



Country report

Cyprus

2016 update to the European inventory
on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1 Introduction and Evaluation

1.1 Abstract

In Cyprus, since 2007, validation mainly takes place through the System of Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) run by the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA). However, existing validation arrangements are fragmented and current practices mostly concern assessment and certification of prior work experience. There is a focus on vocational /occupational qualifications, which correspond to pre-set occupational profiles, which can be attributed to the high rates of individuals employed without any certification in certain occupations.

As yet, there is no comprehensive framework for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the country. An interdepartmental Committee (hereafter the 'Committee'), has been set up with the task to develop and see to the implementation of a comprehensive action plan for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in line with the Council Recommendation of 20.12.12 for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. EU funding is a key enabler of developments in the area of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the country. The 2014-2020 EU Structural Funds offer opportunities for the implementation of two key projects in the area of validation, as follows:

(a) The Ministry of Education and Culture is coordinating the implementation of the project "Establishing a mechanism for the validation of non-formal and informal learning". This project will enable the mapping of the current situation in Cyprus regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Based on the mapping, an overall National Action Plan for the creation of mechanisms for validation of non-formal and informal learning in Cyprus will be developed (by 2018) and a Pilot project will be implemented (in 2018-2020).

(b) defining new vocational qualifications, improving the quality of both the candidates and the examiners taking part in the validation processes and improving the monitoring of the existing quality criteria.

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

Since 2010, some steps have been taken in Cyprus in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Although there is no comprehensive system or framework of validation of non-formal and informal learning, the need for the development of such a system has been identified. Public authorities seem to recognise the importance of validation and the development of supportive structures is foreseen, while specific measures mostly regarding vocational/occupational qualifications are already being implemented.

At the same time, an important development occurred in 2013. The cabinet of Ministers approved the establishment¹ of an interdepartmental Committee (hereafter the 'Committee'), which has the task to develop and see to the implementation of a comprehensive action plan for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in line with the Council Recommendation of 20.12.12 for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

There have been some delays in relation to the implementation of the projects mentioned in section 1.1, mainly having to do with the procedure of the approval of projects supported by the Structural Funds. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) was given the go ahead for the implementation of the project which it is coordinating. The project aims to map the situation in relation to validation activities already taking place in Cyprus, and based on the findings of the mapping, to propose a National Action Plan for validation.

The Committee intends to approve the National Plan for validation by 2018, while it is planned that the MoEC will implement some actions of the National Action Plan between 2018 and 2020. The launching event of the project will take place in June 2016. It will include a one day seminar bringing together external experts and representatives of stakeholders, as well as an in depth discussion. The said activities will allow the Ministry to design the terms of reference for the contractor who will undertake the mapping exercise.

Since 2007, validation takes place through the System of Vocational Qualifications (SVQ) run by the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA).

Box 1 HRDA

The Human Resource Development Authority of Cyprus (HRDA) is an organisation governed by public law, the Human Resource Development Law [Law 125(I)/1999-2007]. The HRDA relates to the Government through the Minister of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance.

The mission of the HRDA is to create the necessary prerequisites for the planned and systematic training and development of Cyprus's human resources, at all occupational levels and in all economic sectors, for meeting the economy's needs, within the overall national socio-economic policies

Additionally, according to the Human Resources Development Law of 1999, the HRDA has the right to:

- Define Standards of Vocational Qualifications for any category or categories of employed individuals
- Provide for the assessment of candidates
- Award and issue the relevant certificates of vocational qualifications

The HRDA has so far developed standards for 72 vocational qualifications. In order to obtain a vocational qualification, an individual needs to succeed in the relevant assessment (validation procedure) of HRDA. This applies to individuals of any educational background, even graduates of formal VET paths (upper secondary technical and vocational education) and apprenticeships. The latter graduates obtain educational qualifications through their studies, but not vocational ones. Currently, and in the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), efforts are being made to adjust the curricula of vocational schools and colleges (*Kollegia*) to the HRDA vocational qualifications.

The system, allows individuals to obtain a vocational qualification, regardless of the learning pathways through which the relevant knowledge, skills, and competences have been developed. In the context of the SVQ, HRDA commissioned a study for the further development of validation of non-formal and informal learning, where the role of guidance and the documentation of knowledge and competences are strengthened.

According to the Council Recommendation for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, 'validation arrangements should be linked to NQF and EQF and ensure that synergies exist between validation arrangement and credit systems'. Since 2010, the Cyprus NQF has been undergoing development and is close to being finalised during 2016. According to experts and stakeholders, the implementation of the NQF will allow for the introduction of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and will thus facilitate the validation of various types and forms of learning. As long as the NQF is not in place, the development of a comprehensive system of validation is challenging. The lack of an NQF also hinders the validation of non-formal and informal learning in formal education: prior work experience and non-formal learning can only be

recognised in higher education due to institutions' autonomy. Even at this level though, validation rarely takes place, according to experts.

Stakeholders hold a central role in existing validation practices. Representatives from all significant stakeholders sit on the Board of HRDA and are involved in the development of the NQF. Nonetheless, there are no examples of validation practices on a sectoral level and there is limited activity from the social partners (e.g. from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry) in this area.

