNFIL provides a possibility to progress between different levels of NQF. The ECVET system is being implemented in VET in order to modularize VET and make it more accessible for adult learners through the usage of VNFIL.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

The outcome of the VNFIL process (the certificate of experience) is based on the learning outcomes of recognized occupational standards. However, it is not automatically accepted by the training institutions – they keep they prerogative in awarding a formal qualification or granting an exemption. Custom occupational standards can be elaborated for specific use cases (recognition of non-formal and informal learning of an individual, without certification - EVP).

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance system is undergoing a transformation, with some risks of being fractured between labour market-path and educational path. However, the national quality code is a very good basis for the development of new QA mechanisms based either on certification of providers, or more soft

approaches (e.g. peer-review).

6. <u>Professional competences of practitioners:</u>

The competition between providers and the system based on trust, rather than formalistic approaches, gives rise to very professional practices, particularly in the documentation of learning outcomes. All the processes are assured by professionals, however, there seems to be no central coordination for the development of practice in the whole system (this issue is particularly important with the dissolution of the central coordinating body).

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: PORTUGAL

General description of the system

National terminology: *"RVC" - Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências*

A formal VNFIL system exists in Portugal since the beginning of 2000. Initially these activities were developed by the RVCC (Centers for Recognition, Validation and Certification), later by the CNO (New Opportunities Centres) and since 2013 by CQEP (Centre for Qualification and Vocational Education). CQEP were structures of the National Qualifications System that play a key role in building bridges between the worlds of education, training and employment, in a perspective of learning throughout life. The CQEP were accompanied by the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP), which is responsible for coordinating the implementation of education and training policies for young people and adults and ensure the development and management of the system of recognition, validation and certification of skills. Since 2017 the Centers were renamed as Qualifica Centers (CQ).

The CQ aims to provide young people and adults an information service, guidance and referral in order to obtain an academic and/or vocational qualifications. The Centre also develops recognition, validation and certification of competences (RVCC) acquired by adults throughout life by formal, informal and non-formal means, in their school or professional dimension.

The CQ can be created in public schools of primary and secondary level; vocational training centres or local authorities or private training providers

The result of the RVCC process is issuing a Qualification Certificate and / or Diploma corresponding to a total or partial certification.

Process and vocabulary

Identification (*Reception)*

Candidate registration and clarification, considering the mission and the scope of intervention of CQEP;

Documentation

Diagnosis: Candidate profile analysis in order to identify education and / or training responses adjusted to their situation (motivations, needs and expectations). A comprehensive profile is elaborated during at least two sessions. The time for the referral to other appropriate services doesn't exceed 1 month.

Information and Guidance: Identification of individual projects of education and professional training, and present realistic options for further studies and / or integration in the labor market;

Referral: Refer the candidate to an offer of education and / or vocational training or for recognition, validation and certification of competences - RVCC (only possible for adult applicants, if they are between 18 and 23 years inclusive, that have at least three years duly proven professional experience),

Assessment

Recognition and Validation of Competences - Identification and validation of competences acquired by adult through formal, non-formal and informal learning. The candidate is oriented by a team of professionals and elaborates a Portfolio. A Bilan de compétences methodology is used, with a clear

information about the process at the beginning.

Certification

Demonstration of adults' competences, before a jury, by conducting an exam. The jury has time for preparatory work (analysis of the portfolio with the RVC counsellor).   The CQEP gives the candidate a clear project and action plan for the continuation of his/her professional development pathway.

Usage of VNFIL

The target groups of these centers are young people aged 15 years or, regardless of age, attending the last grade of primary education or adults with needs of developing and enhancing knowledge and skills. The main focus of the VNFIL system is on the low-skilled citizens. The services provided in CQEP have no cost.

The conclusion of the VNFIL process in a CQ allows to obtain a certification:

> • Academic: Basic level (6th or 9th grade) or secondary
> • Professional: Level 2 or 4 (NQF), referring to the professions in the National Catalogue for Qualifications

Quality assurance

There is a central QA/QD system for VNFIL in Portugal defined in the document - Reference Guide for Quality Assurance in CQEPs. (see attachment
This document defines a set of indicators and benchmarks that allow:

- To guide the activity of CQ, ensuring the quality of its intervention
- Promote harmonization of procedures, so that the network CQEP act in a coherent and coordinated manner
- Monitor the activity of CQ based on common indicators

The analysis and evaluation of the indicators is the responsibility of each CQEP. The ANQEP accompanies and monitors the activity of CQEP by consulting the SIGO data and with meetings and follow-up visits (comprising not only the consultation of the various stakeholders as the technical-pedagogical file consulting). Managers and staff of the CQEPs are trained for the self-assessment and the results are collected and analysed in a centralized database. Self-assessment approach is thus used as a self-regulation instrument. Based on this framework, an annual report including a development plan is drawn up by every centre. This report is the condition for continuous public financing of the centre.

