

INVENTORY ON THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Country report 2023: Kazakhstan

Disclaimer

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1 Introduction

Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) is an established phenomenon in the Republic of Kazakhstan, in existence for many decades outside or on the margins of the formal state-controlled system. VNFIL traditionally offers various forms of confirmation or certification to individuals who have developed a specific set of skills and obtained competence non-formal and/or informal channels. The major perceived benefits of VNFIL are in its flexibility, affordability and availability in all regions in Kazakhstan.

Over the past decade, Kazakhstan has paid serious attention to recognising, developing and supporting VNFIL. One of the most comprehensive and defining overviews of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) and VNFIL has been given in the *Concept of Lifelong Learning (2021)*¹. It provides a broad definition of non-formal learning as follows: ‘non-formal education includes organised learning that is not part of formal education programmes. In particular, [it includes] advanced training programmes, professional retraining, vocational training, courses, lectures, seminars, and training, including online [learning].’ *The Concept* also gives the following definition of informal education: ‘Informal education is learning that is carried out by a person on his own, while no document is issued reflecting the results of learning.’ It further suggests a definition of VNFIL stating: ‘a sustainable and transparent national model will be formed that regulates the procedure for recognising qualifications and skills based on experience, education, demonstrated knowledge and skills.’ It goes further in saying that VNFIL is ‘The recognition of the results of non-formal education² [which] is carried out by educational organisations as an opportunity to form an individual learning path.’

NFIL in Kazakhstan underwent major changes especially due to the digitalisation of educational processes and the arrival of many large international digital and online learning (DOL) companies such as Microsoft, Google, Samsung, Yandex and many others who offer not only training and education, but also their own validation process. In addition, the COVID-19 restrictions stimulated digitalisation of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) as many schools and training institutions introduced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for the first-time, revolutionising learning.

The Concept suggests that VNFIL should cover practically all sectors in the country, including general education (GE), initial vocational education and training (IVET), continuing vocational education and training (CVET), adult learning (AL)³, HE, the labour market, and the third sector. Currently, the focus is on digitising NFIL and attempts to digitalise the VNFIL by setting up IT and online-based validation (tests and exams). The government and private sector stakeholders have been supporting work to link VNFIL with the labour market needs, including further education, training and retraining by supporting and recognising various NFIL programmes in high-demand professions.

However, there is a need to improve information and outreach about the benefits of VNFIL and provide support for better cooperation and collaboration between colleges and NFIL service providers. And there is a need to develop better bridges between the current and projected needs of the labour market in Kazakhstan and the services offered by the VNFIL providers meant to be filling those skill shortages.

¹ The concept of lifelong learning (2021) was repealed in March 2023, <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2100000471> and its content included in the following new documents: (1) Concept for the development of preschool, secondary, technical and vocational education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029 <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2300000249>; (2) Concept for the Development of Higher Education and Science in the RRB for 2023-2029 <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2300000248>

² The Concept of Lifelong Learning refers only to ‘неформальное образование’ (neformalnoe obrazovanie) without mentioning ‘informal learning’.

³ By ‘adult learning’ (AL) we mean any learning opportunities, formal and non-formal, undertaken by adults (both younger and older) who are not in their regular cycle of education. This may include the completion (or pursuit) of a formal qualification in a manner that does not follow a ‘traditional’ or exclusively ‘front-loaded’ path (adapted from Desjardins, R., & Ioannidou, A. (2020). *The political economy of adult learning systems – some institutional features that promote adult learning participation*. Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung, 43(2), 143-168.). AL is similar but not the same as CVET – continuous vocational education or training after initial vocational education and training (IVET) – or/and training after entry into working life aimed at helping individuals to improve or update their occupation knowledge and/or skills; acquire new occupation-related skills for a career move or retraining (adapted from Cedefop Terminology of European education and training policy, <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications/4117>).

The Concept recognises VNFIL and initiated various arrangements, but there is still a need to bring in additional bylaws and decrees for the state initiatives on VNFIL in education and the labour market to become operational.

In July 2023, a new Law on Professional Qualifications was passed that legitimises the validation of informal learning, something which had not been provided in previous legislation, e.g. the 2018 Decree No 17588 'On approval of the Rules for the recognition of learning outcomes obtained through non-formal education'. The main difference between these two regulations is in the purpose and scope of application. The 2018 Rules are intended for use only within the education system and for the purposes of continuing education and obtaining qualifications within the education system i.e. they do not address the issue of recognition on the labour market. By way of contrast, the 2023 Law on Professional Qualifications is intended to 'regulate public relations in the field of recognition of professional qualifications' already on the labour market.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) is an established phenomenon in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which has been in existence for many decades outside or on the margins of the formal state-controlled system. VNFIL traditionally offers various forms of confirmation or certification to individuals who have developed a specific set of skills and competence obtained through non-formal and/or informal channels. At the end of the validation process, individuals should prove their ability to conduct certain professional activities and/or demonstrate certain skills against a specific set of standards and requirements in order to receive an approval or confirmation (non-formal or informal) that the candidate is able to conduct a specified set of activities independently or under the supervision of a master. This confirmation could be informal in the case of the informal economy (e.g. traditional crafts, folk-crafts or various basic services that are often not officially registered as businesses) or non-formal in the emerging 'new economy' (such as IT services, programming, etc.).

In order to better understand the overarching approach to VNFIL in Kazakhstan, it is important to assess it in the context of the development of the labour market in the country. The labour market has been evolving over the past two decades under the impact of economic and structural changes, social and demographic trends and migration (both internal and external). The country has a total labour force of 9.2 million people with an employed population of 8.8 million people while maintaining the relatively low level official unemployment rate at 4.9% (4.4% for men and 5.4% for women (2021, official estimate))⁴. Yet, there are 2 million people (2020, official estimate) who belong to the category of self-employed⁵, though some independent estimates put those figures even higher. In general, Kazakhstan has established quite a comprehensive system of formal education and training for its workforce where a significant proportion of education is covered from the state budget. However, for the self-employed, very often people have significantly lower incomes⁶. Traditionally this group of people has less access to professional education as they have to cover their professional education and training expenses from their own pocket. Having significant time constraints preventing them from pursuing formal education (which typically lasts between 2 and 4 years for professional VET and HE at bachelor's level), they usually achieve lower levels of formal education – according to official estimates 72% of self-employed have no tertiary degree⁷.

The Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan – passed in 2007 – used the term 'non-formal education' thus recognising it and making it a legitimate part of educational processes in the educational sector and providing some general background and concepts on which to further develop a framework for dealing with the phenomenon of non-formal education⁸. In addition, the Law on Education also offered an outline for developing rules and procedures that would harmonise relations between formal and non-formal educational institutions, paving the way to set up guidelines for schools and NFIL providers (e.g. harmonising how extracurricular practical training at school clubs/centres is integrated into a formal school education process). Article 5, 38-3 of the Law called for educators to 'develop and approve rules for the recognition of learning outcomes obtained by adults through non-formal education

⁴ Bureau of National Statistics. (2022). Unemployment rate, by sex and age (years). https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=13&slug=-9&cat_id=7&lang=ru (accessed on 30 October 2022)

⁵ Enbek. (2021). The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality. Astana: Enbek, 2021. p. 46. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁶ According to official estimates, the total monthly income of 85% of self-employed people was below KZT 100,000 (approx. EUR 200), Enbek. (2021). The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality. Astana, Kazakhstan. p. 46.

Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022), p. 53.

⁷ Enbek. (2021). The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality. Astana: p. 46.

Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022), p. 64.

⁸ For the text of the Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (unofficial translation) please follow the link: <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z070000319> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

provided by organisations included in the list of recognised non-formal education providers [sic]⁹. It also developed an idea that non-formal educational institutions should be recognised as educational services providers implying that the formal state-controlled educational institutions should also start dealing/cooperating with the NFIL providers. Article 5, 38-4 urged the sector ‘develop and approve the rules for recognition of organisations providing non-formal education and form a list of recognised organisations providing non-formal education [sic]’¹⁰. Furthermore, the Law also stated that ‘non-formal education’ should be considered as a legitimate path to gaining employment and laid down the path for validation of ‘non-formal education’. Article 37-1 stated, ‘Results of education received by adults throughout their lives through non-formal education are recognised in accordance with the procedure provided for by this Law and contribute to further employment [sic]’¹¹. Despite recognising non-formal education, the Law did not set up a clear mechanism for validating and recognising non-formal learning.

An important step towards developing a systematic approach to Lifelong Learning (LLL) and a more systematic approach to dealing with VET education was the introduction of the National Qualifications System (NQS) in 2012. A working group comprising major stakeholders in education came together and developed a strategic document – the first version of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of Kazakhstan¹², which was finalised and revised through a series of public and expert discussions and workshops and published in 2016. The introduction of the NQF was a significant step forward in standardising and streamlining the entire education system in the country, including VET. The NQF in Kazakhstan contributed to establishing a more systematic and transparent system with the eight-level structure of the qualifications system. At the same time, it has developed a cooperation mechanism for various stakeholders, from schools and VET providers, all the way through to HE institutions. Among other things, the NQF contributed to a more transparent and clearer positioning of VET qualifications within the framework of the NQF. The NQF also became an essential step towards the country having a more systematic approach to LLL, and consequently to the VNFIL, as it developed a mechanism for recognising outcomes and competencies achieved through experience and non-formal training in the workplace and other forms of non-formal and informal learning in various non-school/VET environments. In theory, it enabled individuals to acquire skills and competence and advance in their professional career by combining formal and non-formal/informal education through all levels – from high school and VET to HE and beyond.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) made another step toward developing VNFIL in 2010 as it issued a Decree on approval of the list of specialties and qualifications of technical and vocational, post-secondary education that can be obtained through remote and evening education, as well as external studies in the specialties of culture and art, physical culture and sports (introduced in 2010, and revised and updated in 2022)¹³.

The Atameken National Chamber of Entrepreneurs received a mandate to coordinate collaboration between various state institutions and private businesses to develop professional qualifications, quality assurance (QA) and other activities related to developing the NQS. One of the Atameken’s responsibilities is to validate occupational standards and to run both the Register for Certification Centres and several Certification Centres themselves (the Centres have to be registered and accredited by Atameken). As of 2022, Atameken maintained the Register including 36 Certification Centres, which were established or became operational over the past decade¹⁴.

In response to the challenges post-COVID-19 and due to the digital transformation of the national economy and education system, the government of Kazakhstan decided on a series of education

⁹ For the text of the Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (unofficial translation) please follow the link: <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z070000319> (accessed on 17 January 2023)

¹⁰ For the text of the Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (unofficial translation) please follow the link: <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z070000319> (accessed on 17 January 2023)

¹¹ For the text of the Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (unofficial translation) please follow the link: <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z070000319> (accessed on 17 January 2023)

¹² For detailed analysis, please see: ETF. National Qualifications Framework – Kazakhstan. Turin: ETF, 2021. Accessible: <https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-05/kazakhstan.pdf> (accessed on 27 January 2023)

¹³ For additional details please see the link as follows: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V100006111>

¹⁴ For detailed information, please follow the link: [https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Центры%20сертификации%20специалистов%20\(анализ%20ситуации%20%2008_04_20\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Центры%20сертификации%20специалистов%20(анализ%20ситуации%20%2008_04_20)%20(1).pdf) (accessed on 27 January 2023)

measures. This includes the introduction of many online training programmes in various areas: critical thinking, problem solving, research skills, creativity, perseverance, leadership, collaboration, ICT, civic literacy, ethical literacy, economic literacy and entrepreneurship.

