



Country report

Malta

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

Author: Ilona Murphy

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1 Introduction and evaluation

1.1 Abstract

The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) is currently responsible for the national system for validation. Whilst progress has been made since last reporting in 2014, validation is still limited to a few sectors – namely the childcare, and building and construction sectors. However, through the ongoing development of Sector Skills Units, the NCFHE intends to extend the process to enable validation in more sectors. Indeed, the value and importance of validation is emphasised in several national policy documents recently published. This includes Malta's National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 that sets a target for implementing a transparent and sustainable system within NCFHE in order to validate and recognise non-formal and informal learning by the end of 2016.

The Validation of Informal and Non-Formal learning (VINFL) in Malta is regulated by Subsidiary Legislation No 327.432 of 2012. So far, legislation allows validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) to take place up to Level 5 of the MQF, based on occupational standards developed by representatives of the sector.

One of the measures taken to improve the competitiveness of the Maltese economy has been the introduction of the Skill Cards initiative within the construction industry. Significantly, one of the objectives of the Skill Cards is to recognise the skills of workers in the construction industry which have been acquired through informal and/or non-formal learning.

More recently, the 2016 4th Edition of the Referencing Report of the Malta Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework (NCFHE, 2016) reflects on the range of current reforms representing a move towards a more modular based concept as building blocks for qualifications. Such an approach is intended to allow for and promote lifelong learning for non-traditional learners. It calls for better integration of non-formal learning within mainstream education routes.

Following the launch of the National Quality Assurance Framework in 2015 (NCFHE, 2015a), procedures for the implementation of external quality audits were also published. The outcomes of pilot external audits with the University of Malta, MCAST and ITS, are contributing to developments to ensure that the National Quality Assurance Framework applies to the validation of informal and non-formal learning.

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

In summary, no major changes have taken place concerning the legal basis, the process or the use of validation of informal and non-formal learning in Malta since the last reporting in 2014.

Validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL), as defined in legislation, refers to a process which identifies, assesses and formally certifies the knowledge, skills and competences that individuals develop throughout their lives by means of participation in non-formal and informal learning.

Since the change of government in March 2013 and since the last Inventory reporting in 2014, the strategic and operational context in Malta regarding the validation of informal and non-formal learning continues to progress. The NCFHE, launched in September 2012 continues to deliver a programme of activities in support of the VINFL. By creating a validation system for informal and non-formal learning, the NCFHE continues to work with the developing Sector Skills Unit stakeholders to develop National Occupational Standards in identified areas.

The current development of the Sector Skills Units, which continues to take place, will be a significant step in relation to establishing validation processes at a sectoral level. Much work has already been undertaken to develop formal structures for validation in priority sectors through the creation of four Sector Skills Units in the sectors of i) Childcare; ii) Building and Construction; iii) Hair and Beauty; and, iv) Automotive sector. At the time of writing this report (March 2016), two other units are planned for the Printing and Voluntary Work-related sectors. Significant developments are also underway in the Tourism sector insofar that a Committee between the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) and key industry players has been set up to help identify skill gaps in the ITS curricula as well as anticipate future industry requirements. Next steps will include the development of occupational standards and the appointment of an assessment board assigned to the Sector Skills Unit.

As reported in 2014, the Sector Skills Units will have an integral role in widening sector focussed validation, working with stakeholders, including the NCFHE and Employment Training Centre (ETC), to develop and establish occupational standards for their respective sectors, in alignment with the developed validation processes and referenced to the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). Examples of occupational standards which have been drawn up include those for the childcare, building and construction, the printing sectors and also for motor damage assessors. In childcare for example, a child carer can be validated at MQF Level 4, while a Childcare manager/supervisor can be validated at MQF Level 5 (NCFHE, 2016).

Since the 2014 report, there have been a number of policy developments reinforcing the potential of VINFL in Malta, which are worth highlighting:

- the publication of the fourth edition of the Referencing Report in February 2016;
- the National Vocational Education and Training Policy in April 2015;
- The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2014, and
- the Higher Education Strategy in 2015.

Significantly, the Referencing Report sets out the key principles for the process of validation in Malta, based on three key structures: i) one which oversees the overall process (ensuring there is a framework for validation covering all sectors); ii) one at sector level (establishing occupational standards, conducting the validation assessment, issuing certification and managing redress)¹; and, iii) one for guidance and support. Under this principle, the need for a robust system of advice and guidance and the role of a mentor in supporting the learner to identify and collect evidence for the validation assessment is emphasised (this is discussed further in section 2.2 below).

In terms of the extent to which the outcomes of validation are trusted by stakeholders and society, there is recognition at a national level that VINFL is fundamental to economic prosperity, as well as to supporting individuals to develop their personal and work-related skills and abilities. Indeed, one of the aforementioned key principles of the overall process of validation calls for an overall framework which is functional and caters for validation in the relevant sectors; the rationale is that it would ensure that validation is valued and recognised by employers and education and training institutions themselves in order to maintain the integrity and value of certification obtained through validation.

A key strength of the approach to validation in Malta is that it is aimed at increasing lifelong learning, mobility and employability of the learners.

A further strength of Malta's approach to validation is the close relationship between validation and qualifications. The National Qualifications Framework and its qualifications are

¹ Under the principles for validation in Malta, if an applicant feels that the assessment received was unfair, then there should be the possibility for the assessment to be revised.

based on the principles and objectives of learning outcomes that are subsequently linked to VINFL.

Following a change of government in 2013, whilst progress has been made in developing a national system for validation, the first are sector skills units were set up and to encourage greater momentum has been achieved to accelerate developments at a faster pace than to date.

At the time of writing this report, there were no specific policies, projects or initiatives in Malta directed to the validation of skills for immigrants or refugees. However, there are no restrictions preventing immigrants/refugees from accessing validation opportunities currently available in Malta. One important development in this respect is the Skill Cards initiative currently being trialled in the construction industry (see box 1 below for further information). This initiative provides the possibility for individuals from non-EU Member States to obtain a Skill Card by means of undertaking a trade test to demonstrate, in a real or simulated workplace environment, their performance, competences or otherwise to be duly assessed.

Since the 2014 report, a number of reforms in the national education system have been introduced. This includes a reform in the assessment processes in compulsory education, involving a shift from a system of an external summative assessment at the end of compulsory education to one which is school-based through the Secondary School Certificate and Profile (SSC&P), which are recognised by MCAST for entry into VET courses. Moreover, the development of the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education is another significant reform recently introduced.

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

Since the 2014 report, progress towards establishing a national strategy and framework for validation continues. The NCFHE has been charged with introducing a national system for validation, including drafting National Guidelines for the validation of informal and non-formal learning, aligning with the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). As part of the development of a national system for validation, the framework will cover all sectors.

Occupational Standards supporting a validation framework have been established for the childcare, business and construction, the printing sectors and also for motor damage assessors. Occupational standards are currently being developed in the hair and beauty, and automotive sectors. As reported above, two other Sector Skills Units are currently planned for the Printing and Voluntary Work-related sectors

Also noted above is the growing number of policy developments reinforcing the potential of validation of informal and non-formal learning in Malta. These are summarised below:

Referencing Report 2016

The NCFHE published in February 2016 the fourth edition of the Referencing Report, referencing the Malta Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. The report confirms the legal framework for validation² and reinforces the role of the NCFHE as the competent authority responsible for the Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Learning (VINFL) and for referencing such validation at a level of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF). It also confirms the role of the NCFHE to:

- Introduce a validation system for informal and non-formal learning;
- Set up the resources for the validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL);

² Subsidiary legislation 327.432 of 2012

- Create a national awareness of the VINFL department to function efficiently;
- Convene meetings with key stakeholders on sector skills; and,
- Develop national occupational standards in identified areas.

