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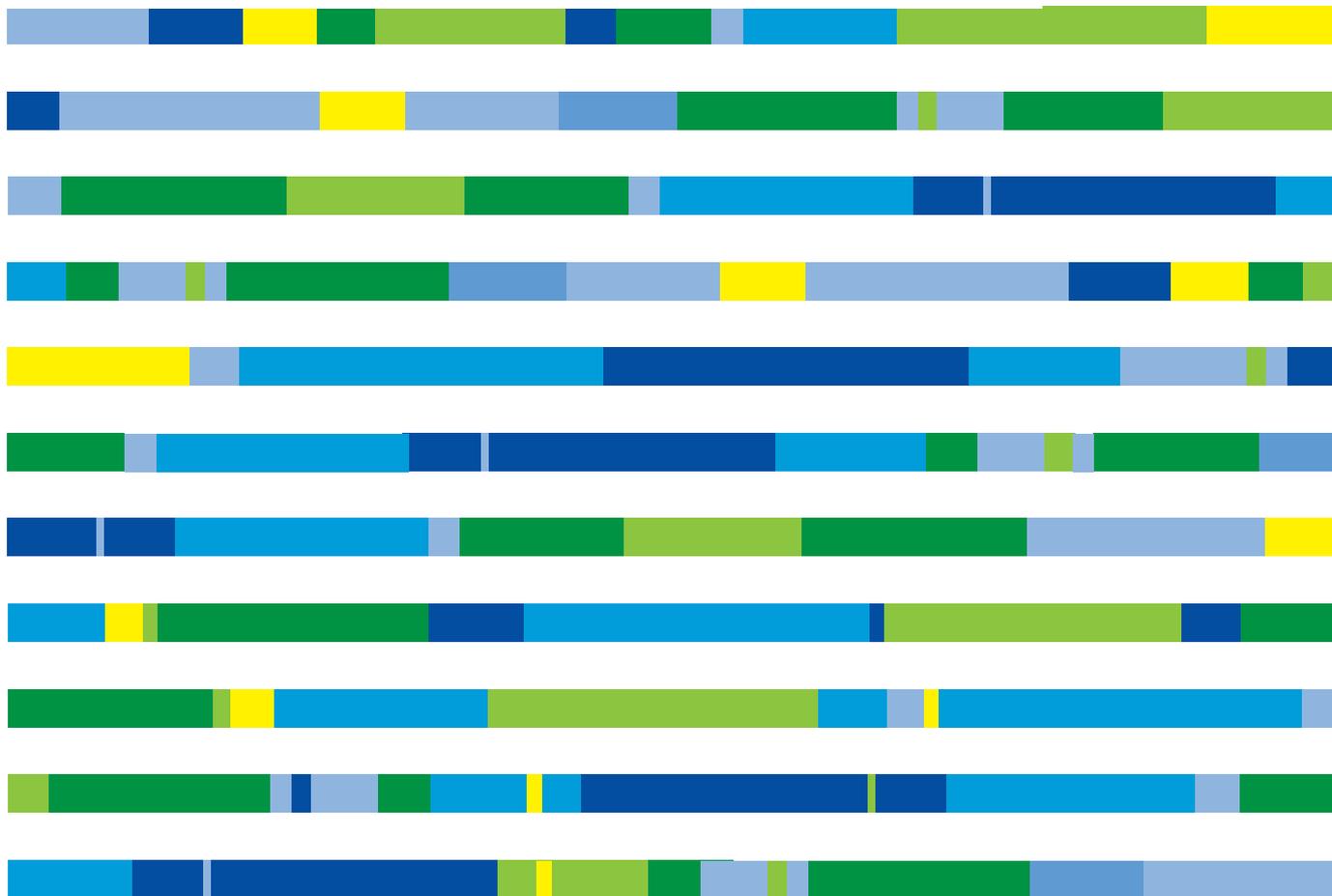
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

THEMATIC REPORT:

Evolution of validation as an integrated
part of national skills policies and strategies

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CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

1.1. Focus of the report

Validation procedures are closely related to other initiatives to promote lifelong learning and flexible career paths, upskilling and retraining, and initiatives that allow individuals to enter, re-enter and combine learning according to their needs and circumstances. To support lifelong and life-wide learning, the accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes across systems and contexts (education, training, labour market, society) must be facilitated. This can be supported by overarching skills strategies across all affected policy areas.

This thematic report focuses on emerging overarching or integrated national skills strategies (see Chapter 2.2) as they are called for in the European Skills Agenda and the Osnabrück Declaration. The aim of this report is to explore the evolution of validation as an integrated part of national skills policies and strategies by addressing the following questions:

- (a) To what extent and how is validation addressed in the new generation of overarching national skills strategies? (Chapter 3.1)
- (b) In these national skills strategies, what other initiatives and tools is validation linked to in particular? (Chapter 3.2)
- (c) To what extent are outreach measures and promotional activities related to national skills policies and strategies, including validation, carried out? (Chapter 3.3)
- (d) Who are the stakeholders involved and how is the coordination between them and across different contexts ensured? (Chapter 3.4)
- (e) What are the key success factors for an integrated validation approach as part of a national skills strategy? (Chapter 4)

In the remaining part of this chapter, a brief overview of sources used and stakeholders consulted for preparing this report is provided. Chapter 2 looks at the evolution of integrated national skills strategies in the countries covered by the Inventory, and Chapter 3 explores the role of validation in these strategies. The final chapter presents some conclusions.

1.2. Methodology

This report is based on the analysis of data provided by the Inventory's network of country researchers. This includes the detailed country reports produced by the researchers and data provided in response to targeted questions related to the thematic topic. The approaches of countries that already have developed an integrated national skills strategy and are implementing it (as of spring 2023) – Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia – were further explored using national sources, including draft country reports for the 2023 Inventory update, National Implementation Plans (NIP) for the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET and Osnabrück Declaration and relevant national policy and strategy documents as well as their reviews or evaluations. European policy documents related to national skills strategies and the background document to and the report on the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on national skills strategies organised by the Adult Learning Working Group in October 2022 were also consulted.

Individual country researchers of the Inventory's network were additionally contacted by e-mail to obtain further information or to clarify open questions. Furthermore, short interviews with three representatives of national authorities were conducted to explore specific national approaches and experiences.

CHAPTER 2.

From lifelong learning strategies to the current generation of national skills strategies

This section first looks at the developments and policies underpinning the evolution of overarching national skills strategies before presenting the countries that are currently implementing such a strategy and some examples of countries that are in the process of developing their strategy.

2.1. Looking back

Education and skills are central for economic performance and societal well-being. This has been increasingly taken on board by policy makers at national and European level and in view of the skills requirements created by the green and digital transformation in Europe, the European Commission declared 2023 the European Year of Skills, putting skills at the centre of attention (European Union, 2023). Over the years, more countries have produced strategic documents ⁽¹⁾ in skills policy, often followed by specific large-scale skills development programmes.

The development of skills strategies is not a new phenomenon; the development of lifelong learning strategies was already called for in 2000 (European Commission, 2000), and strategies focusing on skills and adult learning have been developed since then. Recently, the 2019 Council conclusions on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways called for a broader strategic approach to lifelong skills development (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2021, p. 54), and the importance of overarching national skills strategies is currently underlined by several EU policies:

- (a) The [European Skills Agenda](#) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience ⁽²⁾ aims to improve and adapt skills development and use and calls for national skills strategies that involve all stakeholders (social partners, civil society, education, training and labour market stakeholders). These

⁽¹⁾ Strategic policy documents are defined 'as official policy documents on an important policy area that are usually issued by top-level authorities and set out specific objectives to be met and/or detailed steps or actions to be taken within a given time frame, in order to reach a desired goal(s) or target(s)' (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2021, p. 54).

⁽²⁾ Action 3 of the European Skills Agenda refers to 'EU support for strategic national upskilling action' (European Commission, 2020).

should be designed and delivered through a whole-of-government approach, aligning initiatives across different policy fields, such as employment, education, research, industry and regional development.

- (b) The [Osnabrück Declaration](#) includes – as one of the short-term deliverables for 2021-2025 – the national level actions: ‘Develop national skills strategies for quality and inclusive lifelong learning with all relevant national, regional, sectoral stakeholders and social partners. Besides education and training provision, the national skills strategies may include guidance, incentives for improved skills provision by employers, increased participation by employees, validation of prior learning and targeted public approaches for reaching out to inactive and unemployed individuals, NEETs or individuals at risk of unemployment’ (Osnabrück Declaration, 2020, p. 8).

