
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN SLOVENIA

By Nataša Cvetek (BBJ Consult Inc. – Slovenia)

1.1 Introduction

The Slovenian education system has gone through many changes in the last 15 years, in particular following the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1996). The reform of VET has taken into account life-long principle and established legal grounds for adult education, as well as for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

A new **National Vocational Qualification Act** introducing a certification system was passed in 2000. Preparation of the act including consensus building, among stakeholders and piloting of methodologies have been facilitated by support from the EU Phare programme. The Act enables the assessment and verification of vocation-related knowledge, skills and experiences acquired out of school. It makes it possible for individuals to obtain a vocational qualification in ways other than through formal schooling. Candidates undergo a knowledge assessment procedure by a special commission to obtain a state-approved certificate assessing their competence in performing certain vocational tasks. Vocational qualifications obtained in this way can be used by holders to find a job or, move into further training, demonstrating that part of an education programme has already been completed.

Several institutions and firms started implementing the certification system, which is already successful, even if still new. Along government initiatives, institutional participation in international projects and involvement of private sector in implementing certification, the third sector has already developed many ways of non-formal and informal education, but no system of validation of certification is available at this level.

As a new member of the European Union from the 1st of May 2004, Slovenia aims to fully implement the Lisbon strategy, namely the objective of Life Long Learning. Therefore, in the framework of the European Social Fund, it will continue to develop the certification of non-formal and informal knowledge as a strategic tool for adult education, improved employability and better adaptability to labour market trends.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives : Public Sector

This section describes national public sector initiatives on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Slovenia. Due to the small size of Slovenia, all initiatives by the public authorities in that field are decided and implemented at a national level. Sub-national public authorities don't have separate initiatives.

1.2.1 Existing methods and instruments

There is currently only one national and official system of recognition in place. The National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) is a working vocational or professional qualification, required for an occupation or an individual set of tasks within an occupation.

It can be obtained by achieving:

- vocational or professional education, or
- completing parts of educational programmes, or
- completing vocational training and advanced training programmes, or
- meeting the standards of professional knowledge and skills.

The basis for NVQ is the elaboration of occupational profiles and meeting relevant occupational standards.

Assessment procedures

The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs (MoLFSA) is responsible for assessment and certification of non-formal and informal learning and work experiences, in order to provide national recognised certificate.

The first step is the submission of a personal application to an authorised and registered organisation by MoLFSA.

On the job assessment and certification of individual is then carried out by a nominated commission (whose members must obtain a special licence from the National Examination Centre).

NVQ may be reach a) by certification - direct assessment of professional knowledge, skills and abilities determined in the catalogue or b) in school - on the basis of documents acquired in educational programmes.

The forms, duration of assessment and the composition of commission may be adapted to the persons with special needs.

1.2.2 Legal framework

The Adult Education Act regulates the normative basis of the adult education system, including the verification of non-formal and informal knowledge.

The National Vocational Qualification Act adopted in 2000¹ and the accompanying regulations² provide a legislative basis and framework for links between formal and informal education, one of the pre-conditions for implementing the concept of life-long learning. It introduces a certification system, which provides access to nationally recognised certificates for specific NVQ, enabling recognition of prior learning and experiences of adults. The text itself generally regulates the procedure, bodies and organisations competent for approving standards for selected qualifications as the basis for assessing and recognising prior and non-formal learning.

¹ *Official Journal of RS, No. 81/3708/2000*. It was amended in 2003.

² such as *The Regulation on Method and Procedure of Assessment and Certification of NVQ* (Official Journal of RS, No. 97-4339/2003) and *The Regulation on Procedure on Acquiring NVQ* (Official Journal of RS, No. 017-01-015/99-005), some of them currently revised

1.2.3 Norms / standards setting

Occupational standards, leading to NVQ, defines the code and the name of occupation, level of difficulty of work, competence, and field of work, main tasks, knowledge and skills.

Qualification standards are prepared for the following levels: Lower vocational qualification/education (ISCED level 3C) / Middle vocational qualification/education (ISCED level 3C) / Middle technical qualification/education (ISCED level 3B) / Higher non-university technical qualification/education (ISCED level 5B).

The initiative for the new occupational standard may be given by anybody to the CPI, starting the preparation of the proposal. They must meet the following requirements: stability, long-lasting, widespread, appearance in different work situations, employability of significant number of people, comparability with occupations on foreign labour markets.