The economic crisis and the high levels of unemployed people, especially among young graduates, are recognised as significant challenges to the implementation of a validation framework. The current economic context highlights priorities and also limitations of available resources, both financial and human capital, for the development of public policy. Therefore, it can be expected that validation will primarily focus on those most hard-hit by the crisis and that smaller steps will be taken for the validation of all types and forms of non-formal and informal learning.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

In Cyprus, there is no national legislative framework or system in place for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Non-formal and informal learning are not recognised or validated in formal education. Only on a tertiary level can institutions (public and private universities and colleges, *Kollegia*) recognise previous work experience of individuals so as to allow them to transfer credits and defer specific courses/modules towards the attainment of a specific degree/qualification.

In the non-formal learning sector, HRDA is the leading organisation, as it funds and promotes vocational training either at the premises of training institutions or in companies. HRDA is governed by a tripartite 13-member Board of Governors, including government, employer and trade union representatives.

A significant recent development has been the gradual introduction of a system for the evaluation and certification of training providers, i.e.: training centres, training facilities and trainers of vocational training. The system was fully implemented as of 1 January 2015. The system, entitled 'Evaluation and Certification of Training Providers' (AxioPistoSyn), uses specific criteria to assess trainers, training centres and structures, to ensure that they are eligible for certification. For trainers, the criteria are based on trainers' skills, academic qualifications and professional experience (HRDA, 2015).

Only certified training centres, training facilities and trainers are eligible to provide training programmes funded by the HRDA.

As far as the other organisations are concerned further steps have been taken towards the Council Recommendation in the past three years:

- The Cyprus NQF is at the finalisation stage. The NQF Referencing Report is currently being circulated to all relevant stakeholders in Cyprus and will be presented to the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG) during 2016;
- the use of Europass has significantly increased - Europass is promoted by the Cyprus Productivity Centre (CPC-*Kentro Paragogikotitas*, KEPA), the national Europass Centre, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance (*Ypourgeio Ergasias kai Koinonikon Asfaliseon*, YEKA);
- the interdepartmental Committee that has been given the task to develop and see to the implementation (by 2018) of a comprehensive action plan for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in line with the relevant Council Recommendation.

The cabinet of Ministers approved the establishment (MoEC Decision, 2013) of the interdepartmental Committee, as mentioned above. The Committee consists of representatives of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Coordinator), the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the General Directorate for European Programmes, Coordination and Development (the former Planning Bureau), the HRDA, the Foundation for the Management of European Lifelong Learning Programmes, the Commissioner of Volunteering and NGOs and the President of the Youth Board of Cyprus. The Committee may expand to include others, according to the needs which will occur.

The Committee is taking into account the work that is already being done by the HRDA, (described below), in order to implement Council Recommendations for the general and adult education sector as well as the non-formal learning that takes place within the volunteering and youth sector.

2.2 Validation in education and training

Non-formal and informal learning are not recognised or validated in formal education. Only tertiary level institutions (public and private universities and colleges, *Kollegia*) may recognise previous work experience of individuals so as to allow them to transfer credits and defer specific courses/modules towards the attainment of a specific degree/qualification. Also, the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (KYSATS), which recognises Higher Education (HE) qualifications, can recognise, as part of an individual's qualification, credits that come from work experience and credit transfers from recognised examinations of foreign education systems (e.g. A levels) (KYSATS). So, if for example, an employer asks a job applicant to get recognition of his/her qualifications from KYSATS, and this qualification includes credits from work experience, the Council will grant recognition. However, such credits from non-formal or informal learning can only comprise up to 10 % of the qualification in question. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), although autonomous, try to adhere to the 10 % limit of KYSATS.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

The main validation arrangements in place to help people to get a vocational qualification are related to the national system of Vocational Qualifications and are described below in more detail.

System of Vocational Qualifications (SVQ)

HRDA validates non-formal and informal learning, within the **System of Vocational Qualifications (SVQ)**. The system is based on Vocational Qualification Standards and aims at promoting the local human resources through the assessment of knowledge and competences and the certification of vocational qualifications. During the period 2007-2013 the SVQ was co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) (85 %) and by HRDA (15 %) (HRDA). In the SVQ, an individual may seek the validation of his/her knowledge and professional competences or a company can seek the validation of its employees. The SVQ is open to all citizens that legally reside in Cyprus, either Cypriot or foreigners; as well as to employees of companies registered in Cyprus, regardless of the country of employment.

Development phases

The ESF programming period 2007-2013 led to the development of 72 Vocational Standards for the following sectors/occupations: tourist industry, construction industry, wholesale and retail trade sector, motor vehicles repair sector, manufacturing sector, ITC systems and networks, trainer of VET, and hairdresser (HRDA 2016a).

During the ESF programming period 2014-2020, the plan is to develop another 80 additional Vocational Standards. The Vocational Standards already developed will also be revised to respond better to labour market needs. Plans also include improvements to the approval

criteria for candidates and assessors, the assessors' training, as well as the assessment methods used by assessors.

The standards include all task areas of the occupations and each task is further analysed to sub-task elements. The necessary knowledge is provided regarding each sub-task element. It is noted that the qualification standard includes both occupational-related skills, but also soft skills that can develop from work experience (e.g. teamwork, collaboration etc.)². All individuals can apply, provided they have satisfactory related experience, regardless of how they acquired the required knowledge and competences.