Role of Peer review: The peer review methodology will strengthen the link between CQs. In a context of financial constraints, it allows each CQ with a low investment to have expert feedback on the quality of their interventions. Peer Review potential is related to the fact that this approach results from a set of existing good practices (cooperation between CQEP).

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

A comprehensive service is provided by publicly financed centres, which assures the visibility and transparency of the whole process from the beneficiaries' point of view. The centres have also the mission of giving information on career development and referring beneficiaries to other types of

services and/or trainings.

2. Stakeholders coordination:

The national legislation defines the policies, regulates the procedures and evaluates the activities of CQEPs. The responsible public entity is ANQEP. National and local stakeholders don't seem to be directly involved in the provision or policy-making.

3. Links to national qualification framework

Clear links exist between targeted qualifications and NQF. Qualifications on EQF level 2 to 3 are targeted via VNFIL. The outcomes of VNFIL are equivalent to the diplomas gained through formal learning.

4. Standards and learning outcomes

National qualification standards exist both for the general/academic and professional qualifications (EQF level 3 and lower).

5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is done on national level through legislation, that defines the basic rules of the VNFIL system. Very good central system based on EFQM standards exists (Common Assessment Framework - CAF). The system provides and IT backend for the management of beneficiaries and provides clear criteria for the self-assessment of the CQEP centres.

6. Professional competences of practitioners:

Counsellors have diverse backgrounds – there is no specific RVCC qualification, but professionals must have a degree in an area of social sciences. Continuous development is assured through monthly meetings. No formal requirements for members of Juries, but they must be a locally relevant stakeholder/teacher accredited by the CQEP.

VNFIL COUNTRY FICHE: SLOVAKIA

General description of the system

<u>National terminology:</u> *Uznávanie výsledkov neformálneho a informálneho učenia*

There is no genuine and appropriately developed national model of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). Although Lifelong Learning (LLL) strategies addressed this issue, a fundamental legislative basis for VNFIL is still missing. Nevertheless, the 2009 Act on Lifelong Learning created at least some pre-conditions for gradual progress. First of all the National Qualifications System (NQS, "Národná sústava kvalifikácií", www.kvalifikacie.sk) is backed by this legislation introducing a new approach based on learning outcomes to the description of qualifications.

Currently, validation according to the Act on LLL refers only to:

- recognition of results of further education based on assessment of achieving qualification standards leading to a full or partial qualification, the former fully corresponding to all requirements of a profession and the latter only to some of the knowledge, skills and competences related to the respective profession; and
- verification of a professional competence necessary for running a business regulated by the Trade Licensing Act No. 455/1991 Coll. that is also based on assessing compliance with standards.

None of the above cases is a clear case of VNFIL. The first case refers to accredited programmes leading to qualifications described by standards, hence linked to formal rather than non-formal learning. Validation is based on examination of graduates from accredited programmes (1291 in total in 2015) by authorised institutions accredited for validation that organise the examination. Nevertheless, individuals with 5 years of practice can apply for examination in authorised institutions and can receive a certificate confirming compliance with qualification standards, without prior graduation from the accredited programme.

No tangible outcomes can be achieved through the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Awarding of partial qualification pursuant to Act on LLL cannot be seen as genuine VNFIL as explained earlier: It refers to further education rather than non-formal and informal learning and leads to a different certificate compared to formal education system. Currently existing procedure leads to certificate confirming professional competence entitling to starting a regulated trade however does not lead to the certificate of apprenticeship.

In 2018 the Ministry of education prepares another project with the objective of creating a VNFIL system in Slovakia. The identification phase is planned to be realized through a personal online training account, where the candidate for validation will be able to compare his competences to the requirements of a professional standard.

Process and vocabulary

There are no detailed validation procedures elaborated yet. The examination is the only obligatory part of the process also for the purpose of recognition/validation of further education and recognition/validation of partial or full qualification. Regulation (see http://isdv.iedu.sk/Documents/Usmernenie_skusky.rtf) addresses in detail administrative aspects of

examination, but there is neither regulation nor guidance concerning four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) available. Validation procedure is fully up to authorised institutions listed in the Information system ISDV (http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleInstitutions.aspx).

