



# RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND FINANCING APPROACHES

Faced with rapid technological progress, an ever-changing world of work, the imperatives of post-Covid pandemic recovery and the green and digital transitions, skills provision has become a strategic priority for nations around the world.

To succeed in these challenging times, people, organisations and countries must acquire more and new skills. Across Europe and the European neighbourhood, countries need to urgently and radically raise the skills levels of their populations.

Many adults will need to upskill, reskill, or have validated the skills they have learned in life and on the job, in another country or language. This has thrust the recognition of prior learning (RPL) from the margins of society, towards the centre of efforts to raise and update adult qualifications.

Some experts suggest there is not so much a skills shortage problem, as a skills recognition problem, which RPL can help to resolve. Others argue that validation is the quickest and least expensive way for nations to raise the skills capacities of their populations. Portugal's large and successful RPL programme is swiftly upping the education levels of its people.

**“MANY ADULTS  
WILL NEED TO  
UPSKILL”**

People learn all the time and everywhere, in life and on the job. Everybody needs to be able to build on the competences they have, however they acquired them. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is a vital part of a lifelong learning system. It, among other things:

- Enables people to identify, document, assess and certify their skills and competences
- Can make people aware of their strengths and motivate them to engage with training
- Gives a second chance to people who did not succeed in traditional education settings
- Allows workers to comply with new certification requirements
- Enables migrants to make use of the skills they bring to a new country
- Empowers people of all ages to develop skills in flexible ways to improve life chances.

Learning new skills – and having existing skills certified – is important for the development of individuals and societies, as well as for economic development. Research has shown that personal income rises with each level of qualification. In America, bachelor degree holders earn on average 74% more over a lifetime than those with only a high school diploma.

One of the greatest challenges facing RPL is funding, which is currently insufficient, unreliable and unsustainable. Governments debate whether they can afford RPL – when the real question is whether they can afford not to. This brochure presents key elements of sustainable RPL funding.

The latest studies of RPL in partner countries of the European Training Foundation (ETF) conclude strongly that governments largely leave recognition providers on their own as regards funding. The work is financed from their budgets and fees charged do not cover the full costs of validation and certification processes. Learn more about funding practices in ETF partner countries.

**“... LOSS IS NOT  
ONLY ABOUT  
MONEY”**

The economic impacts of recognition are significant. An increasingly skilled workforce translates into economic growth as income, productivity and capacity rises. Canada calculates that having 844,000 adults who are under-valued due to the differential between their skills and credentials, breaks down to Can\$16 billion (€11 billion) annually in lost income.

Everybody loses. For governments, the loss includes tax revenue and economic growth. But loss is not only about money: in North America, 27% of mature students (those who have passed the usual age for formal education) complete credentials – this success rate rises to 49% for mature students who have earned RPL credits. This brochure concludes with policy advice pointers for sustainable RPL financing.

## Economic impacts – A compelling Canadian case

The British Columbia Prior Learning Action Network – BCPLAN – commissioned a study on the economic impacts of prior learning assessment and recognition. It was conducted in 2020 during the disruptive height of Covid-19. Out of 25 public post-secondary institutes surveyed, 10 provided data: six colleges, two institutes and two universities.

The institutions reported a total of 1,614 assessments completed in 2019. Health sciences was the most common area, followed by business, arts, social sciences and technology. Only two institutions had designated assessors. At the others, assessment was piecemeal, often by faculty members.

### British Columbia job outlook 2019 to 2029

The British Columbia labour market is forecast to have 861,000 job openings over the next 10 years. Only 3% of those jobs will be eligible for people with less than high school, and only 20% for people with high school only. The rest will require a post-secondary credential.

### Credential recognition challenges

- 844,000 Canadian adults have credential recognition challenges.
- 524,000 people have international credentials.
- 200,000 people have out-of-province credentials.
- 120,000 people have experiential learning that is not recognised in a credential.

*Source: Conference Board of Canada: Brain Gain, 2015.*

### Assessment fees

Half the institutes did not charge for assessments. Among the others, fees varied depending on type of assessment. There was no consistent fee structure. But the study estimated:

- Can\$5,700 (€3,960) average annual revenue for institutes that did fewer than 100 assessments.
- Can\$165,142 (€114,560) average annual revenue for institutes that did over 100 assessments.

### Economic impact

Economic impact calculations combined: wage differential between credential and non-credential workers; employment rate differential between credential and non-credential workers; number of students entering the workforce; and direct and indirect spending attributed annually to the students.

In British Columbia, economists calculated a ‘multiplier effect’ of 1.5 for recognition of prior learning: for every €1 invested, there is €1.5 worth of net impact.

Recognition for the 1,614 individuals at some public institutions in the province was worth Can\$31 million (€21.5 million) annually. The figure across all colleges, nationally, is far higher.

- The 844,000 adults who are under-valued due to the differential between their skills and credentials, translates into Can\$16 billion (€11 billion) annually in lost income.
- For 120,000 people classified as having experiential learning but no credentials, there is Can\$2.3 billion (€1.6 billion) in annual lost income.

“It is a no-brainer that we should be funding this activity,” said Dr Kevin Wainwright, one of the survey authors. This is because of what countries lose if they do not do skills recognition – including, for governments, tax revenues on additional earnings generated.



Close to one fifth of adult Europeans struggle with reading and writing, calculation and using digital tools, according to the European Skills Agenda. About 22% of adult Europeans obtained lower secondary education level at most. Without certified skills and with low-level qualifications, they are at high risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

The post-Covid recovery, the green and digital transitions, and technical progress driving the 4th Industrial Revolution and automation will require a massive effort to upskill and reskill people – those whose jobs are impacted by industrial change, those who have missed out on formal education and need new ways and opportunities to learn, and those who have learned skills through experience that have not been formally recognised.

RPL is being viewed in the wider context of national skills developments and challenges that are profoundly changing the ways in which people of all ages will work and learn. It will be a key part of lifelong learning, which has emerged from under the shadow of the formal sector to become the overarching goal of education and training systems and a key to prosperity.

**“RPL... A KEY PART  
OF LIFELONG  
LEARNING”**

RPL will be crucial to providing people – employed and unemployed – with qualifications they need to secure jobs and be mobile in the jobs market, and in providing routes back into education and training in order to upskill or reskill. Establishing a system for validating non-formal and informal learning is also a vital step in building a culture of lifelong learning.

