Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in ETF Partner Countries (2022-2023)

Summary of cross-country analysis

Introduction

Valuing learning from all contexts

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL, hereinafter referred to as 'validation') is an important instrument promoting social inclusion and entitlements to lifelong learning, the creation of new pathways and progression routes, elimination of dead-ends in education and recognising the importance of authentic experiential learning as a valid alternative to classroom settings. Validation can help with fulfilling people's potentials by making visible and providing value to all learning an individual has undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills/competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

Among ETF Partner Countries, many are working towards initiating or further developing arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. To a certain extent, these developments are also inspired by European developments and policies, in particular the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning[1] (the Recommendation).

According to the Recommendation, the term validation is *'a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.'*

The terms 'non-formal learning' and 'informal learning' do not fully match with the terms used by ETF Partner Countries. For instance, some of them use synonyms or related terms such as self-learning, spontaneous learning, upskilling, reskilling, work-based learning. The same situation occurs with the term 'validation', which, depending on the national context, can be replaced by 'recognition of prior learning', 'certification', 'confirmation', 'attestation' or 'assessment'.[2] For the purposes of the study, we use the term 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' (hereafter validation) as an umbrella term that collects all possible variants of the phenomenon observed.

EU policy framework related to validation

In the EU policy framework underpinning the development and use of validation arrangements, several milestones play a pivotal role. The establishment of the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)** 15 years ago as a translation device between National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) of participating countries highlights the link between NQFs based on learning outcomes and validation of non-formal and informal learning. The **2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning** further enhances this link through the formulation of general principles that Member States need to consider when implementing validation arrangements, for instance, to

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29

[2] Some of these terms are broader and other narrower than validation. For example, 'recognition of prior learning' is broader since it refers to the process for recognising learning that has come from experience and/or previous formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. Therefore, validation is a form of recognition of prior learning. 'Assessment' and 'certification' are narrower as they mean specific stages of a validation procedure.

establish links between VNFIL and NQFs and thereby offer certificates that have NQF levels on them. Other general principles refer to:

- targeting disadvantaged groups including unemployed who are very likely to benefit from validation;

- providing information and guidance to validation candidates;

- using transparent quality assurance (QA) measures such as reliable, valid and credible assessment procedures;

- assuring the development of professional competences of practitioners involved in VNFIL.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (2018) promotes a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity. It states that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. European Union Member States agreed that 60% of adults should be participating in learning by 2030. In order to reach out to everyone, strategies for upskilling and reskilling must increasingly consider all prior learning, irrespective of when and where skills were acquired. The Covid crises fundamentally changed the way we work and learn and showed how important it is to adapt to rapidly changing situations. The **European Skills Agenda** 2020 is accompanied by actions supporting people to develop skills for life that encompass validation including initiatives related to Upskilling Pathways, Individual Learning Accounts, Micro-credentials. In the post-covid restructuring, the EU policy framework has changed its focus through setting goals much more focused on adult learning, upskilling and reskilling. According to Eurostat, more than 75% of EU companies already struggle to find professionals with the necessary skills to fill jobs. At the same time many migrants coming from outside the EU work below their abilities because their diplomas and skills are not recognised. Offering wider access to validation and streamlining recognition are needed to make people skills visible.

The ETF 2023 cross-country study on validation

People's skills are the most precious resource of today's economies. Many ETF partner countries have recognised the importance of validation and started to develop VNFIL initiatives and systems. In 2018 ETF started to monitor VNFIL systematically in the framework of the European Inventory. In 2021 ETF made VNFIL one of the priorities in the modernisation of qualification systems and decided to monitor VNFIL in all partner countries where there was a significant development. In 2021 ETF carried out a cross-country study on validation in 5 countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Jordan, Moldova and Ukraine. In 2023, this exercise was extended to cover a total of 16 countries, including updated information from the above five countries and additional 11 countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tunisia and Türkiye. The aim of the study is to take stock of the state of play of validation of non-formal and informal learning in ETF Partner Countries and make a comparative analysis using a common methodology that is also used for EU member states.

Based on study results the current summary provides information on:

- Main drivers for VNFIL in ETF Partner Countries;

- Key findings regarding different aspects of validation;

- Recommendations.

Findings of the comparative analysis will be consolidated in the forthcoming cross-country analysis report and the accompanying national reports and factsheets.