As noted above, the report sets out the key principles for the process of validation in Malta.

The National Vocational Education and Training Policy in April 2015 (MCAST, 2015)

The National Vocational Education and Training Policy acknowledges the role of validation in taking forward the VET agenda in Malta. Significantly, the policy recognises the role of validation of informal and non-formal learning in facilitating access to training and qualifications. The report sets out a way forward for VINFL and its relationship with VET provision by way of:

- Fully-fledged establishment and functioning of the Sector Skills Unit;
- VET providers and other stakeholders to be actively involved in a structured way in the work of the Sector Skills Unit in the development of Occupational Standards and validation processes which include the development of national guidelines;
- All VET institutions to ensure that learning outcomes of their courses respond to the set Occupational Standards once these are set and where applicable;
- To ensure the development of modular courses in response to Occupational Standards so as to supply provision of unmet standards for individuals who fail validation assessments;
- Initiate recognition of extra-curricular activities and skills developed through such activities at IVET level, through supplement certification of achievement of such skills;
- To ensure that a rigorous QA system for VINFL is set and adhered to in order to build and ensure trust in VINFL (in both the concept and processes). This has to be formulated by the NCFHE hand-in-hand with the Sector Skills Committee;
- Develop an accredited training programme for VINFL assessors in evaluating experiences gathered or competences developed by individuals.

The Higher Education Strategy (NCFHE, 2015b)

The Higher Education Strategy commits to further developing the validation of informal and non-formal learning. The strategy recognises validation as an important vehicle to focus education more strongly on the needs and experiences of the individual. In doing so, the strategy highlights the need for information on alternative access routes into higher education for mature students to be improved in order to facilitate access for those individuals interested in continuing their education at tertiary education level.

It also recognises that learning alongside employment may have an important role to play in this regard. To this effect, the validation of informal and non-formal learning attained in the workplace may be an important tool to value the achievements of employees' and incentivize employers to further invest in them.

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2014 (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2014)

The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2014 commits to the accreditation and transparency of all learning experiences including the validation of informal and non-formal learning. It strives towards having a certification system (at all levels) that adds value to employability, mobility and higher standards of transparency.

Apprenticeship Review: Malta. In pursuit of quality and relevance: revitalising apprenticeship (Cedefop, 2014)

The Apprenticeship review document reports that exemption as a result of validation of prior learning is currently not possible in Malta. It therefore proposes that the right of apprentices to have their prior learning validated with a view to exemption should be legally foreseen.

The rationale behind national policies and their specific focus on validation as reinforced in the recently published Referencing Report, is to help individuals and enhance their education and employment prospects by enabling them to gain entry to education and training courses; gaining exemption from parts of a training course; or gaining a qualification related to a specific occupational standard.

The NCFHE states that *“individuals, employers, the community, the third sector/voluntary sector, training providers and society (economy) all benefit from the validation of informal and non-formal learning. Such processes enrich Malta’s workforce and make our Nation more competitive and closer to achieving levels of excellence in key economic sectors”*³.

Emphasis is given to the role of the individual in accessing and benefitting from validation, as illustrated: “The individual is the ultimate aim of the validation of informal and non-formal learning and therefore all people should have access to the validation process on a voluntary basis”⁴.

The National Youth Policy - Towards 2020, published in 2015 (Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport, 2015), states that the validation of non-formal and informal learning will be pursued.

As reported in 2014, since 2010, Malta has made considerable progress towards putting into place a national framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This has been formalised in legal terms through a Legal Notice implemented as part of a series of amendments to the Education Act (Government of Malta, Legal Notice 296/2012, 2012), which came into force in 2012.

This legal notice sets out the regulatory framework for the validation of informal and non-formal learning. The object of the regulations is to provide a regulatory scope, framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and for the granting of validation awards classified within the Malta Qualifications Framework in accordance with the types of awards established within the Framework (ibid).

Also contained within the regulations are related rights for the NCFHE including the right to establish on the advice of the Sector Skills Committee, Sector Skills Units – the members of which are to be appointed by the Commission with the approval of the Minister. The legal notice also provides details on the process of validation and how the Sector Skills Committee on advice of the Sector Skills Units can regulate the validation process (Cedefop, 2012).

The process of Setting up of a National System for Accreditation and Licensing of Further and Higher Education Programmes and Providers and of Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Prior Learning, has been based on a number of key principles and objectives including:

- The accreditation of formal further education programmes (defined as programmes at levels 1-4 of the Malta Qualifications Framework and which are not provided in the form of compulsory education).
- The accreditation and licensing of (public or private) further education providers eligible to operate in their respective sector.
- The accreditation of formal higher education programmes (defined as programmes at levels 5-8 of the Malta Qualifications Framework).

³ http://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/FAQs/faqs_vinfl.aspx

⁴ http://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/FAQs/faqs_vinfl.aspx

- The accreditation and licensing of (public or private) higher education providers eligible to operate in their respective sector.
- Recognition of prior non-formal or informal learning, as linked to specific individuals on the basis of previous work or other experience.

Incorporating these principles, it is not only necessary to implement the legislative criteria supporting policy and guidelines relevant to the procedures of internal and external quality assurance on which accreditation and licensing is to be based, but also capacity building and supporting providers through the transition phase.

2.2 Validation in education and training

Currently, the national system for validation is being developed and is intended to cover all sectors of education.

Within the compulsory education sector, the validation of informal education activities are governed by regulations set by the Directorate for Standards and Quality in Education and the NCFHE⁵. A secondary school certificate and profile was introduced in September 2010, which recognises all forms of learning during the five years of secondary education. Since the 2014 report, changes to the types of programmes that are accepted on a school profile has broadened – now including for example nationally recognised ballet qualifications. The secondary school certificate and profile gives credit to formal education as well as to non-formal education received throughout the previous five years (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). This certificate has been pegged at either a level 1, 2 or 3 qualification on the national qualifications framework. It ensures that learners are given credit for all learning that takes place and is expected to ultimately support individuals to progress into further and higher education.

Within the VET sector, in different institutions including the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), and the Employment Training Centre⁶ a number of different courses have been developed that allow students to access courses which then build on competences and outcomes of learning and allow further progression to other types of learning provision⁷. From a labour market sectoral perspective, the NCFHE is charged with leading the development and implementation of Occupational Standards Occupational standards support standardisation of the assessment system, procedures and documentation and increase uniformity in the support provided to the stakeholders; in particular the training centres, employers (sponsors), the assessors (Trade Testing Board members) and the candidates themselves. Through an ESF funded pilot project, a handful of Occupational standards have already been developed and implemented in the childcare sector, the printing sector, for Motor Damage Assessors and in the Building and Construction sector. More formal National Occupational standards are under development in the sectors already identified, as well as in the hair and beauty sector and within the automotive industry.

As noted above, the National VET Strategy emphasises the role of validation in taking forward the VET agenda in Malta. Significantly, it commits to the development of Sector Skills Units, the involvement of stakeholders in the development of occupational standards and the validation process, which will include national guidelines. Amongst other aspects,

⁵ Details of these regulations can be found in the booklet Secondary School Certificate and Profile - Guidelines determining the verification of informal learning in secondary education (2010).

⁶ A key objective for the NCFHE is that “Close to 200 people will have their knowledge, skills and competences assessed and formally certified by the ETC. The results of such process will be endorsed by the NCFHE”. <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/vinfl.aspx>

⁷ In certain cases there is an age requirement for 21 years of age as confirmed in the programme prospectus.

the strategy also emphasises the importance of a rigorous QA system for validation and supporting the professional development of validation assessors.