## The European Skills Agenda

The European Skills Agenda is a five-year European Union plan to help people and businesses develop more and better skills and put them to use. It encompasses recognition of prior learning.

Objectives to be achieved by 2025 include that 50% of adults aged 25 to 64 years, 30% of low-qualified adults and 20% of unemployed people should have engaged in recent learning, and 70% of adults aged should have at least basic digital skills.

The New European Skills Agenda builds on the 2016 skills agenda and includes 12 actions around four building blocks: a call for collective action; actions to ensure people have the right skills for jobs: tools and initiatives to support people in lifelong learning pathways; and a framework to unlock investments in skills.

Several actions relate directly to RPL and lifelong learning, and their financing, including: an initiative on individual learning accounts; a new approach to micro-credentials; and unlocking public and private investment in skills.

### Funding

The Skills Agenda highlights a need for massive investment in skills. Over and above what enterprises and governments spend, the EU is investing some €85 billion to support skills.

To unlock more funding, the EU is: exploring how fiscal

frameworks can better support investment; promoting enhanced reporting on human capital; working with national statistics offices on transparent skills reporting; and investigating innovative financial mechanisms.

One of the pillars of the Skills Agenda is helping people to develop skills throughout life. The success of these efforts will be based on effective outreach, guidance and support measures. The focus is on:

- **Upskilling pathways:** This initiative helps adults to acquire literacy, numeracy and digital skills. There are three steps. First, a skills audit identifies a person's skills and any need for upskilling. Second is an offer of education or training to address the skills needs identified, aligned to labour market needs. Third, people have skills validated and recognised. Many European countries already offer elements of upskilling pathways and will build on these.
- **Individual learning accounts:** Individual learning accounts are being investigated as a human rights-based way of providing funding support for workers seeking training, especially those who do not have the means.
- **Europass platform:** The Europass platform helps people to assess their skills and showcase them to employers, and informs people about opportunities to develop skills and to find a job.
- **Micro-credentials:** A European approach to micro-credentials is being developed, to promote the recognition of prior learning and of skills obtained through short courses.

Along with transformations in societies, economies and technologies, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic, has come an explosion of innovation in learning.

The ETF conference on “Building Lifelong Learning Systems”, held in June 2021, identified a fundamental shift in the way people are becoming involved in lifelong learning. It is driven among other things by technology and online learning as well as interest among young people in learning via individually-constructed pathways and in bite-sized chunks, combining online and face-to-face learning across providers to deliver employable and adaptable skills.

Traditional qualifications are usually awarded at the end of a long formal education or training programme. People who upskill and reskill usually do so through short courses.

Some countries and organisations are developing micro-credentials that enable people to stack up small learning credits to qualify for larger formal qualifications, promoting more flexible learning and easier credit transfer between institutions. Experiential skills may also be assessed and recognised as micro-credentials, filling in gaps as people work towards formal certification and the improved life chances it represents.

In India, the University Grants Commission is creating a national ABC – Academic Bank of Credit – where learner credits from multiple institutions are ‘deposited’, and may be cashed in to receive a qualification. In Turkey, all qualifications to Level 6 must be accessible via RPL, exclusively through recognition or by using RPL to access further learning pathways.

With growing international migration, RPL has become an important way to enable migrants to put their professional skills to work – for personal and host country gain.

The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees is a multi-country project of education ministries, university associations and UNHCR among others. Qualifications are assessed based on available documentation – although many refugees have no documents at all – and a structured interview. The ‘passport’ presents information on work experience and language proficiency, and reliable information for progression towards employment or studies. A RPL project is targeting Turkey’s more than four million refugee population.

The European Union’s revised Blue Card Directive, agreed in May 2021, will increase demand for RPL in the EU and in sending countries. The revisions, which update the scheme originally adopted in 2009, introduce efficient new rules for attracting highly skilled workers to Europe. One area concerns qualifications and skills equivalency: the scheme will facilitate the recognition of professional skills and experience for occupations in specific sectors.

**“MANY  
REFUGEES  
HAVE NO  
DOCUMENTS  
AT ALL,”**

## Overcoming the fees barrier

A key lesson from the Netherlands and elsewhere is that funding support for people is crucial to the uptake of RPL and lifelong learning. After a rapid rise in RPL in the Netherlands, reaching 22,000 people in 2010, ending public subsidies sparked a drop to 14,654 in 2012.

### The Qualifica Programme in Portugal

The Qualifica Programme was launched by the government of Portugal in 2017 to enhance and promote adult education and training and upgrade the qualifications of adults.

There was good reason to do so. Half of the adult population (aged 25-64) have not completed upper-secondary education. Only 33% of people aged 25-34 have finished school, according to the OECD. And nearly 500,000 people were illiterate in 2011.

This is a very old problem in Portugal. Efforts to tackle it have not succeeded. “That’s why we needed to have strong political programmes,” said Maria João Alves, head of unit for Qualifica Centres Monitoring in the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training in Portugal, in an interview with the ETF.

There is a significant problem regarding basic skills, mostly literacy, numeracy and digital skills. Many people who do not have basic skills, have problems getting into or succeeding in the labour market and achieving full social integration. Further, less qualified people tend not to participate in lifelong learning – the ‘low-skills trap’.

### The Qualifica Programme

The main objectives of the Qualifica Programme are to raise the qualification levels of adults and their

employability, and increase digital and functional literacy. The target groups are less qualified adults, the unemployed, and young people not in employment, education or training.

Another objective is to better align training provision with labour market needs. And ultimately the plan is to have a good combination of recognition, validation and certification of competences, and a strong connection with adult education and training pathways. There are now 310 Qualifica Centres. It was crucial to get close to people throughout Portugal.

The Qualifica Centres have teams of experts in adult education and training. They play a key role in motivating and facilitating adults for lifelong learning, and articulating with education and training providers and other stakeholders, for instance employers and municipalities.

The centres provide information and guidance on the recognition, validation and certification of competencies, and on education and training pathways that lead to vocational and academic qualifications up to Level 4 of the National Qualifications Framework.