The process toward a vocational qualification: Access and Award

Individuals who are interested in certification can seek information from the assessment centres and the HRDA. The applications are submitted to the centres and should be accompanied by a self-assessment regarding the specific knowledge-skills-competences of the vocational qualification that the individual seeks to obtain and sufficient documentation of education and previous relevant work experience. The applications and the relevant documentation papers are submitted to HRDA for approval. Selection criteria for each vocational qualification (i.e. each level of difficulty of the vocational sectors) have been pre-agreed by the sectoral technical committees and are included in HRDA guides.

The selection criteria also differ between vocational fields and levels.

Each vocational qualification in the SVQ is designed in modules. So, an individual can choose (and/or may be advised) to take parts/modules of the qualification. Through self-assessment, the individual can also decide whether further training is necessary.

The award process includes three stages:

- Diagnosis of knowledge and competences
- Assessment of knowledge and competences
- Certification

The diagnosis, which corresponds to the identification stage, is completed by an internal assessor. The diagnosis takes place through an interview with the individual and the assessor's evaluation of the self-assessment. There is pre-set template for the identification, where the internal assessor has to identify and explain if and why the applicant fulfils the requirements for the total or parts of the qualification.

The assessment, which corresponds to the formal assessment stage, is undertaken by an internal and an external assessor. A quality assurance responsible/verifier also reviews the assessment procedure and content at the end.

Assessment takes place in groups of three candidates in more than one meeting in centres that have been approved by HRDA. The exact number of meetings and their duration is pre-defined. Centres may be private companies or public/private training centres, such as vocational schools or the Cyprus Productivity Centre (CPC).

Assessment results are sent to HRDA, which validates the successful candidates. The latter are awarded a vocational qualification. If the candidate has succeeded in some of the qualification modules, a certification is provided only for those modules.

The vocational qualifications achieved are gradually accepted by the labour market, both the public and the private sector. For example, the Ministry of Transport accepts the vocational qualifications of HRDA as sufficient requirement for the attainment of professional licence for car mechanics, when non-certified individuals need to sit relevant exams. Recently (2015) the Energy Service (Ministry of Energy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism) set the SVQ

² For example, this is the vocational qualification by modules for pastry chef. Internet: <http://www.hrdauth.com/images/media/assetfile/zaxaroplastiki.pdf>

qualifications as the requirement for the attainment of professional licence for technical specialists on the Energy Performance of Buildings.

According to national sources, the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance is considering making HRDA's vocational qualifications obligatory for professionals in certain sectors/occupations to increase the employability and mobility of learners. The Ministry of Labour is considering this, especially for some sectors initially, such as the tourism sector. Additionally, professional bodies in the construction sector are also progressing towards making certification obligatory in order for individuals to obtain a license for certain construction professions.

Study³ on the feasibility and potential for recognising prior formal, non-formal and informal learning within the System of Vocational Qualifications⁴

HRDA commissioned an independent consultant to study the 'Feasibility and potential for recognising prior formal, non-formal and informal learning within the SVQ'. The study was completed in late October 2013.

The study took into account HRDA's strategies, the relevant EU framework (especially the Council Recommendation), and the national vocational education and training system.

The suggested validation process put forward by the study is comprised of five stages, which are described in short below.

■ **Stage 1: Briefing - personalised consultation**

The individual will be able to collect information from assessment centres and explore the opportunities available. The individual will be informed on the goals and benefits of recognition, the prerequisites for participation in the system, the process structure and duration, the knowledge and competences required for specific Vocational Qualifications etc.

■ **Stage 2: Identification**

During this stage, individuals will be assisted to analyse their learning and work path, self-assess their position in the labour market, design a career path and prepare for the assessment of their learning outcomes. Then, those interested in participating in the SVQ will submit an application and the self-assessment form. An internal (centre's) assessor will support individuals during this stage.

■ **Stage 3: Documentation**

This stage aims at the accumulation and control of one's certifications, qualification documents etc. that will prove the sufficient knowledge and competence for the vocational qualification in question. The documentation of the individual's learning outcomes will be realised through the portfolio method. This method will include all knowledge, skills and competences, developed from various areas of activities, from the workplace to leisure time. The individual will again be supported by an internal assessor. The internal assessor, along with an external assessor will work as a two-person Assessment Committee. They will ensure validity, sufficiency, authenticity and reliability of the content of the portfolio.

■ **Stage 4: Assessment**

As part of the proposed route of validation, individuals who submit all the relevant documentation can go through a three-hour assessment (i.e. case study presentation), where capabilities linked to significant elements of the personalised portfolio will be evaluated with regard only to the modules where there is not sufficient documentation. Contrary to the existing SVQ, the proposed new route of recognition of prior learning will aim mainly at

³ HRDA commissioned through a competitive process a private consultant to run the study.

⁴ A summary of the study outcomes were provided by HRDA; this report includes extracts from the summary.

confirming rather than exploring an individual's knowledge and skills. During this stage, the 'verifier' will observe and confirm the results of the individual's assessment.

