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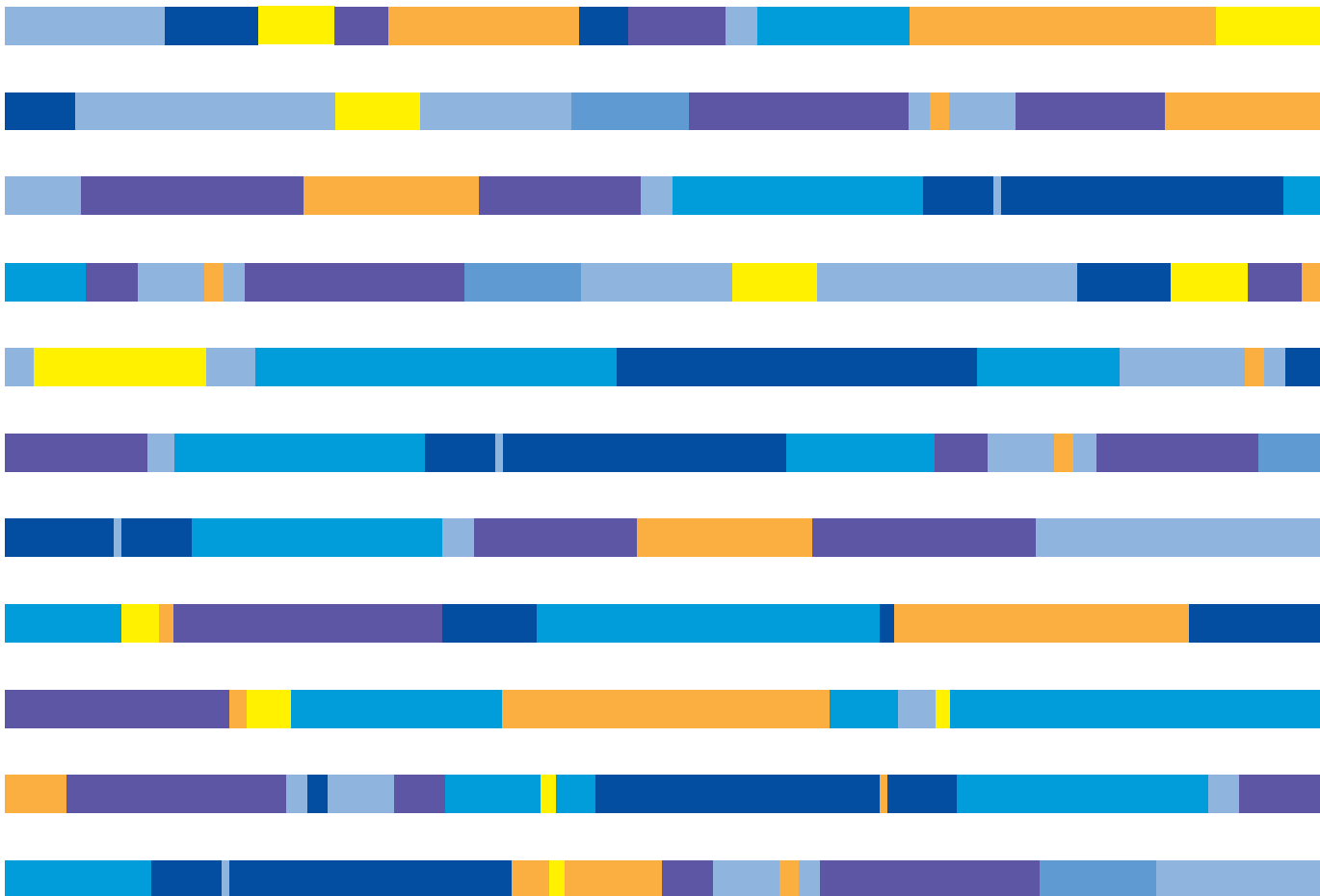


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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