The European Commission has supported Member States in developing such national skills strategies until 2020 through Erasmus+ and later through the Technical Support Instrument 2021-2027 ⁽³⁾. Cedefop also provides support by [analysing skills policies and practices](#) in EU Member States, including on [mismatching and skills forecasting](#).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), also supports countries in [building skills strategies](#) for: i) developing relevant skills over the life course, ii) using skills effectively in work and in society, and iii) strengthening the governance of the skills system’ (OECD, 2022, p. 1). The dimension ‘developing relevant skills over the life course’ includes ‘Making lifelong learning visible and rewarding: Strengthening systems of skills validation and certification’ as one of its key building blocks.

Table 1. **OECD support for Skills Strategies in European countries**

Country	OECD country reports	Cooperation OECD & DG REFORM to support skills policy reforms
Austria	Diagnostic Report, 2014	
Bulgaria	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2023	The development of a National Skills Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria, 2022-2024
Flanders (Belgium)	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2019 OECD Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance for Flanders, Belgium: The Faces of Learners in Flanders, 2022	

⁽³⁾ See for example the development of the National Skills Strategy for Bulgaria (OECD, 2023b).

Country	OECD country reports	Cooperation OECD & DG REFORM to support skills policy reforms
Ireland	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2023 ⁽⁴⁾	
Italy	Diagnostic Report, 2017	
Latvia	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2019	Supporting employers to promote skills development in Latvia, 2021-2023
Lithuania	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2021	
Luxembourg	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2023	
Netherlands	Diagnostic Report, 2017	
Norway	Diagnostic Report, 2014	
Poland	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2019	
Portugal	Diagnostic Report, 2015 Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance – Strengthening the Adult-Learning System, 2018	Strengthening Quality Assurance in Adult Education and Training in Portugal: Implementation Guidance, 2021
Slovak Republic	OECD Skills Strategy - Assessment and Recommendations, 2020	Enhancing the Digital Skills of Seniors in the Slovak Republic, 2022-2024
Slovenia	Diagnostic Report, 2017 Skills Strategy Implementation Guidance - Improving the Governance of Adult Learning, 2018	
Spain	Diagnostic Report, 2015	

Source: OCED, June 2023, <https://www.oecd.org/skills/oecd-skills-strategies.htm>

2.2. Integrated national skills strategies in European countries

The current generation of national skills strategies is characterised by the following features ⁽⁵⁾; they are:

- (a) based on comprehensive and long-term cooperation with all relevant stakeholders from the public and private sectors, as well as from different

⁽⁴⁾ Ireland had developed its National Skills Strategy 2025 (NSS 2025) without the support of the OECD; this report is intended to help Ireland take stock of current policy priorities and review how the NSS 2025 may need to be adapted.

⁽⁵⁾ Based on: Working Group on Adult Learning: findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels

- policy areas (education, employment, research, industry and regional development policies);
- (b) designed with a sound governance structure and ensure the commitment of key stakeholders to the implementation of the strategy and cooperation in its implementation;
 - (c) based on data and evidence that underpin the identification of needs and challenges in developing relevant skills for work and society across the life course;
 - (d) delivered through a whole-of-government approach, aligning initiatives across different policy fields and considering coherence and collaboration;
 - (e) take a holistic approach to skills development across the life course by considering the entire skills ecosystem to better support the interaction between learning at work and in education and training as well as individual wellbeing and social inclusion.

The overarching goal of integrated national skills strategies is to foster sustainable economic growth, reduce unemployment, enhance social inclusion, and improve the overall well-being of individuals by coordinating efforts, aligning policies, and involving key stakeholders.

There is, however, no clear definition of when an integrated national skills strategy can be said to exist, and because such strategies can also be named differently, it is difficult to make a clear statement about the number of countries in which these are already in place or being developed.

Based on the research conducted for this report, the countries that already have developed such a strategy and are implementing it (as of spring 2023) include: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia ⁽⁶⁾. These strategies are introduced briefly here below:

- (a) Finland: The [Continuous Learning Reform](#) launched by former Prime Minister Sanna Marin's coalition government (2019-23) has a strong focus on the changing skills needs arising from the world of work and the competences of working age people and is in practice delivering Finland's national skills strategy - although the term 'skills strategy' has not been used. The development of the reform involved stakeholders from all areas of government as well as non-governmental actors and was designed based on evidence gathered through research and analysis. It was published in 2020, covering

⁽⁶⁾ According to the latest [update on the European Skills Agenda](#) (March 2023), 13 Member States have started developing a national skills strategy and six are implementing theirs. Please note that not all countries that have been supported by the OECD (Table 2.1) have taken steps to implement a national skills strategy during the period considered here.

- the vision, goals to 2030, and 27 measures to reach the goals (Finnish Government, 2022).
- (b) Germany: A National Skills Strategy ⁽⁷⁾ (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2019) was launched in 2019 by the Federal Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS) and Education and Research (BMBF) in cooperation with several policy partners, Federal Government, the Länder, business associations, trade unions and the Federal Employment Agency. It initiates and bundles measures with a focus on professional continuing education and the Strategy is structured into ten fields of action, including increasing transparency of the training offer, developing the continuing training offer further, and improving quality, strategic forecasts and training statistics on the training offer ⁽⁸⁾.
 - (c) Ireland: The National Skills Strategy 2025, approved in 2016, aims to increase the number of people across Ireland engaging in lifelong learning, and to focus on active inclusion, supporting participation in education and training and the labour market. 'Through the vision, actions and targets set out, the Strategy will support development of a well-educated, well-skilled and adaptable labour force, creating and sustaining a strong pool of talented people of all ages living in Ireland. [...] This Strategy is designed to benefit all people living here, companies operating in Ireland or planning to establish here, those working here and those hoping to work here. It recognises the role that skills can play in the betterment of all and supporting people here to grow as global citizens (Ireland. Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 14).
 - (d) Norway: The 'Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017–2021' was signed in 2017 and aims to improve the transitions between different learning arenas by promoting coordination between various policy sectors, authorities, labour market entities, and other actors in the field of skills development. It 'provides direction for the various strategy partners' work both jointly and separately: the National Skills Policy Strategy aims to ensure that individuals and businesses have the skills that give Norway a competitive business sector, an efficient and sound public sector, and an inclusive labour market (Norway. Ministry of Education and Research et al., 2016, p. 4). The strategy partners agree to: 'contribute to making informed choices for the individual and society, promote better learning opportunities and effective use of skills in working life, strengthen skills among adults with weak labour market attachment (Norway.

⁽⁷⁾ The direct translation of the German term *Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie* is 'National Further or Continuing Education Strategy'; however, in the English publication the title 'National Skills Strategy' is used.

⁽⁸⁾ Germany developed the National Skills Strategy without support from the OECD.

- Ministry of Education and Research et al., 2016, p. 15). The period indicated in the strategy has already passed; nevertheless, the activities are continued.
- (e) Poland: In December 2020, Poland adopted the 'Integrated Skills Strategy 2030 (detailed part)' which 'defines the basic conditions, goals and directions of the country's development in the social, economic and spatial dimensions of a given field or a given area' (Poland. Integrated Qualifications System, 2023). It 'sets out a framework for promoting policy complementarity and integration of operations in the wider skills area. [...] The strategy considers demand for specific skills, their availability, their adaptation to the needs of the labour market and the economy, as well as the management and coordination system in these areas' (Integrated Qualifications System, 2023). Within the framework of the strategy, an implementation coordination structure has been developed that includes both the central and regional levels. The strategy takes a whole-of-government approach, bringing together all ministries involved in skills development ⁽⁹⁾.
 - (f) Slovakia: The 'Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021-30 (LLLCS 2030)', was approved by the government as in November 2021 (Slovakia. MŠVVaŠSR & ŠIOV, 2021; European Commission. Eurydice, 2022). The strategy aims at strengthening inclusiveness of adult learning and improve learning pathways for all, including adults with low levels of basic skills; increasing participation and equity of adults in learning, i.e. opportunities also for adults with low levels of skills and/or educational attainment; supporting the development of further vocational training; linking education and the labour market more effectively, with an emphasis on expected changes in the structure of jobs; increasing the efficiency and flexibility of the qualification system of the Slovak Republic. It focuses on four thematic areas: the first one refers to the qualifications system, the second focuses on basic skills and civic education, and the third and fourth parts address the supra-ministerial nature of lifelong learning and counselling and the motivation of citizens for lifelong learning. The OECD project is seen as the start of the process as it highlighted some issues. The Slovak National Skills Strategy is a more complex strategy that goes deeper and also offers solutions to problems.
 - (g) Slovenia: Specific national actions are being taken in the country, such as the development of the Slovenian Adult Education Master Plan 2022-2030 (a follow-up to the 2013-2020 plan) and the strengthening of cooperation between specific stakeholders in adult learning policy making and programme design (Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, 2023). Next steps are the