In the latest development, the government of Kazakhstan developed and introduced *The Concept of Lifelong Learning*¹⁵ (2021) and *The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026* (2022)¹⁶. These *Concepts* envision a series of fundamental changes in education, including TVET (and covering the NFIL sector as well) by addressing the needs and demands for specialists with a strong sense of critical thinking, problem solving, research skills, creativity, leadership, collaboration, ICT-literacy, ethical literacy, economic literacy and entrepreneurship. The government intends to address these needs and improve the quality of education by establishing competence centres, centres of excellence and summer schools. It also plans to improve the quality of LLL by recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning as equal contributors to the educational process¹⁷.

Work will continue on the standards to support the process of recognising the results of non-formal and informal learning. As part of formal education, students will additionally receive micro-qualifications or 'nano-degrees'. Plans are in place to create a lifelong learning model for the adult population, based on the experience of the credit (accumulative) system and providing opportunities to acquire new competencies and skills. The introduction of innovative learning technologies will continue, in particular in the short term 'Massive open online courses' (MOOCs) by teaching staff, the use of innovative pedagogical technologies and teaching methods, as well as the modernisation of educational programmes. (*The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026* (2022))¹⁸.

2.2 Validation in education and training

Historically, NFIL existed in Kazakhstan in various formats and forms due to the peculiarities of the labour market and the structure of the national economy. Due to the fact that quite large segments of the population have been employed in the informal sector of the economy¹⁹, they often turned to NFIL and consequently to a kind of 'informal validation of NFIL'²⁰ for confirmation of their skills and competency. The long distances in the country and underdevelopment of transportation and communication infrastructure also contributed to the development of the NFIL sector. For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s the NFIL sector played an important role in training young people in working professions, particularly in remote rural areas, and in training adults who lost their jobs due to the structural economic reforms and closure, downsizing or restructuring of hundreds if not thousands of Soviet-era enterprises, factories, and kolkhozes/sovkhozes (collective farms)²¹. In addition, self-employed individuals in many localities and many industries (such as agriculture – 33.3% of self-employed people work in this area; and retail sector – 32.1% of the self-employed), etc. (2020,

¹⁵ The Concept of Lifelong Learning. (2021). Government Resolution dated 8 July 2021 No 471. Retrieved from <https://www.adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P210000471> (accessed on 29 January 2023)

¹⁶ Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022 - 2026 (2022). Government Resolution dated 24 November 2022 No 941. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000941> (accessed on 29 January 2023)

¹⁷ The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026 (2022). Government Resolution dated 24 November 2022 No 941. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000941> (accessed on 29 January 2023), Chapter 4, paragraph 3

¹⁸ Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026 (2022). Government Resolution dated 24 November 2022 No 941. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000941> (accessed on 29 January 2023), Chapter 6, paragraph 2

¹⁹ Abazov, Rafis. (1997) Formation of the non-state sector and privatisation in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, *Communist Economies and Economic Transformation*, 9:4, pp. 431-448

²⁰ For example, a young car mechanic could seek assessment from a panel of experienced car mechanics who would evaluate his/her skills. While they might provide oral confirmation or references, formal certificates or documentation would not be issued.

²¹ Until 1 January 2019 some universities and colleges in Kazakhstan offered part-time correspondence education (заочное образование). Many educational entities offered programmes by correspondence and used extramural exams, tests or course assignments to validate knowledge for some (but not all) subjects. Retrieved from https://egov.kz/cms/ru/articles/university_degree/extramural-studies (accessed on 29 March 2023)

official estimate)²² perceived that they did not need to obtain formal qualifications or advance their skills as most of them were engaged in basic manual labour. The state regulators did not require them to have formal qualifications or professional training.

Observations and studies of the labour market in general and of the professional training market suggests that NFIL has been widely accepted as a form of obtaining skills in many regions (oblasts) outside of major metropolitan centres (Almaty, Astana and Karaganda). High demand among the population, especially among young people, for quick and practical ways of getting trained and educated also contributed to the NFIL sector becoming a key path to obtaining the required knowledge, experience and expertise in various professions. Therefore, VNFIL has also very often been informal and included informal procedures, such as bringing together a small group of experienced professionals who observe or test the skills and ability to perform practical work and then provide oral approval and references to those who took part. Some private entities (like educational centres or workshops) may provide their own certificates or reference letters. For example, a young individual could get basic training with experienced and respected auto-mechanics at an auto-mechanic or agro-mechanic workshop and after a certain period of time could take part in an informal validation procedure. Upon completion of this VNFIL and meeting all requirements, they could start working on basic auto-mechanic work under the supervision of the master or independently, or move to another place of work providing references (oral or written) from the masters who trained them and validated their skills and competence. In fact, mass media in Kazakhstan regularly reports that these types of VNFIL were valued more than formal VET diplomas in the informal sector²³.

In addition, a large number of new providers have been entering the professional education market especially in the 'new' and 'gig' economy²⁴ over the past two decades (since the early 2000s). This includes private colleges, private tutoring organisations and individuals, international and regional companies (such as CISCO, Microsoft, Samsung, etc.), international online education providers (from online universities, online MBA and other programmes, to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) providers such as Coursera, which entered the Kazakhstan's educational market in 2019-2020²⁵), and organisations that have been offering numerous privately and publicly certified training conferences, seminars and workshops.

Over the past decade, online training and professional educational programmes (including nationally produced MOOCs) have emerged. In the case of the various MOOCs produced by Kazakhstan's universities, they usually (but not always) follow some educational standards and requirements (for example, they require students to follow norms assigned to credit programmes and a required mandatory 36 or 72 academic hours for getting certificates accepted by universities).

Both government officials and representatives of the educational institutions have been aware of the situation (regarding online universities, online MBAs, etc.) and have been working on formalising VNFIL. This was reflected in the Law on Education, introduced in 2007, which became a kind of benchmark in formally recognising and developing VNFIL in Kazakhstan²⁶. On the one hand, the government and government agencies have been introducing measures and requirements for linking jobs and employment opportunities to formal education and training in the accredited VET institutions, and to receiving official state-endorsed diplomas and certifications in an increasing number of subjects and disciplines. On the other hand, representatives of the educational institutions, in collaboration with major

²² Enbek (2021). *The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality*. Astana, , Kazakhstan. p. 67. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2023)

²³ This information was obtained from the informal interviews with auto-mechanic masters in Almaty in 2022.

For additional details and mass media coverage, please see: Professia avtomekanik [Profession – auto mechanic]. Accessible at: <https://bagdar.kz/ru/professiogram/avtomehanik> (accessed on 7 February 2023)

Neformal'noye obrazovaniye priznayut v Kazakhstane: chto eto znachit [Non-formal education has been recognised in Kazakhstan: what does it mean in practice?]. Accessible at: <https://bizmedia.kz/2022/08/09/neformalnoe-obrazovanie-priznayut-y-rk/> (accessed on 7 February 2023)

²⁴ The Cambridge dictionary defines the new economy as follows: New economy – activities based on knowledge and information, rather than traditional industries such as manufacturing. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/new-economy>

²⁵ <https://bolashaq.edu.kz/en/novosti-en/coursera-platform-training/> (accessed on 7 February 2023)

²⁶ For assessment of the educational policies in Kazakhstan, please follow the link: OECD. Education policy outlook Kazakhstan 2018. <https://www.oecd.org/education/Education-Policy-Outlook-Country-Profile-Kazakhstan-2018.pdf> (accessed on 8 February 2023)

stakeholders (such as Atameken, MoE, Orleu National Training Centre²⁷, other line ministries, etc.) have been working on developing and implementing *The Concept of Lifelong Learning*, which includes VNFIL. For example, the VET colleges in Kazakhstan have been working on making VET institutions more flexible and their services more accessible to different groups of young (and lately adult) individuals. These measures have included providing some VET programmes free of charge (with support from various government-funded programmes) for recent graduates, people in need, NEET groups, the unemployed and those who recently changed professions. By and large, the public education providers have also been dealing with the sharp rise in competition for education and training services. As a reaction to declining demand for traditional VET (the number of VET students has gone down over the past decade²⁸), the VET colleges have been working on making themselves more flexible, inclusive and accessible for all groups of the population.

In general, the MoE, Atameken and some other major stakeholders have been supportive (e.g. by issuing various bylaws and decrees) of formalising the NFIL sector in general and VNFIL in particular as a way of developing LLL and improving links between the VET providers and the labour market. The general expectations included improving practical skills, better professional training and greater flexibility in the workforce, especially among young people, NEETs and adults changing professions. The VET institutions in Kazakhstan have also been following the trend and establishing VNFIL mechanisms. For example, many colleges have begun developing and running their very own specialised courses and workshops targeting various specific groups. Some of them have also established special procedures and assessment centres for VNFIL. However, they have been facing many challenges in implementation. One of them is the unclear methodological framework (no clear formal instructions from the MES) for integrating qualifications received through NFIL into the formal educational credentials or recently introduced credit and credit transfer systems. The second challenge is that young individuals, especially students and even educators themselves, lack the knowledge, information and expertise about the procedures and benefits of VNFIL. The third challenge is the unclear status of the results of validation, as most of the state-affiliated companies and agencies still require a formal education (VET or HE) course certificate and they perceive the VNFIL as welcome bonuses, but which cannot be accepted as proof of full qualification and/or professional training. The fourth challenge is that, even though several regulatory decrees and other documents issued by the MoE recognise VNFIL and the NFIL sector (e.g. the Order of the Minister of Education and Science dated 28 September 2018, No 508, which specifies rules for the validation of adult learning outcomes acquired through non-formal learning²⁹), these documents do not set down in law how to implement VNFIL.

2.3 Validation in the labour market

As already mentioned, a new Law on Professional Qualifications was passed in July 2023 and it covers VNFIL on the labour market. The law is significantly broader than previous regulations in its interpretation of the concept and procedures of validation and the possibility of awarding qualifications through VNFIL. For example, while the new law speaks primarily about professional qualifications and recognition on the labour market, it nevertheless ensures a link between education and the labour market, since it is based on an understanding of the National Qualifications System as a set of legal mechanisms for coordinating the supply and demand of qualifications, including informal ones.