### Strong results

Portugal is satisfied with the results of its system of recognition, validation and certification of competences so far. As of April 2021, these include:

- 606,575 enrolments in Qualifica Centres.
- Some 86% of people who enrolled – 520,281 – have already had their skills assessed and have either entered education and training or the skills recognition process.
- Most people – 387,840 – were oriented to education and training pathways, with a tailored learning offer.
- 132,441 adults are or have been in the RPL process, with nearly half having already gained a certification.



### Funding aspects

People enrolled in Qualifica Centres do not pay anything, to ensure that there are no financial barriers for citizens.

The Qualifica Centres are funded by the European Social Fund and/or by state or private budgets. The funding pays for staff wages. There are schools, training centres and private providers involved in the centres, and the European funding applies to all of them. One third of the network is private stakeholders.

There are three funding arrangements on the Portuguese mainland. The biggest slice of funding goes to the three main regions, where Qualifica Centres have 85% of their human resource bill paid by the EU and 15% by the government. In the Algarve the cost split is 80% EU and 20% government, while in Lisbon it is 50:50.

The average annual cost of a Qualifica Centre is between €150,000 to €200,000. The centres apply for funding that is determined by the number of beneficiaries of their services.

### Strengths and weaknesses

- There is increasing recognition of the importance of raising skills levels. People have been made fully aware of the link between low qualifications and problems in the labour market – an awareness that is not automatic.
- The positive effects at individual level are very important, because it not only raises self-esteem and motivation towards future learning, but gives people the idea that they can go further with the background they have.
- Another strength is aligning – and achieving returns on – skills and employability, which is important for individuals and the labour market. It is a major achievement to align the recognition of

competencies and lifelong learning with what the labour market needs.

### Challenges

- The focus of education remains firmly on young people. There needs to be a wide consensus regarding adult education as a policy priority.
- Reliance on European Union funds must be reduced. It is important to pursue other financing sources.
- Qualifica Centres must be made an integral part of the education and training landscape. With stability, it will be possible to find the money to support RPL.
- The social value and recognition of RPL qualifications needs to be improved.
- The engagement of stakeholders needs to be increased, especially employers. Big companies have Qualifica Centres, but more is needed.

## Learning sectors

Recognition of prior learning is delivered in different sectors – education, the labour market and the ‘third’ sector or civil society. It is provided by different actors and has different functions depending on the sector. In the education sector, RPL is usually about obtaining credits to enable enrolment and study; in the labour market it is more about access to a job or promotion; and in the ‘third’ sector the empowerment aspect is highlighted.

One issue is that validation delivered in one sector might not always be accepted in another. For instance, when RPL is delivered for the labour market by a private provider, this may not always enable the continuation of studies in the formal education sector. This is because the three sectors use different standards and-or methods. As a consequence, the allocation and management of funds can vary between the different sectors.

Currently, under education or labour market or even migration policies, validation is placed on the fringes as an additional, supporting mechanism, never at the centre. That might be a reason why proper planning and budgeting of RPL is frequently overlooked. For example, in the education sector, validation activities are usually placed in adult education departments, which have always been severely underfunded. One of the RPL challenges in the European Union is to build bridges between these systems.

## European Training Foundation

The ETF is an EU agency based in Turin, Italy. It is the EU centre of expertise supporting reforms of education, training and labour market systems in European neighbourhood countries. The ETF has 29 partner countries in South Eastern Europe and Turkey, Eastern Europe, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, and Central Asia.

## Validation works – the ETF and partner countries

There is an array of different policies, systems and stages of RPL in Europe. Countries in the European Union are grappling with numerous challenges around validation and lifelong learning. Still, EU recommendations and country experiences have inspired RPL activities in European neighbourhood countries.

The ETF supports the European Commission by providing policy analysis and advice, disseminating knowledge and enabling international exchange of experience. In the area of validation, the ETF facilitates the knowledge exchange of EU practices, peer learning, and monitoring and training. It also assists partner countries to modernise qualifications systems.

As with many other nations, ETF partner countries struggle to build competitive economies and deal with qualifications deficits and skills mismatches. To maximise skills acquisition and use, they are under pressure to develop policies and mechanisms for RPL and smooth integration into the labour market.

The ETF has assisted partners to identify priorities for validation systems, and has exchanged knowledge and EU practice in the area. It has facilitated peer-to-peer exercises to inform regulations, the training of assessors, conferences to advance thinking and cooperation, and handbooks for practitioners, among other actions. The ETF also monitors validation in partner countries, and reports on progress.

## Backdrop

A European Council recommendation in 2012 encouraged EU Member States to put national arrangements for validation in place by 2018.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), created in 2008 and revised in 2017, adopted the principle of recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, and requires that new qualifications in national registers can be awarded through validation.

In line with EU practices, the ETF advises partner countries to take an overarching approach to RPL, stressing that validation tools and systems should form an integral element of qualifications systems so that RPL becomes an accepted and equal route to qualifications.

It suggests that to achieve the scale necessary to gain societal acceptance and buy-in from stakeholders, countries should anchor RPL pilot schemes into wider policies that are of immediate relevance.

In countries that have successfully scaled up validation practices, they have been part of human resource strategies for economic sectors, rather than social strategies to support disadvantaged groups – although that has been a focus of EU policy.

## Overview

There have been positive developments around qualifications. Turkey and Western Balkan countries follow the EU skills agenda and participate in the European Qualifications Framework. They and countries of the Eastern Partnership have made progress in designing and building qualifications systems through NQFs.

Human capital development policies in these countries are oriented towards lifelong learning, quality and inclusion. Successful validation systems in ETF countries have been linked to NQF implementation. Often, new qualifications in NQFs allow alternative ways to award credentials, such as RPL.

A current study of validation in five countries – Azerbaijan, Georgia, Jordan, Moldova and Ukraine – shows that ETF partner countries have made substantial progress at the policy and regulatory level and are gradually rolling out systematic validation arrangements.

**“PROPER  
PLANNING AND  
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## Some challenges for European neighbourhood countries

While much progress has been made, ETF research revealed a set of challenges facing validation in many partner countries. In summary:

- RPL has to be built across various policies (education, labour, economic development, migration)
- There are too few qualifications based on standards or learning outcomes
- Assessment systems are weak and lack quality assurance
- Validation practitioners need training
- There are problems attracting candidates
- Information and career guidance are weak
- Formal education providers do not accommodate flexible pathways
- There is a serious lack of funding

In terms of policy goals and dialogue, there are needs for overarching policy and for priority sectors, for working across sectors, and for identifying an institutional home for oversight. Further, countries need to identify a strong business model for validation, and there needs to be capacity assessment of and regular support for RPL providers.