COUNTRY REPORT:
NORTH MACEDONIA



Disclaimer

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	3
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1 INTRODUCTION	5
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2 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE	6
2.1. Overarching approach to validation	6
2.3. Validation in the labour market	11
2.4. Validation in the third sector	12

3 LINKS TO NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF)	13
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4 STANDARDS AND REFERENCE POINTS	14
--	----

5 ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED IN THE VALIDATION ARRANGEMENTS AND THEIR COORDINATION	15
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6 VNFIL SERVICE PROVIDERS	16
---------------------------------	----

7 INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE	18
7.1. Information, outreach and promotion	18
7.2. Advice and guidance	18

8 VALIDATION PRACTITIONERS	20
8.1. Profile of validation practitioners	20
8.2. Qualification requirements	20
8.3. Provision of training and support to validation practitioners	20

9 QUALITY ASSURANCE	22
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10 INPUTS, OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES	23
10.1. Funding	23
10.2. Distribution of costs	23
10.3. Evidence of benefits to individuals	23
10.4. Beneficiaries and users of validation processes	23

11 VALIDATION METHODS	25
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12 USE OF ICT IN VALIDATION	26
13 THE POSITION OF VALIDATION IN SOCIETY	27
14 RECOMMENDATIONS	28
REFERENCES	30
17 ACRONYMS.....	32

1 Introduction

The first work on establishing the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) arrangements date back to 2013/14 and the adoption of the Concept Paper for Non-formal Adult Education and Informal Learning in the Republic of Macedonia (2015). The first comprehensive document to set out how VNFIL would work was the 'Roadmap for implementing a system of VNFIL' from 2016. The current legislation regulating education and qualifications only mentions the possibility for VNFIL, but arrangements are not yet operational. However, several strategic documents and draft Laws on the National qualifications framework (NQF) (MOES, 2023a) and Adult Education (AE) (MOES, 2023b) propose implementation of validation arrangements in all sectors. VNFIL arrangements will be coordinated nationally.

The amendments to Law on NQF define VNFIL as a process of recognising of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in accordance with previously defined criteria and standards, including certification with a publicly recognised document from an authorised institution. The are four stages to VNFIL: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The amendments to Law on NQF set out plans that VNFIL will be possible for all qualifications in the sectors of education, labour market and the third sector up to NQF level 5B (EQF level 5), including: formal primary education, secondary education i.e. general secondary education and initial vocational education and training (IVET), postsecondary education, as well non-formal continuous vocational education and training (CVET) and other forms of adult learning.

The draft new laws on AE and on NQF provide for certification both for vocational and educational qualifications. People will be able to obtain educational qualifications through the formal education system and gain a diploma providing access to both the labour market and further formal education. Vocational qualifications will be available through both formal vocational education and training (VET) and non-formal education and training. Those obtained through non-formal education lead to a certificate providing an access to labour market, but without a mobility in formal education. Once the new Law on AE is passed, people will be able to acquire both types of qualifications through VNFIL.

The main stakeholders involved in the development of VNFIL are the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) and Adult Education Centre (AEC), together with the Coordinating Body and Working Group on validation. There's also an active role for the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the VET Centre, the NQF National Board, the Sectoral commissions for qualifications, the Employment Service Agency (ESA), the Bureau for the Development of Education (BDE) and adult education and VNFIL service providers. MOES is responsible for the overall policy on VNFIL. The AEC is responsible for the accreditation of providers of validation and adult education, and for development of the VNFIL measures, trainings for the VNFIL practitioners, preparing information packages, advice and guidance for candidates, as well for monitoring of the validation processes.

Once the amendments to AE and NQF laws are adopted, something which is expected to take place soon, there will be a legal basis for VNFIL arrangements to come into effect. With that, the stakeholders will start implementing the validation scheme.