The 2023 Law was an important step forward from the Order of the Minister of Education and Science dated 28 September 2018, No 508, as it established a clearly defined matrix for the VNFIL at the national level with clear guidelines (Article 19) on when and how the Certification Centres could (officially)

²⁷ For additional details and the activities, please see: <https://orleu-edu.kz>

²⁸ For additional details and data, please see: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=39706228&pos=5:-116#pos=5:-116 (accessed on 8 February 2023)

²⁹ For additional details and data on the regulation of VNFIL, please see the Order of the Minister of Education and Science dated 28 September 2018 No 508: On approval of the Rules for the recognition of learning outcomes obtained through non-formal education; Retrieved from: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1800017588> (accessed on 22 January 2023).

recognise the outcome of the validation processes in terms of credit accumulation and credit transfer³⁰. The Law on Professional Qualifications also established procedures for the validation of professional qualifications and 'The procedure for obtaining a document in recognition of professional qualifications' (Article 21). The Law also called on stakeholders to 'develop and approve qualification programmes in the manner determined by the authorised body' (Article 17, Section 4)³¹.

Furthermore, the 2023 Law differentiates between mandatory and voluntary certification, whereby professions will be subject to mandatory certification provided that this is prescribed in the corresponding sectoral laws. Mandatory certification concerns professions such as doctors, notaries public, lawyers, professional auditors, etc. and means that, in addition to their diploma, these professionals have to pass mandatory certification exams in order to start to work in their field. According to the new law, Atameken will be in charge of accrediting Certification Centres for professions with voluntary certification.

The dynamic changes in the labour market have played an important role in changing perceptions of and provisions for VNFIL³². Kazakhstan's population grew from around 15.3 million in 2003 to around 20 million in 2023³³, and the total labour force grew from 7.75 million in 2002 to 9.256 million in 2022 (2022, official estimate)³⁴. The total employed population is estimated at 8.8 million people. The official unemployment rate remains at 4.9% (4.4% for men and 5.4% for women (2021, official estimate)).³⁵ However, it was the national economy which grew at the highest rate in the Central Asian region, with Kazakhstan's GDP rising from approx. USD 31 billion (EUR 28 billion) in 2003 to approx. USD 200 billion (EUR 180 billion) in 2021 (World Bank estimates)³⁶.

The steadily growing economy developed 'push' and 'pull' factors that affected the labour market. Due to the rapid economic growth with relatively small growth in the labour force, there was a rising demand for qualified and experienced professionals especially in the private sector, something which supported job creation and stimulated high demands for professionals in various sectors of the national economy. In addition, many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) – which are traditionally very flexible and create a significant number of jobs – have hired an increasing number of workers over the past 20 years, regardless of formal and informal education or validation. This development affected the NFIL sector and led to the emergence of two trajectories. One was the rise in demand for NFIL, as the private sector, especially SMEs, in the traditional sectors of economy such as retail and agriculture, required only basic training and basic skills. The other trajectory was the emergence of and strong demand for highly specialised advanced professional training involving VNFIL in high-tech, IT services and programming due to the growth of a new segment of the labour market – the 'new' and 'gig' economy involving online and computer-based VNFIL in high-tech, IT services and programming.

In this environment, many citizens preferred to receive short term NFIL opportunities and – if required – an informal validation of their NFIL (as described in the section above). In many cities outside of the large metropolitan centres (such as Astana, Almaty, Karaganda), NFIL offered quick and relatively

³⁰ Article 19 'Recognition of non-formal and/or informal education as part of the recognition of professional qualifications' clearly names the Certifications Centres. 'Learning results obtained through non-formal and/or informal education shall be recognised by the Certification Centres when undergoing the procedure for recognition of professional qualifications if the requirements for recognition of the results of non-formal and/or informal education are established by the relevant professional standards, and in their absence - by qualification requirements.'

https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36924216&doc_id2=38051365#pos=17:-76&pos2=3:-98 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

³¹ For additional details about the Law on Professional Qualifications, please see: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36924216&doc_id2=38051365#pos=17:-76&pos2=3:-98 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

³² United Nations Population Fund (2019). Population Situation Analysis of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/07_FEB_UNFPA_Report_20pager_ENG_PREVIEW%20%281%29_0.pdf (accessed on 22 January 2023)

³³ Data for 2023 is an estimate by the UNFPA. United Nations Population Fund (2019). Population Situation Analysis of the Republic of Kazakhstan, p. 14.

World Bank estimates for 2003. Please see <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=KZ> The Bureau of National statistics estimates for 2022.

³⁴ For additional details please see: Bureau of National Statistics (2022). <https://new.stat.gov.kz> (accessed on 22 January 2023)

³⁵ Bureau of National Statistics (2022). Unemployment rate, by sex and age (years).

https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=13&slug=-9&cat_id=7&lang=ru (accessed on 30 January 2023)

³⁶ For additional detail, please see: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files (2023). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=KZ> (accessed on 30 January 2023)

reliable access to employment opportunities especially in the informal sectors of economy (e.g. traditional crafts, folk-crafts or various basic services that are often not officially registered as businesses). In addition, some NFIL programmes could offer a quicker pass to certification in the areas where the government required such certification, e.g. medical professions (see box below). In the formal educational sector, most of the VET colleges offer 2, 3, or 4-year programmes, which are officially recognised by private and public sector companies and state-affiliated businesses and organisations. However, formal VET education is not necessarily highly valued in the labour market³⁷. Unfortunately, VET graduates from formal education often had the reputation of possessing theoretical knowledge, but not necessarily mastering practical skills. In the time of high economic growth between 2003 and 2013³⁸, many sectors of the national economy experienced shortages of qualified professionals, especially in the VET-trained professions.

Practices in the medical sector

On 28 December 2017, the self-regulatory organisation the National Centre for Independent Examinations was accredited by the Joint Quality Commission of the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kazakhstan to assess professional preparedness and confirm the qualifications of healthcare professionals. This national centre replaced the Knowledge and Skills Assessment Centre, which was a part of the Republican Centre for Health Development (RCHD).

Since January 2018, a full-scale implementation of an integrated information system (IIS) has begun, developed as part of a World Bank project in developing quality assessment by transparent independent examination. The IIS provides high-quality theoretical and practical examinations for doctors and nurses, graduates of medical universities and colleges, residents and interns. Registration, testing and calculation of results are carried out automatically. Each applicant has a personal electronic account, helping applicants to choose the date and time of the exam, as well as apply for the exam and track its progress. Test results are instantly sent to the applicant's permanent personal account and it cannot be deleted or changed.

Since assessments were transferred to the new Centre, applications from medical workers have undergone an assessment of professional preparedness and compliance with the qualification category. The application is sent to a non-governmental non-profit organisation – the National Centre for Independent Examinations through the qazexam.kz website.

Source: <https://kz.kursiv.media/2018-01-11/v-kazahstane-ocenka-znaniy-i-navykov-medrabotnikov-budet-provoditsya-v/>

The Atameken NCE and the Enbek Workforce Development Centre began playing an increasing role in coordinating relations between the private sector (especially SMEs) and education³⁹.

It was Atameken that contributed to many policy changes, including drafting and discussing various policy initiatives and introducing various measures for better relations between the private sector and education. It has also been offering various flexible educational programmes (including NFIL) – from short-term general courses to targeted professional training covering such topics as financial literacy, business management, opening and running new private enterprises, as well as government grants and

³⁷ For additional detail, please see: OECD (2014). A Skills Beyond School Review of Kazakhstan.

<https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/ASkillsBeyondSchoolReviewOfKazakhstan.pdf> (accessed on 30 January 2023)

³⁸ For additional details please see: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files (2023). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=KZ> (accessed on 30 January 2023)

³⁹ For additional detail, please see <https://atameken.kz/ru/pages/39-missiya-palaty> (accessed on 31 January 2023)

credit management. Atameken has created its own Atameken Academy and Atameken Business School, which have been offering specialised short-term training in private entrepreneurship and private businesses to various eligible groups and 'for certain categories of employed persons not involved in existing programmes to support entrepreneurship, as well as for startup and existing entrepreneurs [SMEs] on a free basis,'⁴⁰ in many remote rural areas. In a new development in March 2021, Kazakhstan introduced a special list of regulated occupations that included professions requiring compulsory independent certification for graduates. In the beginning, the list included 72 occupations (70 are in healthcare, one in accounting and one in auditing). By the end of 2021, the number of regulated occupations amounted to 202 occupations⁴¹.

The Enbek Workforce Development Centre became another significant player working both on policy formulation for labour market development measures through its analytical work and offering various short-term training and retraining opportunities and consultations through its online platform 'Skills Enbek'. Enbek coordinates the work of the 203 state-financed Employment Centres (*tseñtri zaniatos*), which were established under the Law on Employment (2011), with offices in every province, and their main goal is the 'provision of labour-related assistance to citizens and employers, implementation of active measures to promote employment, and organisation of social protection against unemployment'⁴². Each centre provides services (for free) in different formats, including face-to-face consultations, and online services on the e-government platform. In addition, they organise job fairs (including events targeting specific groups of people – job fairs for young people, recent graduates, disabled people, women in business, etc.), online public workshops and seminars, and other forms of training and education, including NFIL (which are often onsite activities and events in various VET colleges)⁴³.

2.4 Validation in the third sector

Kazakhstan has a widespread network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on various social, economic, youth and gender issues, involving non-profit organisations, women's groups, youth and student associations, volunteer groups and organisations, etc. These third-sector organisations have a unique niche in NFIL due to their access to remote rural areas and to a wide range of age and social groups. They provide training programmes in different fields, regularly focusing on 'soft skills'. The programmes vary in duration and quality and include such topics as financial, economic and IT literacy, team building, leadership programmes, self-management, online and offline courses in traditional and social media marketing, and many others. Some of the training courses follow international standards or programmes developed by partner overseas universities, donor agencies or organisations. However, many of them are developed by local trainers using local standards and approaches. The language of instruction might vary as well, from Kazakh, Uigur and Russian, to English, Chinese, Korean and German.

Most of the training programmes offered by NGOs lead to certificates confirming attendance of an NFIL course. Again, the experiences and approaches in issuing certificates vary. In fact, there is no unified approach to 'validating' this type of NFIL. Some of the third-sector representatives require final tests or exams, assessing the knowledge of the subject matter. Others require students to complete a case study or a project (individual or team projects) on assigned topics. And others require just short assessments and no formal examinations or tests.

The attitudes towards these certificates and the NFIL offered by NGOs are very different. Some universities and colleges encourage their staff members to attend these courses as a way of upskilling

⁴⁰ For additional detail, please see: <https://atameken.kz/ru/pages/541-biznes-shkola> (accessed on 26 September 2023)

⁴¹ For additional details please see: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Kazakhstan_0.pdf (accessed on 26 September 2023)

⁴² Enbek. (2021). The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality. Astana, Kazakhstan. p. 88-92. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 27 January 2023).

⁴³ For additional details and a list of activities, please see: <https://cz-almaty.kz> (accessed on 26 December 2022)

their personnel. Some (but not all) universities accept these certificates as proof of undertaking the training. Many young people, especially university, college and high school students, use these certificates as proof of acquiring basic skills in their job applications for on-campus and part time jobs.