Importantly countries need to identify who benefits from validation and how, and the costs and benefits of validation. Outreach, guidance and counselling need strengthening, and user experiences need to be monitored and the results used to make improvements.



# THE BIG CHALLENGE

## – SUSTAINABLE FINANCING OF RPL

Sustainable funding should be a goal of any recognition of prior learning system, along with efficiency and effectiveness, transparency and accountability.

Based on the experiences of many countries, funding is the major challenge for RPL. An aim of this brochure is to assist the RPL efforts of ETF partner countries, including governments and other key education, training and skills stakeholders. There are other challenges worth mentioning, albeit in brief. Some are preconditions for the success of RPL systems.

### **The planning challenge**

Assessing demand for and uptake of RPL can be difficult. Low uptake of validation services is a big challenge across the EU – it has been below expectations for years. Successful systems tend to involve collaboration between the state, private sector and civil society, from the start and throughout, which can be complex and time-consuming. Factors to consider include the needs of stakeholders, system design, implementation, outreach, accessibility and quality.

### **The coordination challenge**

RPL systems frequently involve multiple stakeholders, organisations, training providers and others across the public and private sectors. Good coordination and communication between all facets of the system is crucial.

**“GOOD COORDINATION  
AND COMMUNICATION  
... IS CRUCIAL,”**

### **The awareness challenge**

People of all ages need to be made aware of RPL services, their benefits and how they may be accessed, or take-up of RPL and its many benefits will be compromised.

### **The information and guidance challenge**

Career and training guidance must be easily available and accessible, so that people learn how to optimise the recognition and certification of their skills, how this might benefit them in terms of jobs and careers, and what further training options are available.

REFERENCES

POLICY ADVICE

FUNDING PRACTICES IN FIVE ETF PARTNER COUNTRIES

THE BIG CHALLENGE – SUSTAINABLE FINANCING OF RPL

THE CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

### The flexible training challenge

For many people, RPL may be the beginning of a new training journey, with certified skills qualifying them for further education or training, reskilling or upskilling. There must be clear and accessible pathways from RPL into education and training. It is a major challenge for education systems to create and accommodate flexible learning pathways, as this involves the reorganisation of school logistics.

### The quality challenge

This involves the quality of the RPL process and of the qualifications it delivers. These are both crucial to the acceptance and usefulness of RPL credentials. A national qualifications framework needs to set appropriate standards and learning outcomes, and be kept up to date.

### The monitoring challenge

There is insufficient data on RPL and there needs to be more monitoring and data collection. More statistics are needed on take-up and beneficiaries, and on costs and benefits.

The 2021 ETF conference debated how to secure funding to support lifelong, including RPL. Partner countries, experts and international organisations, highlighted these and other ways:

- Training funds – such as skills or unemployment funds – to create a pool of resources.
- A role for the financial sector in raising funds for skills, helped by public policies.
- Novel financial products such as learning accounts, some in public-private partnerships.

The European Union places major emphasis on skills provision, including RPL. To support more investment in skills, the EU is investigating more effective use of fiscal frameworks, enhanced and transparent reporting on human capital, and

## Some planning factors

ETF research has identified factors to be considered in planning RPL funding. These include:

- The establishment of a structure for costs
- The consideration of all costs
- Acknowledgement that costs can differ depending on the sector and complexity of the process, and the varying costs of outreach
- Multiple funding sources may require a coordinating body
- Administrative efficiency must be achieved
- Finding ways to prevent the misuse of funds and to assure transparency
- A balance should be sought between costs to individuals and subsidised costs, so that fees support RPL funding but do not constitute a barrier to people obtaining recognition

innovative financial mechanisms. Individual learning accounts are being explored as a way of providing funding support for all people seeking training for new skills, or for reskilling or upskilling.

## Turkey – A successful RPL and qualifications system

Turkey has notched up considerable achievements in developing a qualifications system aimed at equipping the labour force with up-to-date qualifications and recognising learning in the workplace. Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been a priority.

Turkish culture and society is used to learning at work. Many people practice occupations they have learned on the job, so there is a huge demand for the recognition of occupational learning, which is seen as a quicker and cheaper route to qualifications than formal education. Importantly, companies also care about recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Interestingly, Turkey established an overarching qualifications system and RPL from scratch, at the same time.

A new state institution – the Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA) – runs the system and provides a

powerful platform that brings together the state, employees and employers.

The VQA created the Turkish Qualifications Framework (TQF), which was adopted in 2015 and is referenced to the European Qualifications Framework. All new qualifications were “developed from zero”, along with labour market stakeholders, according to Osman Seçkin Akbiyik, a senior expert at the VQA, who was interviewed by the ETF. “This took a lot of time.”

There has been RPL for vocational qualifications since 2006, but first major outcomes were in 2010 and the system was fully implemented in 2015. The TQF Regulation has provisions for RPL, and stipulates that all of its qualifications may be attained via RPL.

### VOC-Test Centres

Assessment, evaluation and certification are conducted by VQA-authorized certification bodies also called Vocational Test Centres – VOC-Test Centres. These bodies do not offer education or training.

They can be public or non-government, such as ministries, chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions, employers’ associations and private companies – nearly 70% of the centres are companies, reflecting the high involvement of the private sector in the system.

Today there are 236 VOC-Test Centres providing validation services within 336 qualification standards. Some 255 of those standards are for dangerous or hazardous occupations – regulated professions in which a formal vocational qualification is required to practice.

Turkey is different from many countries in requiring people seeking RPL to demonstrate competences through

both theoretical and practical examinations, rather than relying on identification and documentation of skills and self-assessment approaches.

### Special features

- Increasingly, other occupations and sectors are seeking new, modern vocational qualifications.
- Companies and other labour market stakeholders, such as trade unions and trade associations, are at the centre of the system, which is semi-public and semi-private, with the balance tipped towards the private sector.
- Companies are represented in management of the authority and are directly involved in preparing occupational and qualifications standards. They run many VOC-Test Centres and are thus responsible for assessing and evaluating learning and providing qualifications.