⁽⁹⁾ Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels

establishment of a monitoring body and support for quality assurance in adult education, covering areas related to adult education. A common tool will be developed to support the monitoring of the adult education system and to measure the effectiveness of the system ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Several countries have also explicitly taken steps to develop an integrated national skills strategy, including Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria and Luxembourg:

- (a) Belgium (Flanders): In Flanders a Partnership for Lifelong Learning was created in 2020 and tasked with writing an action plan for Lifelong Learning (presented to the government in November 2021). This action plan is a relatively comprehensive framework for lifelong learning, containing several actions by the government regarding skills development (for adults). It consists of actions related to raising awareness, developing mobilisation strategies as well as guidance systems and encouraging partnerships. A broad information campaign is also planned for 2023 to boost adult education in Flanders. In addition, significant funds are earmarked to promote adult education and training in VET and higher education. The Flemish government has also taken the first steps towards an individual learning account and the Ministry of Labour and Social Economy (with ESF support) has launched projects to promote competence audits for organisations and their employees.
- (b) Bulgaria: Based on the assessment of the performance of the Bulgarian skills system ⁽¹¹⁾ an ongoing DG Reform (Technical Support Instrument, TSI) project with the participation of the OECD is supporting Bulgaria in its efforts to implement the recommendations emerging from the OECD Skills Strategy project and other relevant Bulgarian strategies (OECD, 2023b). The project is expected to conclude in 2024.
- (c) Luxembourg: 'In light of a rapidly evolving skills environment, the digital and green transition, and prevalent skills shortages in some sectors, Luxembourg is currently in the process of developing a national skills strategy, supported by an OECD-led study, in a whole-of-government approach and consultations of all relevant stakeholders' (Luxembourg. Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, 2022, p. 7). The OECD Skills Strategy Luxembourg: Assessment and Recommendations was published in February 2023 (ReferNet Luxembourg & Cedefop, 2023).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels.

⁽¹¹⁾ The report OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria. Assessment and Recommendations' was published in June 2023 (OECD, 2023b).

However, there is also a few countries that have not yet adopted a national skills strategy or have no plans to develop one. One possible reason is that these countries consider that they already have comprehensive policy frameworks that (largely) serve the same function as national skills strategies ⁽¹²⁾. Some countries also have several separate strategies, including education strategies – such as Czechia with the Strategy for the Education Policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+ (Czechia. Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020), Estonia with the Education Strategy for 2021-35 (Estonia. Ministry of Education and Research, 2022), Latvia with the Education Development Guidelines 2021-2027 (Jākobsone, 2022), or Malta with the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 (Malta. Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Denmark is an example of a country that has skills strategies for individual education sectors that are constantly reviewed and adapted, and the Danish model for labour market and education policy development in general is based on a high level of stakeholder participation. However, the country does not have an explicit overarching or integrated national skills strategy. In addition, a strategic orientation in this direction can be observed: A government-appointed Reform Commission (2020-2022) aimed to develop recommendations for major societal challenges (Denmark. Reform Kommissionen, 2022) and had taken steps in the direction of an overarching skills strategy, but these have not yet been incorporated into policy.

Several countries also have lifelong or adult learning strategies in place. These strategies sometimes have certain similarities with national skills strategies but are not explicitly considered as such in the national context. In Austria, for example, the strategy for Lifelong Learning 2020 (Austria. Republik Österreich, 2011) was jointly developed as inter-ministerial strategy and supported by the social partners and all key stakeholders. The current government programme announces the plan to further develop the strategy for lifelong learning in Austria in a participatory process (Austria. Republik Österreich, 2020, 2011). Cyprus has a more recently developed lifelong learning strategy, based on the support received from DG Reform, the Cyprus Lifelong Learning Strategy (CyLLLS) 2021-2027 (Cyprus. Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, 2022). The strategy takes a comprehensive approach, focussing on establishing a governance, monitoring, and evaluation framework, decrease youth unemployment and up- and reskilling youth and the workforce, increasing the participation of adults in lifelong learning,

⁽¹²⁾ See: Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels). France is cited as an example in this context, as the introduction of the Individual Learning Account (2015) and accompanying measures created a general reform framework for skills development and adult learning (Cedefop, 2015).

and enhancing the professional practice of adult educators and trainers. The strategy is seen as a first step; subsequently, an action plan with key performance indicators (KPIs) and a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities of all partners involved will now also be developed ⁽¹³⁾.

⁽¹³⁾ Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels)

CHAPTER 3.

Validation in integrated national skills strategies

This chapter explores to what extent and how validation of non-formal and informal learning is addressed in national skills strategies and policies and linked to other measures and tools, as well as outreach activities. Moreover, it looks into the cooperation of stakeholders and their coordination in the implementation of the strategy and refers to monitoring and evaluation activities. This chapter focuses on strategies that are explicitly considered as integrated skills strategies in the respective countries with a broader and overarching approach as described in section 2.2.

3.1. Validation as important element in integrated national skills strategies

The assessment of existing strategies shows that there is a need for further action in validation for national skills strategies to be properly implemented. In several cases validation is addressed in the assessments of national skills strategies conducted by the OECD (as listed in Table 1). In the case of Portugal, for example, barriers related to the recognition of prior (including formal, non-formal and informal) learning of adults were identified and the recommendations included, among others, to improve the supply of high-quality, relevant and flexible learning programmes and to raise awareness of the value of skills (OECD, 2018). For improving Lithuania's skills performance, the recommendations included 'improving the processes to recognise and validate non-formal and informal learning' (OECD, 2021).

But some of national skills strategies themselves recognise the benefits of validation as a foundation for lifelong learning, and point to the need for further development. The Finnish Parliamentary Reform of Continuous Learning, notes better identification and recognition of individuals' existing competence and competence gaps as a starting point for continuous learning. Consequently, two of the 27 measures to be undertaken during 2021-24 are directly targeting validation: Measure 3: Recognising competence acquired at work and in other contexts better than currently; and Measure 4: Creating tools for skill survey and career planning as part of the digital services for continuous learning (Finnish Government, 2022,

pp. 38-39). Digitalisation is seen as a way to support the expansion of validation and promote the development of practices and methods.

The Slovakian Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021-30 (LLCS 2030) proposes 55 measures divided into thirteen thematic units. One of them is explicitly referring to a System of validation of non-formal education and informal learning. It includes the following measures:

- (a) Introducing descriptors of lower levels into SKKR (NQF)
- (b) Draft act on the recognition of prior learning outcomes – introduction in the Act on LLL (permeability of the education system)
- (c) Equalisation of qualifications at the level of apprenticeship certificate
- (d) Extension of the General School Leaving Examination for adult education - Amendment to the School Act
- (e) Extension of the Vocational School Leaving Examination for adult education - Amendment to the Act on VET
- (f) Introduction of the Master's Examination
- (g) Introduction of professional technician specialist (SKKR 6) and professional engineer (SKKR 7).

The development of a systematic approach to the recognition of non-formal education and informal learning outcomes at all levels of the NQF should provide opportunities for flexible forms of qualification accomplishment in different life situations of individuals. A national project on validation has recently been finalised and two new laws have been prepared that are expected to be approved by the new government following the elections in September 2023. The lifelong learning legislation is the umbrella law that sets the general principles while the new act on adult learning will include the details on validation.

More common is the establishment of links between validation and employment in the strategies. The importance of validation for disadvantaged groups is highlighted in the German Strategy, which contains references to validation schemes to make the competences of formally low-skilled people who have gained extensive experience during their working lives more visible (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2019). Procedures for standardised arrangements for identifying, assessing and certifying vocational skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning are advocated by the strategy partners. Such procedures are to be tested as part of the ongoing ValiKom transfer project, which aims to further improve the standardised validation procedure and structures developed as part

of the ValiKom project ⁽¹⁴⁾ and then possibly implement them permanently at national level– which has been reemphasized in the strategies’ renewal in 2022, but not yet implemented (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2022). Moreover, the MYSKILLS ⁽¹⁵⁾ programme is mentioned as a further means to strengthen validation arrangements in Germany.

Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 (Ireland. Department of Education and Skills, 2016) emphasises the role of recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) and supports a multi-agency approach to the development of RPL in consultation with relevant stakeholders. Action 4.3 is to increase recognition of workplace learning and to develop capacity for RPL. This is to be achieved through the following measures:

- (a) ‘Provide for the recognition of awards by private, professional and non-national awarding bodies within the National Framework of Qualifications and to ensure that programmes leading to recognised awards are quality assured.
- (b) Promote the development of a common understanding of Recognition of Prior Learning and support the dissemination of good practice in RPL across the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.
- (c) Support a multi-agency approach to the development of RPL in consultation with relevant stakeholders’ (Ireland. Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 100).

The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017–2021 (Norway. Ministry of Education and Research et al., 2016) includes the following objectives related to validation, related to the labour market and migration:

⁽¹⁴⁾ The Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts and the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry are working together with other partners from the skilled crafts sector, commerce and industry and the agricultural sector in the framework of the Ministry-supported ValiKom transfer project. As part of the ValiKom project, a procedure was developed for the assessment and certification (validation) of vocational competences acquired outside the formal education system. At the end of the procedure, the competent chamber issues a certificate confirming and attesting to the acquired vocational competences of the certificate holder. <https://www.validierungsverfahren.de/en/home>

⁽¹⁵⁾ MYSKILLS - Identifying Professional Competencies was used by the Public Employment Services (PES) to support counselling and placement services. It is a computer-based test to make vocational competences of job seekers without formal education visible. MYSKILLS provides objective and valid proof of vocational skills. Based on this, a tailor-made placement or qualification strategy can be developed. MYSKILLS was developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation and operated by the PES; however, PES discontinued the programme at the end of 2022. Since spring 2022, the DIPF (Leibniz Institute for Research and Information in Education), together with the Bertelsmann Foundation, has been testing the use of MYSKILLS with educational institutions in Germany and internationally (DIPF, 2022).

- (a) Make it easier to document skills acquired at work, so that they can be utilised more efficiently. Develop a method and model for evaluating skills acquired in the workplace as part of this work.
- (b) Simplify and improve systems and the supply of recognition and assessment of foreign qualifications, professional qualifications and supplementary education.

For Slovenia, in the Resolution on the Adult Education Master Plan in the Republic of Slovenia for the period 2022-30 (Republic of Slovenia, 2022), five priority areas for the development are defined: general informal adult education, education to obtain a degree, professional training and training to meet the demands of the labour market, research and development, and activities in the adult education field. Two of these are closely related to validation:

- (a) The third priority area, 'Professional training and training to meet the demands of the labour market', focuses on the National Vocational Qualifications (NPK) system and refers to the validation of informal and non-formal learning: individuals can acquire a national vocational qualification certified by a public document (NPK certificate) that is transferable to different work environments and allows greater mobility of workers between sectors and companies within the country and internationally. This allows for greater flexibility and mobility of workers at the same level of education.
- (b) The fourth priority area, 'Research and development', provides for the further development of systems, procedures and validation processes for previously acquired knowledge and its monitoring as one of the measures.

Finally in other strategies, validation is linked to both the employment and education systems. In Poland, the 2030 Integrated Skills Strategy includes 'planning lifelong learning and the recognition of skills' as one of its 'Impact Areas' and aims to promote, among others:

- (a) skills development outside formal education;
- (b) skills development and use in the workplace;
- (c) collaboration of employers in formal and non-formal education;
- (d) planning lifelong learning and the recognition of skills (ReferNet Poland; Cedefop, 2021).

The strategy is expected to contribute to more effective assessment, validation and certification of learning outcomes, regardless of the setting in which they have been achieved. The document also addresses the development of counselling for validation as well as of recognition of prior learning (RPL) at the national, regional and local levels. The following action lines are indicated:

- (a) disseminating the aims and objectives of validating prior learning outcomes;

- (b) implementation and dissemination of opportunities to validate learning outcomes acquired through non-formal education and informal learning;
- (c) developing validation counselling;
- (d) involving employers in the validation process;
- (e) promoting opportunities to return to formal education;
- (f) networking between certification bodies and certification and skills development institutions (Poland. Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, 2020, p. 53).

An important role of validation is also highlighted in the development process of national skills strategies, as the example from Bulgaria shows:

Box 1. Validation as embedded element in the development of a national skills strategy in Bulgaria

Validation is an area that has been covered in two projects supported by the OECD. For instance, the OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria report recommends that the country reforms the RPL system for adults to encourage greater take-up of RPL services and, in particular, that the National Agency for VET (NAVET), the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) should collaborate with emerging RPL centre(s) to implement more streamlined and effective RPL processes and to incentivise greater take-up of RPL services, particularly among low-skilled adults (OECD, forthcoming). To do so the RPL process should be streamlined by simplifying and shortening the administrative process for both individuals and providers, altering the design of RPL certificates to match other learning certificates, collecting data on RPL outcomes through a data and evidence centre (the establishment of which is also recommended in the report), and targeting RPL services to specific vulnerable groups such as the low-skilled (OECD, forthcoming). To incentivise greater take-up of RPL, the report recommends that subsidies for RPL fees be provided to individuals, similar to those provided for participation in adult education and training, and that grants should be available to adult education and training providers that offer RPL services (OECD, 2023b).

Source: OECD.

3.2. Link between validation and other initiatives in integrated national skills strategies

The analysed overarching national skills strategies include measures related to validation as well as other initiatives, tools and services. However, the extent to which validation is linked to these is not always evident or made explicit in the documents.

For example, career guidance and counselling services are referred to in all these strategies – the Slovakian strategy even explicitly refers to lifelong learning

and counselling in its title – but how these services are linked or integrated with validation offers is not so clear.

In Germany, the initiatives mentioned in the strategy (e.g. ValiKom) are connected to career guidance and counselling, but this is not explicitly mentioned or emphasized in the strategy. The implementation report (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2022) recommends, for example, that people without a vocational qualification can be helped to obtain a subsequent vocational qualification through counselling services, through the validation of informally and non-formally acquired vocational competences and through supplementary qualification offers.

Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 includes measures related to RPL (Promote the development of a common understanding of RPL and support the dissemination of good practice in RPL across the Further Education and Training and Higher Education sectors; Support a multi-agency approach to the development of RPL in consultation with relevant stakeholders) as well as to guidance and careers information (Carry out a review of guidance services, tools and careers information for school students and adults and recommend changes to improve the services available) without explicitly linking RPL and guidance.

Validation is more explicitly linked in the strategies to some other aspects of National Skills Strategies, with up- and reskilling initiatives as the most prominent ones. In some cases, validation is linked to other specific initiatives. The Slovakian Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021-30 (LLLCS, 2030), for example, links validation to the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) which will be the institutions for validation and recognition of prior learning and master examinations. The Slovakian strategy also includes the further development of the NQF and the qualifications system (as these are considered essential for a functioning validation system) and refers to two measures that are based on EU initiatives that are closely linked to validation: the development of Individual Learning Accounts as a tool for individualised support of individuals in further education (re-skilling) and a pilot scheme for strengthening adults' motivation to participate in learning. In addition, the Slovakian strategy refers to the aim of increasing the flexibility of the qualifications system with smaller qualifications and micro-credentials (micro-certificates).