Over the past few years, representatives of the third sector have been discussing ways to develop standards and a unified approach in the delivery and validation of NFIL, however, this development is still in a very early stage and has not led to concrete results. Nevertheless one of the outcomes is the 'Academy of NGO' in Almaty 'for the professional training of representatives of non-profit organisations' under the project implemented by the state association the Centre for Civil Initiatives with support from the Ministry of Information and Social Development. It aims to professionalise NFIL delivery in Kazakhstan⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ For additional details please see: <https://academy-ngo.kz/итоги-по-информационной-кампании-про/> (accessed on 27 January 2023).

3 Links to national qualifications framework (NQF)

Kazakhstan introduced its NQF in 2012 as an initial step towards systematic introduction of LLL principles and establishing a comprehensive and systematic approach to adapting qualifications, standardising course content and making it easier to compare and recognise the country's qualifications internationally. The NQF was introduced by Decree of the MoE (No 444)⁴⁵ and it became the main document governing the NQS country-wide. The stakeholders envisioned that the NQF would become a major tool in developing a more flexible and effective education system (school-VET-HE). The newly introduced changes should help people to enter the national labour force, including its industrial, agricultural and service sectors, by reflecting the changes in the labour market needs and requirements. According to this vision, the NQS should help individuals to access the education system at any stage of their life and professional career and at any age by 'ensuring cross-sectoral comparability of qualifications'⁴⁶. It was also envisioned that the NQF would not only contribute to smooth transfer vertically (from one qualification to the next) but also horizontally from one school to another. This horizontal and vertical flexibility came through the new credit and microcredit systems.

Introducing the NQF contributed to a more holistic approach to education in general and to integrating major forms of formal and non-formal/informal learning regardless of format, age and/or geographic location into a systematic learning process – from basic (level 1) all the way to the highest and most advanced (level 8). The most important part of the introduction and implementation of the NQF was in recognising NFIL and an attempt to establish and develop the mechanisms for VNFIL and integrating and/or connecting them to the NQF. According to this vision (not implemented so far), VNFIL can lead to receiving micro credentials or could certify certain skills and competence which can in turn lead to receiving qualifications. *The Concept of Lifelong Learning (2021)* states that micro credentials can lead to micro-qualifications, 'At all levels and stages, the opportunity to acquire micro-qualifications and take into account the results of nano-training (Nanodegree) will be implemented, which will allow you to quickly acquire the necessary professional skills, build your individual learning path and eliminate gaps in your knowledge'⁴⁷. *The Concept* defines the tools for receiving micro credentials, which could include various forms of short term education 'Citizens will also be given the opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and competency through various forms of education, including massive open online courses ('MOOCs'). Offered by global providers such as Coursera, edX, Udacity, and Khan Academy, MOOCs are diverse, flexible, and accessible to the general public. Higher education institutions have also developed MOOCs and provide online educational services. To ensure access to online learning for the wider population, existing platforms will be integrated and repurposed to issue electronic certificates.'⁴⁸ *The Concept* suggested that micro-credits could be 'stackable' and it defines this process as follows: 'Certificates and credits earned through short courses will be converted into 'stackable degrees'⁴⁹.

Before the introduction of the NQF, formal education at VET colleges did not have links with other forms of learning (though some colleges tried to experiment with offering learning courses to run in parallel and in addition to their ongoing formal VET courses). The advent of the NQF allowed VET students to continue education on the traditional VET trajectory, focusing on receiving and enhancing theoretical knowledge, and at the same time attend additional education – formal and/or NFIL and/or practical training – to receive micro credentials towards qualifications. Educational bodies in Kazakhstan use the terms *mikro-kredity* (*микрo-кредиты*) or *mikro-uchetnye dannie* (*микрo-учетные данные*). For example, students can study 'Hospitality business studies' at VET college and also attend some NFIL programmes and practical training. At the end, they receive both a VET graduation diploma in

⁴⁵ For additional details please see On approval of the National Qualifications Framework <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/archive/docs/V1200008022/24.09.2012> (accessed on 27 January 2023).

⁴⁶ On approval of the National Qualifications Framework <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/archive/docs/V1200008022/24.09.2012> (accessed on 27 January 2023).

⁴⁷ *The Concept of Lifelong Learning*. (2021). Government Resolution dated 8 July 2021 No 471. Retrieved from <https://www.adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2100000471> (accessed on 20 September 2023)

⁴⁸ *The Concept of Lifelong Learning*. (2021). Government Resolution dated 8 July 2021 No 471. Retrieved from <https://www.adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2100000471> (accessed on 20 September 2023)

⁴⁹ *The Concept of Lifelong Learning*. (2021). Government Resolution dated 8 July 2021 No 471. Retrieved from <https://www.adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2100000471> (accessed on 20 September 2023)

'Hospitality business studies' and additional qualifications (for example, as a tour guide, tour operator, and/or hotel assistant manager under the Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks). VNFIL could be arranged by colleges where they create a committee (jury) which consists of a representative of the college/educational institution and three representatives from the relevant business sectors⁵⁰. There are also lesser qualifications listed on a qualifications register under the Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks/classifier of occupations, i.e. in the health sector⁵¹.

There are no specific rules regulating how training is run and the awarding of micro-credentials though experiments on the development and implementation of such training programmes have already been successfully conducted, for example, at Astana IT University⁵² and Toraighyrov University⁵³ and in healthcare⁵⁴. Furthermore, the Independent Quality Assurance Agency (IQAA) is already working on the issue of quality assurance of such programmes⁵⁵.

Kazakhstan has established 36 sectoral qualification frameworks (SQFs) whose main function has been to certify industry personnel including professionals already working in the sector. Between them, the 36 SQFs cover the eight levels on the NQF. In the strategically important oil and gas processing and production industries, the SQF covers levels 2 to 8. In the information technology (IT) sector the SQF comprises levels 3 to 8. In general, each SQF has its own level descriptors⁵⁶. The introduction of micro-credentials has been discussed but has not yet been set out in a systematic way.

Recognition of VNFIL and VET colleges integrating it into the NQF is still in the early stage in Kazakhstan. Although the major documents and decrees have been issued and approved at an official level, work on the relevant supplementary instructions is still in progress to create clear practical explanations on how to conduct the validation in colleges and how to integrate the outcomes into the course content and the final transcript upon graduation.

The Certification Centre of the Hospitality Industry LLP, under the Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) and the Kazakhstan Association of Hotels and Restaurants (KAGiR)

The Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) and the Kazakhstan Association of Hotels and Restaurants (KAGiR) were among the first in the Republic of Kazakhstan to carry out a systematic programme on the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and professional standards (PS) in the industry. The programme ran with the support of the ETF.

One of the key elements of the NQF has been independent industry certification that provides an assessment of the level of qualification by the professional community.

⁵⁰ Section 3 of the Law on professional qualifications defines the rules and procedures for 'recognition of professional qualifications. For additional details about the Law on Professional Qualifications, please see: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36924216&doc_id2=38051365#pos=17:-76&pos2=3;-98 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

⁵¹ For additional details please see the Ministry of Health 'Guidelines for the development and design of sectoral qualifications frameworks':

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj48lYnsuCAAxVnW_EDHeqxBpgQFnoEC_DQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kazenergy.com%2Fupload%2Fdocument%2Fmetod-recomendacii-ramki-kval.doc&usq=AOvVaw1Ku6CYTseMQqWic_zxwLo&opi=89978449 (accessed on 7 January 2023).

⁵² Astana IT University. 'ML specialist' course. Retrieved from <https://astanait.edu.kz/en/educational-program-of-the-microqualification-ml-specialist/>

⁵³ Toraighyrov University. 'Industrial robotics and automation' course. Retrieved from <https://tou.edu.kz/ru/component/programmms>

⁵⁴ Maqsut Narikbayev University. <https://academy.kazquu.kz/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Predlozheniya-po-GOSO.docx>

⁵⁵ IQAA (2022). Micro-credentials linked to Bologna Key Commitments. Retrieved from <https://iqaa.kz/press-tsentri/item/1111447-iqaa-prinyalo-uchastie-v-evropejskoj-konferentsii-microbol>

⁵⁶ For additional details please see the: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Kazakhstan_0.pdf (accessed on 29 January 2023).

In 2013, the KTA and KAGiR ran a pilot project by opening the Certification Centre of the Hospitality Industry LLP (SCIG). The special legal status of the Centre ensures independence from certification applicants, which is a prerequisite for certification procedures.

In 2014-2015, the Centre identified the most in-demand qualifications in the industry and created working groups to develop regulations for certification procedures, control and measuring materials. It also provided training to expert auditors from the labour market who were then certified by the Committee for Technical Regulation and Metrology of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KTRiM) and included in the state register of expert auditors for conformity assessment of specialists in the tourism industry.

In 2017, the SCIG was accredited by the National Accreditation Centre at the KTRiM RK and it was also included into the Atameken Register of certification centres of NCE RK (re-registered in 2020).

The Centre certified 8,670 applicants between 2016 and 2022 and issued certificates.

The certification is for the qualifications below:

- 1) Tourism – tour guide, guide, guide-guide, guide-translator (with knowledge of English), tourism instructor, tourism manager, travel agent, airline agent and operator for booking railway tickets.
- 2) Hotel industry – maid, receptionist, auditor, room booking operator, supervisor/service manager.
- 3) Catering – waiter, cook, pastry chef, maître d’hôte, service manager.

Applicants for certification were:

- industry specialists who did not have any specialised education, but had acquired skills in the workplace;
- freelancers who wanted to confirm their skills for a specific qualification;
- college and university graduates;
- students on training and retraining courses for industry specialists, including welfare programmes.

The certification procedure consists of two stages:

1. Theoretical testing (knowledge).
2. Practical testing (practical skills), depending on the declared qualifications. It is carried out in the form of solving situational tasks (scenarios) or performing specific practical tasks at assigned companies. The assessment of practical skills is carried out by a qualification jury consisting of expert auditors for the assessment of personnel and employers.

Each qualification has its own certification scheme, in line with the specific requirements in the field and the types of activity. The certificates issued by the SCIG are valid for a period of 3-years, and holders must be registered and listed in the Register of NCE or in the Registers on the KTA and KAGiR websites.

Financing mechanisms:

Applicants (individuals or businesses) pay for the service from their own pockets. The cost of the service depends on the applicant’s social category and ranges from KZT 2,500 (EUR 5.2) to KZT 10,000 (EUR 21) per candidate.

The Centre continues to attract applications from practitioners in the field. In 2022 924 applicants submitted requests for certification. The Centre issued 852 certificates, including:

- graduates of VET – 518 people (60.8%);
- university graduates – 266 people (31.2%);
- short-term course students – 34 people (4.0%);
- staff – 34 people (4.0%).

The applicants came from the following specialties:

- tourism 69.1%;
- catering 21.5 %;
- hotel industry 9.4%.