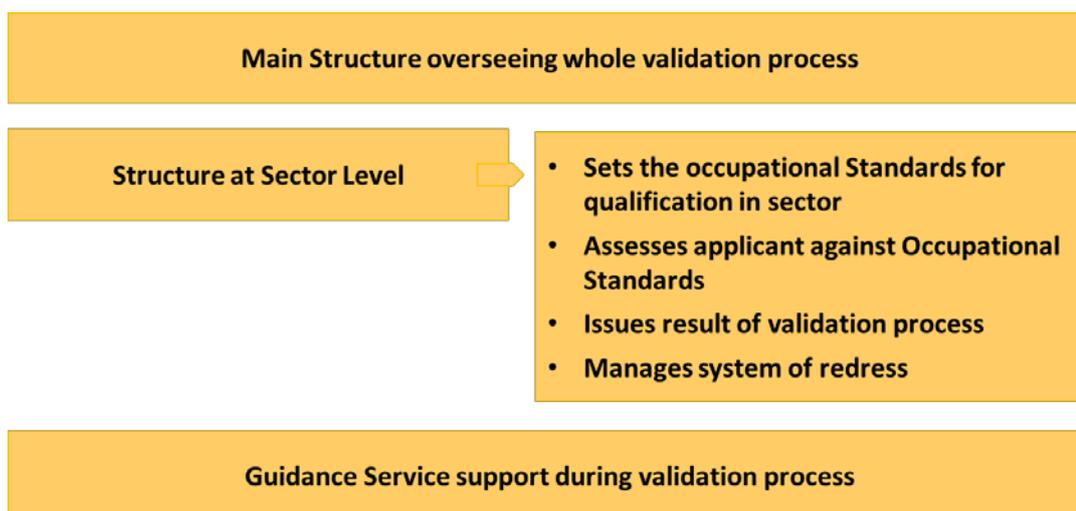
Within higher education, there are steps towards establishing a system of validation which aligns more closely with the formal qualifications offered via HEIs. The University of Malta has put in place validation arrangements for individuals who are over the age of 23 years who wish to apply to follow courses but do not possess the standard entry requirements. In this case, the individual is invited to attend and interview where their work and other relevant experiences are considered.

As mentioned above, the Higher Education Strategy recognises validation as an important vehicle to focus education more strongly on the needs and experiences of the individual learner and highlights the need for information on alternative access routes into higher education for mature students.

In terms of the extent to which the four stages of validation are included in the national validation arrangements, as noted above, the system of validation is still currently under development. However, all four stages are present in the system of validation that has been developed for the childcare sector.

As introduced in the previous section and illustrated below in Figure 2.1, the NCFHE (2016) Referencing Report also presents a clear overview of the main structures involved in the VNFIL, incorporating the different stages of validation. The report provides a differentiation between stages of validation and provides clarification on specific processes.

Figure 2.1 Structure involved in the validation of informal and non-formal learning



Source: NCFHE (2016) Referencing the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education

A key strength of the approach to validation in Malta is that it is aimed at increasing lifelong learning and employability, with an emphasis on the value of validation for the individual as a lifelong learner. Indeed, the NCFHE (2016) Referencing Report also considers the validation process from the applicant's perspective, represented in the following steps:

- **Step 1: Decision to validate own learning**
 - For some individuals who may never have received formal training, they can voluntarily decide to have their learning, knowledge and skills validated. The law stipulates that applicants need to have a minimum of three years of work experience within the occupation.
- **Step 2: Provision of guidance to gather evidence of learning**

- A mentor is assigned to every applicant, who then analyses the different experiences of the individual applicant and guides him/her in identifying ways of gathering evidence for their experience. The mentor has an important role to play in ensuring the evidence is compiled well and covers as much as possible the learner's experiences.
- **Step 3: Assessment carried out**
 - Once evidence is compiled in a portfolio, it is presented to the assessing board. The assessment process always calls on the application for further assessment – this can be an interview, written exam or practical test.
- **Step 4: Applicant receives outcome of assessment**
 - Once the assessment process has been carried out, the applicant receives the results. If the applicant has satisfied the requirements of the assessing board, certification will be issued. In the case that not all the performance criteria have been achieved or proved, the assessment report will identify the weaknesses and help the applicant prepare for a re-sit.
- **Step 5: Applicant may contest assessment outcomes**
 - The applicant may disagree with the assessment outcome and has the option to apply for a revision of the assessment process. If the applicant applies for revision, a new and independent board is set up to review the assessment that had taken place.

Whilst there is no specific strategy in relation to validation of learning undertaken by means of open educational resources in Malta, the use of MOOCs, Open Course Ware and OER in general are certainly growing in momentum. As reported in the 2015 Apprenticeship Review (Cedefop, 2015), the Maltese government is giving due importance to the digital economy which is considered the backbone to Malta's future economy.

This follows Malta's publication of its National Digital Strategy (2014-20) (Government of Malta, 2014) which includes a focus on the role of ICT and developing ICT skills. The strategy reflects the government's commitment to promoting ICT within education through investment in a comprehensive ICT infrastructure for educators, students and parents, encouraging a digital mind-set and widening learning opportunities. In doing so, it underlines the need to offer more pathways for learning and developing ICT skills to attract more students into the sector.

Specific to validation, the report calls for the validation of technology-related experience and education obtained through non-formal or informal learning by ICT practitioners. Linked to these developments, the 2016 Referencing Report recognises the need for accreditation and quality assurance parameters for digital/online learning.

In addition, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), has developed the infrastructure for an e-learning platform. This project targets the skills base of the workforce so that individuals can adapt to shifting economic scenarios. Three key features are to provide:

- **Blended Learning:** to allow learners to engage in a number of training modules directly from home or their workplace through the e-learning platform.
- **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL):** to encourage individuals in the labour market to further their studies by recognising their prior learning and exempting them from the relevant course modules.
- **Prior Experiential Learning/Accreditation of Prior experiential Learning:** to allow students who enrol into taught programmes of study to claim 'credits' for previous learning. The previous learning acquired from work, community or volunteer experience and which had previously not been assessed and/or awarded credit, must be relevant to

the programme for which they are applying and if successful, the credit will count towards their programme of study.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

By law, persons who have undertaken non-formal or informal learning for at least three years in a specific economic sector may have their prior non-formal or informal learning experience validated.

National validation arrangements in place to help people to access the labour market and to support their career development mainly relate to the introduction of the Sector Skills Units and the development of occupational standards. As set out in legislation, a Sector Skills Unit *'is an industry-focused unit established by the NCFHE that develops occupational standards and designs qualifications with the purpose of improving the skills of the workforce'*. Representatives of employers and employer associations, workers, professionals and trade unions are members of the Sector Skills Units and have an important role to play in helping people to access the labour market and to support their career development.

A specific example can be found in the construction sector following the recent introduction of the Construction Industry Skill Card in Malta. As described in more detail in Box 1 below, the aim of the Skill Card is to identify skills gaps in the workforce, to encourage workers to continue their education and to introduce training programmes to ensure that the standards of expertise in the trade comply with the legislation. In this sector, trade testing serves to validate the non-formal and informal learning individuals have acquired during work and other experiences. As discussed in more detail below, trade testing is also used in the childcare sector. In this sector, individuals who are employed as child-carers but do not possess an accredited qualification related to childcare and are working within a Child Care Centre need to be in possession of a Level 4 qualification. Trade testing is therefore used to validate the knowledge, skills and competences of those working in the sector who may not have the qualifications required.