The individuals who are not able to provide the relevant documentation can go through the current assessment route, i.e. depending on the qualification they are interested in they have to go through between two and five assessment meetings (observation in real working conditions or simulation, oral and written tests, case studies).

■ **Stage 5: Certification of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning**

Individuals will obtain a full or part of a vocational qualification if s/he has been successfully assessed and has passed the written examination, where this is needed.

In the current SVQ, certification is focused on assessing individuals mainly through observation in real working conditions and oral/written questions. The new route for the recognition of prior learning will place emphasis on the documentation of knowledge and competences.

Quality assurance is a priority for the 2014-2020 EU Structural Funds programming period. The new system of prior learning recognition will include a robust quality assurance framework, regarding the structures, processes and methods and human resources involved. This will include improving the quality of both the candidates and the assessors taking part in the validation processes and improving the monitoring of the quality criteria which have already been developed.

It is proposed that under the new route the recognition process should not exceed five months.

The study is expected to affect policy decisions for the 2014-2020 programming period and lead to relevant changes in the existing system. The goal is to implement a System of Vocational Qualifications that will provide the opportunity to recognise prior learning through examination/assessment of all aspects of the qualification; alternatively, first the portfolio of qualifications/certifications of an individual will be evaluated and then the examination/assessment will only be about the qualification modules where there is not sufficient documentation.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in the private sector

Validation of non-formal or informal learning also takes place in the private sector at occupational level. In order for an individual to apply for membership to the Cyprus Association of Certified Auditors (ICPAC, 2013), his/her work experience can sometimes be recognised as a substitute for relevant formal qualifications. Due to the high level of graduates in the country and the high unemployment rates due to the crisis, it is rare that individuals with such a profile apply. It should be noted, however, that this process is in line with the Directive 2006/43 of the European Parliament and Council (ESMA, 2013) and is not a country-specific initiative.

Social partner organisations also organise validation of staff members of their member companies, on the basis of ISO standards.

Furthermore, non-formal learning in ICT skills is validated by the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and by private providers (ECDL, 2013).

2.3.1 Skills audits

Skills audits do not take place in Cyprus. The public employment service (PES) (*Dimosia Ypiresia Apasxolisis*) offers no such service.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

No specific third sector initiatives for validation were found. However, the interviewees pointed out that a lively debate is taking place in Cyprus, including a discussion on whether/how volunteering can be validated.

The HRDA is of the view that since the validation by SVQ is well advanced, the HRDA could define new occupational profiles to include third sector professions and volunteering in the SVQ. However, there are also thoughts on developing a separate system for the third sector. The Committee's Mapping Study, which is planned for 2016-2017, will bring to light any third sector validation practices that may currently exist but which have not been recorded due to the limitations of the remit of the current study.

3 Links to national qualification systems

Qualifications and Cyprus' qualifications framework

Significant steps have been taken towards the completion of the NQF of Cyprus, which is expected to be finalised in 2016. The Council of Ministers approved the framework in May 2012 and it was decided to adopt the eight levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, the NQF has been developed in order to promote educational advancement and job progression of all Cypriot people through lifelong learning.

The final diagram of the NQF has been presented to all stakeholders and has been amended based on their feedback. Although stakeholders are actively involved in the development of the NQF, the Ministry of Education and Culture underlines that a broader representation of stakeholders is needed; for example, all employers from all sectors should be included to represent all levels and types of industry in Cyprus.

The Referencing Report of the NQF is at its finalization stage and ready to be distributed to all stakeholders and it is expected to be presented to the EQF Advisory Group during 2016..

The importance of including validation of non-formal and informal learning in the NQF is acknowledged. More specifically, the SVQ (see Section 2.1) is included in the final diagram and expected to be integrated into the NQF. In order to achieve this aim, the SVQ has replaced its previous level descriptors and adopted the EQF level descriptors.

Most importantly, as mentioned above, a committee for the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been established, after the suggestion by the Ministry of Education and Culture to the Board of Ministers. The Ministry also suggested recognising non-formal and informal learning when referring an individual to NQF levels 5 and 6, so that previous work experience and non-formal training are recognised as part of a qualification.

Credit systems

In Cyprus, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is used in higher education and is linked to learning outcomes for the majority of the programmes. One needs at least 240 ECTS credits to obtain a first cycle degree (EHEA, 2015). In this way, the mobility of higher education learners is promoted, especially in relation to the Erasmus programme, where the performance of Cyprus is lower than the European average. However, universities do not provide full or partial qualifications through recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In practice, non-formal learning is not recognised within higher education; but in some cases, informal learning/previous work experience may be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, it is considered a very unusual practice by higher education institutions. The latest report on Cyprus's implementation of the Bologna Process (2012-2015) states that candidates without the standard higher education entry qualifications cannot be admitted (EHEA, 2015).

ECVET is not yet in place. The Foundation for the Management of European Lifelong Learning Programmes is responsible for the coordination of the work of the five national ECVET experts, and the promotion and implementation of ECVET in Cyprus. A series of events are organised to increase awareness of ECVET. Given that secondary vocational and technical education is undergoing reform, with new curricula being developed, ECVET is expected to be integrated in the new curricula. For this reason, pilot ECVET projects will be implemented, designed by the ECVET European expert group (ECVET, 2016).