What does certification give to employees?

- determines the professional level of employees;
- officially recognises their competence and qualifications;
- determines the trajectory for further professional development;
- increases chances of employment;
- inspires confidence in the certificate holder.

What does certification give to employers?

- the ability to choose personnel from the labour market;
- confidence in the quality of its staff work;
- motivation for staff to improve professionalism;
- high economic results.

What does certification give to graduates?

- social stability and mobility in the labour market;
- employment opportunities;
- the ability to easily adapt to the production process;
- the possibility of obtaining a higher salary;
- career planning and further development in the hospitality sector.

Sources: Information on the Certification Centre of the Hospitality Industry LLP under the Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) and the Kazakhstan Association of Hotels and Restaurants (KAGiR) (Unpublished report, 2022); <https://kaztour-association.com/sertifikacionnyj-centr-industrii-gostepriimstva/>; <https://kagir.kz/sertifikacionnyj-centr-industrii-gostepriimstva/>

4 Standards and reference points

Kazakhstan has established a comprehensive system of documentation and framework for regulating and maintaining state educational standards for all levels of education. Over the past two decades, educational standards have been developed and updated on a regular basis for all levels – GE, IVET, CVET and HE – according to the changes in regulations and requirements introduced by the Law on Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the NQF, and some other relevant documents and decrees. The list of educational standards has been entered into a database maintained online on the 'Adilet' website of the Ministry of Justice⁵⁷. The database also posts regular updates on changes in educational standards and in other fields of education (such as Order of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan No 2 dated 20 July 2022 On approval of state compulsory standards of higher and postgraduate education⁵⁸). However, the instructions and special recommendations on implementing educational standards are prepared by the relevant departments of the MoE and often posted directly to the relevant authorities and educational institutions. The MoE's officials regularly hold workshops for educational representatives at all levels in order to explain and clarify the legal changes in education regulations and their impacts (if any) on educational standards (usually at the annual August workshops/seminars). In addition, the MoE regularly hosts or co-sponsors scientific conferences jointly with the leading national universities and colleges (often in collaboration with international partners such as GIZ, UNICEF, UNESCO, etc.) on educational development, international best practices and implementing educational standards. The outcomes of research projects and academic discussions are made available to a wider audience on the websites of relevant universities and other bodies.

The educational standards are supplemented with methodologies designed for every level of education (IVET, CVET, and HE) defining learning frameworks, learning outcomes, general and professional skills and the relevant instructions. Currently certificates issued by schools, universities or colleges include special codes that refer to the speciality and qualification). The Certification Centres use nationally approved professional standards, providing certificates according to the national standards.

There are several documents setting out the standards used for assessment in independent certification. The standards are described in several documents such as the unified classifier of types of economic activities; the union-wide classifier of workers' professions; the unified tariff-qualifications manual of workers' professions, and some others⁵⁹. As of 2022, Kazakhstan had 36 Certification Centres on the Register maintained by Atameken. Associations of employers run 26 centres, large enterprises run nine centres, and there is a VET institution running one centre (with support from businesses). The roadmap for developing the NQS 2019-2025 includes piloting a certification and validation system in priority sectors. The Law on Professional Qualifications dated 4 July 2023 was an important step as it established and clarified the roles of and procedures for Certification Centres in Kazakhstan⁶⁰.

The NQF provides the general framework for developing the list of vocational skills (in this case for IVET and CVET) by further clarifying competence into general competence, general cultural competence,

⁵⁷ For additional details please see the link: Legal information system of Regulatory Legal Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan. <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng> (accessed on 27 January 2023).

⁵⁸ For additional details please see the link: On approval of state compulsory standards of higher and postgraduate education <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V2200028916#z10> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁵⁹ For additional details please see the link: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/Kazakhstan_0.pdf (accessed on 29 January 2023).

⁶⁰ Article 19 'Recognition of non-formal and/or informal education as part of the recognition of professional qualifications' clearly names the Certifications Centres. 'Learning results obtained through non-formal and/or informal education shall be recognised by the Certification Centres when undergoing the procedure for recognition of professional qualifications if the requirements for recognition of the results of non-formal and/or informal education are established by the relevant professional standards, and in their absence - by qualification requirements.' https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=36924216&doc_id2=38051365#pos=17;-76&pos2=3;-98 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

professional competence, ‘instrumental’⁶¹ competence, social-personal competence, and some others. The Law on Education uses the term ‘non-formal education’, thus recognising it as a legitimate part of the educational process and the education sector. Therefore, educational standards should be applied in the future for the VNFIL using the aforementioned competence list, as VNFIL should address the general questions about which area of competence NFIL should help to develop in order to achieve particular standards.

The MoE and VET colleges invite representatives of the employers’ organisations to attend the training practices. They contribute to planning and/or hosting work-based learning (WBL) in order to deal with the gaps between VET educational practices and standards and the practical needs of the employers’ organisations and the labour market. By and large, the communication procedures and practices between the VET colleges and the employers’ organisations have become regular and normalised. In general, education and training standards in Kazakhstan are developed from the activities in occupational standards. MoE traditionally defines learning objectives to ensure that a person develops the necessary skills and knowledge to enable him or her to function at an agreed level in an occupation. However, the next step – the integration of recommendations from employers into formal VET processes and developing professional standards – still needs clarification and clear methodologies.

⁶¹ The term ‘инструментальный’ (instrumentalniye) sometimes also called ‘ключевые’ (key) skills is used to describe ‘the ability to apply the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in the process of learning in practice.’ For additional details, please see: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiKptuZuOCAAxXuRvEDHV5nAmkQFnoECDwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Ffauezov.edu.kz%2Fmedia%2Fattachments%2F2022%2F03%2F19%2F_-13.03.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3nkgPigm23q0iGpTqYyoVO&opi=89978449 (accessed on 29 January 2023).

5 Organisations and institutions involved in the validation arrangements and their coordination

The NFIL sector has been around in Kazakhstan for many decades, serving mainly private sector organisations, SMEs, individuals in remote rural areas, young people and some categories of adults seeking credentials for getting their first job or changing careers. However, there has been no systematic and standardised approach to VNFIL, and there are no clearly and transparently assigned organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements. The process is quite informal and usually involves representatives of private organisations and/or qualified masters in certain professions or other relevant stakeholders.

Analysis of the institutional setup and collaboration in developing VNFIL in Kazakhstan suggests the emergence of three major groups of stakeholders actively working in this area.

One important group includes the state institutions and state-affiliated agencies led by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, and the Enbek Workforce Development Centre. These institutions set major trajectories in policy formulation, development, assessment, expertise, and work in an institutional setting on identifying priorities and target groups, budgeting, funding distributions, and selecting the bodies (public or private) that will work on programmatic activities, including VNFIL.

The second important group includes private sector companies and corporations led by the 'Atameken' National Chamber of Entrepreneurs and its branches in every region (oblast) in the country. This group of stakeholders is ultimately consumers and institutional beneficiaries of educational products, including VNFIL, as they need a qualified labour force. However, the sector's institutions are not simply consuming educational products: they also play an important role in developing various training, re-training and other educational programmes and therefore play a significant role in implementing VNFIL.

The third active group includes the educational institutions (both public and private) and the third sector. Schools, colleges and universities have played a major role in developing NFIL programmes over the past 5 years, including programmes developed jointly with the third sector and private companies. These play a key role in VNFIL as they identify and assess VNFIL programmes and implement VNFIL on the ground.

Despite many changes in the education system in Kazakhstan, including the decentralisation of education and colleges and universities attaining a significant level of autonomy, the MoE of Kazakhstan still plays a key role in the oversight in the sector through several controlling mechanisms (such as regular checks for compliance with the state standards) and very stringent auditing procedures. The Ministry still has powers to revoke accreditation or licences from education centres, colleges and universities or to cancel courses under the pretext that the centre is not following the state regulations or standards. The situation changed somewhat with the introduction of the NQF, some regulatory documents on standards (e.g. Government decree On approval of state compulsory standards of higher and postgraduate education⁶²), and the Register of Certification Centres (on the Atameken website.⁶³). According to these regulatory procedures, the validation and independent certification of both specialists (i.e. validation practitioners who need to be certified in order to carry out validation) and NFIL have been decentralised and delegated to the Atameken-accredited Certification Centres⁶⁴. Therefore, the

⁶² The Government decree On approval of state compulsory standards of higher and postgraduate education' determines 'the requirements for course content with a focus on learning outcomes, the maximum teaching load for students, the level of student training, the duration of study in higher and/or postgraduate education, including in military and special educational institutions, regardless of the form of ownership and departmental subordination'. For additional details please see: On approval of state compulsory standards of higher and postgraduate education <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V2200028916#z10> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁶³ For additional detail, please see the:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Реестр%20сертификационных%20центров.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁶⁴ For additional detail, please see:

[https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Центры%20сертификации%20специалистов%20\(анализ%20ситуации%20%2008_04_20\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Центры%20сертификации%20специалистов%20(анализ%20ситуации%20%2008_04_20)%20(1).pdf) (accessed on 17 January 2022)

organisations and institutions involved in validation include the Certification Centres accredited by Atameken, relevant colleges, and private or public organisations and/or large employers. The regulation introduced much simplified procedures for certification and validation of specialists and/or individuals seeking to receive VNFIL. However, the procedure is not free of charge and individuals, sponsoring organisations or other bodies have to cover the cost of certification. In general, information about the institutions involved in the validation and certification process can be found at colleges, which can also provide consultations about the procedures and benefits of validation and certification.

In addition, the Certification Centres have to meet certain requirements, such as they need to prove ‘the availability of premises for certification by means of a right of ownership, or lease, or a cooperation agreement (for industry associations, if certification is organised by organisations (businesses) that are members of this association of legal entities) – industry associations are the most competent in creating and updating control measuring materials. Regarding the certification base, they can use the premises of association members’⁶⁵.

The institutions involved in drawing up and maintaining the Register of Certification Centres for specialists and Register of certified specialists⁶⁶ as well as for the whole process of certification are as follows:

- 1) ‘Atameken’, the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is the body responsible for drawing up and maintaining the Register of certification centres with input from Regional chambers.
- 2) Regional chambers (RCPs) – chamber of entrepreneurs for the difference regions, major cities and the capital – these bodies are responsible for making a ‘decision to approve/refuse to include the Centre in the Register of Certification Centres, approving the members of the Qualification Commission and its chairman (as put forward by the Centres) to assess the qualifications of specialists the Centres, approving the members of the Appeal Commission and its chairman(as put forward by the Centres)’⁶⁷.
- 3) Certification Centres for Specialists (Centres) – a division under legal entity or industry association (union), individual entrepreneur, or a legal entity that determines the degree of conformity of the skill level (ability) of specialists to perform work within the framework for that profession; they are also responsible for the ‘documents and [preparation] materials for the meetings of the Regional Council of the Chambers of Entrepreneurs of the various regions, major cities and the capital’⁶⁸.
- 4) Qualifications jury – a body created to determine the level of knowledge, skills and abilities of the examinees and their compliance with the requirements, curricula and qualifications.
- 5) The Appeals Commission – a body created to consider disputed issues and protect rights upon a written application by participants for violation of the established procedure or to contest the results.