Development and modernisation of occupational standards in respective fields is the main task of nominated "field committee", composed of the representatives of chambers, ministries and trade unions. It may also propose modification or development of new job profile, occupational standard or catalogue to the responsible chamber or ministry, who nominates expert group, responsible for statement on adjustment of proposal with national and EU legislation and with labour market demands.

After the positive opinion on the proposal by the expert board, the SSPIU submits it to the MoLFSA for approval.

The knowledge and skills required for acquiring NVQ are determined by a catalogue of standards for professional knowledge and skills. These catalogues, are needed for certification of NVQ, and are developed on the basis of the occupational standard.

The proposal for a catalogue is developed by the responsible chamber (or ministry for activities for which the chambers are not organised) or by CPI in close cooperation with professional and vocational associations and trade unions.

The initiative for the adaptation of catalogue of professional knowledge and skills may be proposed by anyone to the CPI, who decides on relevance of initiative.

Expert board, nominated by SSPIU, is responsible for coordination of the proposed catalogue in line with the established needs for vocational qualification, international comparability and compliance with the Slovene legal system and EU regulations. The proposed catalogue is then determined and published by the MoLFSA.

1.2.4 Outputs and outcomes

As of May 2004, based on the number of catalogues of professional knowledge and skills available, non-formal and informal knowledge could be validated for about 65 qualifications. Other data available (May 2004) show that:

- The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education has trained 180 assessors and 58 counsellors for APL (assessment of prior learning).
- More than 500 candidates went through this system (i.e. built up a portfolio containing evidence of non-formal and informal knowledge and skills) and successfully acquired a certificate.

Approaches, which take account of prior learning of learners, are promoted as part of the reform of the formal system, yet especially on secondary level there is little evidence of the impact of this in the classroom. Education institutions are still rather rigid in their behaviour and tend to rely on formal evidence when learners pass between the systems of work and learning, between different education systems or between different paths within the system. They seem to be reluctant to leave the responsibility to learners rather than take it on themselves.

Adopting the national law on vocational qualifications, requires education and training institutions to take certified qualifications in account when people undertake formal education and training paths. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning systems in Slovenia, is been recognised. This requirement is also taken into account in the most recent guidelines for the preparation of vocational education and training programmes; entering the programme is facilitated on the one hand for those with working experience and on the other hand for those who for some reason have left the system before achieving formal recognition and have acquired some certified marketable skill/qualification and thus increasing their employability.

1.2.5 Limits

- There is still a lack of connection between the system of NVQ and higher / further vocational education
- The NVQ are not included in the official Occupational Nomenclature (Nomenklatura poklicev) which is the basis for the official salary scale, as are other degrees and certificates gained through formal education.
- The system of marks / transferable credits is still missing, and therefore not in line with Europass, as it should be in the future.
- The role of trade unions should be increased for more transparency.

1.2.6 Other interesting initiatives by the government for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

It can be interesting to mention that public institutions are involved in initiatives aiming at recognising non-formal and informal learning, but only in some specific sectors.

1. The CPI (Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education) is taking part in a 2-year project financed by the EU programme Leonardo da Vinci and entitled “*Facilitating access to lifelong learning through the development of recognition procedure of non-formal and informal learning*”.

The project objective is to develop a package of tools, which would ensure an independent valuing of non-formal and informal learning in the target sector of retail trade, in order to recognise persons’ competencies, acquired during non-formal and informal learning in their working life.

2. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education is also involved in a project “*Assessment and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)*”.

This development project was established in order to set up a network for the accreditation of non-formal (prior) learning (APL). Namely, diverse types of knowledge which are acquired in non-formal ways; - either as a hobby (by self-education), or based on working experiences.

Owing to the fact that the drop-out rate from the Slovenian formal education system is fairly high, the APL system is expected to serve well. Until now certificates issued in a particular work organisation have not been transferable to new work environments - not even in the case of college degrees from higher education institutes.

The main APL project tasks will include evaluation of prior (non-formal) learning; preparation of standards of knowledge; non-formal knowledge/qualification; criteria for accreditation of evidence; training of advisors and assessors/evaluators.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private sector

1.3.1 Industry sectors

The example of the firm Krka and of the pharmaceutical sector

Along with in-house training, courses and workshops and training on the job, the firm KRKA was the first company to develop and start implementing 3 standards of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), i.e. certification of non-formal and informal learning valid at the national level:

- production of final products (in the pharmaceutical sector)
- production of raw products (in the pharmaceutical sector)
- logistics

The second pharmaceuticals company in Slovenia, the trade union confederation, the Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (CPI), the chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs were involved in developing the system.