The completion of the NQF will allow for the gradual integration of ECVET and then the validation of non-formal and informal learning into STVE.

4 Standards

As mentioned above, the NQF has now been developed, while the NQF's Referencing Report to the EQF is expected to be presented and adopted in June 2016. The NQF of Cyprus has adopted the eight EQF levels, anticipating the promotion of lifelong learning attainment.

As far as the SVQ is concerned, the Standards of Vocational Qualifications have been defined and the framework has been outlined for the training and development of an individual to reach the appropriate competence level. The standards used in the system have been influenced by the current UK National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Recently, the SVQ has replaced its previous level descriptors and adopted the EQF level descriptors. Standards are approved by technical committees in which stakeholders participate.

Since validation of non-formal and informal learning almost exclusively takes place in the vocational field, the standards used are relevant to the vocational qualifications. Therefore, HRDA is in consultation with vocational schools and colleges (*Kollegia*) regarding the development of curricula that will match HRDA's vocational qualifications.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

National institutional framework

In Cyprus, there is no national approach to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, there is no single authority which is responsible for all types and forms of such validation in the public and private sector.

Nonetheless, HRDA is the organisation that holds a central role in continuing vocational training. The SVQ that HRDA has developed is considered the first step towards the development of a validation framework.

Allocation of responsibilities (at national, regional, local, social partner, provider level) according to the different aspects of validation

HRDA is the organisation responsible for all validation steps towards vocational qualifications.

In the non-formal education sector, certification of ICT knowledge is offered by private organisations that represent foreign providers, for example, ECDL and the ICT certification provided by the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry. For these two certifications, the validation of non-formal learning takes place through online examinations set by the 'mother' organisations (ECDL Foundation and ICT Europe, respectively).

Since validation of non-formal and informal learning is not systematic nor is it included in a framework, provision of guidance to individuals is not yet embedded in the relevant

processes. HRDA recognises the importance of guidance and that the current SVQ does not sufficiently include it. This is one of the reasons that the suggested new route for recognition of prior learning includes the provision of guidance to individuals. Unemployed individuals can currently receive guidance from Public Employment Authority local offices, but this is not part of a validation process.

Education and training providers:

Only HRDA validates non-formal and informal learning, through the system that has been described earlier in this report (see mainly Section 2.1). Validation does not take place in formal education, except for higher education: higher education institutions are autonomous and thus have the discretion to decide what they recognise and how they recognise learning. Nonetheless, it is rare for non-formal and informal learning to be recognised.

The implementation of the NQF, which is in its final stages of development, will promote the use of ECVET and facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning in relation to formal education and training.

Private sector actors (including social partners)

In Cyprus, representatives of social partners participate in the Board of the HRDA. The SVQ and the anticipated new route for the validation of prior learning is/will be agreed with these representatives.

Social partners (e.g. chambers) offer training. However, participants only receive a participation certificate and the knowledge and skills acquired during the training are not validated through a formal process. On the other hand, the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry offers certification of ICT knowledge, regardless of the learning pathway followed.

Coordination between stakeholders

Validation practices are fragmented, as there is no national framework for validation. With regard to the SVQ, social partners closely collaborate in the Board of the HRDA: all occupational profiles, criteria and processes for accreditation of assessment centres and assessors etc. have to be approved by the Board. Sectoral representatives were involved in the technical committees that defined each occupational profile for each vocational qualification, to make sure that these qualifications satisfy the labour market.

The government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance is also involved in the system, as their representatives sit on the Board. Since validation is not formally recognised in formal education, the Ministry of Education and Culture does not participate in other activities.

Stakeholders from Ministries and social partners are heavily involved in the development of the NQF, which is expected to be completed shortly.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

HRDA informs the public of its activities, the SVQ included, through the press, internet, radio and television promotion. HRDA also tries to inform and engage companies, so as to guide their employees to certification through the system. Awareness-raising events for companies have taken place at local level, to which CEOs and sectoral representatives are invited.

In order to raise awareness about the ICT Europe certificate, the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry participates in the annual Education Fair that takes place in Nicosia, organised by the Ministry of Education. Also, the Chamber informs its members/businesses

about the certificate to increase their interest and to encourage their employees to participate.

ECDL is also promoted through the annual Education Fair, which mainly targets upper secondary students. ECDL Cyprus⁵ also uses the social media to raise awareness about the diploma, while several Examination Centres, which are private providers, promote ECDL through advertising.

Role of information, advice and guidance networks / institutions

The SVQ includes provision for guidance to applicants. During the diagnosis stage (identification), candidates discuss with the internal examiner their goals and knowledge-skills-competence (as identified in their self-assessment). However, this is not a structured guidance process. This limitation has been identified by HRDA and is reflected in the suggested new route for the recognition of prior learning. The anticipated route for the validation of prior learning will now focus more on the provision of guidance, before the stages of identification and assessment.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

Employment counsellors of the local PES offices are aware of the SVQ and can suggest that individuals participate. No specific initiatives have been found regarding guidance practitioners.