Also, the Union of Food Enterprises of Kazakhstan (UFEK)⁶⁹ established its own ‘Centre for certification of specialists’ in 2016⁷⁰. The Centre, in coordination with relevant stakeholders such as representatives of the UFEK and Almaty Technological University, certifies and validates specialists resulting in

⁶⁵ For additional detail, please see:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

⁶⁶ For additional detail, please see:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁶⁷ For additional details please see the link as follows:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

⁶⁸ This implies that these centres are involved in drawing up and maintaining the register.

⁶⁹ For additional detail, please see: www.sppk.kz (accessed on 17 January 2022)

⁷⁰ For additional detail, please see: www.sppk.kz/index.php/o-nas/sertifikatsionnyj-tsentr (accessed on 19 January 2022)

qualifications (such as cook, bartender, service manager, waiter, and some others). Private individuals can apply to validate their NFIL at any time of year to get their certificate.

6 VNFIL service providers

NFIL has quite a long history in Kazakhstan, although for many decades it mainly served the informal economy and self-employed individuals⁷¹. NFIL bodies have had links with the VET colleges in providing some additional training and practical opportunities, especially for small colleges that lacked the facilities and outreach available to large colleges and professional training centres. At the different stages of economic and social development, NFIL providers have played different roles and delivered different types and levels of services. For example, due to the steep recession in the 1990s, NFIL providers became quite popular and competitive in the professional education market as they provided a relatively quick (in comparison to the traditional professional education at VET colleges) path to employment opportunities in the tight labour market and a flexible approach to the validation of skills and competence.

The introduction of the Law on Education in Kazakhstan (2007) provided greater flexibility to the education providers. It also led to diversification in the field of education as the Law provided equal rights and positions both for private and public educational institutions.

Several NFIL providers emerged in the country, providing different types of services of diverse quality and in different areas, targeting various categories of customers.

VET colleges began offering not only traditional standard packages but also some short-, mid-, and long-term courses that could be classified under the category of NFIL. Some colleges opened their own education centres or education service providing units using existing facilities or by renting additional space. Their activities could range from offering tutoring in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) to high school students to organising youth clubs dealing with electric car and cart engineering, car mechanics, experimenting with quadcopters and drones or mini-robotic studies. The MoE also established the Orleu National Training Centre as a semi-private entity providing formal and non-formal training to representatives of the educational sector⁷².

The rapid growth in MOOCs led to the emergence of an extensive network of MOOC education service providers. The Covid-19 restrictions on education institutions also contributed to further growth in the popularity and outreach of MOOCs in different formats and different forms of general and tailored education in general. These NFIL service providers usually delivered not only education but also validated NFIL through their own test validation procedures, which usually required the participants to pass tests of different levels of difficulty in order to gain certification.

National and international education and training centres in the IT sector have emerged as an important group of NFIL service providers as they grew significantly during Covid due to the growth of the 'new' and 'gig' economy and a rising demand for specialists in IT servicing and programming. Many local and international companies and even some universities introduced short- and medium-term courses in face-to-face and hybrid formats. Among the largest providers are companies such as CISCO, GOOGLE, Huawei, Samsung, Microsoft, Yandex Academy⁷³, and some others. These organisations have not only provided NFIL and VNFIL, on some occasions they have also provided placements on projects related to their business activities in Kazakhstan and in other countries (remote work).

The new *Concept of Lifelong Learning* (2021) and *The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026* (2022) were intended to bring significant changes to the position of NFIL providers among the education service providers in the country. *The Concepts* also acknowledged the digital transformation of the education system where NFIL providers will play a greater role due to their flexibility and mobility.

⁷¹ For additional details please see the link as follows: Abazov, Rafis. (1997) Formation of the non-state sector and privatisation in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, *Communist Economies and Economic Transformation*, 9:4, pp. 431-448,

⁷² For additional details and activities, please see: <https://orleu-edu.kz> (accessed on 28 February 2023)

⁷³ For additional details please see the link as follows: <https://academy.yandex.ru>
https://www.samsung.com/kz_ru/microsite/codinglab/

Overall, a network of 36 Certification Centres emerged as important players in the system of NFIL providers especially in the validation of NFIL.

According to the new 2023 Law on Professional Qualifications, Certification Centres, previously registered at Atameken, are now transformed into Professional Qualifications Recognition Centres ('Recognition Centres'). Previously, their accreditation did not take any meaningful form, but under the new 2023 Law, Accreditation Bodies are recognised as part of the National Qualifications System. The 2023 Law also introduces an entire chapter dedicated to the accreditation procedures at recognition centres. Atameken still provides accreditation free of charge (in co-ordination with the National Professional Qualifications Authority) and is obliged to carry out accreditation in accordance with Article 23 of the 2023 Law.

This Law prescribes the rights and obligations of the accreditation body, the sequence of accreditation, accreditation criteria, the rules of decision-making on accreditation or refusal of accreditation, the rules on reissuance and withdrawal and termination of the accreditation certificate.

As follows from the 2023 Law, a Recognition Centre:

- must be a legal entity;
- must have ownership, economic management, operational management, on the basis of a joint activity agreement or temporary possession and use of premises, equipment and material resources necessary to perform work on the recognition of professional qualifications;
- must be registered in the register of professions;
- draft qualification programmes must comply with the requirements established by the authorised body;
- qualified personnel must be available to perform the work on the recognition of professional qualifications. Recognition centres may not be established in educational institutions.

Furthermore, the conditions for the authorisation of Certification Centres to carry out certifications include, as follows: '[proof of] carrying out activities and having work experience in the field of the professional activities corresponding to certified (assessed) qualification(s) and certification centre industry affiliation, [proof of] available internal specialist certification centre documents; and [proof of] current, control and measuring materials for certifiable qualifications agreed upon with employers'⁷⁴.

The Centres create a qualifications jury (QJ) for independent certification of specialists ('NSS') in order to determine the degree of compliance of the level of qualification (ability) of an NSS participant to perform work in the framework for that profession; To conduct NSS on specialties (qualifications), the QJ must have at least three members (odd number). The QJ is to be formed from specialists in relevant specialties (qualifications), representatives of businesses and employer associations no less than 30 calendar days before the start of the NSS. The QJ may include qualified employees of companies, industry associations, teaching staff of colleges, universities, and training centres. The Chairman of the jury is selected from businesses and employers' associations.

A representative of the Atameken Chamber of Entrepreneurs explained the procedure for independent certification of specialists as follows: 'A specialist who claims to be a skilled worker will now be able to prove this by providing the employer with a certificate that testifies all their individual abilities, professional knowledge and skills necessary to perform work in a particular specialty. These people can be given a profession. They [trainees] will be able to get a job without hindrance and the employer will have no doubt about their qualifications'⁽⁷⁵⁾.

⁷⁴ For a full description of procedures, please see:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 17 September 2023)

⁷⁵ Retrieved from: <https://atameken.kz/en/news/25805-v-sko-poyavyatsya-centry-sertifikacii-specialistov> (accessed on 27 July 2023).

The Certification Centre of specialists at the 'Union of Food Companies of Kazakhstan'

The Certification Centre of Specialists (CCS) at the 'Union of Food Enterprises of Kazakhstan (UFEK)' plays an important role in certifying professionals and developing national professional standards. It was added to the Atameken Register of Certification Centres of Specialists of NCE of the Republic of Kazakhstan in February 2017.

The CCS has contributed to the development of the 28 Professional standards in the food industry that were approved by the Atameken NCE between 2018 and 2020. With the support of the International Organisation GIZ, it also developed instructions for Methodological Recommendations on the development and design of professional standards approved by Order No 46 of 31 January 2019 and sent to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Kazakhstan (July 2021).

The UFEK acts as a link between the business community and educational institutions, providing constructive dialogue. It is actively engaged in creating and supporting industry certification of food industry specialists, and is part of the cluster for training personnel for the food industry.

The CCS is working on the introduction of a qualitative indicator – 'The share of graduates who have passed industry certification through NCE RK-registered certification centres', something which will be taken into account when certifying or accrediting colleges and universities, placing a state educational order or determining the rating of educational institutions.

The CCS uses the 'Perpektiva' Education College LLP as its base to conduct the certification exams and works with the Almaty College of Economics.

Source: Brief summary about the Certification Centre of specialists at the 'Union of Food Enterprises of Kazakhstan' (unpublished report prepared by the Certification Centre of specialists at the 'Union of Food Enterprises of Kazakhstan', January 2023).

7 Information, outreach and promotion & Advice and guidance

7.1 Information, outreach and promotion

The coverage of information and outreach in promoting VNFIL opportunities varies from sector to sector and in the context of such a large country as Kazakhstan – the ninth largest country in the world by land mass – from region to region. An additional dimension for outreach effectiveness and coverage is IT literacy/illiteracy among different groups of the population and access to good quality Internet and IT equipment.

The services of the Kazakhstan education service providers, including Certification Centres and state-affiliated entities, are used and valued by different groups of population because they offer quite a quick, transparent and wide-ranging pathway to validating their NFIL. Education service providers widely use the Internet as one of the main tools for communicating information and arranging outreach campaigns about the benefits of VNFIL, highlighting that ‘learning results of the previous level of formal education are recognised automatically and the number of academic credits acquired and the duration of study are reduced’⁷⁶. Most of the information about the procedures and other formal requirements are available on the websites (and lately also on Instagram) of the education service providers, including the VNFIL procedures. In their outreach, NFIL providers, especially for-profit businesses, highlight that validating NFIL is important in the modern business environment for doing business and for meeting compliance requests from government entities.

Another channel of information, outreach and promotion on VNFIL is traditional channels of communications such as television, radio and print media. Some television channels organise televised roundtables, debates and interviews providing careers guidance information to young people, women and other target audiences. The Atameken television channel regularly broadcasts special programmes dedicated to professional VET education (both in Kazakh and Russian) and broadcasts case studies of successful masters and/or mentors who validated their NFIL. These programmes are often supplemented by open telephone lines where listeners can ask questions. Some regional (oblast) television stations run special outreach programmes and roundtables with the representatives of Certification Centres for their target audiences such as the rural youth and women.

In addition, many education service providers organise careers fairs, workshops and special open-door PR sessions where they offer information not only about traditional formal education services, but also about the value of VNFIL⁷⁷.

Lastly, in many rural areas and small towns, word of mouth (*uzun kulak* in Kazakh) still remains one of the important channels of communication and information outreach about the benefits of validating NFIL.