More broadly, there is growing recognition of the potential to raise the skills level of employees through the use of VINFL. Indeed, the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2020 (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015) recognises that individuals in the labour market might have a wealth of knowledge acquired through practical work experience, but no equivalent formal qualifications. Here it is noted that within the narrow context of the labour market, the accreditation of non-formal learning becomes as vital as the accreditation of formal learning. Furthermore, the Higher Education Strategy recognises that learning alongside employment may have an important role to play and to this effect the validation of skills attained in the work-place may be an important tool to value the achievements of employees' and incentivise employers to further invest in them.

2.3.1 Skills audits

From a sectoral perspective, the development and implementation of Occupational Standards is also integral to enhancing validation activity at its broadest level, with a focus on skills audit. For example, the NCFHE is leading on the development and implementation of National Occupational Standards across a range of sectors. Alongside the role of the Standards in supporting validation of informal and non-formal learning – *"Validation of informal and non-formal learning needs to be carried out against some form of standard. Occupational standards allow this comparative assessment to be done"* is recognition that the Standards help employers to carry out skills audit: *"Occupational standards allow and facilitate the process of skill-audit within the company carried out by employers. Employers are thus in a position to know what knowledge and skills his workforce possesses"*.

Skills profiling and the development of occupational standards play a key role in clarifying the required skills and competencies across sectors, for the benefit of employers and employees alike. Skills audit also supports the identification of skills gaps at an individual and

organisational level. Supporting employers in how best to address skills gaps, and motivating individuals to develop is crucial. This needs to be underpinned by stakeholders ensuring that the validation system remains current and reflects changes at an industry level.

Once they are established, the Sector Skills Units will be responsible for overseeing skills audit activities across their respective sector. Occupational Standards for each sector will form the basis for skills audit approaches, which will be developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. In the case of the childcare sector, there is currently an agreement in place where the Trade Testing system can be used.⁸ The Trade Testing system is managed by the Employment Training Centre (ETC) and was set up in order to assess individuals who have acquired knowledge, skills and competence in a particular occupation but do not possess a formal qualification. The Trade Testing system incorporates the following types of assessment:

- Interview;
- Theory Test;
- Practical Test;
- Logbooks (in the case of candidates who sit the trade test after completion of an apprenticeship or traineeship scheme);
- Portfolio (for candidates sitting the trade test in child care).

Candidates who successfully pass from the Trade Testing are awarded a Certificate of Competence in that particular occupation. There are over 50 occupations in which Trade Testing is offered, which span a number of sectors including care, construction, engineering, hospitality and tourism, IT.⁹

The Maltese Government Public Administration Human Resources Office¹⁰ provides a clear illustration of the understanding and definition of skills audit (or Skills Profiling, as it is termed) from a national institution perspective. The Government, as an employer has led by example and introduced a programme of skills audit activity for its workforce. The origins of this activity, formalised as a Skills Profiling Exercise, stem from the Flexicurity Pathway, one of the main pillars of Malta's National Reform Programme, which stipulates that a skills audit of the national working population is to be carried out.

The Skills Profile of an individual is defined as "a summary of his/her work experience, skills and abilities". The component parts of the Skills Profile include:

- the Present Employment Details,
- Formal Qualifications,
- Employment History and Part-Time Employment,
- Language Skills,
- Organisational & Social Skills,
- Computer & IT-related Skills,
- Technical and Artistic Skills,
- Work Preferences,
- Job Mobility, and

⁸ <http://etc.gov.mt/Category/4/87/trade-testing-employers.aspx>

⁹ For the full list of occupations please refer to: <http://etc.gov.mt/Category/4/87/trade-testing-employers.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://pahro.gov.mt/skills-profiling?!=1>

- Human skills such as intra and interpersonal communication styles.

Individuals who are employed within the Public Service are required to compile a Skills Profile (this is done on their first day of employment). The Profile is stored on a dedicated database, which enables the host organisation to maintain an up-to-date record of employees' skills profiles.

The advantages of establishing and maintaining an effective Skills Profiling system are highlighted by the HR Office, both for management and individual employees. From a management perspective, Skills Profiling assists in identifying Skills Gaps (the Skills possessed by employees compared to the skills needed by the organisation to carry out its mandate) and to identify measures to bridge identified gaps (through training, redeployments, etc.). From the employees' perspective, they can benefit from better opportunities for their personal development, and achieve higher levels of satisfaction and motivation within the workplace. Also included on the Public Administration HR Office website is a dedicated Skills Profile Questionnaire which can be downloaded¹¹.

Further developments are underway in the construction sector through the Skill Cards initiative, as illustrated in the box below.

Box 1 Construction Industry Skill Card Initiative

The 2015 White Paper on Skill Cards in the Construction Industry states that the industry itself is one of the main pillars of domestic economy in Malta, accounting for 11.1 % of gross value-added and employs more than 12 000 workers. The report also states that there has been a 1% increase in employment in the construction industry in the first quarter of 2014 compared to the corresponding quarter of 2013.

The White Paper refers to deep concerns that the industry as a whole is underachieving and that most trades within the construction industry are not governed by any laws or regulations. This has led to situations whereby individuals do not possess the adequate knowledge, and/or training, or do not possess the necessary skills or capabilities that are required to undertake a particular task. Such skills deficiencies reportedly make it difficult for contractors to meet the demand of customers for high quality buildings and construction projects. It is further observed that the skills required for the industry may not necessarily be officially recognised, as a consequence of which employees in the construction industry may not always appreciate the value of their own skills.

In view of the above, the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC) reportedly arrived at the conclusion that the gap between the supply and the demand of skilled employees in the industry needed to be addressed immediately. As such, the preliminary concept of the Skill Card was first introduced in the 2015 Budget and thereby officially adopted as a government policy. The BICC believes that the issuing of Skill Cards, which will also incorporate safety cards, would address the gap between the supply and demand and create other beneficial incentives, such as the increase of environmental safety awareness at work. It is believed that such incentives shall bear a positive outcome not only as regards employment or services, but also as regards the workers themselves in achieving certification relating to their employment.

As presented in the White Paper, the objectives of introducing Skill Cards include:

- Improve the perception of the construction industry;
- Enable the industry to provide better quality products and service;
- Facilitate the adoption and incorporation of new technologies;
- Address the issue of lack of skilled workers within the construction industry;
- Reduce unwarranted costs;
- Improve occupational health and safety awareness;
- Reduce any detrimental impact which may be caused to the environment through building and construction procedures; and,

¹¹ <http://pahro.gov.mt/skills-profiling?!=1>

- Recognise the skills of workers in the construction industry which have been achieved through informal and /or non-formal learning.

The main benefits of the Skill Card are summarised in the table below:

Benefits of the Skill Card initiative	
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Proof of skills, competence and qualifications; ■ Improves health and safety awareness; ■ Enhances employment prospects and opportunities.
Employers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improves health and safety awareness among workers; ■ Provides foundation for staff training and development and ensures that occupational health and safety training is renewed every five years; ■ Diminishes the risks of accidents on construction sites; ■ Identifies personnel vested with recognised safety awareness training skills and adequate competence; ■ Provides easy access and facilitates the correct choice of qualified human resources.
Customers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Improves standards of workers resulting in a better reputation for the construction; ■ industry; ■ Encourages consumers to make use of the services provided by qualified workers; ■ Improves the quality of construction projects; ■ Increases the possibility of securing a better economic investment for Malta.