### Some statistics

The population of Turkey is nearly 85 million. The country reports considerable success for its RPL system, e.g.:

- In total 1.3 million certificates have been awarded.
- Almost 90% are for 'dangerous occupations', of which there are around 160.
- 92% of applicants are employed and practicing their occupations.
- The labour market and economy have started to benefit from RPL.

### Funding

Financing is diverse, spread across the state, private sector, organisations and education and training providers, special funds – the Unemployment Insurance Fund – EU funding, and individuals, who contribute towards validation expenses.

The business model for the private sector to engage was defined by the introduction of the list of dangerous and hazardous occupations for which certification is mandatory. This is a very important feature of the Turkish system, as it assures demand for RPL.

The following are key features:

- It is accepted that the private sector should help finance vocational training and RPL.
- Companies, trade unions and employer associations invest in the system directly.
- The VQA and organisations involved in developing standards and qualifications, including companies, do this voluntarily.
- There are costs attached to assessment and evaluation at VOC-Test Centres. They depend on the complexity and comprehensiveness of learning outcomes, and vary between occupations.
- An annual fee is paid by certification bodies to VQA depending on the number of certificates issued. Centres incur several other costs including for accreditation and authorisation and skills audits, and staff and facilities.

Assessment and evaluation expenses have been financed by the Unemployment Insurance Fund, through which the state has provided nearly €100 million. The EU gave around €25 million to establish VOC-Test Centres and for assessment and evaluation expenses. This money is also provided to some learners, to alleviate the cost barrier.

UIF funding is available for people who work in the 81 dangerous or hazardous occupations and need a formal qualification to practice. By 30 June 2018, the fund had been used by 259,121 people for a total amount of almost TL190 million (€17 million).



A direct grant, supported by EU funds, is available for the assessment and certification of all qualifications provided by VQA: 32,040 people had made use of this fund by 30 June 2018 for a total amount of TL18 million (€1.58 million). The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organisation provides up to TL30,000 (€2,630) to enterprises.

For people, assessment fees for certificates average around TL1,000 (€88). The fees are determined by the complexity of the qualification and assessment cost. The documentation fee is TL150 (€13). The application fee varies. The audit fee is TL1,500 (€130) per person per day.

## Key elements of RPL financing

### Funding sources

There are various substantial sources of RPL financing, and diversification is advised.

- **State budgets.** This has been the main source of RPL financing, but the funding can be limited and countries are increasingly diversifying funding sources.
- **Donor funding.** This is a significant source of RPL funding, but is usually for new initiatives and is of limited duration.
- **Employers.** The private sector is involved in RPL financing and delivery in several countries but is not always willing to contribute. Employers may pay through a variety of mechanisms such as levies, sectoral funds and taxes. Private sector involvement in decision-making and governance of RPL is important if company funding is sought. Kazakhstan has an assessment and certification system that is employer-run (see below).
- **Special funds.** Such as from skills or unemployment levies. These can combine other sources mentioned above and ensure a steady flow of funds that can be used generally for RPL or for specific purposes.

## European RPL funding practices

### Common RPL financing features across Europe

- There is a mix of public and private funding
- Fees are charged to candidates
- There is EU and project funding. This is common at the early stage and may involve joint financing. Funding is time-restricted and there may be challenges of coordination. In Portugal, Greece and Cyprus, mainstream RPL operations are financed by the European Social Fund.

### A major difference between countries

- **State funding is not explicitly dedicated to RPL.** Education and training providers deliver RPL within their budgets. This enables autonomy in delivery and high acceptance. However, monitoring is difficult and there can be a diversity of modalities. Public providers often complain that their budgets are insufficient to cover all RPL-related costs.
- **State funding is dedicated to RPL.** Funding is allocated to ministries of education or labour, employment services and/or regional budgets among others. Direct funding for RPL is an incentive for providers and helps to lower cost barriers facing RPL candidates. Its distribution can be proportionate to activity. In addition, a playing field is established with regard to allocation mechanisms that allows for policy experimentation to incentivise providers to offer RPL on a more regular basis and in an output-oriented manner. Challenges are to ensure that funding is sufficient and to provide clear information on allocation mechanisms.

- **Fees.** This demand-oriented source has significant potential to help finance RPL. Non-subsidised fees can form a major barrier for candidates, so caution is needed. Individual Learning Accounts are being investigated in Europe and elsewhere, and may be in public-private partnerships. One challenge for EU and ETF partner countries is a very low uptake of RPL services: without reaching a certain level of demand, economies of scale cannot be achieved and costs cannot be optimised.

### Funding allocation mechanisms

The role of recognition of prior learning in financing education is important. RPL has the potential to improve the cost-effectiveness of public resources mobilised for education and training, re-skilling and upskilling. There are several mechanisms commonly used to allocate RPL funding. They may be input oriented or concerned with goals, performance or demand.

- **Public planning:** Central or decentralised planning.
- **State or market providers:** Such as schools, adult education centres or the private sector.
- **Targeted programmes:** For sectors or groups like the unemployed or migrants.
- **The individual:** Demand oriented through fees, vouchers or individual learning accounts.

### A public provider perspective

RPL in the public education sector links strongly to the provision of individualised, flexible learning pathways. RPL candidates who are awarded partial qualifications ought to be offered complementary training courses. However, when formal education and training institutions engage for the first time in RPL, their organisation and financing systems are not geared to accommodate individual learning journeys and need to be adapted.

The typical funding system of education institutions – per capita funding, per student year – does not provide an incentive to offer RPL, as it shortens training periods. An element of funding could be introduced for the number of qualifications and modules awarded, to make it financially attractive for institutions to provide RPL.

This has happened in Finland, where the state-funded, free-of-charge vocational education and training system has been reformed to integrate RPL and open up individual pathways linked to higher and further education. Finland introduced a slice of funding based on the number of qualifications and modules awarded, to make offering RPL more attractive to institutions.

## Finland and Sweden – State-funded and successful

Finland and Sweden are interesting examples of successful state-funded systems of RPL.

### Finland

Vocational education and training is well respected in Finland: 90% of people think it is of high quality, and 40% enrol after basic education. The reasons include qualified and competent teaching, flexible qualifications, strong employment prospects and eligibility for further studies, says a Cedefop video, “Vocational Education and Training in Europe: Spotlight on Finland”.