2 National perspective

2.1. Overarching approach to validation

The existing national legislation provides a prospective basis for VNFIL arrangements. For instance, the Law on NQF from 2013 and the Law on AE from 2008 mention the possibility of validation of prior knowledge and skills, but a significant and more recent development in the area is the preparation of new bills on NQF and AE. They clearly present VNFIL and provide the basis for putting in place key VNFIL arrangements. The draft legislation and the related strategic documents predicate that VNFIL will consist of four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The central concepts and assumptions of the Recommendations of the Council of the European Union on VNFIL (Council of the European Union, 2012) and the European guidelines for VNFIL (Cedefop, 2015) are reflected in detail in the policy document 'Roadmap for implementing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the FYRoM' (MOES & AEC, 2016). The Roadmap, together with the 'Guidance note on VNFIL processes' and the 'Handbook for assessment in the context of validation of non-formal and informal learning' - provide guidance for setting up VNFIL arrangements (these documents are explained in the Inventory on VNFIL for 2018, North Macedonia).

The Roadmap suggests the following priority target groups for VNFIL:

- people who have not completed basic (primary) education;
- people with relevant skills and competences who have few or no officially recognised qualifications;
- unemployed people and those (including women with families) wishing to return to the labour market following a break from employment;
- people returning to the country who have acquired relevant skills and knowledge whilst living or working abroad.

Prioritising target groups for validation follows two principles: the labour market need for qualified workers in certain sectors, and support provided to the unemployed (especially those with fewer qualifications and skills) to access the labour market. The Employment Service Agency (ESA) analyses labour market needs annually using multiple sources of information.

The Strategy on education 2018-25 (MOES, 2018) proposes VNFIL measures that would give horizontal and vertical mobility within the education system and the labour market, and defines VNFIL as one of the priorities when it comes to adult education.

In 2022, MOES adopted the Development Concept for the Establishment of Regional Vocational Education and Training Centres in North Macedonia (RVETC) (MOES, 2022b). The Concept document serves as a legal basis for converting three VET schools in the cities of Tetovo, Kumanovo and Ohrid in RVET Centres. The description of the process and selection criteria is provided in section 9 (on quality assurance). These institutions continue to provide formal VET but additionally each of these RVETCs established a sector for development of AE and VNFIL. These centres nominate staff to coordinate their new AE and VNFIL sections, and they are expected to start putting in place firm arrangements and delivering on the first cases of VNFIL for candidates once the bill on AE is passed by the Parliament.

In November 2022, the MOES adopted the new Concept document on secondary education for adults (MOES, 2022a). Like in the Concept on primary education for adults (adopted in 2016), VNFIL in the document is proposed as one of the main pillars of adults' secondary education. The Concept includes concrete arrangements and goals, both in formal and non-formal education. It sets out the adult secondary education curricula as based on the key competences (recommended by the Council of the EU) and provides an explanation on how they are correlated to the subjects in the regular courses. It also shows how they could be further incorporated into the national standards with expected learning outcomes. The document maps out a methodology for evaluating and upgrading knowledge and skills

of adult candidates based on VNFIL principles, which could serve as a practical guide when implementing the validation process.

In 2022, with support by the European Training Foundation (ETF), the national authorities drafted a National Implementation Plan (NIP) on monitoring the implementation of EU Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) and of the 2020 Osnabrück Declaration. The NIP prioritised VNFIL arrangements for support and monitoring.

The NQF and AE bills seek to bring in significant developments in VNFIL. The bills are in the advanced phase of processing and are expected to be passed into law by the Parliament soon.

The NQF bill (MOES, 2023a) clearly states that qualifications could be obtained through VNFIL. The law points out that the procedures for VNFIL shall be governed by the Law on AE.

The draft AE bill (MOES, 2023b) includes a whole chapter specifically on VNFIL, that sets out the procedures, phases and conditions. It states that VNFIL is available to anyone over 16 years of age for validation at NQF¹ level 1 (9 years in school); over 17 years of age for validation at NQF level 2 (secondary education); and over 18 years of age up to NQF level 5B. Regulations of this law referring to vocational qualifications should become operational within six months of the law coming into force, while for educational qualifications – it will be 1 year.