The text provides more information on specific aspects of the Skill Cards initiative as set out in the White Paper. In order to achieve the objectives of the Skill Cards, workers employed in the construction industry will be recognised as qualified employees and duly registered as such by the respective Authorities. They will be required to undertake the necessary training skills in relation to their type of trade. In relation to persons who are already practising their trade but do not possess any formal qualifications, there will be opportunities for workers to undertake a trade test as evidence of their knowledge and skills. The trade test will require applicants to demonstrate, in a real or simulated workplace environment, their competence or otherwise, by virtue of their performance assessments. Applicants will be assessed by competent and qualified assessors and successful candidates will be awarded a Certificate or Diploma of Competence. It is the intention that adequate training and skill testing will help employers and workers across the industry develop and enhance their knowledge base and to apply their existing and newly acquired skills in a more proficient manner.

In Malta, under current legislation, the Sectors Skills Units are responsible for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which is attached to the MQF. As such, the NCFHE is expected to work with the BICC in establishing performance criteria and assessments methods as tools for assessing, recognising and validating individuals within the sector who have acquired knowledge, skills and competences by means of informal and non-formal learning.

The Skill Cards (which include the safety card) will be issued according to the four levels which determine the competence of each type of trade and will be colour coded according to the level of competence acquired by applicants in terms of their respective trade as follows:

1. Red Skill Card for trainees
2. Blue Skill Card for operatives (MQF level 2)
3. Silver Skill Card for Craftsmen (MQF level 3)
4. Gold Skill Card for Technicians (MQF level 4)

Successful applicants will receive a photographic identity card which will serve as a means of evidence that the holder has undertaken adequate training in relation to the attainment of appropriate skills and competence required for that particular task.

As stated in the White Paper, for the first five years the Skill Cards will be awarded free of charge. Skill Cards will remain valid for a period of five years subject to renewal against a nominal fee (after the initial trial period of five years). Following the five-year trial period in the respective trade, it will be

mandatory for all employees in the construction industry to be in possession of a Skill Card.

As stated by one interviewee, there are some parallels in terms of validation in both tourism and construction industries. In both sectors, people are not qualified. Giving value to validate certificates, which gives a skills card.

Source: Extracted from Ministry for Education and Employment and the Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties (2014)

2.4 Validation and the third sector

No specific projects of validation in the third sector have been identified in Malta. However, sitting alongside the legal framework for validation, the National Youth Policy Towards 2020 (Parliamentary Secretariat for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport, 2015) sets out a clear commitment to develop and implement initiatives that utilise both formal education and non-formal learning, as mutually reinforcing agents, with a view to enhancing young people's educational attainment levels and progression. In the context of employment and entrepreneurship, the Strategy commits to promoting an entrepreneurial spirit among young people through non-formal education and informal learning opportunities. In taking forward the Strategy, the NCFHE continues to work with a range of stakeholders across different sectors, including Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ (National Youth Agency).

As reported in 2014, providers, Higher Education institutions and third sector organisations, as well as Trade Unions and other stakeholder organisations will all have designated roles to play in the development, implementation and maintenance processes of the national system for validation.

3 Links to national qualification systems

Malta has had a comprehensive national qualifications framework for lifelong learning (Malta Qualifications Framework, MQF) in place since June 2007. It encompasses qualifications and awards at all levels, provided through formal, non-formal and informal learning. Following the fourth update of the referencing of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (NCFHE, 2016), the MQF has been updated with the insertion of two new levels: Introductory Level A and Introductory Level B. These cover the learning gained, but not yet rated at Level 1 and recognise any learning that has taken place to serve as stepping stones towards Level 1.

The level descriptors of the different MQF levels are specified in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. The descriptors highlight specific attributes such as communications skills, judgemental skills and learning skills. The level descriptors reflect complexity, volume and the level of learning expected for the particular qualification. Progression within the MQF is recorded in terms of:

- knowledge and understanding;
- applying knowledge and understanding;
- communication skills;
- judgemental skills;
- learning skills;
- autonomy and responsibility.

Strengthening the learning outcomes approach has become fundamental to reforms across education and training in Malta, and has been applied across qualifications and levels in recent years. One of the tasks of the National Commission for Further and Higher Education is to introduce national standards of knowledge, skills and competences and to ensure that these are systematically implemented and used.

For general education, the national minimum curriculum defines learning outcomes as educational objectives that enable learners to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes. The school leaving certificate was redesigned following a series of consultation meetings between the Directorate of Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) and the (then) Malta Qualification Council to include informal and non-formal learning as well as the individual's personal qualities. Covering the first two levels of the MQF, this initiative was intended to instil a culture of acknowledging learning achievements irrespective of the context within which the learning process occurs, from the early stages of education.

In 2009, Malta was the first Member State to prepare a single, joint report which references the MQF simultaneously to both the EQF and the QF-EHEA (Malta Qualifications Council and Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 2009). This approach has been set as an example followed by many other countries in their own referencing process. The establishment of the MQF and its subsequent referencing have led to substantial modernisation efforts. As a result, in May 2012 an updated version of the report was presented to the EQF AG (Cedefop, 2013). As previously noted, a fourth update of the report was published in February 2016 (NCFHE, 2016).

Individuals would be assessed against the standards set in the Malta Qualifications Framework. Both the validation of informal and non-formal learning and the Malta Qualifications Framework have a common objective – that of enabling individuals to advance on the basis of their learning outcomes,¹² i.e. the knowledge, skills and competences an individual has acquired and is able to demonstrate after completing a learning process. This is a continued challenge; to ensure that assessment and accreditation systems are geared up to meet the needs of the sector.

Credits

Malta's Qualifications Framework captures all levels and sectors in education. This referencing process consolidates the already existing credit system for HE that helps mapping existing and new qualifications to the Framework. Assessment of learning outcomes entitles the learner to credit and therefore to a qualification recognised by the MQF.

The Level descriptors for the different MQF levels, specified in terms of learning outcomes and qualifications, include a number of credits required at each level. These learning outcomes set the standard against which all Qualifications and Awards, within the national education system, are accredited. All courses accredited by NCFHE, as well as those conferred by the self-accrediting institutions, use credits.

One credit is defined as being equivalent to a workload of 25 hours of total learning. Education and training institutions can label credits as either ECTS or ECVETs, according to the orientation of the learning programme. Both ECVET and ECTS have the same hours of total learning.

To ensure ongoing validity and relevance of credits acquired, and to support meeting the needs of industry, consideration should be given to limiting the period of time for which a credit remains current, and set a timeframe for updating these.

In ensuring transparency in qualifications and awards, the 2016 Referencing Report highlights the importance that essential information about any qualification and award is provided in the certification provided to learners who have successfully completed a programme or course of study. However, it is not possible, by looking at the certificates, to know what has been obtained through validation.

¹² https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/Pages/FAQs/faqs_vinfl.aspx

4 Standards

The MQC, the predecessor to the NCFHE, established standards on which education and training institutions agreed upon when both parties sign Protocols and to which they were obliged to adhere to. These standards included aligning qualifications to one of the levels of the MQF, to provide learning outcomes and credit based qualifications, clear assessment procedures and, eventually, the recognition of informal and non-formal learning.

As previously mentioned, occupational standards have already been developed and implemented in the childcare sector, the printing sector, for motor damage assessors and in the building and construction sector. Occupational standards are currently under development in the hair and beauty sector and within the automotive Industry.