Learner admission is case by case and recognises work experience. Learning is personalised, with a development plan created at the start and adjustable at any time. Study covers only what learners do not already know. Prior learning is state funded and validated for free. Reform in 2018 increased the proportions of performance-based funding (35%) and effectiveness-based funding (15%).

### Sweden

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education is responsible for coordinating a national framework for recognition of prior learning. It collaborates with other public authorities to provide information and guidelines to support industries and the education system.

Experimenting with policy, incentives are offered to providers to deliver RPL and flexible learning pathways. They receive some €1,000 for each validation, plus a variable grant based on the number of credits provided, with a ceiling of 75% of the regular grant per study place. Results are promising, with 85% of students graduating faster, implying a saving of about 50% of a programme’s normal cost.

### A private sector perspective

Private sector providers engage in RPL when there is a business case (demand) for it. The demand can come from individuals, and-or from societal or labour market needs. There can also be state demand for certification. An example is Turkey (see the case study), where skills standards need to be met in order to, for instance, attract investors into the country.

The funding usually comes from fees. However, higher fees are a barrier to participation in RPL. Providers may also be contracted by the state based on state demand for specific qualifications. Fees may also be subsidised by the state via special funds, individual learning accounts, vouchers or reimbursement in the form of tax exemptions.

There are advantages to opening a market for private RPL. Private providers tend to be more innovative in their approaches, and more linked to the labour market. Their assessment methods are not locked into the traditional education system approach, which prioritises theory over experiential learning.

### 3D printing in Poland

One example of innovation comes from Polish provider the VCC Foundation which, among other things, offers RPL in any location from a fully equipped mobile unit, for an in-demand qualification – programming and operating the 3D printing process. When Covid struck, mobile assessment was quickly complemented by online assessment that enables communication with printers in the assessment centre and a full overview

## The Netherlands and Poland – One country, two allocation models

The Netherlands and Poland are examples of countries that offer two models of allocation for RPL.

### The Netherlands

#### RPL in the education sector

There is a long tradition of RPL in the Netherlands and regular funding from government. The focus is on RPL to re-enter the education system and receive a formal qualification in the most effective way, by receiving exemptions from modules that include validated competencies. So RPL may lead to secondary vocational or higher education diplomas.

The quality of the process is assured by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and its bodies: the education inspectorate in vocational education and training; and the accreditation body NVAO in higher education.

#### RPL in the labour market

In the labour market, RPL leads to job-related objectives. It is usually tied to sectoral standards that are regulated by the private sector, linked to the Dutch Qualifications Framework. Quality assurance is via the National Knowledge Centre VPL (Kenniscentrum EVC) and two private quality bodies that assess RPL providers on its behalf.

Private RPL providers charge fees. There is a mix of public and private financing through tax deductibility for individuals and employers and through training and development arrangements in collective labour agreements: in some sectors, social partners have established funds to finance RPL for employees.

### Poland

#### RPL in the education sector

In the education sector RPL is centrally planned, administered by Regional Examination Boards and supervised by the Central Examination Board. There are extramural exams twice a year for general and basic vocational education qualifications. Fees are charged but are not a barrier for participants, and there is high uptake under this mature scheme.

#### RPL for 'market qualifications'

A market of RPL providers has been introduced for non-formal qualifications. An Integrated Qualification System has been developed, open to market-relevant qualifications from beyond the formal education system. Non-state organisations can apply for the status of an RPL awarding body. EU funds have supported the development of the new scheme.

There have been novel approaches used by providers in terms of validation methods. There are substantial fees and low uptake, but private RPL providers often offer their services under various state and EU-funded programmes – for example, regional development funds.



## Financing instruments

### Special training funds

A training fund provides a flow of financing for skills recognition and training outside normal government budgetary channels. Training funds may be diverse, with differences in the governance models, the number of funds per country, the type of activities and target groups supported, and the way the money is collected and redistributed.

Here are some advantages:

- Funds are often combined with levy systems
- Can be supplied by many sources, for instance – and importantly – donor funds
- May be reserved for a dedicated purpose
- Funding windows are possible for priority target groups or initiatives.
- 
- Conditions for success:
- The goals, functions, structure and administration must clearly defined
- The fund must be accepted by all stakeholders.
- The administration must be efficient and effective.

### Other financing instruments

Cedefop – the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training – lists various types of financing instruments in a database on financing adult learning. Aside from training funds, as described above, it outlines:

#### Tax incentives for companies and individuals

- Tax incentives are concessions in tax codes that involve a conscious loss of government revenue by reducing either

the tax base (tax allowance) or tax due (tax credit).

- Countries typically regard company spending on training as a business cost that is 100% tax deductible.
- In some countries, companies may also receive additional tax incentives for training.
- Tax incentives for personal income tax may allow adults to deduct costs for RPL or adult learning related to a current or future occupation from individual income tax or tax due.

#### Grants for companies

- Companies may receive public funding (grants) to cover training costs. Public resources may come from general taxation, unemployment insurance or the social security system.

#### Grants for individuals

- Adults may receive public funding to cover costs related to RPL or training.
- Public resources may come from taxation, unemployment insurance or social security.
- Such schemes are implemented across Europe as grants, training vouchers, training accounts, individual learning accounts etc.
- They are part of a shift away from financing training providers to a more demand-led approach that finances learners.

#### Loans

- A loan scheme allows people to borrow financing, on favourable conditions, from future income to cover part of education and training spending.
- States may support the availability of loans and co-finance loan-related costs to encourage participation in RPL and adult learning.

### Employer incentives

- Training leave is a regulatory instrument that sets out conditions under which employees may be granted temporary leave from work for learning purposes.
- Payback clauses are a legal instrument that encourage companies to invest in training by allowing them to bind employees for a period after training in return for the training.

### Individual Learning Accounts

Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) are attracting policy attention in Europe and elsewhere as a way to boost lifelong learning. They provide all citizens with an education and training entitlement, and empower people to make their own choices around personal development.

They place individuals at the centre of education, training and lifelong learning, and they link training rights to the individual rather than to the job.