Drivers for validation in ETF Partner Countries

The development and implementation of validation initiatives in ETF Partner Countries are influenced by a combination of external and internal drivers. One prominent external driving force is the **EU policy framework** related to European Qualifications Framework (EQF) , which has inspired some Partner Countries to modernise their qualifications systems. For instance, the Western Balkan countries and Türkiye as well as some Eastern Partnership countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have joined the EQF as pre-accession countries, which has also triggered developments in the area of validation.

Another important external driver is the **availability of donor support**, which plays a pivotal role in building capacity, setting up mechanisms, tools and instruments, and testing approaches especially at the stage of development or early implementation of validation arrangements. All Partner Countries analysed have used donor support mostly through country-focused EU projects and cooperation projects supported by other international organisations: DVV-IIZ, ILO, UNDP, IOM (migrants). Illustrative examples of positive impact include Moldova and Serbia: in Moldova, detailed regulations, guidelines and templates for validation were developed through donor projects. It is important to emphasise that while donor support is indispensable for these countries during development and early implementation stages, an overreliance on external assistance over an extended period of time may signal issues with regard to sustainability.

External drivers, while significant, are not singularly sufficient to make validation happen. It is the interaction between these external influences and the internal (context specific) drivers that accounts for the progress made or the lack thereof in the area of validation.

Some Partner Countries have already had **past experiences** in the field of validation. For example, in in Jordan and Tunisia skills tests have been in existence for trades and for artisans allowing them to get recognised as qualified workers without formal training. In the former Soviet Union countries, training did not stop after completing formal education, but there was systemic adult education organised by companies allowing workers to upgrade their skills and adapt their profiles through '*perekvalifikacija*' which also contained an element of assessing increased skill levels, giving the right to higher salaries. In former Yugoslavia, andragogy was a relatively independent branch of studies at universities and linked with well-developed adult education practices with state supported infrastructures such as the Workers' universities (which still have a legacy e.g. North Macedonia). There has been a tradition of extra mural exams for general and higher education ('*eksternat*') in former Soviet Union countries (e.g. Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), which have been an established form of assessing the knowledge and skills of young people who did not participate in traditional schooling. It is important that relevant past experience is considered and built on when modernising qualifications, establishing lifelong-learning oriented qualification systems and/or legally adopting NQFs.

A growing number of countries are developing **lifelong learning or related national strategies**, recognising thereby the need for validation in the context of globalisation, information technology, easier access to learning through own means, need for adaptation to rapidly changing world and learning throughout life. For example, mentioning validation of non-formal or informal learning in lifelong learning strategies relates to **a changing perspective towards learning, which is expressed in** empowering individuals to act autonomously rather than just reproduce knowledge, or follow instructions. This is, also reflected in new laws of education that put more focus on competences, individuals' agency in choosing own learning pathways and lifelong learning, thereby highlighting the importance to recognise learning from different settings. It is often accompanied by initiatives to structure qualifications into smaller components such as units of learning outcomes, supporting the provision of more individualised and flexible learning pathways and facilitating the recognition of smaller bits of learning. With countries adopting new policy documents and laws that acknowledge the need for validation services, donor support to develop and pilot validation mechanisms is activated.

A more recent internal driver refers to **dissatisfaction with the (learning) outcome of VET qualifications** when they do not respond to existing skills needs in a country or region. In several

cases, this has led to the creation of employer or sector-led alternative approaches, typically in countries where employer organisations play a more important role. Examples refer to validation arrangements in the labour market implemented by: sectoral recognition centres (former certification centres) in Kazakhstan, authorised certification bodies (ACB) in Türkiye, and Qualification Centres in Ukraine. The alternative approaches focus on sectoral or professional qualifications, usually closely linked with occupational/professional standards, and are expressed in an independent assessment outside the VET system. These independent assessments are likely to be more trusted by labour market stakeholders as compared to the VET exams leading to the acquisition of a VET qualification.

Another more recent trend that can be observed is the **setting up and accrediting of new educational institutions (e.g. adult education providers) or expanding the mandates of existing ones to become validation providers**. This approach can become a positive driver when delivery of validation service is entrusted to strong and trusted institutions. For instance, in Moldova the Centres of Excellence which are the main validation providers have demonstrated an ability to scale up validation services in a relatively short time. North Macedonia will test the delivery of validation services in three Regional VET Centres. The fact that these institutions are trusted in their respective national contexts implies that validation results will possibly be better accepted and recognised.