⁷⁶ For example, the Ekibastuz Engineering and Technical Institute, named after the academic K. Satpayeva, developed its own documentation and regulatory framework - Quality management system regulation about the procedure for crediting previous level of formal and non-formal education training results. It is officially available on the website of the university and university staff are instructed to promote the value of the validation of formal and non-formal education. For details, please see: https://eiti.edu.kz/files/files/16/file/1664941243_303779206.pdf (accessed on 27 September 2023)

⁷⁷ For the published materials of a workshop conducted by the Abylai Khan university of international relations and world languages, please see: <https://www.ablaikhan.kz/images/obyav/Sборник%20Д.Мухтаховной.pdf> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

7.2 Advice and guidance

Major VNFIL stakeholders are currently developing a comprehensive, sustainable system of guidance to VNFIL services, processes, outcomes and benefits. There are several established and emerging channels for providing advice to different groups of the population.

There are three different groups of guidance providers in Kazakhstan.

One is traditional formal education channels for guidance (e.g. schools informing children and their parents about possibilities to learn outside of school) about VNFIL service providers and about the regulations, offering the latest documents and changing demands and opportunities in the labour market. They also provide advice to VNFIL customers, especially young people and adults, looking for new skills and new career opportunities.

The second group are traditional informal channels, as in the past when extended families and networks of relatives and friends have been the main source of advice for many generations of young people. People can still find information about various educational and training opportunities, including VNFIL, through traditional channels such as extended families.

The third digital. Recently the Enbek platform, which is run by the Enbek Workforce Development Centre in collaboration with and with contributions from the network of employment centres, has emerged as one of the largest and most comprehensive digital providers for advice and guidance. Enbek is working on developing an evidence-based assessment of the labour market using the latest big-data tools, and assessing current and projected needs in the different sectors of the economy. Enbek runs several platforms⁷⁸, such as Skills Enbek (education services for all individuals, regardless of their employment status), or Business Enbek (offering various services to the business community and business people, including those who would like to start their own business)⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ For additional details please see: <https://skills.enbek.kz> (accessed on 29 January 2023)

⁷⁹ For additional details please see: <https://business.enbek.kz/ru> (accessed on 29 January 2023)

8 Validation practitioners

8.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The profiles of validation practitioners have not been clearly defined and regulated with requirements and guidelines. There are therefore different approaches to describing them. In general, validation practitioners can be divided into three major groups:

- traditional formal validation practitioners;
- traditional informal validation practitioners;
- digital validation practitioners.

Traditionally, personnel working in the Certification Centres include qualified professionals who completed their education at VET colleges and HE institutions and have relevant qualifications, life experience and formal certifications or graduate degrees (e.g. qualified employees of companies, industry associations or the teaching staff of colleges, universities and training centres)⁸⁰. They have to follow formal state-defined and approved procedures, testing programmes and validation requirements. At the KTA and KAGIR Certification Centre for the hospitality industry there are several Expert auditors who perform the role of assessors in the Centre⁸¹.

Traditional informal validation practitioners include qualified professionals from different fields and sectors of the national economy who have relevant qualifications and experience but not necessarily formal certifications or graduate degrees. They are not required to follow the formal VET procedures but have their own procedures, testing arrangements and criteria for validation.

Digital validation practitioners are an emerging group and include qualified professionals from 'digital' sectors of the national economy who have relevant digital skills and qualifications and IT experience but not necessarily formal certifications or HE graduate degrees. They are not required to follow the formal VET or HE procedures and have to follow their own procedures, testing arrangements and criteria for validation, very often defined by labour market requirements or training programme developers (e.g. Samsung or Yandex).

8.2 Qualification requirements

The qualification requirements for the validation practitioners in a formal institutional setting have been clearly defined in the formal VET sector and described in the documentation on Certification Centres⁸². The regulation usually requires that these validation practitioners prove their qualification credentials and have experience in relevant fields, including education experience (such as teaching and training experience and in some cases having certain formal diplomas). Some are subject to additional assessments.

The qualification requirements for the validation practitioners in the informal sectors and among NFIL providers are not clearly defined and the criteria for their selection are quite opaque. Qualification requirements involve informal requirements for qualification and in-field experience.

⁸⁰ For additional detail about the types of people working in the centres, please see:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

⁸¹ For additional detail about KTA and KAGIR Certification Centres for the hospitality industry, please see: <https://kaztour-association.com/serifikacionnyj-centr-industrii-gostepriimstva/ehksperty-auditory-po-ocenke-personala/#> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

For additional details please see the link as follows:

<https://atameken.kz/uploads/content/files/Положение%20о%20включении%20в%20реестр%20центро%20сертификации.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2023)

⁸² For the decree On approval of the Rules for accreditation of professional organisations and certification organisations please see the link as follows: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1500010703#z9> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

The situation in the digital sector is probably somewhere in between. Qualification requirements for validation practitioners in the digital and/or 'new economy' sectors are not clearly defined. However, there is a qualification requirement for specific digital products (e.g. for Yandex programming products) that validation practitioners have at least experience and be graduates from the Yandex or similar IT programming courses.

The MoE, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and other major stakeholders should develop mechanisms to address the qualification requirements when implementing *The Concept of Lifelong Learning* (2021)⁸³.

8.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The provision of training and support for the people involved in validation in formal institutional settings reflects the situation on the qualification requirements for validation practitioners. In the formal VET system, there is always a general requirement and it is compulsory for regular professional development, upskilling and retraining for all VET teachers and work-based learning masters. The Certification Centres usually recruit their personnel from educational institutions and various government agencies. The government regulation identifies validation practitioners as a part of the education sector; therefore, their training and support is regulated according to the rules and requirements assigned to educators⁸⁴. According to Article 15 of the Law On the Status of a Teacher, every educator must undergo certification 'at least once every 5 years.'⁸⁵

Training and support for the people involved in validation in the NFIL sector is different as there are no compulsory requirements for regular professional development. However, there is voluntary self-assessment and self-development. Usually, these categories of validation practitioners either work on personal professional development or receive occasional methodological, pedagogical and practical support from VET colleges, HE institutions and large corporations.

In the IT/programming sector, the situation is also different. Many formal VET and HE institutions provide both formal training in IT/programming and some NFIL opportunities for student clubs, student-led startups, university competition teams, etc. However, various private companies in the IT/programming sector still play a very large role. Training and support for the people involved in validation in the IT/programming sector is very often informal and not compulsory. Large IT companies do provide training and support for validation practitioners involved in validation procedures simply as they need to have experienced people with programming skills and knowledge of the latest technologies.

⁸³ For additional details, please see: *The Concept of Lifelong Learning* (2021). Government Resolution No 471. Retrieved from <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000941> (accessed on 29 August 2023)

⁸⁴ Educator is defined as 'a person who has teaching or other professional training in the relevant profession and carries out the professional activities of a teacher in training students and/or pupils, improving methodologies and running educational activities' Training, retraining and upskilling requirements are regulated by the government Decree On approval of the Rules and Conditions for certification of teachers holding positions in educational organisations implementing general educational programmes of preschool education and training, primary, basic secondary and general secondary education, technical and vocational, post-secondary, additional education and special educational programmes, and others civil servants in the field of education and science. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/V1600013317> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

⁸⁵ For additional details, please see: <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1900000293> (accessed on 27 September 2023)

9 Quality assurance

Kazakhstan has no specific QA framework or procedures in VET validation. The formal education system has the QA mechanisms applied in formal VET such as special sets of tests, exams, and assignments for candidates that are also used in validation procedures. Certification Centres provide services to a wide range of groups of people and use their internal mechanisms for quality assurance often similar to quality assurance in VET education institutions.

In the formal education sector, the QA mechanisms for education at all levels are quite well developed. The main reference points for educational qualifications are the State Educational Standards, which cover all formal sectors. The requirements in the Standards cover both the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. In addition, the NQS is built on the foundation of the NQF and sectoral qualifications frameworks and their recognition procedures.

However, the situation is different in the non-formal education sector. NFIL providers have concerns about QA yet they currently do not have any clearly defined mechanisms for that.

The MoE is planning to work on this issue. *The Concept of Lifelong Learning* and *The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022-2026* will probably provide the key framework for this work. The main driving idea behind the *Concepts* is to develop VNFIL in more systematic ways and increase the collaboration between the VNFIL providers so as to improve the QA procedures.

10 In the latest development, the government has issued an additional decree on the implementation of the Law on Professional Qualifications⁸⁶ Inputs, outputs and outcomes

10.1 Funding

Kazakhstan does not have specific state funding for the validation of NFIL in all areas.

However, the formal VET institutions and some private colleges can allocate some funding from their own budgets for validation (e.g. to attract more young people and adults by offering interesting NFIL opportunities such as in entrepreneurship and gaming).

In general, the individuals who would like to validate their NFIL have to finance their education and training courses and the validation from their own pocket.

Most of the Certification Centres provide their services for free. However, they receive some funding for providing validation services to some segments of the society, especially unemployed young people, women and people in need.

10.2 Distribution of costs

The cost distribution situation in Kazakhstan is quite complex and it depends on many variables. In some cases, VNFIL includes fees for candidates but it might sometimes be free of charge.

The VET colleges have a mechanism for distributing the cost of VNFIL. It is free of charge if the NFIL can be included into the formal VET process (for example, a student needs to get practical training or do an internship at an SME or other business/organisation). In these cases, the VET colleges would cover the cost of VNFIL from their own budget (e.g. covering teachers' hours spent on VNFIL and/or printing relevant documentation and certificates for VNFIL). However, when a student would like to receive additional NFIL in an additional field (that is not needed for their formal education), the cost of both training and validation has to be covered from the student's personal budget and a VET college would charge a fee.

For high schools in the public sector, the cost of VNFIL is usually covered from the state budget, as state schools usually have specially allocated budgets to cover teachers' hours spent on VNFIL, usage of auditoriums, and/or printing relevant documentation and certificates for VNFIL. However, in private high schools and colleges, the cost of VNFIL has to be met by students.

Some categories of socially vulnerable groups (e.g. young people from remote rural areas or women with many children, and some others) can receive VNFIL free of charge as a part of a package of welfare or support to enter the labour market.

⁸⁶ The government issued an order clarifying implementation mechanisms for the Law on Professional Qualifications: Order of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 16 August 2023 No 128-r On measures to implement the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 4 July 2023 'On professional qualifications' and 'On introducing amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on issues of professional qualifications, state awards, social security and education' Please see: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38011482 (accessed on 22 September 2023). In addition, the government issued an order clarifying implementation mechanisms for the Law on Professional Qualifications: Order of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 16 August 2023 No 128-r On measures to implement the laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated 4 July 2023 'On professional qualifications' and 'On introducing amendments and additions to some legislative acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on issues of professional qualifications, state awards, social security and education' Please see: https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38011482 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

10.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

Assessments of the impact of VNFIL on the employability of individuals in current labour market conditions suggest that there is strong evidence of the benefits of VNFIL both to individuals and companies, employees and employers⁸⁷. VNFIL has both a competitive advantage and some shortfalls. The competitive advantages of VNFIL include its flexibility and ability to quickly adjust to the needs of and demands in the national and regional labour markets.