6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

Employment counsellors of the local PES offices are aware of the SVQ and can suggest that individuals participate. No specific initiatives have been found regarding guidance practitioners.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

Under the SVQ, there are two assessors for each group of individuals (up to three individuals), an internal and an external assessor. The internal assessor is an employee or a partner of the assessment centre. The external assessors have to be registered in HRDA's register, which means that they are certified by the organisation. A third person, the verifier, is responsible for ensuring the quality of the process. Verifiers are also registered in HRDA's register.

7.2 Qualification requirements

Internal and external assessors as well as verifiers have to meet specific criteria, regarding minimum qualifications and/or experience. The requirements differ among the vocational qualifications in order that they match the demands of each vocational profile.

⁵ ECDL Cyprus is a non-profit organisation and is the organisation responsible for examinations; it does not offer learning.

For example, internal and external assessors, as well as verifiers for the wholesale and retail trade field should be:

- HE graduates in any sector, with at least three years of study, with a minimum of 10 years of professional and/or teaching experience in the topic/field that they will examine; or
- secondary education graduates with at least 20 years of professional and/or teaching experience in the topic/field that they will examine.

For the construction industry, five years of experience from HE graduates is requested from assessors, specifying the focus of their studies and experience relating to the various vocational qualifications/modules (for example, assessors for carpentry will have a different profile from assessors in management and supervision of a construction project).

Assessors for the trainers of vocational training need to have a Master's degree and eight years of work experience, five of which as VET trainers.

For the hotel and catering industry, qualifications and/or minimum work experience of assessors is determined for each vocational field accordingly.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

All assessors in the SVQ have to attend a programme on assessment and verification, run by HRDA, to ensure that common understanding and approaches are implemented during the assessment stage.

8 Quality assurance

Since there is no national framework for validation, no relevant quality assurance system exists.

HRDA has a robust process of quality assurance regarding the SVQ. All elements and participating actors in the system are quality assured by HRDA, which holds relevant registers of centres and assessors per vocational field and per region.

More specifically, other relevant factors are described below.

- HRDA approves all assessment centres. Criteria include the available infrastructure, the managing structure, and quality of human resources, e.g. the qualifications and relevant experience of the manager and the trainers that undertake assessments. In order for an assessment centre to be approved, it should have at least one certified internal assessor per vocational field. Also, assessment centres should have quality assurance systems in place to safeguard that assessments take place in a transparent and impartial way. After approval, if an assessment centre fails to comply with its obligations, a two-month notice is issued to take corrective actions; otherwise, the operational licence is withdrawn by HRDA.
- Internal assessors are also approved by HRDA and can be experts or employees/partners of assessment centres. HRDA sets out specific qualifications that internal assessors should meet, and identifies specific duties and responsibilities of internal assessors. The latter collaborate with external assessors during the assessment process and have to inform the responsible HRDA officer of any arising issue.
- External assessors/verifiers are experts certified by HRDA that fulfil pre-set criteria of qualifications and/or relevant work experience. An individual cannot apply for both an external and internal assessor's position in the same assessment centre. This is to ensure that the applicant's assessment is based on more than one professional opinion. External assessors /verifiers are obliged to attend specialised training that HRDA organises. The external assessor collaborates with the internal assessor to ensure that

the applicant is formally assessed through transparent and fair processes. The external assessor collaborates with the verifier and informs the responsible HRDA officer if any issue occurs. When the assessment of the applicant is completed, the external assessors drafts and submits a relevant report to the Unit of Vocational Qualifications of HRDA. The verifier controls the assessment plan of each individual and of the assessment methods implemented. S/he is responsible for checking the assessment centre for availability of the necessary infrastructure (e.g. machinery) for the particular assessment. The verifier is responsible for written tests, and for the review of these tests. The verifier provides feedback to the assessment centre and the HRDA Examination Committee to safeguard coherence and quality of the assessments that take place in that particular centre. As with the external assessors, the verifier drafts a report and provides all necessary documentation to the Unit of Vocational Qualifications of HRDA.

Given that stakeholders are highly involved in the SVQ and in HRDA's governance overall, the quality assurance process has been designed in accordance with sectoral representatives, as well as Ministries and social partners.

8.1 Evaluation framework

No evaluation framework is in place regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The SVQ of the HRDA has not yet been formally evaluated, as it is still in the early stages of implementation

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

The major financial contribution for initiatives related to validation is provided by the European Structural Funds. The ESF is co funding both the project lead by the HDRA and the project lead by Ministry of Education and Culture

The main source of income for HRDA comes from the Human Resource Development levy paid by all companies in the private sector and semi-governmental organisations. The levy corresponds to 0.5 % of the payroll of each contributing company. The levy is used to finance the activities of HRDA, and mostly the provision of training. The adverse effects of the economic crisis on the public and private sectors underline the challenges for the sustainability of this levy.

Regarding the SVQ, the first phase (2005-2007) was funded from national resources. The current, second phase is co-funded by the ESF, which has created more opportunities for expansion and inclusion of more companies and stakeholders etc. SVQ has also been put forward for co-funding during the new programming period (2014-2020).

For the realisation of the tasks of the Committee appointed by the Cabinet, specific provisions were incorporated into the National Strategic Reference Framework and a project lead by Ministry of Education and Culture entitled "Establishing mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning" is to be supported financially by the European Structural Funds (2014-2020).