Finally, an increasingly important driver is related to the need for integrating disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (like long-term unemployed, people with lower incomes and lower qualifications or lack of qualifications, (returning) migrants and refugees) into labour markets, which may incentivise countries to introduce validation as part of **active labour market measures.** For instance, Kosovo introduced validation to support career development and the access of registered jobseekers to the labour market. Validation may also be used as part of **(re-)integration measures**, especially aimed at returning migrants (as reported in Moldova) or procedures specifically targeted at refugees, as for example reported in Jordan and Türkiye. In some cases, validation is seen as an instrument supporting formalisation of economy.

Main Findings

Sectoral initiatives, **arrangements and/or practices still prevail.** Although ETF Partner Countries have made variable progress in adopting and using validation arrangements, these are characterised by approaches focused on one or the other sector and therefore, are not included in a single comprehensive mechanism for recognising competencies obtained through non-formal and informal learning. In this context, it is too early to speak of VNFIL systems and national approaches as such and is more precise to highlight the prevalence of sectoral arrangements.

While the **adoption of relevant legislation** (including overarching laws as well as by-laws) is a key enabler for the implementation of validation, it does not necessarily ensure its wider usage. At the same time, the absence of legislation that provides for the implementation of validation in some cases acts as a veritable stumbling block to the development and implementation of validation arrangements. For instance, the majority of countries explored have already adopted legislation related to validation (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine), but only in three of them (Moldova, Türkiye and Ukraine) a significant progress in terms of usage (increased number of beneficiaries) has been observed in the last few years. In the case of Türkiye and Ukraine, the observed developments have been additionally boosted by the existence of a strong sectoral or employer-led validation approach in the labour market and in the case of Moldova, validation providers (so called Centres of Excellence) are strong and trusted institutions, which in a way positively impacts the use of their services.

At system level, a clear **link between validation of non-formal and informal learning and other relevant policies and initiatives** (related to economic development, migration, active labour market) is often still missing. Yet, such a link is a key aspect for the sustainability of validation initiatives and their integration into existing systems. Kosovo provides a noteworthy example by introducing validation as an additional labour market measure for jobseekers, while Moldova uses validation as a

re-integration measure for returned migrants. Jordan and Türkiye make use of validation as a social inclusion measure for migrants and refugees.

In the majority of countries and to varying degrees, the assessment and certification stages[3] are likely to be emphasised while identification and documentation – which are more closely related to **career guidance provision** – less so. In this context, putting the focus on the individual, reaching out to different target groups, considering their needs and circumstances and helping them adequately seems to be a challenge.

For validation providers, a key issue is the **lack of a business model for validation,** in the sense that it is a challenge for them to provide validation service as part of a sustainable business concept**.** This may partly stem from uncertainties regarding their target groups, the reasons people might seek validation, and how the validation process is financially supported. In most cases, validation providers find themselves solely responsible for organising the validation process, including building partnerships, organising funding, assuring a quality service, and reaching out to the candidates. In Türkiye, for instance, this has been partially resolved by making validation compulsory.

Financing and access to validation often form a serious impediment to participation accompanied by limited possibilities for support to individuals. In some countries, validation is employer dependent (e.g. Morrocco), while in other countries candidates face high fees (although fees are considerably below EU levels, but so are salaries as well). Furthermore, support for successful completion of validation procedures, in particular, the allocation of funding (at system level) for complementary courses is largely missing.

In some countries, the accreditation of validation providers includes **lengthy and burdensome procedures** that require passing through several instances (e.g. Kosovo, Türkiye). These procedures are geared towards making the accreditation process more quality assured and trusted, thus avoiding potential cases of corruption. However, the measures taken may sometimes have also negative effects potentially leading to costlier validation services for individuals or a decrease in the number of validation providers applying for accreditation.

In terms of **beneficiaries**, some countries are succeeding in getting initiatives off the ground that reach many people. Noteworthy examples can be observed in Türkiye, Jordan, Ukraine, Moldova, Montenegro and Kazakhstan. At the same time, several countries are not yet able to start pilots or visibly struggle to move beyond them. There is evidence for under-reporting of outcomes of validation procedures (e.g. cases are not documented) in general education (extra-mural exams), adult educations and the third sector (e.g. validation initiatives carried out by youth organisations, volunteering organisations, NGOs and/or organisations supporting migrants, refugees etc.)

In most of the countries examined, a common challenge lies in the **lack of trust** among education institutions and employers in the outcomes of validation processes. Additionally, there is a pressing need for comprehensive and precisely targeted awareness campaigns to communicate the advantages of validation to individuals who may currently have limited understanding of these benefits.