The Finnish strategy refers to Open Badges and refers to validation in relation to them: 'The reform of continuous learning seeks to develop micro-credentials and a national Open Badge system for basic skills for adults, which will help to identify and recognise learning acquired through non-qualification programmes. Micro-credentials enable the acquisition of learning needed in employment without completing a full qualification programme' (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

In some cases, National Skills Strategies have been developed through funding mechanisms which can help the implementation of validation. In Ireland, the National Skills Strategy 2025 and particularly RPL is seen as a way to better connect with enterprise and employers. To support this, dedicated funding for collaboration between labour market and education and training stakeholders is made available: For example, in Further Education and Training the 'Innovation through Collaboration Fund' encouraged applications from projects providing up-skilling and re-skilling support for employees, particularly people working in low-skilled jobs or in sectors vulnerable to displacement. Education and Training Boards (ETB) were required to work in partnership to deliver these projects with at least one other ETB and another organisation. Some examples from the 2019 funding round included RPL projects in the care, aquaculture, advanced manufacturing and hospitality sectors. In higher education (HE), RPL for enterprise pilot projects include one with the farming sector and another with the design profession.

The Finnish Continuous Learning Reform was developed as a comprehensive and overarching strategy covering all relevant aspects. How validation is strongly embedded and closely linked to various other measures in this national skills strategy is shown in Box 2 below.

Box 2. Close links between validation and other measures in the Finnish Continuous Learning Reform

Validation is embedded in the three goals of the 'Continuous Learning Reform' (Finnish Government, 2022) in Finland:

- First, the reform aims to ensure that continuous learning is embedded in the working life, through validation, which is conceptualised as identification and recognition of competence as well as developing of a 'learning work community' and strengthening the links between work and the education and training system.
- Second, validation is part of a goal to develop a service system for continuous learning through reformed education and training offers, stronger foresight, service processes for learners and jobseekers, digitalisation, and links between work and competence.
- Third, to ensure the accessibility of continuous learning, better guidance is developed, also covering identification and recognition of competence, along with improved outreach and benefits system.

Validation is being further developed as part of the ongoing the 'Continuous Learning Reform', and closely connected to its other measures, such as the development of lifelong guidance, the development of a digital service package for continuous learning (JOD), and the development and activities of the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment (JOTPA).

Furthermore, some of the key measures of the Parliamentary Reform of Continuous Learning were prepared in parallel with other development projects, such as

WORK2030 (TYÖ2030) – the development programme for work and well-being at work, social security reform, and the reform of work and economic services- to which they are related. Hence, the implementation of the parliamentary reform of continuous learning has also partly taken place through these projects.

The Continuous Learning Reform has been included in Finland's sustainable growth programme (published in May 2021) to speed up implementation. The sustainable growth program is financed by the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility instrument (RRF, Next Generation EU) with a total of 76 million euros for the period 2021–2024. Funding is directed to training and outreach activities that support structural change, the development of validation (competence identification), foresight and guidance, and the digitalization programme for continuous learning.

Source: Finnish Government.

3.3. Outreach measures and promotional activities in integrated national skills strategies

Outreach measures and promotional activities are usually part of the overarching national skills strategies. However, like in the case of guidance, the extent to which validation is explicitly addressed by these remains unclear ⁽¹⁶⁾.

In Germany, for example, the national skills strategy partly includes outreach measures, without specific reference to validation. However, validation measures themselves usually have outreach measures and promotional activities, even if this is not mentioned in the national skills strategy (see for example the involvement of chambers in the ValiKom project).

Promotional activities linked to the Slovak national strategy are focussed on the individual thematic areas. In general, as soon as specific measures are addressed in implementation, promotional activities are also conducted. For example, during the conduction of the national project on validation, media campaigns were carried out.

Outreach activities and promotional activities are linked to the national skills policy and strategy in Slovenia by promoting education and training, equal opportunities and equal access to education and training, and validation opportunities. The website dedicated to national vocational qualifications (NVQ) (Institute of Republic Slovenija for VET, 2023), which can be fully awarded based on the validation of non-formal learning, is an example of how increasing the visibility and attractiveness of NVQ and validation opportunities is promoted. The website presents various short videos categorised as follows: Videos about the

⁽¹⁶⁾ For detailed information and examples of outreach activities related to validation services, please consult the thematic report dedicated to this topic.

NVQ and how to obtain them (including through validation); explanations from NVQ holders; experiences and opinions from users with an acquired NVQ.

In Finland, outreach measures and promotional activities initiated by the skills strategy closely linked to validation include the large 'Reveal Your Skills' campaign launched by SITRA, the Finnish Innovation Fund, in 2021 and the JOTPA (Service Centre for Continuous Learning) activities. JOTPA's legal tasks include the development and coordination of information, advice and guidance services. In addition to an annual 'Reveal Your Skills' week, JOTPA contributes to awareness raising through other tasks (see section 3.4). It also develops and experiments with new ways to reaching out to those working age people who participate the least in education training. Such 'outreach pilots' will be conducted in 1,200 companies and will also provide research data on the impact of the measures.

Box 3. Reveal Your Skills campaign, a validation-related outreach measure initiated by the Finnish Continuous Learning Reform

The first two-week 'Reveal Your Skills' campaign was organised in autumn 2021 (30.8.-12.9.2021) in cooperation with the SITRA project team, the Finnish Association of Adult Education Centres KoL and Sivis Study Centre (SITRA, 2023). In line with the goals of the 'Continuous Learning Reform', its primary goal was to encourage working age adults to identify their diverse competences in a positive light. The aim was also to spark discussion about the importance of identifying competences for well-being, employment, competitiveness and inclusion. The campaign engaged a wide range of actors to reach a maximum number of people. The programme was implemented by more than 350 different companies, working life and leisure organizations, educational institutions, liberal adult education institutions, occupational pension companies, public administration organizations and projects, employment pension companies and guidance professionals.

Each organisation worked with their own target groups – customers, personnel, students and members – in different ways (coaching, workshops, storytelling etc.) to help people identify their own competence in line with common principles and diverse tools. SITRA acted as convener and coordinated the event. More than 350 different actors collaborated in the organisation of the campaign. Their events and communication reached hundreds of thousands of people who saw their own and others' competences in a positive light.

The focus was on identifying and documenting acquired competence (rather than skills that are missing). The event increased an understanding that everyone accumulates valuable skills and competences in different environments – education, work, hobbies and relationships – at all stages of life.

Since 2022, the annual 'Reveal Your Skills' event has been coordinated by JOTPA. A dedicated website was set up which contains tools and exercises produced by various operators for identifying and articulating own competence¹⁷. A total of 23 exercises have been collected to help individuals identify and articulate their own skills. The tools and exercises are free of charge, are available year-round and can

(¹⁷) Some exercises and tools are available in English (SITRA, 2023).

be used by all. JOTPA markets them especially in connection with Reveal Your Skills week. In September 2022, as part of the Reveal Your Skills week, JOTPA organised an event where experiences and good practices from the outreach work (*hakeva toiminta*) were shared. The event was attended by 200 people.

Source: Finnish Government.

3.4. Involvement and coordination of stakeholders in integrated national skills strategies

From the research conducted, it appears that a key characteristic of integrated or overarching national skills strategies is that they are jointly developed as cross-governmental strategies, across policy fields (including the different sectors of education and training and the labour market), in cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders, including social partners and in some cases also NGOs and civil society organisations⁽¹⁸⁾. The stakeholders with a leading role in validation are usually involved in the coordination and implementation of the strategy. As a rule, the strategy with its objectives and measures forms the framework for cooperation, which in many cases is supported by a coordination group and additional working or discussion fora. In addition, research plays a role, as the development of these strategies is often based on scientific research in the field of skills and their implementation may be accompanied by monitoring and evaluation activities.

This approach is highlighted, for example, in the Irish strategy, the development of which was supported by a high-level steering group with representatives of stakeholders from the education and business sectors, based on research, analysis and a consultation process. Similarly, with regards to implementation, 'Implementation of the National Skills Strategy is not the sole responsibility of any one government department or agency, it is a cross-cutting strategy, which will require cooperation from many different stakeholders. In addition to the responsibilities of government departments and agencies, employers and individuals also have their own parts to play in the implementation of the strategy' (Ireland. Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 113). The implementation of the strategy is, among others, backed up by Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that are in place between the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and its agencies. Some of them also have an important role to play related to validation (or RPL) and for taking the lead for implementing the measures related to it set out in the strategy: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), SOLAS

⁽¹⁸⁾ See also Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels

(Further Education and Training Authority) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Moreover, new skills governance arrangements were developed that resulted in the establishment of new bodies, such as the National Skills Council and nine Regional Skills Fora. Both organisations have a role to play in fostering greater engagement between the education and training sectors, with employers and in matching skills provision with economic and regional development.

Also, in the Polish approach it can be noted that the strategy developed an implementation coordination structure that covers both the central and regional level and comprises the main stakeholders responsible for validation. It applies a whole of government approach bringing together all ministries involved in skills development. At the central level, an Inter-ministerial Taskforce for LLL and the Integrated Qualifications System ⁽¹⁹⁾ has been established for the implementation of the strategy as well as an Implementation Consortium. At the regional level, Regional Coordination Teams have been established. All three bodies are supported by a team of experts at the Ministry of Education and Science.

In Germany, the national skills strategy involves the Ministries of Labour, Education, Economics, the federal states, the Public Employment Services (PES), labour unions and employer associations, and the chambers of industry and crafts. Thus, the main actors responsible for the validation initiatives highlighted in the strategy – the chambers for ValiKom and the PES for MYSKILLS – are closely involved. For the coordination of implementation activities and ongoing networking, an implementation committee was installed where all partners meet every six months. Furthermore, theme labs and workshops were organised to elaborate on specific topics, such as literacy and basic education, guidance or quality assurance (ReferNet Germany and Cedefop, 2021). The national VET institute (BIBB) provides technical and organisational support for the policy process on behalf of the Ministry of Education.

The preparation of 'Continuous Learning Reform' in Finland also engaged stakeholders across government, as well as non-governmental actors. The social partners have been the driving force behind giving validation an important role in the reform. The argument was that validation of prior learning is well anchored in the education sector and that common guidelines exist for it, but that competences acquired in the work context are still not sufficiently visible and valued. The development of the reform has been informed by the work of SITRA and the OECD and other evidence collected through commissioned research and analysis. It also led to the implementation of a new organisational structure, the Service Centre of Continuous Learning and Employment, JOTPA. This Service Centre finances

⁽¹⁹⁾ Validation is an important element of the Integrated Qualifications System which was introduced in 2015.

targeted training based on foresight information and develops and tests new ways to reach out to educationally disadvantaged workers (see outreach pilots mentioned above). In addition, the Service Centre analyses predictive information on skills and labour needs, develops information, advice and guidance services, and promotes the effectiveness of regional and other cooperation networks (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). There is no central coordination of validation activities in Finland. However, the main actors involved in validation are represented in the strategy and JOPTA has an important role to play related to validation (see Section 3.3).

The strategy partners in Norway include the Norwegian Government, social partner organisations, and the voluntary sector and adult learning associations represented by the Norwegian association for Adult Learning (VOFO). To follow-up on the implementation of the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017–21, new bodies were established: the Skills Policy Council (*Kompetansepolitisk råd*) its mandate was renewed in 2022 and the Future Skills Needs Committee (*Kompetansebehvosutvalget*) its mandate has been renewed for the period 2021- 27.

In the case of Slovakia, several ministries, other state and public administration bodies, local governments, employers' organisations, civil society organisations, churches and other entities were involved in the preparation of the draft strategy based on an invitation by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The various stakeholders were involved in roundtables, working discussions and meetings or provided written comments on the draft document. Before submission to the Slovak Government for approval, a public consultation on the strategy document was organised. The process was also supported by the European Commission: 'In parallel with the national discussions, the preparation of the document was monitored and commented on by the European Commission, with whose representatives several meetings were held during the months April-July 2021' (Slovakia. MŠVVaŠSR & ŠIOV, 2021, p. 70). Responsible parties have been defined for the implementation of the individual measures of the strategy (Cedefop and Refernet, 2023): In most of the thirteen thematic units the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport is a responsible actor. For measures related to two thematic units (support for the sustainability of the sector council management system with a focus on the transfer of innovation processes and labour market requirements to lifelong learning; development of professional counselling services within employment services), the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the Alliance of Sectoral Councils are responsible actors, with the education ministry as a supporting partner. In only one case (measure aimed at improving digital skills) the

responsibility lies with the Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatisation, while the education ministry is among supporting partners. As shown in the 2022-2024 Action Plan (Slovakia. MŠVVaŠSR & ŠIOV, 2022), several partners are usually involved, whose profile depends on the respective thematic area and the respective measure.

3.5. Monitoring and evaluation activities

The coordination bodies and working groups mentioned above are important structures for reflecting on progress made in the implementation of overarching national skills strategies and adjusting activities as necessary. Dedicated monitoring and evaluation activities also play an important role.

The Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance 2021-2030 for the Slovak Republic presents for each of the thirteen thematic units structural indicators that will be monitored. For the thematic unit System of validation of non-formal education and informal learning, for example, these include: Participation of adults in education; Employment 20-64; Unemployment of the low educated.

Moreover, action plans are developed: 'The individual objectives of LLLG Strategy and the corresponding measures will be detailed in action plans with a timeframe for the implementation of the measures and the financing of the individual measures after the approval of the document by the Government of the Slovak Republic. The action plans for the implementation of LLLG Strategy will be drawn up and submitted to the Government of the Slovak Republic for approval by 31 March 2022, 2025 and 2028, with an evaluation of the results of the interim monitoring of the previous period' (Slovakia. MŠVVaŠSR & ŠIOV, 2021, p. 13). So far, the Action Plan of the Strategy of Lifelong Learning and Guidance for 2022–2024 has been developed. It 'contains a roadmap of activities, based on the defined thematic areas of the Strategy and the actions proposed therein (including for thematic area 1.5: System of validation of non-formal education and informal learning). Each measure includes a proposal for a set of activities aimed at achieving the objectives of that measure as well as the overall goals of the Strategy, output indicators, the institutions involved in their implementation and an indication of possible financial resources. The financing of the activities is planned to a large extent from EU funds from the programming period 2021-27 through the Programme Slovakia' (Slovakia. MŠVVaŠSR & ŠIOV, 2022, p. 1). The following action plans will be based on the results achieved and grounded in monitoring and evaluation. Such monitoring activities are planned and scheduled for 2024.

Of the countries with overarching national skills strategies covered in this report, Ireland, Germany and Finland have already taken action to analyse

progress made in implementation and to identify necessary adjustments and next steps.

To ensure that the Irish National Skills Strategy 2025 (Ireland. Department of Education and Skills, 2016) remains fit for purpose and adjustments can be made where necessary, the OECD supported the country in a review of the strategy in 2022. Drawing on detailed analysis and extensive stakeholder engagement, the OECD identified 24 tailored recommendations that provide high-level strategic directions for Ireland in four priority areas: 1. Securing a balance in skills through a responsive and diversified supply of skills, 2. Fostering greater participation in lifelong learning in and outside the Workplace, 3. Leveraging skills to drive innovation and strengthen firm performance, 4. Strengthening skills governance to build a joined-up skills ecosystem. One of the recommendations is explicitly related to improving the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for individuals and enterprises to make lifelong learning more accessible to all. The following specific actions are recommended (OECD, 2023a, p. 34):

- (a) '6.1 Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to offer recognition of prior learning, including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL.
- (b) 6.2. Improve awareness of and access to recognition of prior learning, including tools for individuals to accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning.
- (c) 6.3. Implement a mechanism for recognising and rewarding informal, on-the-job learning provided by employers.'

The German National Skills Strategy was published in 2019 (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2019) and the OECD was asked to provide expert support for the implementation process and to document achievements in a country report on continuing vocational education and training in Germany. This implementation report was published on 23 April 2021 (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2022). With regard to the area of 'making competences visible', the report refers to the following contributions to the implementation of the strategy: Together with its partners, the umbrella organisations German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) and German Confederation of Skills Crafts (ZDH), the Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) has set up competence centres at the chambers to implement the standardised validation procedure developed in ValiKom, where qualification-related validation procedures can be carried out for selected occupations⁽²⁰⁾. Progress has also been made regarding MYSKILLLS, the video- and image-based test procedure that records professional action knowledge in 30 selected

⁽²⁰⁾ [Occupations in the fields of skilled crafts, trade and industry and agriculture.](#)