These qualifications have been officially accepted by the Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (CPI), Trade Union Confederation, Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs. As a result, NVQ's at Krka can not only be obtained by completing in-house training or attending in-house lectures (some 150-200) but crucially also by carrying out practical on the job training and then meeting the official standards in written and practical tests. About 100 workers have finished the in-house trainings on the job and lectures and haven been tested and verified by the special national group of evaluators.

Having built a strong network with the other Slovene firms from the pharmaceutical sector, Krka has been designated as the only institution habilitated to check and certify the NVQ for these 3 standards.

In 2005 the company is working (again, with other major Slovene pharmaceutical production company) to develop further three qualifications for production workers (level 1 employees). This training is dealing with automatic processing and IT. Krka is also thinking about expanding this system to staff working for Krka in branches abroad.

The example of the Slovene Chamber of Commerce and Industry (GZS)

The GZS has elaborated a system of "Chamber exams" for the validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning.

Standards for certification are prepared by the different professional associations that are organised within the GZS. However, there is only a control of the final knowledge, and not of the learning path.

These chamber exams are available for all qualifications / knowledge that cannot be included in the NVQ, for example:

- if the qualification is very limited/narrow and specific (e.g. safety in the work place)
- if the occupation is new for Slovenia and therefore only a limited number of people have acquired knowledge in that fields through non-formal and informal learning (real estate, accountancy for small companies...)

However, at the end of the procedure, the individual receives a letter of reference (and not an official certificate). This letter (and the qualifications indicated inside) can be recognised by all the firms that are members of the GZS (basically all firms working in Slovenia since the registration is compulsory). There is no automatic recognition and no official regulation. It means that a firm can also refuse to recognise this validation.

The example of the Chamber of Craft

The Chamber of Craft has started preparing 2 profiles of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), i.e. certification of non-formal and informal learning valid at the national level:

- for truck drivers
- for the people responsible for logistics in international freight / international truck traffic.

So far the Chamber has prepared information seminars, formal procedure of recognition, standards to be achieved and has proposed names for the Commission in charge of recognition. Implementation will start in the first half of 2004.

These 2 certificates were developed to certify the knowledge of people already working in that field for many years, but who didn't have any official recognition. In fact, to be line with an EU directive in this field, Slovenia, as a new member state, needed to establish a system of certificates in the field of international truck drivers.

Common initiative by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chamber of Craft

Alongside with their initiatives within the framework of NVQ, the two Chambers have developed another scheme for the recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge in the field of small catering (cooking, service, food safety...).

This certificate is needed if people wish to start an independent small catering business. Even though it has existed for more than 15 years, it is not yet recognised officially at the national level (it is not an NVQ). However, the two Chambers are planning to have it included in the NVQ system in the near future.

The example of the Social Chamber

This Chamber is responsible for all actors active in the field of social affairs. In 2000, it started implementing the certification of non-formal and informal knowledge for the qualification of "Social home carer". After a 2-year preparation phase, the first certificates were issued in 2003.

1.3.2 Individual companies

Alongside with the activities undertaken by Krka (see 3.2.1. Industry sectors), the Ministry of Labour recorded, as from May 2004, 27 firms/institutions implementing this certification system in Slovenia.

These firms are mostly located in the capital town, Ljubljana, but also in other big towns such as Maribor, Celje, Novo Mesto, Nova Gorica (where the main actor is the Technical school centre) and Murska Sobota.

All fields of activities are represented. The two biggest companies are Krka (pharmaceuticals) and Elektro Slovenija –Eles (the only electric power transmission company in Slovenia). Additionally, 30 more firms / institutions are waiting for accreditation to become certification centre.

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

Several other initiatives were developed by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education together with local actors in the field of non-formal and informal learning, but even though they receive financial support from the Slovene state (Ministry of Education, National employment Agency...), the knowledge acquired is not officially recognised nor validated:

- Centres for self-directed learning are active (*središča za samostojno učenje*).
- The Learning Exchange (*borza znanja*).
- Study Circles (*študijski krožki*).
- Folk universities
- Project Learning for Young Adults (*Projektno učenje za mlade*) who dropped out of school;
- A literacy programme Training for Life Efficiency (*Usposabljanje za življensko uspešnost*).
- Programmes developed within the University of the Third Age.

1.5 Stakeholders' responsibilities

In the last 15 years, the Slovene government has undertaken an in-depth reform of the Slovenian education system, in particular following the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1996).

This reform of VET has established legal grounds for adult education, as well as for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

A new **National Vocational Qualification Act** introducing a certification system was passed in 2000, enabling the assessment and verification of vocation-related knowledge, skills and experiences acquired out of school.