In general, the shortfalls and disadvantages of NFIL include the lack of QA or any clearly defined frameworks for evaluating educational outcomes.

Benefits of NFIL for individuals:

for an employee:

- accessible and flexible training and learning process;
- enhancing employability by quickly adjusting to the needs of the labour market;
- learning according to own needs and timeframe (especially true of online learning);
- additional boost for personal professional development and career growth;
- learning without quitting an existing job.

for an employer:

- access to the labour force with updated skills and competence;
- being able to hire people with relevant skills for newly created jobs;
- opportunity for quick retraining and upskilling of employees where there is a need;
- opportunity to reduce the cost of training and/or retraining especially in the new fields that require new skills.

10.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

10.4.1 Validation trends

Kazakhstan does not have a comprehensive system for collecting information and statistics about the numbers of VNFIL providers, number of qualifications offered and individuals who have undergone VNFIL. However, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of VNFIL users has been increasing over the past 5 years due to the Covid-19 restrictions and the increasing awareness about the benefits of VNFIL.

10.4.2 Validation users

Kazakhstan does not maintain a comprehensive database on the number or distribution of validation users by target groups, gender, age, employment status and previous qualifications.

Assessment of the work of the Certification Centres and other bodies carrying out validation might help to collect data about validation users. Some indicators suggest that most of the validation users come from vulnerable groups including the rural youth and young women.

⁸⁷ Enbek. (2021). The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality. Astana: Enbek, 2021. p. 46. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

There is some disaggregated data available for individual Certification Centres. For example, in 2022, the number of beneficiaries in the tourist sector was relatively high – 852 as compared to those in the food production sector – 163⁸⁸. The main target groups for both centres have been VET students, job seekers, freelancers, employees as well as people with lower incomes. The newly adopted Law on Professional Qualifications (2023), which introduces mandatory certification for several professions, will certainly lead to an increased number of VNFIL beneficiaries in these professions.

10.4.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

VNFIL is available for disadvantaged groups, such as the long-term unemployed, migrants, refugees and people with low or no qualifications. For example, state institutions and VET and HE bodies can validate NFIL for disadvantaged groups under the special funding, grants and microcredit opportunities funded by the state through Employment Centres, Atameken, and some state-funded projects and programmes.

Some limited statistics on the proportion of this target group are available in the publications of the Enbek Workforce Development Centre (such as ‘The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality’), and reports about work at Employment Centres⁸⁹.

The government is working on initiatives to support disadvantaged groups through developing mechanisms and opportunities for both NFIL and VNFIL services.

As the education market in Kazakhstan is very diverse and has many education service providers including NFIL, access to validation processes, particularly for disadvantaged groups, might be different from case to case.

⁸⁸ Data provided by the Certification Centre for the hospitality industry and ‘Union of food enterprises’ Certification Centre.

⁸⁹ Enbek. (2021). *The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality*. Astana, Kazakhstan. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

11 Validation methods

The validation methods vary from sector to sector and could be divided into three major groups.

Validation in the formal VET sector must follow the state-defined standards and procedures. This could include multiple choice questions, assessments with open questions, interviews, observed assignments or tasks, portfolio of evidence, presentations, simulations and controlled job practice.

The non-formal education sector does not need to follow the state-defined standards and procedures but validation practitioners use some methods similar to the formal VET validation including assessments with open questions, interviews, observed assignments or tasks, portfolio of evidence, presentations, simulations of the work practice and controlled job practice. Usually, the emphasis is on illustrating practical skills and competence by completing a practical assignment, e.g. changing the oil or coolant on a car.

Likewise, the digital and online learning (DOL) education sector does not need to follow the state-defined standards and procedures but uses multiple choice questions (online or offline), assessments with open questions, interviews, assignments or tasks, portfolio of evidence, presentations, simulations and job practice inspections. Very often, the most important part of validation is an observation of controlled job practice, e.g. writing a short computer code within a specified period of time.

Multiple methods used to get reliable results give flexibility to the training providers as they can adjust their methods and approaches and the speed of the learning process. However, there are no mechanisms to check the reliability of these methods.

As there are no unified qualification requirements and regulations, different methods can be tailored to fit different contexts, target groups and validation purposes. This approach can be seen in the formal VET colleges. However, private and independent VNFIL providers do not necessarily tailor their programmes to fit those different contexts, target groups and validation purposes⁹⁰.

⁹⁰ Nagibova, Gulzina (2019). *Problems and prospects of professional self-determination and professional development in the Republic of Kazakhstan*. Nazarbayev University, Bagdar, India. For additional details please see https://bagdar.kz/ru/Article/Item?alias=problemy_i_perspektivy_professionalnogo_samoopredeleniya_i_professionalnogo_razvitiya_v_rk

12 Use of ICT in validation

Some VNFIL providers use digital tools, especially in offering MOOCs and other online or hybrid training courses. In general, they are used in identifying, documenting, assessing and/or certifying competence, usually through online web-based testing tools.

The country has some nationally standardised ICT tools and templates (e.g. online tools, e-portfolio templates, etc.) to be used in formal education validation procedures in the format of standardised online or computer-based tests administered by schools and colleges. Non-formal education providers usually develop and use their own standardised ICT tools.

The Innovative Service Samsung Academy in Almaty

The Innovative Service Samsung Academy is a social project supported by Samsung Electronics Central Eurasia and the Assistance to Sustainable Development fund. The Samsung Academy was opened at al-Farabi Kaz New University on 29 September 2015, offering short-course non-credit training (certified by Samsung Academy).

Specially trained educators at al-Farabi deliver express courses to students in several IT and IT servicing subjects including radio engineering, electronics engineering and telecommunications on software engineering for mobile devices and some other information and communication technology courses using devices and infrastructure provided by Samsung Electronics. In addition, several students started working on their Start-up projects.

The Innovative Samsung Academy Service also provides introductory special courses on mobile applications and repairing and servicing air conditioning systems, televisions and other electronic devices.

For the validation of NFIL in IT services, candidates can follow two possible tracks. One is to validate their NFIL at the Certification Centres. The second is to study at an educational institution (e.g., VET school) and combine the formal with NFIL in a formal educational process while requesting validation of their NFIL.

Source: <https://www.kaznu.kz/en/18886/page/> (accessed on 17 July 2022)

Digital tools can be used for validation on specialised and advanced training programmes and courses (such as process management, monitoring, interoperability and transfer of achievements). Different types of data can be collected from all the major VET colleges and HE institutions (e.g. careers guidance database and assessment items databases with qualification databases), however, it is not always effectively used due to the lack of relevant training.

All large formal VET colleges and HE institutions use digital tools to register and keep track of the learning achievements of individuals using different platforms. They also keep registers of certificates issued through VNFIL. The data included on the certificates includes the name of the institution (in Kazakh and in some cases in two or three languages: Kazakh, English, and Russian), location of the training, duration of the training (usually both in calendar days and learning hours) and the names of the members of the certifying committee. However, small education providers may not always keep registers of certificates issued through VNFIL.

The concept of data privacy is in an early stage of development. Large entities have already begun using the European standards on data privacy in full or, more commonly, in part. Information about an

individual's progress and achievements in VNFIL is not usually publicly shared but all education officials can have access to it.

13 The position of validation in society

VNFIL is visible in major national strategies and policy documents. The government of Kazakhstan has developed and introduced *The Concept of Lifelong Learning* and *The Concept of Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022 - 2026*. These *Concepts* envision a series of changes to education, including LLL and VNFIL.

The Enbek Workforce Development Centre collects and publishes information on how the labour market and the world of education deal with VNFIL and how these practices can be implemented in Kazakhstan⁹¹. Faith in the results of VNFIL is patchy and different from sector to sector. For example, there is high trust in VNFIL offered by large international companies like Microsoft, CISCO, Samsung but much less trust in VNFIL offered by colleges and education centres. There is growing scepticism in the certificates and validations issued by small private entities.

Due to the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, there is a high level of involvement from key stakeholders (government organisations and agencies, trade unions, employers, education and training institutions, third-sector organisations and private and public employment services) in the implementation of VNFIL in order to provide job seekers, especially young people, with a fast track to the job market, bypassing lengthy education in the formal education sector. In addition, they see it as one of the important tools in introducing greater competitiveness and flexibility to the labour force in Kazakhstan as the VNFIL will attract more people to various newly emerging sectors of the economy.

⁹¹ Enbek. (2021). *The Labour Market in Kazakhstan: Development in the Face of a New Reality*. Astana, Kazakhstan. Available at: <https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/1220> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

14 Recommendations

- The regulations and requirements for VNFIL should be introduced very carefully and decision makers should avoid overregulating and bureaucratising the validation process.
- Frequently VNFIL stakeholders associate benefits of validation with educational attainment rather than considering the advantages for the labour market. Therefore, more attention should be paid to identifying who can benefit from the VNFIL, especially in the labour market.
- Overall visibility of validation in society is relatively low. Therefore, the MoE and other stakeholders should work on increasing the overall visibility in society and among businesses.
- The requirements concerning the validation providers have yet not been clarified as they have to follow newly introduced initiatives and regulations but do not have enough tools and resources to implement them.
- Validation providers have very limited access to financial incentives enabling them to offer services for all citizens/specific target groups (especially vulnerable people in rural areas). Therefore, especially in key areas, funding should be mobilised to trigger the offer.
- Even though over the past 2 years the MoE has increased the information about validation among stakeholders, information exchange and collaboration between stakeholders is not sufficient, and there is a need to increase awareness of initiatives at the early stage of VNFIL development.
- The profile of potential candidates has been identified quite systematically by the Enbek Workforce Development Centre. However, awareness raising initiatives should take place at the early stage of VNFIL development and cover both formal and non-formal education providers.
- Validation practitioners should have access to continuous training at all major retraining (upskilling) centres at HE institutions and the Orleu National Training Centre, and to all forms of training: mentoring, peer exchange opportunities, communities of practice, etc.
- There is a need to create practical guidelines and recommendations clearly defining key stakeholders' roles, responsibilities and key skills of actors, with sufficient explanation of the VNFIL procedures for the validation providers.
- VNFIL providers should be concerned about QA and developing clearly defined mechanisms to ensure it.
- In addition, there is a need to develop public trust in VNFIL, especially among educators in the formal VET and HE sector, public sector representatives and the general public.
- Considering the lack of statistical data, the VNFIL stakeholders should consider developing better and clearly defined mechanisms in monitoring, evaluating and collecting data on VNFIL and NFIL.

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16 ACRONYMS

AL	Adult Learning
Atameken CIC	Atameken Chamber of International Commerce
Atameken NCE	Atameken National Chamber of Entrepreneurs
CVET	Continuing Vocational Education and Training
ETF	European Training Foundation
GE	General Education
HE	Higher Education
IVET	Initial Vocational Education And Training
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MLSPP	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection for the People of the Republic of Kazakhstan
MoE	Ministry of Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQS	National Qualifications System
PES	Public Employment Service
SQF	Sectoral Qualifications Framework
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VNFIL	Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning