



CEDEFOP INSIGHTS

Recognition and validation of foreign VET qualifications in Europe

Comparative insights
for skills portability



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CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

The recognition of qualifications has become a central priority in the European Union (EU), underpinning the [free movement of learners and workers](#), [the functioning of the Single Market](#), and more recently the objectives of [the Union of Skills](#) and [the Skills Portability Initiative](#), which aim to strengthen the transparency, recognition and portability of skills and qualifications across Europe.

Over the past two decades, significant progress has been achieved in enhancing the transparency and comparability of qualifications through a range of European tools, such as [Europass](#), [ESCO](#) (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) and [ELM](#) (European Learning Model), and most notably through the development of [National Qualifications Frameworks](#) (NQFs) and their referencing to the [European Qualifications Framework](#) (EQF). NQFs classify qualifications within national education and training systems according to levels based on learning outcomes, while the EQF functions as a common European reference framework enabling comparison of qualification levels across countries.

These developments have supported a shift towards learning outcomes-based approaches, strengthened quality assurance, and improved access to information on qualifications systems (Cedefop, 2024a). In parallel, validation arrangements for non-formal and informal learning have contributed to making skills more visible and transferable, reinforcing the recognition of learning outcomes irrespective of learning pathways (Cedefop, 2024b).

Within this broader framework, the recognition of vocational education and training (VET) qualifications remains comparatively fragmented. In this paper, VET qualifications are understood as formal qualifications linked to specific occupations, trades or broader labour market needs, primarily covering foreign VET qualifications at secondary, post-secondary and higher levels. Unlike higher education, which benefits from more established legal instruments and cooperation structures, VET recognition practices vary significantly across Member States in terms of legislation, governance arrangements and institutional responsibilities. This is closely linked to the stronger relationship between VET systems, national labour market needs, occupational standards and sector-specific regulation.

The organisation of recognition is often characterised by multiple actors and distributed responsibilities across institutions, resulting in fragmented procedures, case-by-case assessments and varying levels of transparency and predictability (Symeonidis & Blomqvist, 2025). For individuals seeking recognition, these

arrangements may be difficult to understand and navigate, while similar challenges can also be observed in validation processes. Addressing these issues has become increasingly urgent amid demographic decline, labour shortages and global competition for talent. The Commission's Union of Skills (2025) highlights that difficulties in recognising qualifications, both within the EU and for third-country nationals, contribute to skills mismatches and the underutilisation of human capital, constraining productivity and competitiveness. Strengthening recognition systems for VET qualifications is therefore particularly important given their relevance for many shortage occupations and their role in supporting inclusive labour market integration.

This Cedefop Insight builds on a systematic mapping of national structures and legislation governing the recognition of foreign VET qualifications across the EU-27 plus Norway and Iceland. It covers recognition for both further learning and employment purposes, distinguishing between regulated and non-regulated professions, and also examines existing validation arrangements in connection to recognition practices. Drawing on data from a ReferNet survey conducted in 2024 (Symeonidis & Blomqvist, 2025) and the [European inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) (2023), as well as email consultations carried out in 2026 with 24 ENIC-NARIC centres ⁽¹⁾ and respective competent recognition authorities, the analysis provides a comparative overview of practices across Member States. The complete dataset covering all 30 systems ⁽²⁾ analysed is provided in the [Annex](#).

Specifically, the analysis examines how recognition and validation systems for foreign VET qualifications are organised according to different purposes, such as access to further learning or employment, and the legal and institutional frameworks governing these processes. It maps the distribution of responsibilities among national authorities and institutions, highlighting the pivotal role of ENIC-NARIC centres, and analyses the relationship between recognition practices and validation arrangements. In doing so, it identifies convergences and divergences across countries regarding governance arrangements, recognition methodologies, recognition outcomes and the ways validation is positioned across different education and employment purposes. The findings provide comparative evidence relevant to ongoing discussions on skills portability and the transparency of qualifications in the EU.

(1) [ENIC-NARIC centres](#) are national information centres established under the Lisbon Recognition Convention to facilitate access to information and provide guidance on the recognition and assessment of qualifications across countries.

(2) EU 27 Member States, plus Norway and Iceland, with separate inputs collected from the Flemish and French Communities of Belgium.

CHAPTER 2.

Purpose-driven recognition of skills and qualifications

The recognition of formal qualifications generally follows two distinct pathways, depending on purpose:

- recognition for further learning (commonly referred to as academic recognition); and
- recognition for employment purposes (commonly referred to as professional recognition).

Recognition for further learning seeks admission to education and training opportunities, whereas recognition for employment purposes primarily aims to support access to employment. In some countries, these distinctions are further differentiated according to specific objectives. In Italy, for example, non-academic recognition ([*riconoscimento non accademico*](#)) may support access to job centres, career progression in public administration or eligibility for scholarships. In Germany, formal recognition procedures under the [recognition act](#) may result in 'partial recognition', enabling access to employment while requiring completion of compensatory educational measures.

Specifically, recognition for further learning is governed primarily by national education legislation and institutional admission requirements. Education and training providers generally determine whether a foreign qualification grants access to further learning opportunities and how it is positioned within the national system. This process may be supported by national or regional authorities, including ENIC-NARIC centres and competent recognition authorities. According to the [Lisbon Recognition Convention](#) (LRC), a competent recognition authority refers to 'a body officially charged with making binding decisions on the recognition of foreign qualifications' (Council of Europe, 1997, p. 3). These bodies may issue comparability, equivalence or advisory statements. Depending on the legal framework, these statements may constitute either an administrative service or a legally established right for applicants, often linked to education legislation. In some systems, such statements may also result in legally binding recognition decisions.

In some cases, admission to further learning may additionally occur through validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) – also referred to as recognition of prior learning (RPL) – whereby learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings are assessed against relevant standards and, where

appropriate, formally certified. Such validation processes may, but do not necessarily, form part of qualification recognition procedures.

With regard to professional recognition, where access to a profession is legally regulated, recognition is governed by [Directive 2005/36/EC](#) (Professional Qualifications Directive – PQD). This form of recognition is often referred to as *de jure* professional recognition, as it confers a legal right to access and practise a regulated profession in the host country. Professions may be regulated in some countries but not in others. The directive applies primarily to EU/EEA nationals benefiting from the right to free movement, while third-country nationals do not enjoy an equivalent automatic right under this framework and are generally subject to national procedures.

The PQD establishes three main recognition systems applying to different categories of regulated professions:

- automatic recognition (harmonised training requirements): Applies to a limited number of professions (nurses, midwives, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, architects and veterinary surgeons) across the EU. Recognition is based on predefined minimum training requirements, allowing direct access to the profession without further assessment. Competent authorities just need to verify the authenticity of qualifications.
- recognition based on professional experience: Applies mainly to certain craft, trade and industrial occupations listed in Annex IV of the Directive. Recognition is granted if sufficient and verified professional experience has been acquired in another Member State, sometimes in combination with formal qualifications, thereby taking account of competences acquired through work practice and lifelong learning.
- general system (case-by-case assessment): Covers all other regulated professions. Competent authorities compare the applicant's qualifications with national requirements and assess whether substantial differences exist. Where necessary, compensatory measures (e.g. aptitude tests or adaptation periods) may be imposed.

In each country, the competent authority responsible for the regulated profession under the PQD will issue a decision that allows 'persons having acquired their professional qualifications in a Member State to have access to the same profession and pursue it in another Member State with the same rights as nationals' (Directive 2005/36/EC, p. 22). In this context, a competent authority refers to an authority or body empowered by a Member State to receive applications and supporting documentation and to take decisions under the directive. This should be distinguished from the concept of a competent recognition authority under the LRC.

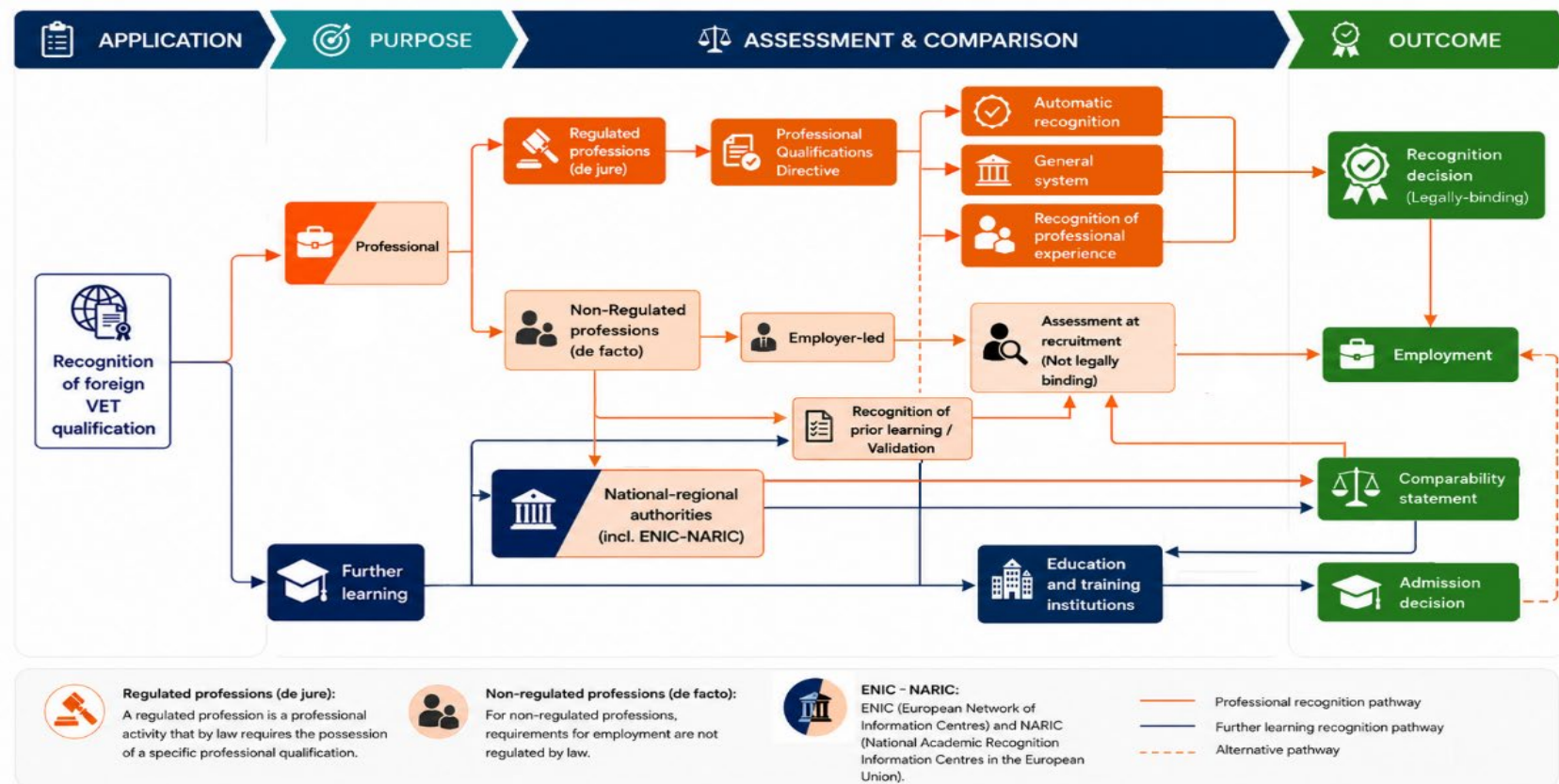
For non-regulated professions, the recognition process does not require the involvement of competent authorities designated under the PQD and is often referred to as *de facto* professional recognition. Competent recognition authorities, ENIC-NARIC centres or other bodies may provide comparability or advisory statements to facilitate employers' assessment, but these tend not to be legally binding. Typically, such statements are not issued for a single specific purpose and may therefore be used both for further learning and employment purposes.

Employers are, in principle, free to assess foreign qualifications directly and decide on recruitment without formal recognition requirements. At the same time, VNFIL may support access to employment opportunities. Depending on national arrangements, validation bodies, VET providers or other designated authorities may identify, document, assess and certify the learning outcomes acquired by the applicant against specified standards that give access to the profession. VNFIL may support access to employment or the award of a qualification equivalent or identical to one awarded in the host country.

Figure 1 presents a simplified conceptual overview of the main recognition pathways depending on purpose. Similar decision-tree approaches are used in several countries to direct applicants towards the appropriate recognition authority or procedure. In practice, however, recognition arrangements are often considerably more complex than such schemes suggest. Procedures may differ depending on the profession concerned, the country of origin and destination, the legal and institutional framework governing the profession, and the number and type of authorities involved. Connections between qualifications and occupations may not always be clear across countries, and the volume of applications received may influence the level of guidance and support available to applicants.

Particularly in relation to non-regulated professions, employers may remain reluctant to recruit individuals holding foreign qualifications without additional evidence of comparability or host-country certification, even if no formal recognition requirement exists. In such cases, individuals may be encouraged or required to undergo validation procedures or obtain equivalent host-country qualifications. These dynamics may create barriers to effective skills portability and contribute to unequal treatment or underutilisation of holders of foreign qualifications.

Figure 1. The process of recognising foreign VET qualifications based on purpose



Source: Authors.

CHAPTER 3.

Recognition and validation for further learning

This section examines recognition and validation arrangements linked to access and progression within formal education and training pathways. It focuses on how foreign VET qualifications are positioned within national education systems, the extent to which they support access to higher education or advanced vocational pathways, and the role played by ENIC-NARIC centres, specialised VET recognition bodies, and education and training institutions. Particular attention is given to the types and levels of VET qualifications covered, the distinction between equivalence and comparability statements, and the relationship between qualification-based recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

3.1. Recognition for further learning

For the purpose of further learning, recognition of foreign VET qualifications is predominantly dependent on existing formal education pathways. The recognition procedures in the systems analysed focus specifically on upper secondary VET qualifications, typically at EQF 4, that grant access to higher education or advanced vocational and professional tracks. Only a limited number of systems, such as Croatia, Ireland, and Latvia appear to include post-secondary or higher VET qualifications at EQF 5 and above within these arrangements, particularly where they are formally linked to tertiary education pathways or NQFs. Qualifications or credentials awarded outside formal education systems are rarely integrated into these formal recognition processes; instead, they are handled via separate validation arrangements, maintaining a clear distinction between recognition for formal qualifications and the validation of prior experience (see Section 3.2).

Access to further learning opportunities is heavily influenced by the internal architecture of national education systems, as NQF/EQF referencing alone does not automatically guarantee access to further learning pathways. In Sweden, for example, the ENIC-NARIC determines the position of foreign VET qualifications based on its knowledge of the foreign education system's structure. Where a foreign upper secondary VET qualifications (EQF 3 or EQF 4) grants access to higher education in the country of origin and is comparable to a Swedish upper secondary VET qualification, a statement is issued for both academic entry and employment. However, post-secondary VET qualifications (typically referenced at EQF 5 and above) in Sweden are generally assessed only for employment

purposes. Other countries maintain stricter progression barriers; for instance, Czechia links higher education access to matura-type examinations, which limits progression for VET graduates whose qualifications are not considered equivalent to that specific pathway. Similarly, in Germany, recognised VET qualifications support further vocational training but do not grant an automatic right to enter higher education. In Norway, foreign VET qualifications are typically recognised for professional rather than academic purposes.

The outcomes of these recognition procedures also differ significantly in terms of their legal weight and the methodologies used. Some systems utilise formal administrative procedures to establish legally binding equivalence or nostrification ⁽³⁾, a practice observed in countries such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, and Romania. Other systems, including Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, the Netherlands and Slovenia, rely on advisory recognition statements or comparability assessments that position qualifications within the national education systems of the host countries without establishing full equivalence to a specific programme.

Despite these administrative differences, the authorities responsible for admissions are most commonly the individual education and training institutions (e.g. secondary schools, adult apprenticeship programmes, or higher education institutions), which act as gatekeepers by conducting their own assessments or utilising guidance provided by national authorities (e.g. ENIC-NARICs) to determine a candidate's suitability for specific study programmes. This institutional autonomy is particularly visible in countries such as Belgium (Flemish community), Denmark and Finland, where ENIC-NARIC centres would refer applicants directly to education and training institutions for assessment and admission decisions concerning foreign VET qualifications.

Institutional organisation reflects this diversity, with responsibilities for the recognition of foreign VET qualifications distributed across different institutions and governance levels. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that ENIC-NARIC centres facilitate information provision for foreign VET recognition in 23 of the 30 systems analysed. In several countries, including Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden, ENIC-NARIC centres move beyond information sharing to directly assess VET qualifications or issue comparability statements for further learning. Approximately one third of the systems analysed additionally involve specialised VET or sectoral bodies in the recognition process. For example, [SBB](#) in the Netherlands, [AVETAE](#) in Croatia, [EOPPEP](#) in Greece and [ANQEP](#) in

⁽³⁾ Nostrification implies the recognition of a foreign degree as legally equivalent to a domestic one.

Portugal provide information, guidance or assessment on foreign VET qualifications (typically referenced at EQF 1-4). In a few countries, including Czechia, Spain (through the autonomous communities), Italy and Austria, information and guidance on recognition procedures concerning foreign VET qualifications for further learning is provided at the regional level.

Across the European landscape, recognition methodologies continue to rely on comparison of formal qualifications and curricula, while increasingly also considering qualification frameworks and learning outcomes. A critical component of this shift is the application of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), primarily used in the higher education context, to the VET sector. At least 15 national systems, explicitly apply or align their VET recognition processes with LRC principles. This ensures that foreign qualifications are recognised unless substantial differences can be demonstrated, fostering a more transparent and learner-centred approach.

Nevertheless, the application of LRC principles to vocational pathways remains less consistent than in higher education. This is particularly visible in cases where vocational qualifications have been acquired through apprenticeships or in non-formal settings, as well as through validation of work experience, which are often difficult to assess solely through qualification-based recognition procedures. As a result, recognition of foreign VET qualifications might require complementary procedures beyond the comparison of formal qualifications alone, such as validation of non-formal and informal learning.

3.2. Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Around three fourths of countries reviewed allow the acquisition of VET qualifications through the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2024b). The award of a VET qualification through validation may provide access to further learning opportunities, including progression to higher levels of education.

In most cases, the bodies responsible for recognising foreign qualifications for further learning, typically education and training providers, are also responsible for carrying out validation processes. In some countries, however, dedicated validation centres exist, such as those operating in Romania or the *Qualifica* centres in Portugal. These centres are generally accredited VET providers authorised to conduct validation.

Despite these institutional overlaps, validation and the recognition of foreign qualifications remain distinct processes with different requirements. A formal foreign qualification is assessed through a recognition procedure involving competent recognition authorities, education and training providers and, in some

cases, ENIC-NARIC centres. By contrast, the validation of non-formal and informal learning, while often involving the same providers, generally follows the four-stage approach set out in the [2012 Council recommendation](#) (Council of the European Union, 2012): identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

Applicants are typically supported by a practitioner in identifying and documenting their skills and competences, which are subsequently assessed and, where appropriate, certified. Validation may lead to admission to formal programmes or to the award of credits, partial qualifications or full qualifications (Cedefop, 2023). Although a formal foreign qualification may be used as evidence during the documentation phase of a validation process, the possession of a formal VET qualification will normally trigger a separate recognition procedure rather than a validation process.

CHAPTER 4.

Recognition and validation for employment purposes

This section examines recognition and validation arrangements of foreign VET qualifications linked to employment purposes across the systems analysed. It analyses the main characteristics, governance arrangements and recognition practices identified in relation to regulated professions, non-regulated professions and validation pathways linked to labour market access. Particular attention is given to the role of ENIC-NARIC centres and other national structures involved in these processes, as well as to the scope of VET qualifications covered, the legal basis underpinning recognition arrangements, the services provided and the types of recognition and validation outcomes issued.

4.1. Recognition for regulated professions

Recognition for this purpose constitutes the most legally structured and procedurally harmonised process across countries, as it is governed by national legislation transposing [Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications \(PQD\)](#). In contrast to recognition for further learning, the purpose here is to grant the legal right to practise a profession under the same conditions as nationals. Across all systems analysed, competent authorities designated per profession issue legally binding recognition decisions linked to the regulation of the

profession in the host country. Recognition is therefore mandatory and the profession cannot be legally exercised without it.

For this process, a critical factor shaping recognition practices is the extent to which professions are regulated within national labour markets. Countries differ significantly in the number and type of regulated professions, as well as the degree of flexibility embedded in their recognition systems. In general, systems with fewer regulated professions, such as Lithuania or Finland, appear to rely more strongly on labour market flexibility and employer judgement, while countries with more extensive regulatory frameworks maintain more formalised and rigid recognition procedures. Crucially, requirements depend on whether a profession is regulated in the host country rather than the country of origin. This implies that occupations considered non-regulated in one country, including many VET-related occupations linked to technical trades, construction, transport, beauty services, or health and safety activities, may require formal recognition procedures in other countries. In some systems, regulation may apply only to specific professional activities rather than to an entire occupation.

In practice, many VET-related regulated professions are assessed under the general system established by the PQD, whereby competent authorities compare foreign qualifications with national requirements and may impose compensatory measures when substantial differences are identified.

National assistance centres established under the PQD play an important role in providing information and guidance on recognition procedures, documentation requirements and competent authorities. In 18 of the systems analysed, ENIC-NARIC centres formally act as national assistance centres for regulated professions, while in four additional systems they provide complementary information and guidance. Even if ENIC-NARIC centres are not formally designated as assistance centres, the responsible authority is often located within the same ministry or institutional structure.

At the same time, several countries rely on dedicated assistance structures operating outside the ENIC-NARIC framework. In Belgium, for example, the FPS Economy operates the [Be-Assist centre](#), while ENIC-NARIC bodies provide complementary information concerning academic recognition pathways. Germany similarly relies on [BIBB](#) as national assistance centre, whereas Czechia operates a dedicated [Centre for Recognition of Professional Qualifications](#) alongside the [ENIC-NARIC centre](#). In several countries, online databases and digital portals additionally provide information on regulated professions, competent authorities and applicable recognition procedures, supporting individuals in navigating often complex recognition arrangements.

Final recognition decisions, however, are generally taken by sectoral ministries, professional chambers, regulatory bodies or other specialised competent authorities designated for each profession. In some systems, governance arrangements are further decentralised; Italy distinguishes between professions regulated at national and regional levels, while Germany relies on a network of chambers and competent bodies distributed across sectors and federal states.

An important interaction exists between academic and professional recognition in several systems. Applicants may first be required to obtain an academic equivalence or level assessment establishing the position of their qualification within the national education system before applying for professional recognition. At the same time, legally binding professional recognition decisions are different to broader comparability statements issued by ENIC-NARIC centres or other authorities. As mentioned in previous sections, in most cases, such statements assess the level of the qualification and its comparability with corresponding qualification levels in the host country rather than establishing full programme equivalence. These comparability statements are, thus, typically not enough to exercise the profession.

For qualifications linked to regulated professions, academic recognition procedures may nevertheless involve more detailed assessment of programme content and comparability with corresponding national qualifications. This is the case, for example, in Belgium (Flemish Community), where [NARIC-Vlaanderen](#) may assess equivalence with the corresponding Flemish programme for qualifications connected to regulated professions, while professional recognition decisions themselves remain within the competence of the designated professional authorities. While comparability or level statements may support interpretation of foreign qualifications and facilitate access to employment, they do not replace formal professional recognition decisions where these are legally required. In France, for example, a foreign electrician, a profession considered regulated, may be employed based on a comparability assessment, whereas establishing oneself as an independent professional or business owner in this sector requires formal professional recognition by the competent authority.

The visibility of VET qualifications within these structures remains uneven. While the PQD applies across all qualification types, recognition pathways are generally more clearly structured for professions with established legal entry requirements and designated competent authorities. In countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, formal upper secondary and post-secondary VET qualifications, typically referenced at EQF levels 3–5 and embedded within national education systems, are more systematically

incorporated into recognition procedures for regulated professions. By contrast, lower-level vocational certificates and recognition pathways based primarily on professional experience are often managed outside centralised recognition structures, with assessment organised through sectoral chambers, occupational regulators or regional authorities. This complexity, exacerbated by the large number of competent authorities, continues to present challenges for transparency and accessibility.

Nonetheless, there is an increasing trend toward utilising the procedure for recognition of regulated professions and its comparability tools more flexibly, by providing outcomes that can also be used for broader labour market purposes, even when the applicants do not intend to practise the regulated profession itself. [ENIC-NARIC France](#), for example, is considering establishing a mechanism to certify the academic level of certain foreign qualifications linked to regulated professions for applicants who wish to practise professions outside the regulated professional framework. At present, however, the centre rejects all requests related to regulated professions; in 2025 alone, approximately 3 000 such applications were rejected as it is not in the scope of its mandate, referring applicants to the relevant competent authority.

4.2. Recognition for non-regulated professions

Recognition of VET qualifications for non-regulated professions constitutes the least formalised and most heterogeneous domain across the 30 systems analysed, both in terms of institutional arrangements and types of outputs. Unlike the legally structured procedures governing regulated professions, recognition in this context functions primarily as a de facto process to support the interpretation, comparability, and transparency of foreign qualifications for the labour market. Rather than conferring legally protected professional rights, these procedures facilitate labour market integration by helping employers understand foreign credentials. Final recruitment and employment decisions rest entirely with employers, who determine whether a foreign qualification is suitable for a specific occupation. Consequently, recognition here does not serve as a work permit or legal authorisation to practise but acts as a voluntary transparency process.

Arrangements for non-regulated professions appear widespread across Europe. In 21 of the systems analysed, ENIC-NARIC centres provide information and guidance concerning foreign qualifications for non-regulated labour market purposes, while in 18 systems they additionally issue non-legally binding comparability or advisory statements positioning qualifications within the national education or qualifications system. In most systems, the same assessment methodologies and comparability statements used for further learning are also

applied to employment in non-regulated professions, without substantial differentiation in criteria or procedures according to labour market needs. Such statements typically support interpretation of foreign qualifications for salary placement, recruitment procedures and broader employment conditions.

There are cases, however, where legally binding recognition decisions are also issued for this purpose, such as in Norway, where the ENIC-NARIC issues legally binding decisions confirming comparability to Norwegian VET qualifications, although employers retain discretion regarding recruitment decisions. In Denmark, while comparability statements are advisory in nature, the qualification level indicated may be binding in certain public sector contexts. In some systems, such as Croatia and France, VET qualifications linked to regulated professions may also be assessed for use in non-regulated labour market contexts.

At the same time, important differences exist regarding the legal basis underpinning such arrangements. In approximately one third of the systems analysed, legislation explicitly establishes a formal framework or statutory right for individuals to request recognition, equivalence or comparability assessment of foreign qualifications for labour market purposes. This is the case, for example, in countries such as Denmark, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Austria. In other systems, comparability statements are provided primarily as an administrative or informational service without a dedicated legal entitlement.

An institutional and legal overlap can also be observed between academic recognition, labour market recognition and validation arrangements in the context of non-regulated professions. In many systems, the same legal frameworks, authorities and recognition procedures originally established for academic recognition are also used to assess foreign qualifications for employment purposes in non-regulated professions. As a result, comparability statements developed within education recognition frameworks are frequently reused to support recruitment decisions, salary placement and broader employment conditions. In the Netherlands, for example, [ENIC-NARIC Netherlands](#) and [SBB](#) jointly operate the International Credential Evaluation ([IDW](#)) structure supporting credential evaluation for both employment and further learning purposes.

At the same time, ENIC-NARIC centres rarely assess employer-issued or purely occupational certificates directly, although some systems may additionally consider supporting evidence related to professional experience. In Luxembourg, for example, the Ministries of Education and of Higher Education may take work certificates into account where assessment of qualifications identifies differences in training duration or programme content. Validation of non-formal and informal

learning might constitute another way of accessing a regulated or non-regulated profession.

4.3. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in the labour market

Around two thirds of the systems analysed report some form of validation, RPL or skills assessment arrangements linked to the labour market ⁽⁴⁾. The latest inventory analysis shows a clear increase in the number of countries that are establishing this type of validation arrangements (Cedefop, 2024b). In some instances, these arrangements will be used by employers to qualify (foreign) workers that have professional experience and lack formal qualifications from the host country or will be used as complementary processes in the recognition of foreign VET qualifications. The processes, however, vary considerably in their legal basis, institutionalisation and connection to the recognition of foreign qualifications.

The VET qualifications covered under the Recognition of professional experience in the PQD can, in fact, be regarded as a form of validation, although it is, in several instances, conditional to have a formal qualification.

For non-regulated professions, employers may not feel confident accepting foreign qualifications and may require applicants to undergo validation in order to become qualified workers in the host country. This will usually take place by going through a validation process connected to further learning. As described above, the main responsible body for this type of process is normally the VET provider, which verifies the knowledge and skills of the applicant, awarding them a qualification from the host country or some equivalent certification. The possibility of awarding full qualifications through these processes tends to be connected to comprehensive VET systems, such as those in Portugal and Spain that allow for validation, or when validation is clearly integrated in qualification systems, such as in France or Luxembourg. In Lithuania, VET qualifications can be obtained through bilateral agreements between the employment service and an unemployed or employed person under the law on employment. In Denmark, various bodies at regional and organisational level collaborate to provide validation.

There are instances, however, in which chambers of commerce or professional associations, as well as public employment services (PES) or specific accredited centres, including VET providers, may carry out validation and allow for holders of foreign qualifications to get certificates that can be used to access the

(4) Validation arrangements in the labour market are defined as 'initiatives in which private sector institutions play a central role (alone or in collaboration with public sector institutions.). These initiatives might be promoted, for example, by employers or employers' associations' (Cedefop, 2024b, p. 68).

labour market, although these may differ from formal VET qualifications. For instance, the *ervaringscertificaat* (certificate of experience) together with the *vakbekwaamheidsbewijs* (certificate for vocational competence) linked to professional standards, are two certifications provided through the labour market validation route in the Netherlands. Similarly, in the French Community of Belgium, the *validation des compétences* (VDC) results in a non-formal credential that can be used to apply for jobs, but which remains distinct from a formal VET qualification. The value of these certificates may differ from that of formal qualifications, potentially limiting the portability of skills.

As is the case for further learning recognition, validation processes and recognition processes tend to be clearly differentiated also for employment purposes. ENIC-NARIC centres are rarely involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning, although comparability statements may be used as part of the documentation phase of a validation process connected to the labour market.

CHAPTER 5.

Implications for skills portability and the transparency of qualifications

This concluding section synthesises the main evidence emerging from the comparative analysis of recognition and validation arrangements for foreign VET qualifications across Europe. It highlights key insights concerning governance arrangements, recognition methodologies, recognition outcomes and the relationship between recognition and validation across different education and employment contexts. Building on these conclusions, the section identifies key challenges affecting the transparency and portability of qualifications and skills, and outlines policy pointers to support more transparent, coherent and accessible recognition and validation arrangements.

5.1. Purpose-dependent recognition arrangements

The purpose, the applicable legal framework and the institutional context in which recognition takes place strongly shape the recognition arrangements for VET qualifications. As a result, significant differences exist across countries regarding governance, the legal status and use of recognition outcomes, the scope of VET qualifications covered, and the relationship between recognition and validation practices.

The recognition for further learning is comparatively more structured than the recognition for employment purposes. Particularly in non-regulated professions, the reliance on employer interpretation makes the process less transparent and transferable across contexts, with criteria for recognition less stable and coherent, hindering portability and potential use of recognition outputs.

Challenges:

- recognition arrangements differ significantly depending on the recognition purpose, profession and country, reducing transparency and use of recognition outcomes across these different contexts;
- recognition for non-regulated professions remains comparatively less structured, transparent and more dependent on context specific interpretation;
- the same (foreign) qualification may lead to different recognition outcomes depending on the purpose, the legal bases applied or who carries out the recognition.

Policy pointers:

- clarify and improve accessibility of recognition pathways, procedures and outcomes across different recognition purposes and contexts;
- support clearer communication regarding the legal value, limitations and possible uses of recognition outcomes across education and labour market settings;
- promote more coherent recognition arrangements capable of supporting transitions between further learning and employment pathways;
- develop and promote the use of learning outcomes, common templates and terminology that permit better portability of recognition outcomes across contexts and purposes, while using the potential of digital technologies and credentials.

5.2. Governance arrangements and the role of ENIC-NARIC centres

ENIC-NARIC centres play an increasingly cross-cutting role in the recognition of foreign VET qualifications. Although their formal mandate remains primarily linked to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and recognition for further learning purposes, many ENIC-NARIC centres increasingly support labour market recognition by providing information, guidance, comparability assessments and advisory statements used across education and employment contexts. This development is also reflected in the revised [ENIC-NARIC Charter](#), which acknowledges the growing relevance of VET to the networks' work. In practice, ENIC-NARIC centres increasingly operate as important actors bridging education and labour market recognition contexts. However, they still rely on educational

standards, structures and procedures and are not usually formally connected to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

At the governance level, recognition systems continue to rely on multiple actors and distributed responsibilities across education ministries, labour market authorities, sectoral bodies and education and training institutions. While this allows recognition systems to respond to diverse institutional and occupational contexts, it also contributes to uneven levels of transparency, consistency and portability across countries and recognition purposes. This variety of actors makes it difficult for individuals and employers to navigate recognition and validation pathways as well as understand outcomes attached to them.

Challenges:

- distributed responsibilities across institutions and sectors may create fragmented recognition landscapes and reduce coordination, consistency and reliability of recognition outcomes;
- individuals and employers may face difficulties identifying the appropriate authority, pathway or procedure for recognition or validation;
- cooperation between education, labour market and validation actors remains uneven across countries and sectors.

Policy pointers:

- clarify roles and responsibilities across recognition and validation contexts and purposes, while improving coordination and information sharing across institutions involved;
- expand and build on the existing expertise and cooperation structures of ENIC-NARIC centres to support more transparent, coherent and portable recognition arrangements for foreign VET qualifications;
- strengthen cooperation between ENIC-NARIC centres, VET authorities, labour market actors and validation bodies through enhanced peer learning and exchange of practices across contexts and sectors.

5.3. Convergence of methodologies and growing overlap between recognition purposes

The evidence further suggests increasing convergence in the methodologies and tools used to support recognition. Across countries and recognition purposes, growing reliance is placed on comparability approaches and the positioning of qualifications through NQFs and the EQF. Although still heavily dependent on the purpose of the recognition process, this reliance on NQFs tends to make recognition processes rely on comparability or advisory statements based on education system standards and criteria that, especially in non-regulated

professions, might not be fit for purpose. As a result, the same qualification may be interpreted and used differently across education and labour market contexts.