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[3] In the European context, validation of non-formal and informal learning is generally described along four phases - identification, documentation, assessment and certification- according to which the concept of validation is adapted to different contexts and purposes. Depending on the objective of the validation process, certain phases will be more emphasised than others. Some validation initiatives may only include some of the four stages.

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Recommendations

- **Long-lasting political commitment** – the implementation of validation needs continuous political commitment. It may be that a country has an elaborated validation system including developed draft laws, methodological framework, guidelines, etc. However, without political commitment, which is manifested in the adoption of necessary legislation, institutional framework, quality assurance mechanisms and dedicated funding – the use of validation remains fragmented and unsystematic and therefore, the respective impact is limited. Political commitment also means considering the principles of social dialogue and involving all relevant stakeholders (state institutions and agencies, social partners, third organisations, etc.) in discussing about and creating a common vision or agenda for validation.

- **Complete legislative framework** – in a minority of countries (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jordan, Morrocco, North Macedonia, Tunisia) the absence of legislation, including necessary by-laws, that provides for the implementation of validation impedes the development and implementation of validation arrangements. Political commitment in this case refers to the process of completing and adopting the legislative framework.

- **Focus on individuals who can benefit** – in relation to the centrality of the individual in validation processes, there is still room for improvement in the 16 ETF Partner Countries studied. This can be achieved through clarifying the target groups for validation, better understanding their needs and circumstances through the use of career guidance services. For instance, some countries are likely to put more emphasis on assessment and certification thus, the identification and documentation stages (that are more closely related to guidance) are paid less attention to. Depending on the country context, employment services may play an important role in linking career guidance and validation services.

- **Move beyond single initiative in one sector only** – all countries examined have sectoral approaches to implementing validation covering one or several sectors (typically, VET and the labour market) but none of them has a comprehensive approach for all the sectors. Ideally, a comprehensive approach is when procedures for awarding qualifications, certificates, occupational licences through validation are mutually reinforcing and complementary in the labour market, the third sector and in the education and training system (including its subsectors). In order to make the approach to validation more comprehensive, a set of measures can be explored:

  - build on past/existing validation experiences and dedicated institutions and providers – for instance, past/existing experiences and their outcomes may be relevant and can be linked to the purposes of validation;

  - identify target groups that would benefit the most from validation, for example, additional target groups may be considered through introducing validation in other sectors such as general education of adults, higher education, the third sector;

  - identify policies and strategies, which can be supported through the use of validation initiatives: active labour market measures, (re)-integration and social inclusion policies;

  - systematise the access to validation for all qualifications that are part of the NQF;

  - offer more smaller qualifications or partial qualifications that can facilitate recognition of smaller bits of learning.

- **Funding for validation** – all countries reviewed lack a dedicated, sufficient and sustainable funding model for validation services and further system development. In most cases studied, costs of the validation procedure are covered by the applicant, which may be a barrier to access validation. Funding through fees tends to cover assessment-related costs only while overlooking the full costs related to validation including outreach, information and guidance. Further developing the system requires investments in quality assurance, career guidance, complementary training (i.e. to candidates who have not fully succeeded in the validation process). Elaborating on these important components will require dedicated budget lines and exploring possibilities for synergies

with other policies. Funding of validation should also consider financial incentives - for employers, validation providers as well as individual candidates (e.g. disadvantaged groups, who are overrepresented among those without qualifications and who may benefit particularly). Financial incentives are currently very rarely offered in the countries studied;

- **Building on institutions that are trusted** - given that ETF Partner Countries analysed share a common challenge that relates to the general lack of trust in the outcomes of the validation processes, it is crucial that validation providers are strong and trusted institutions like in the case of Moldova (Centres of Excellence in Moldova) and Montenegro (Central Assessment Commission in Montenegro) to scale up validation;

- **Quality assurance that can convince stakeholders.** In some countries the accreditation of validation providers includes lengthy and burdensome procedures, which is due to efforts to avoid corruption. In these cases, it is important to find the right balance between providers' accreditation that is quality assured on the one hand, and accreditation procedures that are not too complex (passing through various instances, paying several fees, etc.) for providers, on the other hand. In addition, quality assurance that can convince stakeholders may focus on the following aspects:

  - developing relevant job profiles of validation practitioners in the field of career guidance and assessment. For instance, most of the countries analysed do not have any specific requirements for guidance practitioners with the exception of Georgia and North Macedonia.

  - continuously improving validation services based on beneficiaries' surveys and provision of training opportunities for practitioners involved in validation procedures. Such training provision is largely missing in the countries studied.

  - ensuring quality of validation methods used – this can be done through exploring examination content, in particular, whether it is focused on factual knowledge, practical skills, or both. There is also a need to put more emphasis on non-traditional assessment methods (extracting evidence on competences based on portfolio rather than traditional examination).

- **Use advantages of IT** (for purposes related to information, access, registration, transparency, quality assurance and reporting on validation). Although some countries have reported to use digital tools in supporting validation (e.g. in the form of online registration of candidates, examination through online tests), further opportunities can be explored concerning online process tracking, linking individuals' documentation (e-portfolios) to qualifications databases and units of learning outcomes, creating databases of certificates. Elaborating on the technical aspects of the validation system will depend on collaboration (also technical) between the parties involved.

- **Collect feedback and monitor the results in a systematic way** - the countries explored do not have a systematic approach to data collection, monitoring and evaluation in the field of validation. Therefore, it is difficult to gain a precise picture on the extent to which validation is implemented, how this has changed over time and what can be improved. Data reported on beneficiaries is partial since it does not cover all sectors where validation is implemented in a country. Typically, data on disadvantaged groups, migrants and refugees is not publicly available. It is also striking that beneficiaries' surveys have not been reported even for countries with quite high number of beneficiaries like Türkiye.

Annex 1: Development of validation arrangements by sectors

Country	Reporting period	GE	VET	HE	AE	LM	TS
Albania	2022-23						
Azerbaijan	2020-21		low			n.a.	
Azerbaijan	2023		low				
Bosnia and Hercegovina	2022-23						
Georgia	2020-21	high	n.a.	low		n.a.	
Georgia	2023	high	low	low			
Jordan	2020-21					high	
Kazakhstan	2022-23	n.a.	n.a.			n.a.	
Kosovo	2017-18						
Kosovo	2022-23		low			n.a.	
Kyrgyzstan	2022-24	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	medium	
Moldova	2020-21	n.a.	low			n.a.	
Moldova	2022-23		medium				
Montenegro	2017-18		medium			n.a.	
Montenegro	2022-23		medium	low	medium	n.a.	
Morocco	2022-23		medium	low			
North Macedonia	2017-18						
North Macedonia	2022-23						
Serbia	2022-23						
Türkiye	2017-18		n.a.	low		high	
Türkiye	2022-23	n.a.	n.a.	low		high	
Tunisia	2022-23		n.a.		n.a.	n.a.	
Ukraine	2020-21	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.		medium	n.a.
Ukraine	2023	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.		high	n.a.

Source: Study team based VNFIL country reports and updates.

GE=general education
VET= vocational education and training
HE= higher education
AE= adult education
LM= labour market
TS= third sector

high **m**ore than 500 certificates per year on average
medium **b**etween 100 and 500 certificates per year on average
low **l**ess than 100 certificates per year on average
validation arrangements not operational
n.a. data not reported as it is not publicly available, collected or monitored.

Annex 2: Data on VNFIL beneficiaries in 11 countries

Country	Reporting period	No. of full qualifications awarded	No. of partial qualifications awarded	No. of occupational licenses / certificates
Azerbaijan	2020-21	11 (VET)	16 (VET)	
Azerbaijan	2020-23	76 (VET)	679 (VET)	
Georgia	2016-21	3,278 (GE)		
Georgia	2022	1 (VET)	19 (VET)	
Jordan	2016-21	▓▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓▓	11, 745 (LM)
Kazakhstan*: hospitality	2022			852 (LM)
Kazakhstan*: food	2022			163 (LM)
Kosovo	2017-18	▓▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓▓	
Kosovo	2019-22	24 (VET)		
Kyrgyzstan	2016-2017			196 (LM)
Moldova	2020	47 (VET)		
Moldova	2019-23	961 (VET)		
Montenegro	2014-16		318 (VET)	
Montenegro	2019-22		1,172 (VET) 990 (AE)	
Morocco	2019-23		1,323 (VET)	
Türkiye	2016-18			358,679 (LM)
Türkiye	2016-2022			2,412.543 (LM)
Ukraine	2016-21			600 (LM)
Ukraine	2021-23			1,504 (LM)

Source: Study team based VNFIL country reports and updates.

*Kazakhstan – aggregated data on all sectors is not publicly available, therefore, the table presents data on two sectors only, for which, information was provided.

GE=general education
VET= vocational education and training
HE= higher education
AE= adult education
LM= labour market
TS= third sector

high	more than 500 certificates per year on average
medium	between 100 and 500 certificates per year on average
low	less than 100 certificates per year on average
▓▓▓	validation arrangements are not operational

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