Once the full network of Sector Skills Units have been established, the process of developing and implementing occupational standards will be undertaken across all occupational sectors. The development and implementation of these standards has had a significant impact on assessment procedures within the sector, and ultimately have supported the validation process, increasing accuracy and reliability in particular.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

In Malta, the Ministry for Education and Employment has the ultimate responsibility for the education system as a whole, including childcare and early years education, primary and secondary education, higher education, lifelong learning, employment and training, and examinations.¹³

The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), within the Ministry, has responsibility for Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Learning (VINFL). A core objective for the Commission, has a stated objective to “*Introduce a validation system for informal and non-formal learning*”¹⁴. The NCFHE promotes and maintains the Malta Qualifications Framework and the policies and criteria this structure is based upon. The Commission is the competent authority for licensing, accreditation, quality assurance and the validation of informal and non-formal learning.

The NCFHE also oversees the licensing of educational institutions, including maintaining a database of registered Informal Learning Organisations, which is publically available on-line,¹⁵ as well as managing the application and approval process for registration on the database.

In terms of examples for the validation process, the childcare sector already has a validation framework up and running and developments are well underway in other sectors, including the building and construction industry. Further information on the validation process and accompanying occupational standards for the childcare sector are contained in the Information Handbook on the process of validation of informal and non-formal learning for childcare workers in care centres.¹⁶

As predecessor to the NCFHE, the Malta Qualifications Council began the process of developing a decentralised system of assessment, recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, ensuring that the standards and guidelines are respected through internal and external verifiers (Cedefop, European Commission, GHK Consulting Ltd, 2010).

The NCFHE, now continuing this work, is designated as the competent authority for licensing, accreditation and quality assurance of providers and programmes. The NCFHE is developing a system of assessment, recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning, which can ensure that the standards and guidelines are respected through internal and external verifiers. NCFHE responsibilities include:

- setting the standards and principles which are to be followed;
- regulating the bodies responsible for validating learning outcomes/occupational standards;
- regulation of teaching methods in educational institutions
- ensuring that quality assurance systems are put in place, that learners obtain a fair judgment;
- monitoring the validation process;

¹³ <http://mede.gov.mt/en/Ministry/Pages/portfolio.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/vinfl.aspx>

¹⁵ <http://www.ncfhe.org.mt/learning-organisations/> at 09/10/213 there were 1,029 institutions listed in the database.

¹⁶ ETC and NCFHE

- acting as catalyst to promote validation of as much invisible learning as possible (Ministry for Finance, Malta, 2013).
- Ultimately, the learner has a responsibility to ensure that his/her informal and non-formal learning can be validated, it is therefore important for the accrediting body to advise learners on how they can do this.

Since the 2014 report, the Ministry for Education and Employment published its National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (Cedefop, European Commission, GHK Consulting Ltd, 2010). Lifelong learning is described as an all embracing concept, recognising that the *“process of lifelong learning takes place through the integration of formal, informal and non-formal learning so as to create the ability for lifelong continuous development of the quality of life”*.

In addition, the Directorate is charged with implementing the EU Agenda for Adult Learning in Malta (2012-14). This project in Malta aims to reach these focus areas by organising a number of actions including working collaboratively with target groups of the project including Ministries, policy makers, adult education providers, adult educators, employers, workers, unemployed and inactive, adult education professionals, and adult citizens who are low skilled.

Actions in the project include setting up an Inter-Ministerial Committee to map the present state of formal; informal and non-formal adult learning; and, facilitating a network of stakeholders in Adult Learning for Basic Skills, including three subgroups: one for public entities, one for private work sector and the third one for adult learning providers (formal, informal and non-formal).

Supporting the development and implementation of a system of validation for Malta, it was necessary to establish a number of Sector Skills Units, with the role of identifying the knowledge, skills and competences required to perform occupations within their sector. These Sector Skills Units will identify the different jobs in their particular sector, outline the knowledge, skills and competences required to perform these jobs and map these against the National Qualifications Framework.

A key function of the Units is to develop guidelines and mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning for all skills within their respective sector. They also ensure that the validation institutions are meeting the required standards set out for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Legislation stipulates that the NCFHE shall establish a Sector Skills Committee that would be responsible for formulating and developing the following:

- policies and procedures to govern the Sector Skills Units;
- criteria and standards for the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- guidelines for the assessment of skills and competences for the purpose of the granting of awards by Sector Skills Units;
- guidelines for quality assurance in non-formal learning;
- occupational standards relevant to each economic sector; and,
- sectoral qualifications frameworks referenced to the Malta Qualifications Framework, on a proposal of the Sector

Under legislation, the Committee has responsibility for appointing validation process managers and external evaluators as validation practitioners, with the aim of ensuring ongoing quality and trust in the validation process. It is also important to capture the experiences of individuals undergoing the validation process, to ensure it effectively meets the needs of participants.

Since reporting in 2014, developments have been underway to establish a National Skills Council. It is intended that the remit of the Committee (as stipulated above) would be absorbed by the National Skills Council. Therefore, there is no need to establish an SSC as it would replicate the intended role of the NSC.

Sector Skills Units will be responsible for training institutions, for providing guidance and counselling services to individuals submitting their documented experiences for validation, and to undertake assessments and tests for validating non-formal and informal learning. The Units also have a role with regard to audit and quality, with specific responsibilities in relation to auditing of assessment processes and results achieved, and to develop and propose to the Sector Skills Committee marks of distinction and of quality assurance in the provision of non-formal learning in their respective sector and to oversee the use and implementation of such marks.

The assessment of candidates is undertaken by assessors who are validation practitioners (the assessors will be appointed by the Sector Skills Units). The selection of validation practitioners is to be undertaken according to a defined set of selection criteria developed specifically for this purpose. Assessors are individuals trained in assessment and validation who are tasked with judging candidates in order to determine whether specific assessment criteria are met.

Sector Skills Units may from time to time subcontract other public or private entities to carry out the assessment required for the validation of non-formal and informal learning of candidates (Government of Malta, Legal Notice 296/2012, 2012).

Additionally, the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) acts as an assessment agency on behalf of the NCFHE in assessing individuals on their informal and non-formal learning based on occupational standards which will be developed by the respective Sector Skills Units and which will be pegged to the Malta Qualifications Framework. Indeed, a Memorandum of Understanding had been signed between NCFHE and ETC for them to act as the assessment board for validation in the childcare sector. Discussions are currently underway with regard to the appointment of the assessment board for the building and construction industry.

Both the NCFHE and Sector Skills Units have responsibility for promoting the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Malta.

In terms of the specific roles of the different stakeholders, as the national system for validation is still being developed, as are the individual roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. There are however, clear roles that have been allocated in these early stages of development, most notably for the NCFHE, in relation to leadership of the development process of the national system for validation, as well as a co-ordination role. The ETC has responsibility for the provision of information and advice, as well as engaging with individuals and supporting them through the process of validation.

As previously noted, providers, Higher Education institutions, and third sector organisations, as well as Trade Unions, and other stakeholder organisations will all have designated roles to play in the development, implementation and maintenance processes of the national system for validation.

The fact that Malta covers a relatively small area geographically, and that the territory is island-based (the islands of Malta and Gozo) and therefore does not have a significantly decentralised system of governance and administration, means that co-ordination between stakeholders is a relatively straightforward process. There are no significant obstacles reported, to engaging with and working collaboratively with stakeholders across different sectors. Co-ordination activity is generally led by the National Commission for Further and Higher Education.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

At a national level, guidelines for the validation of informal and non-formal learning are being drafted by NCFHE, together with information leaflets on the validation process. These information leaflets will be targeted to specific groups including individual employers and voluntary organisations amongst others.