The findings also indicate that advisory statements and methodologies developed within education systems are increasingly reused to support labour market access, while academic recognition or validation of prior learning in educational contexts may serve as a prerequisite for professional recognition in regulated occupations. In some systems, qualifications linked to regulated professions are additionally assessed for broader labour market use outside the regulated field, while parallel validation arrangements increasingly support the assessment of occupational competences acquired through work experience or non-formal and informal learning. These developments point towards increasingly blurred boundaries between recognition and validation practices in several systems, while there is still not clear connection between recognition and validation practices.

Challenges:

- existing recognition methodologies and frameworks do not always capture the broader function, progression possibilities and labour market relevance of qualifications;
- advisory statements developed for education purposes are increasingly used in labour market contexts without always being designed for such use;
- blurred boundaries between recognition purposes may create uncertainty regarding the legal status and practical use of recognition outcomes.

Policy pointers:

- support greater consistency in the use of comparability approaches, learning outcomes and qualification information across different recognition purposes and contexts by utilising digital credentials;
- further strengthen the use of NQFs, the EQF and learning outcomes to support transparency and comparability of VET qualifications, while broadening their scope to wider types of qualifications awarded outside the formal systems;
- develop user-oriented methodologies for recognition that provides clear criteria, decision steps and guidance to competent authorities and that can work across contexts and purposes;
- develop more flexible and purpose-sensitive recognition approaches capable of supporting diverse education and labour market pathways.

5.4. Recognition, validation and skills portability

The connection between recognition and validation arrangements remains unevenly formalised and underdeveloped across countries and sectors. While education and training institutions are often responsible for both recognition for further learning and validation of prior learning, these processes frequently remain institutionally and procedurally disconnected, limiting the synergies that could support more flexible and portable learning and career pathways. Both validation and recognition procedures tend to rely on formal education structures and procedures, making it difficult for vocational skills relevant for the labour market and not (yet) covered by formal VET qualifications to be recognised. In addition, certification obtained through validation of non-formal and informal learning is, in some instances, not clearly mapped or connected to existing VET qualifications or standards. This limited visibility of vocational skills and competences continues to create barriers to transparency, comparability and portability across education and employment contexts. ENIC-NARIC or other bodies working on the recognition of VET qualifications might also not have the capacity or resources to go deep into the content and determine connections to existing VET qualifications.

The analysis suggests growing demand for more flexible and purpose-neutral, interconnected recognition and validation approaches capable of supporting diverse career pathways and labour market transitions in different contexts. Emerging practices observed in the analysis illustrate increasing efforts to assess qualifications and competences beyond their original regulatory context, pointing towards a gradual broadening of recognition outcomes for multiple purposes.

Challenges:

- links between recognition and validation remain weakly formalised and insufficiently integrated across countries and sectors;
- competences acquired through work experience or non-formal and informal learning remain insufficiently visible within formal recognition systems;
- lack of capacity and resources to focus recognition processes on in-depth analysis of content-related elements.

Policy pointers:

- strengthen connections between qualification recognition and validation arrangements to better support the portability of competences acquired outside formal education and training pathways;
- improve the visibility and transparency of vocational qualifications and competences, including those acquired through work experience and non-formal and informal learning by promoting common learning outcomes approaches, terminology and their certification through digital credentials;

- support more flexible and purpose-neutral recognition and validation approaches capable of responding to diverse career pathways, transitions and labour market needs.

Abbreviations

ELM	European Learning Model
ENIC	European Network of Information Centres
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESCO	European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
IDW	International Credential Evaluation
LRC	Lisbon Recognition Convention
NARIC	National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PES	Public employment services
PQD	Professional Qualifications Directive
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
VET	Vocational education and training
VDC	Validation des compétences
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning

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Annex – Comparative mapping of national recognition and validation arrangements for foreign VET qualifications and skills

The [annex](#) presents the complete comparative dataset underpinning the analysis in this Cedefop Insight, covering 30 recognition systems across the EU-27, Norway and Iceland.

For each system, it identifies the information centres and competent (recognition) authorities involved in the recognition of foreign VET qualifications and skills for further learning, employment in regulated professions and employment in non-regulated professions, as well as the legal frameworks governing these processes.

It also provides information on national validation arrangements relevant to labour-market access and skills recognition.

Recognition and validation of foreign VET qualifications in Europe

Comparative insights for skills portability

This Cedefop Insight examines how recognition of foreign VET qualifications and related validation arrangements are organised across the EU-27, Norway and Iceland. Drawing on a comparative mapping of national legislation, governance and institutional practices, the analysis explores recognition for further learning, professional recognition for regulated and non-regulated employment, as well as links with validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The findings reveal considerable diversity in governance structures, recognition methodologies and recognition outcomes, reflecting differences in education systems, labour-market regulation and institutional responsibilities. At the same time, convergences are also observed mainly through the growing use of learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks and comparability approaches.

The analysis highlights the increasingly cross-cutting role of ENIC-NARIC centres in bridging education and labour-market recognition contexts, as well as the gradual blurring of boundaries between recognition purposes. Recognition and validation arrangements remain largely separate. Strengthening connections between these processes could improve the transparency, comparability and portability of skills and qualifications across Europe.

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