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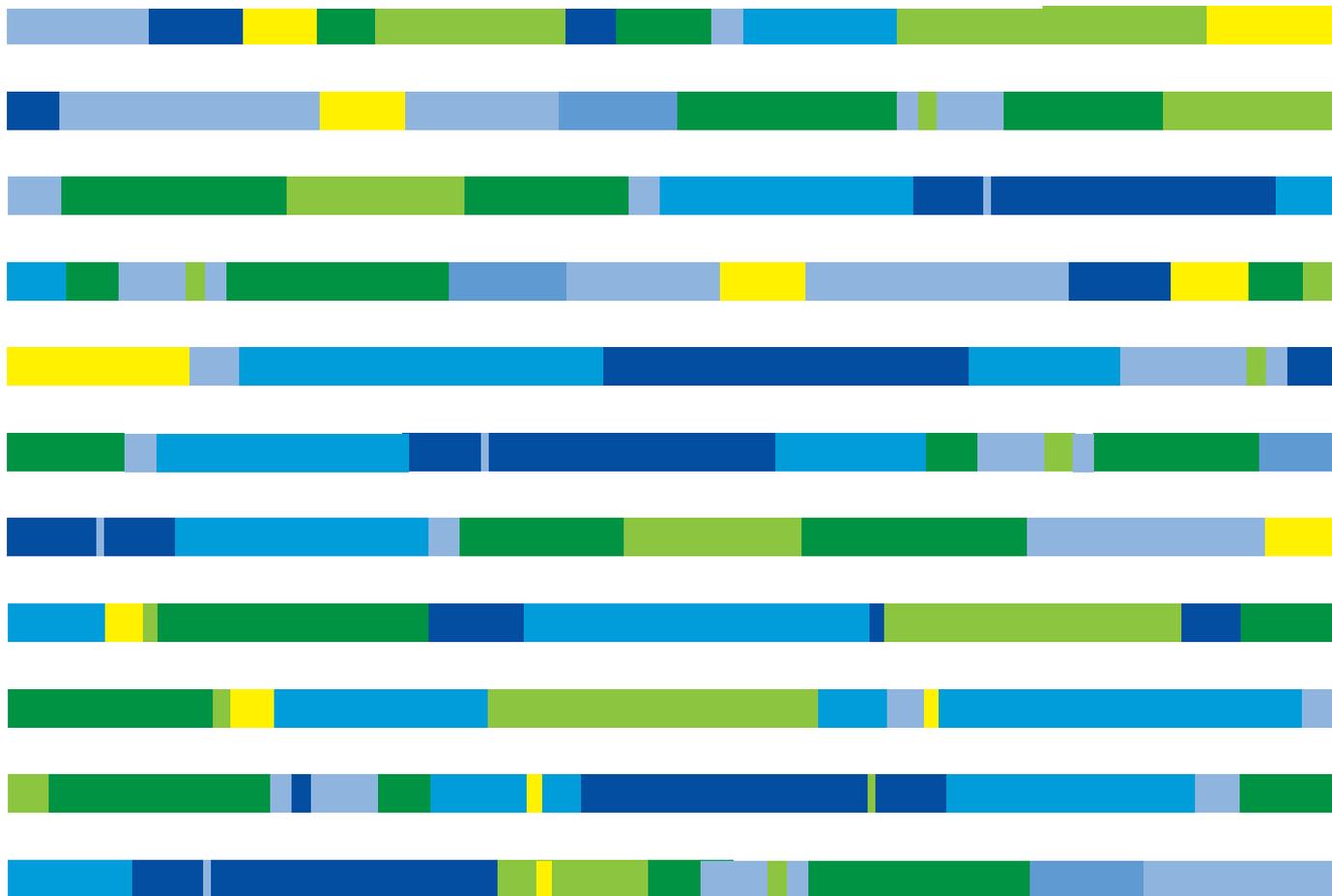
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

THEMATIC REPORT:

Evolution of validation as an integrated part of national skills policies and strategies

Author: Karin Luomi-Messerer



occupations in 12 languages. The BMBF, the *Länder*, the social partners and the umbrella organisations DIHK and ZDH have deepened the examination of legal and financial framework conditions so that the validation procedures for vocational competences can be continued in the next legislative period and, if necessary, placed on a legal basis (BMAS and BMBF, 2022, p. 21 & 44).

Four central cross-cutting issues to be considered in the next implementation phase are highlighted in the report:

- (a) Facilitate access to counselling, promotion and further training offers, taking into account financial and time-related framework conditions;
- (b) Deepening cooperation in regions and sectors;
- (c) Further develop concepts for competences of the future, skills planning in companies and approaches in companies and collective agreements to strengthen continuing education;
- (d) Strengthen digital continuing education with more transparency and innovative learning offers.

With regard to validation, the focus is on obtaining qualifications, and the connection with guidance services is emphasised: For people without a usable vocational qualification, a process description should be developed so that they can be helped along the path to a subsequent vocational qualification, building on guidance services, the validation of informally and non-formally acquired vocational competences and supplementary qualification services to develop skilled workers and increase their career development prospects (BMAS et al., 2021, p. 66).

In September 2022, the further development of the national skills strategy was presented, confirming the commitment to concrete measures and new initiatives to enhance the continuing education system as well as for the strengthening of the continuing education culture. Further measures of implementation are based on the four cross-cutting themes defined in the implementation report. For example, the range of services for competence assessment, validation and development is to be expanded. For the instrument of validation, among other things, a nationwide embedding is being sought (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2022, p. 16).

The Finnish Continuous Learning Reform (2019-23) was published in 2020 (Finnish Government, 2022; Finland. Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022) and the final report on the reform implementation and on the next steps was submitted on 1 March 2023 to the Members of Parliament. It was confirmed that the implementation of these policies will continue during the next government term (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023). To enable continuous monitoring, a set of indicators has been developed and evaluation activities are also planned.

A stakeholder survey on the parliamentary reform of lifelong learning, commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture, shows that in general there is a perception of added value of this reform, but there are different views on priorities (Koramo et al., 2023). While there is agreement that it is too early to assess the success of the reform and important to continue the activities included, some recommendations on key areas for the future implementation of the reform are highlighted. They do not explicitly refer to validation, but mention relevant aspects and measures related to validation. Among others they refer to the establishment of closer links between the world of work and the education and training system (for better responding to the needs of the world of work, a focus on short-term training), the provision of financial incentives for individuals and businesses to become more involved, systematic and better use of foresight data and activation of under-represented groups (in particular training for immigrants) and overall development of guidance (outreach, etc.).

CHAPTER 4.

Conclusions: success factors and challenges

4.1. Key success factors for an integrated validation approach as part of a national skills strategy

To become widely used and relevant for individuals, as well as trusted by stakeholders in the education system, the labour market and in society at large, validation needs to be embedded in and supported by overarching national skills policies and strategies. The national skills strategies analysed show that validation is usually included and plays an important role. However, it is not always clear to what extent validation is linked to other measures in these strategies, and the themes with which it is linked vary from country to country. Validation can play an important role in skills strategies supporting the interaction between learning at work, in education and training as well as in other contexts, such as youth work or volunteering activities (although the latter two areas seem to be less strongly emphasised in these strategies).

To release the full potential of validation, cooperation between stakeholders from different policy areas, contexts, and sectors as well as coordination and integrated support structures are necessary. This is explicitly acknowledged in several countries with an existing overarching national skills strategy or that are currently developing one as the whole-of-government approach is strongly highlighted as key success factor. For Germany, it is even pointed out that the 'implementation process of the National Skills Strategy has established a new culture of cooperation between the decision-makers involved and actors from the scientific community, as well as practitioners. All partners are in favour of a consistent continuation of the activities launched, including consultation and exchange processes (ReferNet & Cedefop, 2021).

A political will and high-level buy-in is also one of the success factors underlined in Slovenia and the lessons learned from the work on the skills strategy in Flanders include the importance of securing broad engagement, partnerships and ownership, having shared principles, developing a shared language and common understanding as well as a clear framework for collaboration with stakeholders (for instance in coordination structures or working groups) with clarity about roles and responsibilities ⁽²¹⁾. Also in the Slovak Republic, for example, the

⁽²¹⁾ Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels

importance of getting all stakeholders, including NGOs, on board is highlighted as key success factor. This was achieved by organising several meetings and workshops for discussing the aims and approach of the strategy that have been identified in a smaller core team.