Further to these materials, information will be made available online. Individuals will also be able to register their interest in validating their competences through online forms. This database will not be available online but will serve as means for transparency, quality assurance and also for national interest with regards to the stocktaking of local skills and competences.¹⁷ The Employment Training Centre (ETC), as a central source of information, advice and guidance for individuals and employers, also has a key role to play in awareness-raising, and in particular in relation to recruitment.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

Rather than being structured according to a network or institutional framework, the provision of information, advice and guidance in Malta is organised more on a project-based level. Of those networks that do exist, these tend to be more sector-specific. There is a central role for the NCFHE, which provides support and advises people wishing to validate their informal or non-formal learning in a number of areas:

- On how to organise and document evidence of learning;
- On how to prepare for their assessment and what to do following the assessment decision; and,
- To help them to be familiar with the validation and assessment procedures, and to know the education system and have an understanding of the labour market.

Once established, Sector Skills Units will be responsible for providing guidance and counselling services to individuals submitting their documented experiences for validation.¹⁸

Handbooks have been compiled to ensure that the candidates know exactly what to expect and how they are going to be assessed. Furthermore, feedback should be given to candidates seeking validation, in relation to the gaps that may have been identified for them.

In terms of career guidance, the Employment Training Centre has worked together with the Guidance and Counselling Section of the Education Division, the University of Malta, MCAST and Euroguidance Malta, to produce the first one hundred career paths. These career paths are available on the EURES website, and provide a comprehensive list of career descriptions which include information on relevant courses as well as what the particular jobs actually entail. Other services offered include job search seminars to help new jobseekers to look for work by providing job-seeking skills.

As noted above, the 2016 Referencing Report emphasises the importance of having a system in place with the responsibility of providing support and guidance to those who wish to validate their non-formal and informal learning. From a learner perspective, the provision of guidance to gather evidence of learning is a recognised step in the validation process. A mentor is assigned to every learner applying for validation and has a key role to play in

¹⁷ <https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/vinfl.aspx>

¹⁸ Presentation on Validation of formal and non-formal learning at Seminar - Gateway to youth employability across Europe – 9 October 2012. <http://www.mcga.org.mt/hot-news-1/agatewaytoyouthemployabilityacrosseurope>

supporting the individual identifying ways of gathering evidence for this experience to demonstrate the different learning outcomes that have been achieved. There is no charge for guidance as part of the validation process.

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

At this stage there are no formal measures in place, due to the nascent stage of development of the validation system. There will however be measures put in place once the system is established more broadly, to include information, courses and support for assessors and guidance personnel.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The validation practitioners currently in place in Malta (bearing in mind that the system is currently in the early stages of development), in the sectors where the validation process has been established, are all experts in their field. The process for appointment of validation practitioners will be led by the Sector Skills Units, once they are established.

In relation to the VET sector, the National Vocational Education and Training Policy (MCAST, 2015) calls for the development of an accredited training programme for validation assessors in evaluating experiences gathered or competences developed by individuals.

7.2 Qualification requirements

As reported in 2014, validation practitioners are required to hold a specifically-developed qualification provided by ETC which equates to MQF/EQF Level 4. Further to the qualification, ETC also provides information, training, and support in a number of forms including regular meetings. Assessment training also provides the opportunity for Trade Testing Board members to meet with other people in the same (and different) fields, and enhance their knowledge through sharing experiences. Once the Sector Skills Units are established there will be sector-specific requirements to be fulfilled by validators/assessors, but these will nonetheless include the requirement to hold the ETC qualification.

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The Employment Training Centre provides information, support and training to assessors as part of the validation system established within the childcare sector.

8 Quality assurance

Since reporting in 2014, the NCFHE has launched the National Quality Assurance Framework for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE, 2015a). This was the key deliverable of an ESF project entitled 'Making Quality Visible'. The main aim was to foster a national culture of quality in further and higher education provision.

Another key deliverable of the project 'Making Quality Visible' was the Manual of Procedures for External Quality Assurance, which set out the procedures for the implementation of external quality audits. In 2015, the first three pilot external audits were conducted with the University of Malta, MCAST and ITS. The outcomes of the external audit pilots contributed towards the development of a quality assurance system to be adapted for validation – anticipated to be launched by the end of 2016. The fact that the validation process leads to a qualification automatically implies that a national quality assurance framework needs to apply to validation.

As it currently stands, the quality assurance arrangements are unchanged since 2014 whereby the NCFHE remains the designated competent authority for licensing, accreditation and quality assurance of providers and programmes, including cross-border provision from Malta or in Malta. According to the 2012 regulations, providers of further and higher education are required to apply for a licence, issued by the NCFHE, to be able to operate in Malta.

- Accreditation is granted upon quality audits carried out by NCFHE of both the provider (at the institutional level) and a sample of the provider's programmes. Such quality audits shall have as their starting point the internal quality assurance system which the provider has in place and a self-assessment or internal evaluation carried out by the provider at provider and programme level. Licenced providers are to undergo periodic provider and programme quality audits every 5 years, in order to maintain their licence. During such five-year period, licences may apply to extend the categories of their licence or to increase the programmes which they provide.
- Once established, the Sector Skills Units will have responsibility for Quality Assurance of the validation process in their respective sectors. There will be an ongoing element to ensuring the continued relevance of skills, part of which will require employees to undergo testing after a set period of time.

The NCFHE accredits programmes of studies and institutions on the basis of level descriptors, quality assurance mechanisms and clear pathways for further training and education. Occupational standards¹⁹ also determine the accreditation of specific programmes of studies. The 2012 legal notices on licensing, accreditation and quality assurance were launched. These continue to further aid the NCFHE in its mission to maintain, uphold, enhance and improve standards.

These regulations endorse the 2012 European Regulations for Further and Higher Education, including the European Standards for Guidelines and Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET). EQAVET has been taken on board at a national level, resulting in the development of a Malta Quality Assurance Tool for Vocational Education and Training Providers²⁰. Given the remit of the NCFHE in relation to:

- Further Education: All non-compulsory formal, non-formal and informal learning which serves to obtain a national qualification classified up to and including level 4 of the Malta Qualifications Framework, or a foreign qualification at a comparable level; and
- Higher Education: All non-compulsory formal, non-formal and informal learning or research which serves to obtain a national qualification classified at Level 5 of the Malta Qualifications Framework or higher, or a foreign qualification at a comparable level.

September 2012 saw the introduction of a requirement for all providers of further or higher education in or from Malta require a license issued by the Commission to operate. The license to operate is subject to successful completion of a provider quality audit, and a programme quality audit. Providers seeking accreditation also need to have in place an internal quality assurance system.

In relation to quality assurance of validation in key sectors, the Sector Skills Units have a role with regard to audit and quality. They have specific responsibilities in relation to audit of assessment processes and results achieved, and to develop and propose marks of distinction and of quality assurance in the provision of non-formal learning in their respective sector.

¹⁹ https://ncfhe.gov.mt/en/services/Pages/All%20Services/vinfl_nos.aspx

²⁰ http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Annual_Forum_2013/Information_Carousel_1_-_Malta_-_Maria_Magro_Scerri_Horace_Caruana.sflb.ashx

Quality Assurance across sectors will be underpinned by the development and implementation of occupational standards. Once established, the Sector Skills Units will work with stakeholders (national organisation, sector bodies, business representatives, etc) to develop these. The development process will be a rigorous one, comprising clear stages of activity:

- initial drafting of occupational standards looking at level descriptors, required skills, competencies, and knowledge;
- review of draft standards by external evaluation contacts;
- signing off the draft standards following external review;
- launch of draft standards for consultation;
- gather and review feedback during consultation;
- refine standards in light of consultation response, and launch final version of the standards.