9.2 Distribution of costs

- Individuals that participate in SVQ assessments are not required to pay any fee.
- The Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry charges participants about EUR 50 for each module of its ICT examination. In cases of unemployed people, people on low

incomes and other groups that face challenges, the personal situation is taken into consideration and fees are reduced.

- To obtain the complete ECDL Diploma, one has to succeed in seven thematic areas (four compulsory and three optional that the individual can select from a list). The applicant needs to have a unique identification number, which is charged at EUR 10. Examinations for each thematic area cost EUR 50 (HRDA).
- The process towards the certification of personal assistants (training and certification) through the EUPA training and tools currently costs around EUR 200.

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

By acquiring a vocational qualification through HRDA's system, individuals increase their opportunities for employment or advancement in their career, so it is relevant and beneficial for all unemployed people, and economically inactive and employed people. At the same time, businesses that promote the certification of their employees also benefit from having more developed and qualified human resources.

According to the results of a recent evaluation study of SVQ, it seems that the system is very well-accepted by the labour market and has the potential to increase employability (Evaluation Study of the co funded Project "Establishment and Operation of a System of Vocational Qualifications" for the programming period 2007-2013, Sept 2015 (unpublished)).

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

During the period 2013-2015, a total of 2 563 candidates' applications have been filed and 1 700 persons have gone through the assessment and succeeded in obtaining a vocational qualification (HRDA). The number of applications was lower than expected due to the economic crisis as well the voluntary aspects of the validation. Furthermore, a great number of candidates' applications could not proceed to assessment due to lack of documentation or cancellation of assessment meetings. In order to obtain higher quality results, HRDA promoted strict requirements regarding the documentation of candidates/assessors' education and work experience and verification of the methods of assessment.

9.4.2 Validation users

During the programming period 2007-2013, according to the evaluation study, 51 % of the 1 244 certified persons were female and 49 % male, 86 % were 35-65 years of age, and 29 % had secondary and 53 % tertiary educational level. The vast majority (90 %) were employed. The most popular qualifications were: Trainer for Vocational Programmes (40 %), Housekeeping (23 %), Front Office Operations (8 %), Food and Beverage Service (8 %) and Food Preparation and Cooking (7 %). An impressive 93 % of certified individuals were satisfied with their participation in the SVQ.

9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

No specific examples of initiatives involving migrants/refugees have been identified through the desk research and interviews.

Due to the increase in unemployment, especially of young people, HRDA runs targeted programmes for the training and work placement of unemployed individuals (Internet: <http://www.hrdauth.com/easyconsole.cfm/id/97#97> (in EL)), including females (Internet: <http://www.hrdauth.com/easyconsole.cfm/id/3> (in EL)). Training is provided in English, IT and administration competences. Individuals that are interested in participating need to visit the local offices of the PES, where specialised employment counsellors provide individualised guidance. It should be noted that the PES does not have a specific system in place for the

validation of non-formal and informal learning of unemployed people. Based on the results of the consultation with the counsellor, individuals receive a referral document where his/her knowledge, skills, and competences, as well as career aspirations are indicated, and they can visit local training institutions. All such institutions are certified by HRDA. The referral document is mandatory in order for unemployed individuals to apply. HRDA selects those that will join the programmes. The selection criteria are relevant to the individual's qualifications and experience, while priority is given to long-term unemployed people and members of large families etc. However, these programmes do not include a well-defined validation system nor stages of a system.

10 Validation methods

As already noted, validation of prior learning mainly takes place through the SVQ. The main assessment method is observation of the candidates in real working conditions or in acceptable simulation conditions, oral questions and written tests (multiple choice questions). The methods are adjusted to the needs of the vocational qualification and the relevant level of qualification. The methods are pre-defined in the standards of vocational qualifications. More senior levels of qualifications include additional and more diverse assessment methods i.e. written tests (open questions), case studies, completion of a small project and / or an interview.

Although the terminology does not match that of the Council Recommendation, it is possible to conclude that three validation stages are recognised:

- Diagnosis of the applicant's competences and knowledge (equivalent to identification);
- Examination of the applicant's competences and knowledge (assessment); and
- Certification.

The diagnosis refers to the identification of the applicant's knowledge, skills, and competences by the internal assessor and is based on the applicant's self-assessment and on interview.

The examination (assessment) is based on an assessment plan that the internal assessor has prepared. The assessment methods used during the assessment vary depending on the type of vocational qualification and the level of qualification sought.

Each vocational profile, developed during the first stage of the SVQ, determines the assessment methods, the number of assessment meetings, and the duration of the whole process.

Only online tests are used for the attainment of certification of ICT knowledge (ECDL and ICT Europe, the latter run by the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry).

The following table presents the main methods used in SVQ through the main stages of validation.

Methods of validation	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Debate			
Declarative methods	x (self-assessment)		
Interview	x		
Observation			X
Portfolio method			
Presentation			X
Micro lessons			X
Simulation and			X

Methods of validation	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
evidence extracted from work			
Tests and examinations			X (written and oral questions)
Other (e.g. e-learning methods) – please specify			X (online tests; product test; project; micro lessons)

Micro-lessons are only used as an assessment tool for the certification of VET trainers.