As a new member of the European Union and in the framework of the European Social Fund, it will continue to develop the certification of non-formal and informal knowledge as a strategic tool for adult education, improved employability and better adaptability to labour market trends.

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is responsible for defining national policy on education, science and sport.
- The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs (MoLFSA) is responsible for the certification system. It prepares relevant legislation, methodologies, approves occupational standards, nominates the commissions for certification of NVQs, etc.

- The National Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (*Strokovni svet RS za poklicno izobraževanje - SSPIU*) is mainly responsible for proposing the catalogues of standards for professional knowledge and skills to the MoLFSA, adopting the methodology of these catalogues, offering expert assistance and proposing training programmes for obtaining licence for assessors.
- The 2 Chambers (Chamber of Commerce and Industry / Chamber of Craft) and responsible ministries (for activities for which chambers are not organised) are responsible for drafting the proposals for catalogues of standards for professional knowledge and skills, proposing the members of assessment and certification commissions, providing the conditions for the assessment and certification, and proposing necessary changes to the catalogues.
- The Center for Vocational Education (CPI – *Center RS za poklicno izobraževanje*) is responsible for advisory and expert work in the development of NVQ standards and in the formation of catalogues of professional knowledge and skills. It has established the National Information Centre for Vocational Qualifications, which offers information on vocational and professional education, certification system, education programmes, occupational standards, catalogues of professional knowledge and skills, etc. It operates in close cooperation with the Employment Service of Slovenia, Statistical Office of Slovenia, Slovenian Adult Education Centre and other expert national and international organisations.
- The National Examination Centre (*Državni izpitni center*) is responsible for developing methodologies for assessment and certification of standards for professional knowledge and skills, organising the training for assessors and members of certification commissions, awarding licences and monitoring the work of members of assessment and certification commissions.
- The organisation of assessment and certification of NVQ is carried out by registered institutions as chambers, schools, enterprise education centres, and other types of organisation, determined by the catalogue of knowledge and skills.
- The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (Andragoški Center Republike Slovenije) and the Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for VET (Center Republike Slovenije za poklicno izobraževanje) have been set up by the government to provide expertise for decisions taken by the National Councils (respectively National Council of Experts for VET and for Adult Education), monitor pilot projects, offer consulting services, organise the in-service training of teachers and design methodologies for writing books.
- For the time being, the Slovene Labour Unions have not been much involved in the certification process, which has been presented as one of the most important weaknesses of the system. Aware of this gap, the government aims at improving the situation in the future, while at the same time, the labour unions will also increase their expertise in the field, so as to be able to express their right of opinion and orientation in this specific field.
- Most employer organisations are in favour of the certification system, which is seen as a benefit for both the employers (evaluation of the skills of their work force) and of the employees (improvement in employability and self-esteem through validation of knowledge). In some sectors (for example pharmaceuticals),

employers organisations have been leaders in implementing the certification system, which they seen as a new important tool to manage human resources through increased employability, adaptability and flexibility of the work force.

1.6 Conclusions

The procedure for standards setting and assessment of prior learning is now in place since 2000, several standards have already been established for more than 60 National Vocational Qualifications and about 500 workers have already been certified through this new procedure.

The certification of prior informal and non-formal learning has not yet been widely applied in Slovenia. A major obstacle is formed by the formal regulations that govern access to education and jobs. Further development of assessment and recognition of prior learning therefore will be largely dependent on overall educational and labour market reforms.

However, increasingly, public institutions, companies, public researchers and other relevant institutions have been concerned with the need to unveil the hidden knowledge many workers have acquired in the course of their work experience. So far, employer organisations, adult education institutions and the MoLFSA have been the main protagonists of certification of prior informal learning. While currently this interest is mainly driven by cost and efficiency concerns, the ongoing debates about lifelong learning for all may provide additional incentives to make further progress. The Ministry of Education will have to secure equality of access to education and the implementation of the Lisbon objectives. There is an increased readiness to be informed about developments in other member states, yet recognition of prior learning is perhaps not among the first priorities of educational reform policies.

In view of the current situation, no radical changes are to be expected. There will be gradual development, building on what has been achieved so far. In the next years, the focus will be put on widening the number of qualifications for which non-formal and informal knowledge can be certified, as well as on finding solutions to overcome some limits that already appear in the current system, such as:

- *the lack of connection with higher / further vocational education*
- *the non-inclusion of the NVQ in the official salary scale.*
- *The non-transferability at the European level.*
- The weak role of trade unions