In combination with the process would be an ongoing programme of information provision and support for stakeholders. Quality Assurance support would also be provided by the Quality Assurance Department, within the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education of the Ministry.²¹

Evaluation framework

As reported in 2014, there is currently no evaluation framework in place, though meetings between Assessment Board members, the Trade Testing Board and other key partners are held to discuss the validation activities and developments more broadly.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

As reported in 2014, In Malta there is no specific budget allocation at a national finance level for validation. Funding is available to support the development of the Sector Skills Units, for example supporting the development of standards with stakeholders across relevant sectors. It is also important to ensure funding is allocated to support the professional development of supervisors in their role.

9.2 Distribution of costs

As reported in 2014, there are no costs to organisations as far as the validation process is concerned. For individuals who are unemployed, there is no cost; the Government funds the validation process through the Employment Training Centre (ETC). For those individuals who are employed, a nominal fee is charged to undergo the validation process.

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

As reported in 2014, there is no data available to evidence the benefits to individuals of validation. The validation process is relatively new to Malta, and therefore the systems are relatively embryonic. It is anticipated that the data collection approach currently being used for the sector in which the validation process is functioning will be extended once the system is spread across all sectors. This data will then be used to support research activity to explore and evidence the benefits to individuals.

²¹ <https://education.gov.mt/en/education/quality-assurance/Pages/default.aspx>

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

There is limited data available regarding beneficiaries of the validation process, as it is only recently established (within the childcare sector, building and construction with other sectors expected to be included once the Sector Skills Units are established).

Data is being collected on those individuals who are going through the validation process, this is being done by ETC, who passes the data to the NCFHE. The data will be collected for those who are involved with different stages of the validation process, from application, through to completion. At the time of writing this report (March 2016), it was reported that so far approximately 500 people have gone through the validation process in the childcare sector.²²

There is considerable value in undertaking longitudinal assessment of the impact of individuals who have completed the certification process. Research and analysis tracking the experience and progress of individuals will enable formative improvement of the process.

9.4.2 Validation users

There is currently no information available in relation to the users according to age, gender, qualification level, target group, citizenship status, etc.

9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

As mentioned above, whilst there are no specific policies, projects or initiatives in Malta directed to the validation of skills for immigrants and/or refugees, there are no restrictions preventing these target groups from accessing validation opportunities currently available in Malta. One important development in this respect is the Skill Cards initiative currently being trialled in the construction industry (see Box 1 above for further information). This initiative provides the possibility for individuals from non-EU Member States to obtain a Skill Card by means of undertaking a trade test to demonstrate, in a real or simulated workplace environment, their performance, competences or otherwise to be duly assessed.

Addressing the Tripartite Social Summit in March 2016²³, Malta Chamber President Anton Borg discussed the integration of refugees into the labour market. Offering those who are eligible to stay the opportunity to obtain the skills required to make a smooth transition into the labour market while simultaneously reducing skill mismatches, was noted.

10 Validation methods

Given that the validation process is still being developed in Malta and the national system has yet to be established, it is difficult to state definitively what methods of validation are used and at what stage. As reported in 2014, some information is available in relation to the childcare sector. In this sector, the process of validation of informal and non-formal learning has been developed for the Child Care sector, in levels 4 (Workers in Child Care Centres) (Employment and Training Corporation and National Commission for Further and Higher Education, nd) and 5 (Child care supervisor/manager) of the MQF/EQF (Employment and Training Corporation and National Commission for Further and Higher Education, nd). In the case of child care the content of the assessment tools used is based on the occupational standards. Given the challenges associated with assessing the skills and attitudes of individuals with lower levels of qualification, there is a need for this to be based on field observation (hence the inclusion of practical assessment in child care). Furthermore, the

²² Source: Interview with NCFHE representative

²³ <http://maltawinds.com/2016/03/18/migration-part-solution-skills-gap/>

tools used (checklists, and worksheets) must be relevant, and formulated in such a way that supports assessment of priority areas.

Competency within the context of childcare (and other) professions depends on skills, knowledge and attitude, with an equal level of credence given to attitude. With reference to the validation of child care workers' competences, efforts have been made to ensure that the occupational standards that address the issue of attitude have been identified and are addressed in the assessment process, mainly during the interview and the practical assessment.

The validation process developed for the childcare sector is as follows:

- Before the validation process, the Assessment Board meets with the prospective candidates to explain what is expected from them to achieve a certificate of competence.
 - For level 5, candidates must: Hold a valid First Aid Certificate that is recognised nationally, be registered with the Food Safety Commission as a Food Handler; have at least 3 years' experience in Child Care/pre-school settings, catering for children from 0-5 years; Be well aware of the relative legislature and regulations and provide the contact details of two referees.
 - For level 4, candidates must have 3 years' experience with children in a child care facility catering for children from 0–5 years and a reference letter from a previous employer
- The Assessment is composed of:
 - A 2-hour written test (100 marks);
 - A 30 minute interview (90 marks for level 4 and 100 marks for level 5),
 - Portfolio reflecting the knowledge and skills acquired during their past work experience (10 marks for level 4 and 100 marks for level 5). This is to be submitted during the interview
 - A Practical Test - only for level 4 (100 marks).
- If candidates do not pass any one of the assessment components they would be eligible for a re-sit in the failed component/s. The candidate would receive guidance from the Assessment Board with respect to the areas for improvement before the re-sit takes place.

Information gathered through these reports on childcare and interviews²⁴ suggests that there are four methods of validation which are most commonly used:

- portfolio;
- a written test (this is seen as more 'traditional' as a form of validation and is more common in some sectors than others);
- interview; and
- observation (more common in some sectors than others. Sometimes the observation takes place at a place of work, in other cases this may be in a simulated work environment).

From a sector-based perspective, as described in the 2014 report, the legal framework for the development of Sector Skills Units as defined by the amended Education Act (Government of Malta, Legal Notice 296/2012, 2012) sets out the assessment methods which will be deemed acceptable by the SSUs:

- debate or interview, where candidates demonstrate the depth of their knowledge and communication and social skills;

²⁴ Feedback from interview with NCFHE representative

- declarative methods, where candidates demonstrate critical reflection, while making evidence-based statements about the competences they possess;
- observation, where candidates' behaviour is observed, which can take place either through a simulated or a real-life work scenario; or,
- tests and examinations, where candidates demonstrate, orally or in writing, their competences on a specific subject.

As previously mentioned, the 2016 Referencing Report (NCFHE, 2016) also provides some indication of methods that can be used in the stages of identification, documentation, assessment and certification. In terms of identification, as noted above, each applicant is assigned a mentor to guide them in identifying ways of gathering evidence to demonstrate the different learning outcomes that have been previously achieved. In terms of documentation, compiling evidence in the form of a portfolio is mentioned. With regards to assessment, different methods are used, including interviews, practical examinations, a written exam or any other method that the assessing board feels will help to assess whether the required learning outcomes have been achieved.

On a broader level, there is no specific information on how the application of methods take into account the different needs of the target groups and the different purposes of validation processes in different sectors (education, labour market, third sector). There is also no specific information on how the methods are applied and how do they differ or are targeted depending on the characteristics of the way learning has taken place (i.e. open educational resources).

At the time of writing this report, there were still no ICT-based assessment methods used for validation, though as noted above the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), has developed the infrastructure for an e-learning platform. With regards to validation, a feature of the platform is to facilitate the recognition of prior experiential learning / accreditation of prior experiential learning. Through the e-learning platform an individual can apply for previous learning acquired from work, community or volunteer experience to be assessed and if successful to then receive credit.

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- Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)



Country report Malta

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).



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020, Email: info@cedefop.europa.eu

[visit our portal www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)