It is argued that the time is right for ILAs, with changes in the world of work driving the need for more skilling, reskilling and upskilling, and with technological advances and other developments such as Covid-19 transforming learning processes.

There are other kinds of training entitlements, according to the OECD, including: training voucher schemes, which provide people with subsidies for training for a period, and often target specific groups; individual savings accounts for training, physical accounts in which people may accumulate resources for training; and individual learning budgets, sometimes provided by companies or negotiated under collective bargaining agreements. For their part:

“Individual learning accounts are personal accounts in which training entitlements can be accumulated and

spent on quality-assured training, guidance or validation services. They are one way of providing individuals with training entitlements.” – European Commission.

France is the only country to have implemented an Individual Learning Accounts scheme – Compte Personnel de Formation – and it has been undergoing reform. Still, lessons may be learned from the French experience and from other individual training entitlements.

While ILAs represent a very European approach – many ETF partner countries have much more centralised, input-driven and collective-oriented approaches – there are attractive features that have become pertinent today.

ILAs enable people to ‘shop around’ among efficient providers for training that is high quality and relevant. Also, they make training rights ‘portable’ between jobs and accessible for the self-employed, who represent a growing proportion of the workforce.

The OECD argues that while ILAs have useful features and may help tackle some problems, they are “unlikely to be a panacea to the challenges arising in the new world of work”. With a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, however, a well-designed programme could help countries achieve better training outcomes.

It suggests that features of a well-designed scheme could include: simplicity; adequate and predictable funding; greater generosity for people the most in need; effective information, advice and guidance; access to quality training; and links with employer-provided training.

# FUNDING PRACTICES

## IN FIVE ETF PARTNER COUNTRIES

In 2021, the European Training Foundation and several partner countries produced national reports on the validation of prior learning. This section highlights how RPL is funded in five of the countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Jordan, Kazakhstan and Moldova.

A primary conclusion is that countries lack earmarked funds for RPL, which is generally seriously underfunded. Providers mostly finance RPL work from their budgets or fees. Invariably, fees charged do not cover the full costs of the validation and certification processes.

It is important for countries to develop sustainable funding models.

### **Azerbaijan**

In Azerbaijan, validation is carried out by the Education Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA) under the Ministry of Education. The EU funded two pilot projects that trained RPL practitioners and developed an expert registry. The EQAA currently offers validation of non-formal and informal learning for 14 qualifications.

When there are enough candidates for one qualification to reach a financial break-even point, the agency starts the RPL process. The number of candidates needed to reach break-even depends on the qualification.

Assessment for some qualification is costly – requiring, for instance, machinery and tools and raw materials – and may only be carried out with assistance from businesses. The EQAA plans to involve the State Employment Agency, the Small and Medium Businesses Development Agency and large employers in funding RPL.

Candidates bear the full costs of the validation process, which takes one month on average. Cabinet decision 508 of 24 December 2020 set current costs: AZN100 (€52) for assessment of knowledge; and AZN80 (€42) per module for assessment of skills, competence and experience. For a diploma qualification with five modules, candidates pay AZN500 (€260) in total.

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### Good practice: Validation helps people obtain self-employment support

The State Employment Agency (SEA) supports entrepreneurs within a self-employment scheme. The main purpose is to move from traditional ‘passive’ policy measures (benefits and assistance) to ‘active’ policy measures to strengthen social protection and improve the living standards of the socially vulnerable, especially low-income families in need of social assistance.

In 2020, 12,000 people applied for support. The Agency gives preference to applicants with qualifications, and so validation of prior learning helps people to obtain support. Under a successful ongoing social programme of the EQAA and SEA, people with disabilities have gone through RPL and received equipment support to start their own businesses.

### Georgia

There is no specific funding for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Georgia. In general education, the process is covered financially through regular resources of the Ministry of Education, Education Resource Centres and schools, and is free for applicants.

In vocational education, RPL is fee-based. Each provider sets fees in line with its own cost calculations. Fees normally include a lump sum for application processing and counselling services, with the full cost normally related to the volume of the work to be assessed and validated (number of learning outcomes).

The absence of government subsidy for validation may be considered a barrier to potential applicants, especially from vulnerable groups. RPL does not target vulnerable groups, given the absence of fee subsidies. Validation is not used much by vulnerable Georgians; but the Ministry runs ‘second chance’ fast-track general education programmes that seem to meet their needs.

### Jordan

The Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission for Higher Education Institutions is the public institution mandated to implement the Jordan National Qualifications Framework.

Funding for validation comes from institutions that organise and implement the RPL system, such as the Technical and Vocational Skills Development Commission (TVSDC), the Vocational Training Corporation (VTC) and the National Company for Employment and Training (NET).

Institutions do not get public grants for providing RPL services in the vocational education and training sector. Usually, RPL costs are covered in their annual budgets, with no specific budget item for validation expenses.



RPL candidates pay fees that typically do not cover the actual costs of preparing and conducting occupational assessment tests. Fees are also charged for issuing, renewal or replacement of occupational practice licences. Test fees vary according to the occupational level of the performed test: semi-skilled, skilled or craftsman. Fees paid are transferred to the public treasury.

## “TEST FEES VARY ACCORDING TO THE OCCUPATIONAL LEVEL”

Bylaws and other operational instructions related to RPL do not include fees exemptions for any group. In some cases, such as when employed candidates are sent by enterprises to be assessed, fees may be paid by employers. Fees may also be covered by donor initiatives or by public authorities: see the good practice examples below.

### **Good practice: Donor supported validation of informal learning**

A project supported by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) aims to recognise the acquired skills of employed workers through validation and certification processes that lead to occupational practice licences. Started in 2017, it targets Jordanian and Syrian workers in construction and manufacturing.

Assessment is implemented by the VTC, NET and other providers, while certificates – occupational practice licences – are issued by the TVSDC. Assessment includes developing a portfolio of skills, assessors conducting field visits to workplaces to monitor candidates’ performance, and occupational assessment tests with both theoretical

and practical components. The process takes one to three months.

The costs of project activities and fees for assessment and certification are borne by the ILO. The total number of issued certificates for workers at the end of July 2021 was 16,250.

The ILO also sent an expert to the TVSDC to support capacity development, particularly around the RPL process and its automation and digitalisation. Other international organisations have, among other things, provided training and technical support for developing RPL and supported the creation of sector skills councils and setting of occupational standards.