There is neither specific funding policy nor policy focus, except explained priority resulting from limits set by Act on LLL (as explained at the beginning of this chapter) and objectives of ESF and communitarian projects. 40 qualifications prioritised as responding to labour market needs within an ESF project (see www.cvanu.sk) completed in 2015 by National Lifelong Learning Institute (NUCŽV). Modularised educational programmes and assessment standards to achieve respective qualification are presented at the project website, (see http://www.cvanu.sk/doc/15/40-modulovych-vzdelavacich-programov and embedded into Information system ISDV at http://isdv.iedu.sk/Documents/Kody_kvalifikacii.pdf). Nevertheless, NUCZV authorisation for validation expired by the end of 2015.

Usage of VNFIL

In 2015, there were 15 authorised institutions accredited pursuant to the Act on LLL entitled for "validation" (not in the VNFIL sense) of 224 qualifications (see the Information System of Further Education - ISDV at http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleInstitutions.aspx).

There were 3943 certificates issued since 2013 (640 certificates issued in 2013, 805 in 2014 and 2498 in 2015). These certificates are however not equivalent to the certificates from formal education. Certificate holders are entitled to start a business regulated by the Trade Licensing Act, but these certificates do not recognise the respective level of education and therefore they are not allowed to continue further studies within the formal education system.

Quality assurance

There is no quality assurance for VNFIL. Currently, the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning depend / are recognized by particular employer.

Educational institutions interested in quality assurance of their programmes are able to ask the Ministry of Education for accreditation process (profiles of the guarantor of the program, the lecturers, material and technical equipment,the program itself-based on the learning outcomes, qualification standard, assessment standards are unified, quality control is carried out by the Ministry of Education). ISO certification is used for the majority of the programmes related to the management of educational institution.

Role of Peer-review: Exchange of good practice, especially in the current state, before passing the Act on further education and Act on Recognition of Learning Outcomes.

Status of implementation of the CEDEFOP guidelines on VNFIL (2015)

1. Availability of information, guidance and counselling:

Regional centres for further training were created by the NUCZV within the CVANU project. These centres provided information on further training opportunities, but were not active in the VNFIL.

There is no genuine VNFIL in place in Slovakia yet. Partially relevant processes are promoted by national

authorities and respective affiliated institution. With regard to

- The 'validation' in the Youth work it is up to the Ministry of Education and Iuventa – The Slovak Youth Institute,
- pre –'validation' activities such as bilan de compétences it is up to Ministry of Labour and public employment services (CoLSAF and its labour offices),
- 'recognition/validation' pursuant the Act on LLL and related to "qualifications" and 'professional competences' it is up to Ministy of Labour and authorised organisations, and by Ministry of Interior and Trade Licensing authorities

2. <u>Stakeholders coordination:</u>

Stakeholders were involved in the creation of the national qualification system with qualification standards. A working group composed of different stakeholders is currently working on conceptual basis of the VNFIL system.

3. <u>Links to national qualification framework</u>

A Slovak National Qualifications Framework (SKKR) has been developed for the purpose of assigning levels of SKKR to qualifications and to enable comparison with qualifications abroad via EQF. There are however no legislative preconditions fulfilled for establishing links to validation. Neither Slovak National Qualifications Framework (SKKR) nor National Qualifications System (NQS) are ready to be used for VNFIL. An ESF project continuing in the further development of the NQS is planned. Assessment manuals for VNFIL should be developed to complete assessment standards.

4. <u>Standards and learning outcomes</u>

Qualification standards (and assessment standards) were developed induced by Act on LLL No 568/2009 Coll. to regulate provision of further education and examination leading to obtaining "partial or full" qualification. These standards were developed as temporary solution to fill in the vacancy caused by delay in development of NQS. These standards are registered and maintained by the Ministry of Education Information System of Further Education (ISDV; http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleInstitutions.aspx http://www.isdv.iedu.sk/ and will be replaced by NSQ standards in the future. Although these qualification standards were often developed in the cooperation with specialists from VET schools, they focused on (professional/vocational) knowledge and skills, while key competence should be reflected in assessment standards.

5. <u>Quality assurance</u>

There is no genuine VNFIL in place in Slovakia yet. Consequently there are no specific quality assurance arrangements in place. There is no model in preparation in distinguishing internal and external evaluations. Quality assurance that is already in place refers to existing procedures- accreditation of education and education institutions as already mentioned earlier concerning Act on LLL and Youth Work Act.