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Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Cyprus Productivity Centre

11.3 Examples

Cyprus has participated in numerous EU-funded projects on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The following projects have taken place or are taking place under the Lifelong Learning Programme.

Box 2 The EUPA NEXT project

Supported by the Cyprus Centre of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), the project has two main objectives: at the sector level, the project aims to develop a European / International qualification for administrative personnel in four EQF levels. At the policy level, the project aims to identify the situation of ECVET in participating countries and to develop a national and a comparative report. The project runs from September 2015 to August 2018, and is funded by the ERASMUS+ programme. The project builds on the EUPA project (see below

for details).

Box 3 EUPA project

The **European Personal Assistant (EUPA)** project, as presented in the 2010 version of the Inventory report, aimed to develop 'a model for the recognition and validation of qualifications in the personal assistants (PAs) sector based on learning outcomes'. The project ran from October 2009 to July 2012 and was led by a Cypriot partner, the Mediterranean Management Centre (Internet: www.mmclearningsolutions.com).

EUPA underlined the importance of learning outcomes, qualifications, EQF, and validation of non-formal and informal learning. The project led to the development of a qualification framework, based on learning outcomes, and certification based on the validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Keeping in mind the EQF, four levels have been developed that were referenced to EQF levels (2, 3, 4 and 5).

In order to identify the competences a PA should have, a number of people were included in the design phase such as business managers, PAs and stakeholders that usually collaborate with PAs (e.g. travel agencies).

Participants/learners from Cyprus participated in training that was designed for each unit of the qualification. Training was assessed by participants in every country (Cyprus, Greece and Slovakia). In Cyprus, the overall assessment was 4.8/5.0.

The project has been evaluated both internally and externally. All elements of the project were evaluated, to ensure the quality of the process (Internet: http://www.mmclearningsolutions.com/Project_Card.aspx?ProjectID=169).

After the completion of the project, the tools which were trialed in the project are used in Cyprus: PAs can participate in training seminars and receive certification for Level 2. Training materials for higher levels are currently under development to satisfy demand. The training curriculum has been submitted to HRDA, seeking certification and subsidy. The view is that subsidy from HRDA will attract more PAs and businesses, due to the decrease of participation costs. Moreover, it is planned to continue the use of the EUPA tools through a Grundtvig programme, so as to attract PAs from across the EU. Additionally, efforts are being made to obtain ISO 17024 certification of the personal competences included in the EUPA training curriculum. This will strengthen acceptance of the tools in the labour market.

Overall, although the tool has not been formally recognised and used by public authorities, it is well known and well received in the private sector. High-demand from the private sector, including large corporations, is a boost to the development of all necessary material for levels 3, 4 and 5, which will also allow for the personal development of the PAs already certified for level 2.

Internet: http://www.mmclearningsolutions.com/TrainingCourse_Card.aspx?TrainingCourseID=1904&TrainingCourseCategoryID= and <http://www.euma.org/eupa---qualification-framework-for-personal-assistants>

Box 4 Certi.MenTu- EU funded project under the Lifelong Learning Programme

The Certi.MenTu project has been running since 2012, completing in 2014. One of the partners - MMC Management Centre Ltd - comes from Cyprus (Internet: www.mmclearningsolutions.com). As part of the aims of the project, the roles of mentor and tutor were defined. A Competence Matrix was also defined, showing the

competences that mentors and tutors should attain.

Education material was developed to allow individuals to acquire these competences. This material will lead to the certification of individuals. The certification is quality assured by ISO standards. Through self-assessment, the individual decides whether further training is necessary to get the certification. As a next step, individuals will be examined by certified examiners. The examination methods were one of the most important outcomes, since they address the challenge of gaining and evaluating soft skills.

Box 5 Europass and Youthpass

Europass is widely known and used by individuals in Cyprus. As mentioned above, the CPC is the National Europass Centre (Internet: <http://www.kepa.gov.cy/Europass/Portal/PortalDocuments.aspx?DocumentId=6f1b1c7e-503c-4d13-a8ac-825593ca8a43>). Since 2007, 228 728 Europass CVs have been completed by residents of Cyprus (Until December 2015; statistical data available at internet:

http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/Statistics/2._Activity_since_launch_by_country_and_language/Europass_Statistic_Reports_SinceLaunch_Locale_el_CY.PDF). The number of CVs completed online has been steadily increasing from 2007 up to 2015, while there was a slight decline from 2013 to 2014. More specifically, 41 940 CVs were completed online by citizens residing in Cyprus in 2015, the highest number of CVs completed online to date. The steady increase could be attributed to the rising unemployment rates that the country has been facing due to the economic crisis, which has led unemployed people, especially youth, to seek employment abroad.

This is also emphasised by the increase in the use of Youthpass. Although awareness of the tool is limited, the use of Youthpass in 2013 (55 projects)⁶ already surpasses that of 2012 and has consistently been rising since 2010, when Youthpass was only issued for four projects.

According to experts, although Cyprus is involved in many relevant projects and dissemination of results is sufficient, time-consuming processes hinder the incorporation of tools into public policy.

⁶ As of 10 September 2013.



Country report Cyprus

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).



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