### **Good practice: Skills validation for Amman municipality employees**

The Vocational Training Corporation assessed the occupational skills of 103 employees of the Amman municipality. The idea was to provide them with occupational practice licences, either for promotion purposes or for employment after a probation period. The municipality committed to paying the fees for the tests and issuing of practice licences.

The tests were in areas such as building construction, metal fabrication, electrical wiring, woodworking and automotive maintenance. They were conducted in two VTC institutes in the Amman area. A list of people who passed the tests and obtained occupational licenses was sent to the Amman municipality.

## Moldova

In Moldova, there is no public funding for institutions or validation centres to implement RPL. Certification costs are borne by candidates.

International organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the International Organisation for Migration have played a key role in developing, piloting and launching RPL. But the reliance on donors and international partners is not a sustainable model.

Fees for validation are set by the education institution or validation centre and are coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, respecting the cost-effectiveness ratio. Validation centres are non-profit institutions, so certification fees do not exceed costs incurred. For some at-risk groups, such as the unemployed or disabled, the certification fee may be staggered via preferential financial arrangements or reimbursed through funding programmes. Businesses may cover validation costs for employees. But the number of people interested is very limited – unless legislation requires employees to be formally qualified, corresponding to their positions and fields of activity in the company.

cooperated with the ETF since 2005, in vocational education and skills, occupational standards, research and monitoring.

Klara Mamutova, Deputy Director of the KTA, has been actively involved in developing a National Qualifications Framework – work that began in 2012 – and occupational standards for the tourism sector.

Today, there is a legal framework that regulates the qualifications system, guidelines for creating sectoral qualifications frameworks, and rules for the development, introduction, revision and replacement of occupational standards. In a World Bank project, some 550 standards were drafted, including in the field of tourism, hospitality and catering.

Certification centres provide skills assessment, in line with qualifications frameworks and occupational standards that are approved by the sectoral ministry. Tourism is supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Sports, and with the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs (business) is responsible for approving standards and registering certification centres.

KTA opened a Certification Centre of the Hospitality Industry in 2013 – Kazakhstan's first. It renews the centre's accreditation every two years with the National Accreditation Centre. This accreditation affords the right to use the national accreditation logo on certificates.

A skills assessment scheme has been developed over five years and, Klara Mamutova told the ETF, it "is a live instrument because it can be changed and supplemented, depending on changes in occupational standards". Practical exams are conducted in workplaces. KTA members are businesses, and their leaders sit on the examination committee.

### Good practice: Kazakhstan Tourism Association drives skills

The Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) has been developing a skills assessment and certification system for the sector. It has already achieved success in delivering skills validation, and involving employers as well as attracting donor support. It provides an example of a skills validation system that is funded and run by the private sector.

The association has supported the tourism industry in Kazakhstan for more than 20 years. It has actively

KTA has a wide range of partners that are involved in drafting standards, organising internships and mentoring, and skills assessments of employees and graduates. “We try to help our experts and employers to develop social responsibility and take an active part in training specialists and skills assessment procedures,” said Mamutova.

### Funding

The Certification Centre of the Hospitality Industry was established as a department of KTA. Its main purpose is to improve the quality of services in tourism and hospitality in the country and provide skills assessment and certification for the sector. In 2020, KTA certified more than 800 people ranging from guides, tourism managers and travel agents to cooks, maids, administrators and service managers in hotels. There were 583 candidates for skills assessment last year who were college or university graduates.

Candidates pay their own registration fee, but fees are very low at around \$5 and are not considered a barrier to skills assessment or certification. The fees paid do not cover costs and the KTA provides considerable funding support, devoting up to 17% of its budget for the certification centre. There is no government support, so KTA funding is from its membership and involvement in national and international projects and grants.

KTA sees the assessment and certification system as extremely important to the industry, and stresses that the system requires government support and greater stakeholder involvement. She believes employers could do more by, for instance, funding validation for employees.

There is also a need for widespread promotion of skills validation among business and the public. KTA expects

education institutions to develop courses based on occupational standards and recommends that graduates complete the skills assessment and certification to complement their qualifications and become more in demand and employable.

“There’s still a lot of work ahead - and we are ready for it,” Mamutova concluded.

## **Secure dedicated and sustainable funding for all elements of RPL.**

Apart from costs related to enrolment and assessment, information and outreach, guidance, partnerships, quality assurance and monitoring are important elements that should be included into the costing of regular operations related to RPL.

Seek increased and diverse financing from the state, employers, fees and EU funds. The most effective RPL systems involve the state, private sector and other key stakeholders at all stages. The financial contributions of development partners can be used to set up the system but cooperation platforms need to be established to facilitate the continuing involvement and support of the private sector.

ETF partner countries can benefit from EU-funded technical assistance projects or projects like ERASMUS + which support validation in Armenia, North Macedonia, Turkey and Ukraine.

## **Assure the budget is spent efficiently.**

One way is to keep validation procedures simple. Digital tools can support the simplification of registration procedures and monitoring. Offering validation services in areas where demand is likely to be high will ensure benefits of scale.

## **Consider offering better incentives for providers to offer RPL.**

A lack of dedicated budget lines for providers results in low motivation of institutions to offer validation services. Allocation mechanisms through dedicated programmes could stimulate a financial interest on the side of providers. Funding for RPL in education systems is closely linked to funding for training. Consider improving the overall financing of VET with performance elements that reward completion of training modules. That would also assure a direct link to flexible upskilling pathways for RPL beneficiaries and motivation to certify people faster.

## **Candidates will need incentives to use RPL services.**

Vulnerable groups are unlikely to use validation services for which payment is required. Cooperation with employment services needs to be established to offer them financial support in the form of special programmes, waivers, or vouchers. Complement validation services with upskilling. Partial or unsuccessful RPL without

opportunities for complementary training can have a negative effect on the motivation of candidates.

**Deploy a range of allocation mechanisms.**

Consider special funds as one of the sources of sustainable financing of RPL, such as employment funds, regional development funds or funds set up to support economic development programmes in priority sectors. Include mechanisms for state and non-state actors to engage in the provision of validation services.

More data needs to be collected on the results of validation, including costs and benefits. This is fundamentally important for accountability and trust in the system.



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