For the successful implementation of the German strategy, it is also considered crucial to adequately document progress in the implementation contributions, to enable strategic feedback regarding the achievement of objectives and to communicate this progress to the public. In the autumn of 2023, within the framework of the first National Continuing Education Conference, an interim review will be carried out (Germany. BMAS & BMBF, 2022, p. 20). Communication plays an important role in this context: 'A primary aim is the constant improvement of communication between the scientific community and practitioners to support better usability and utilisation of the findings for different target groups, especially SMEs' (ReferNet and Cedefop, 2021). Also in Flanders, ensuring good internal and external communication is emphasised in the strategy development process ⁽²²⁾. Continuous promotion of the activities, explaining the rationale for the plans and actions taken, is also of high importance. In the Slovak Republic, this is done, for example during the annual 'lifelong learning week'. Moreover, as highlighted in Slovakia, the development of a knowledge base (e.g. based on studies conducted by ŠIOV, the State Vocational Education Institute) is crucial as well as well-developed action plans.

The box below provides insights into the key success factors identified for the implementation of the national skills strategy in Finland, some of which are consistent with those mentioned above and some of which relate to aspects specific to the Finnish approach (Valtioneuvosto, 2023):

Box 4. Key success factors for an integrated validation approach in the Finnish 'Continuous Learning Reform'

The final report on the reform implementation and on the next steps that was presented in March 2023 refers to the following key success factors for an integrated validation approach in the national skills strategy (Valtioneuvosto, 2023):

- Broad political support and parliamentary consensus on the development of continuous learning, including validation, which supports long-term development –achieving impact and effectiveness requires a long-term approach, beyond one government term;
- Structured collaboration through working groups, including in validation, has brought together ministries and labour market and other key actors; the reform

⁽²²⁾ Working Group on Adult Learning. Findings report PLA on National Skills Strategies, 20-21 October 2022, Brussels)

has improved cross-administrative cooperation between ministries and other actors;

- Inclusion of the promotion of continuous learning, and validation, in other development programmes, has enhanced the progress of different development projects in parallel; by working together with other development projects, it has been possible to ensure that continuous learning and validation are promoted in the working life and the benefits system;
- A highly visible awareness raising campaign (Reveal Your Skills) and various projects have raised the profile of validation of non-formal and informal learning and continuous learning and highlighted their importance in Finland, and generated tools of self-identification and recognition of competence;
- Investing in human resources for continuous learning, for example in 'ELY centers', which in practice act as continuous learning coordinators, has promoted the implementation of policies, and increased also validation related services (for instance in fields of labour shortage);
- The use of evidence-based approaches to developing policies for the delivery of the continuous learning reform as well as validation, for defining the key principles and identifying the topics of the pilots; these include OECD reviews, the work of SITRA, and various research studies, reports and analyses commissioned by the Government;
- Establishment of pilots and experiments to tackle the key issues for both continuous learning as well as validation, identified in the multi-stakeholder working group;

The establishment of the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment, JOTPA, as a permanent structure, equally steered by two ministries, while other ministries and representatives of working life participate in its steering is very much appreciated. Ongoing projects also cover validation.

Source: Finnish government.

4.2. Challenges

Failure to meet the above success criteria is the biggest challenge regarding these overarching national skills strategies. While it may be difficult enough to agree on strategic goals in general, it can be even more difficult to reach agreement on concrete implementation measures and responsibilities. Long-term political commitment is also not always easy to achieve, and it can be interrupted by changes in government (such as in Slovakia) or by overarching crises, such as those triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic (these challenges were noted in Slovakia and Slovenia, for example). Changing political priorities can generally pose a challenge for strategies in this context. Policy priorities are closely related to funding decisions. and as resources are usually limited, it can be challenging for different stakeholders to reach consensus in this area. In the development of the 'Continuous Learning Reform' in Finland, it was therefore decided to first agree on the content of the strategy before deciding on who should finance the individual

measures and in what way. However, given that the implementation of the strategy is supported by EU funds, a challenge for the future is the financing of activities as the reliance on temporary programs does not ensure the sustainability of the reform.

A specific issue for validation in overarching national skills strategies can also be its potential to challenge traditional routes to qualifications: The national skills strategy of Germany emphasises that validation procedures should not replace established training procedures within Germany's skill formation system. This must be seen in relation to certain resistance to a further development of validation among the central actors in the governance of the German skill formation system, in particular the social partners, which partly perceive validation as a weakening of and alternative route to standardised qualifications predominantly earned within the dual apprenticeship system. The relatively low pace of expanding validation arrangements in Germany at least partially results from such political dynamics (Unterweger, 2024). Another difficulty in this area can be to ensure the involvement of working life stakeholders: Their cooperation is necessary as a large part of validation activities takes place in the work context, yet cooperation cannot be enforced and is voluntary. In Finland, one way of trying to meet this challenge is to do intensive information and dissemination among such stakeholders and to provide employers with useful tools (for instance to undertake validation).

As several country examples have shown, the development of an overarching national skills strategy is an important starting point, but it is always only a beginning of a process. The development of such a strategy is important to bring together all relevant policy areas and stakeholders and to reach agreement on common objectives and actions. Implementing the strategy, however, requires continuous cooperation, coordination and monitoring of progress and achievements of all activities and measures included (such as those related to validation) as well as of the effectiveness of the linked implementation of different measures (such as validation and guidance or validation and up- or reskilling activities). Carrying out activities and implementing a series of projects is not enough. To ensure effectiveness, it is important to maintain ownership, consensus and commitment. This also requires discussion and reflection, as well as continuous improvement efforts. Continuous efforts are crucial, as is responding to the impact of global megatrends (including rapid technological development as well as climate change and global warming), policy agendas (such as the ones related to the twin digital and green transition) and crises or shocks (such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine), as strategies need to be reviewed and adapted as necessary.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that the effectiveness and impact of overarching national skills strategies have so far been analysed only to a very limited extent²³. The recent update of the inventory reports shows that this is in many cases also true for the validation measures. The effectiveness and impact of national skills strategies that integrate validation is therefore difficult to assess due to the lack of relevant data. Given that these strategic documents have gained importance for policy making at national and European level in recent decades (not least through their anchoring in the European Skills Agenda and the Osnabrück Declaration), activities should be undertaken in this regard. To this end, the criteria must be negotiated so that – following an overarching approach – the measurement of effectiveness and impact is not based solely on economic criteria but also considers skills relevant to the individual and for wider societal issues.

⁽²³⁾ For example, the Horizon Europe project Skills2Capabilities — Matching Skills: Capabilities, Organisations and Institutions (Skills2Capability Consortium. 2023: [European Commission – Cordis, 2022](#)) currently analyses selected national skills strategies based on the Human Capability Approach. Among others, it analyses the main foci applied in their strategies and the extent to which the actions proposed complement or contradict each other. In addition to this qualitative analysis, the performance of the strategies is analysed, e.g. in terms of whether the quantitative and qualitative objectives set have been achieved, whether the measures envisaged in the strategy have been implemented or not.

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Abbreviations

CoVE	Centre of Vocational Excellence
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
ESF	European Social Fund
ETB	Education and Training Boards (Ireland)
HE	Higher education
KPIs	Key performance indicators
JOTPA	Service Centre for Continuous Learning (Finland)
LLL	Lifelong learning
LLLCS 2030	Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021-30 (Slovakia)
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
VET	vocational education and training
NIP	National Implementation Plan
NPK	National Vocational Qualifications (Slovenia)
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSS 2025	National Skills Strategy 2025 (Ireland)
NVQ	National vocational qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PES	Public Employment Services
PLA	Peer Learning Activity
RPL	Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SITRA	Finnish Innovation Fund
SKKR	Slovak qualifications framework
VET	Vocational education and training

European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

This thematic report focuses on emerging overarching or integrated national skills strategies, as called for in the European Skills Agenda and the Osnabrück Declaration and examines the development of validation as an integral part of these strategies. By spring 2023, the following countries have been identified as having already developed and are implementing an integrated national skills strategy: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The analysis carried out shows that these national skills strategies generally recognise the benefits of validation as a basis for lifelong learning and its role in supporting the interaction between learning in the workplace, in education and training and in other contexts such as youth work or volunteering.

All these strategies also refer to career guidance services and often to other relevant measures and tools that need to be integrated to improve the national skills system and its outcomes. Success factors for integrated national skills strategies include a whole-of-government approach, engaging and collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, jointly setting objectives and action plans, defining clear measures and responsibilities, monitoring, analysing and communicating progress, and using evidence-based approaches.

This report is part of the 2023 update of the [European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) provides a comprehensive overview of validation practices across Europe, covering 32 systems in EU-27 Member States and EFTA countries.

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