6. <u>Professional competences of practitioners:</u>

There are no genuine validation practitioners. It is expected that the profession/qualification of the validation practitioners (including the profile) will be addressed by NQS. Currently, NQS qualification cards set formal requirements for examiners (years of practice and graduation from respective studies). There are no mandatory requirement for practitioners in terms of training and/or a qualification set so far. This should be addressed by the NQS further development and the new legislation. The qualification standards for tutors/counsellors for further education were developed by NUCZV within the ESF project

(www.cvanu.sk) that were also approved by the Ministry of education and embedded into the ISDV information system (http://isdv.iedu.sk/EligibleDetail.aspx?qualification=39). According to these standards, there were also training programmes containing some developed VNFIL relevant components. The required minimum level of education was graduation from second cycle of higher education. Similar approach can be expected concerning validation specialists.

Conclusions

The European council recommendation form 2012 requires member states to "start develop, no later than 2015, national procedures for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, supported, as appropriate, by national qualifications frameworks". For countries with VNFIL tradition (France, Netherlands) the system has been put in place and refined, and despite some hesitations and uncertainities has been firmly established since years. Other countries, through intensive work of universities, research bodies and public institutions and with the support of the ESF, have managed to build a comprehensive and efficient VNFIL system in a rather short period of time (Portugal). These systems are firmly stemmed in national educational and cultural traditions, but always meet the basic purpose of validation – provide citizens an alternative way to gain a qualification and have their learning outcomes recognized on the individual, social and institutional level. Other countries have demonstrated various degrees of success in the development of VNFIL provision: strong development has been observed in Austria, Lithuania also has some elements of VNFIL system in place. In Slovakia, the state and the stakeholders seem to be making rounds in terminological and legislative uncertainties without a clear vision for the development of VNFIL system. The development of national qualification framework and system of occupational standards give hope that the VNFIL system will see the light in Slovakia as well sooner, rather than later. The future promised by the implementation of the VNFIL system – a flexible, modularized lifelong learning system, where the individual "creates" his qualification in a constructive tension between his desires and the needs of the labour market - has, however, not yet been achieved in any of the partner countries – however, Netherlands seems to approach this idea.

This report described current policies in VNFIL and its implementation in countries participating in the VNFIL Extended project. The analysis of the different quality criteria in existing quality standards in some partner countries (Netherlands, Portugal, partly France) and in different European documents has lead to the development of the Quality areas that were used during Peer-Review visits. The development in some partner countries (Austria) in terms of quality assurance indicates a certain convergence of European practices of quality assurance: the proposed National quality criteria catalogue is rather similar to the compiled quality areas in the project in its content (although much more specific in certain areas).

The implementation of quality assurance differs considerably in partner countries, but it is safe to say that in most cases no efficient mechanisms for enforcing quality criteria on providers exist. Even Netherlands is gradually moving away from the system of accreditation of VNFIL providers towards a more trust-based quality assurance system using Peer-Review. In countries where specific quality standards for VNFIL exist, they often are declaratory, without efficient mechanisms for enforcement and regular control (Portugal, Austria). In other countries the main quality requirements are embedded into legislation, but the real quality of the service can vary across different regions, professional sectors and validation bodies. The quality assurance procedures are obviously heavily dependent on the current state of implementation of the VNFIL system. For example there is no common quality assurance system for VNFIL in Lithuania and each institution sets out its own procedures and foresees quality assurance measures. For example, higher education providers themselves are responsible for quality assurance

framework and there is a wide variety of practices (from no quality assurance to external audits of the VNFIL process). In Slovakia, quality assurance for VNFIL is an afterthought for the stakeholders, as the VNFIL system is currently not developed yet.

Overall, it is clear that although VNFIL is not an experimental practice in Europe anymore, there are big differences in its implementation across Europe. These differences are due to different national traditions in the educational system, but also in the dynamism of the national authorities and their ability to continuously reform the educational and training system to make it more adapted to the ever changing needs of the labour market and of society. In this phase the need of harmonizing the VNFIL practice across Europe seems much less important than the need of sharing good experiences across European countries with different levels of development of VNFIL. This exchange of practices however should not be limited to policy-makers and high-level stakeholders: the experience of VNFIL shows that although limited in terms of the width of the impact (only one VNFIL is directly targeted during the peer visit), the trans-national Peer-Review can have a transformative and profound impact on the practice of specific provider in specific region and specific national and institutional context. It provides countries and providers with a structured way of sharing experiences and recommendations of their practice, which can have a gradual, but transformative impact on the whole system. Is this the right time for formalizing and structuring the community of VNFIL practitioners in Europe through Peer-Review?

Some challenges remain however for the implementation of the structured system of exchange of good practices and continuous improvement through Peer-Review, namely the financial sustainability. The question of added value of such a system for countries with a high level of legislative control and uniformity of practice (e.g. France) can also be raised.

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