Other essential developments will be made once the EU-funded Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) project 'Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education'² is implemented. The project started in September 2021 and is expected to last 36 months. The overall objective is to improve skill match of youth and adults in line with the labour market needs by increasing access to quality VET and AE in North Macedonia. The four main tasks (components) of the project are:

- Task 1: Mapping and reviewing VET delivery in the five regions with the aim to support implementation of the Concept on RVETC establishing two new Regional VET Centres
- Task 2: Implementing the system for VNFIL as an important path towards providing quality education for adults
- Task 3: Improving post-secondary education with newly developed curricula, in line with the labour market needs
- Task 4: Improving compatibility of the national system of VET and AE with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET

Tasks for VNFIL include selecting five qualification standards from the NQF that will be offered to candidates and 'tested' for validation. The selection of qualifications was based on several criteria: importance of the qualifications for the specific regions (and RVETCs) where they will be validated, shortage of skills in the region(s), and estimates on the interest of the prospective candidates. The qualifications selected from five different sectors are: Hairdresser/hairstylist, Car body repair technician, Baker, Beekeeper, and Dressmaker. In cooperation with the industry sectors commissions, the project seeks to update the standards for these qualifications, making them more relevant to the labour market and for use by the potential candidates.

The main activities of the project are:

- to nominate teachers from the selected RVETCs who will join the validation commissions for that Centre;

¹ NQF levels correspond to EQF levels

² EUROPEAID/140265/IH/SER/MK. The project is financed under the 2017 Action Programme for the Republic of North Macedonia, part of the European Union Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) which was adopted by the European Commission on 29 November 2017. A Financing Agreement concluded between the European Commission and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia in accordance with the Framework Agreement entered into force on November 2, 2018. Available at: <https://mkvet.mk/about-the-project/>

- to launch a call for validation service providers and to deliver a training for assessors in VNFIL;
- to improve assessment of competencies and effective quality assurance;
- to promote VNFIL to individuals;
- to carry out capacity building activities in VNFIL monitoring.

The expected project outcome for VNFIL is to have developed and upgraded the VNFIL system helping individuals to obtain official certification, which will boost their employability and career prospects.

Another VNFIL-relevant project supported by the EU and which is currently running is 'EU for Youth'³. It has been implemented by the Macedonian MOES and MLSP. It consists of measures that will contribute to higher youth employment through improving the quality of VET provided by the new Regional VET Centres and that include VNFIL. Among other activities, the plan is to revise and prepare six standards for qualifications for 'testing' VNFIL. Each RVETC selected two qualifications from the sectors covered by them. Those qualifications are: Waiter and Cook for the RVETC in Ohrid; Web-editor and Locksmith for the RVETC in Tetovo; Tractor driver and Producer of milk products for the RVETC in Kumanovo. It is expected that these qualifications will have priority in 'testing' for VNFIL.

The goals of these two EU-supported projects show commitment to bringing in concrete VNFIL arrangements, both from the national institutions, and from the EU in supporting the national institutions.

To date, there are no arrangements in North Macedonia specifically directed towards implementing the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. Current regulation does not recognise potential for validation to be financed by an individual learning account⁴ or similar financial scheme. However, projects targeting people with low educational attainment that included validation have been implemented (see the examples of good practice below).

The process of developing VNFIL arrangements faces some serious challenges and potential barriers. One of them is that the labour market (employers) in many sectors do not require employees to have certified qualifications for the jobs they offer, which does not encourage potential candidates to apply for VNFIL and get a certificate. Another is that, in many instances (mainly in the national education-related institutions) there is a lack of trust that the validation process could provide the quality equal to that of formal education, which leads to insufficient support being provided to the arrangements. A further reason is that awareness about the benefits of VNFIL is still lower than expected, after almost a decade of developments in the field. Financing is still not thoroughly discussed, likely due to reticence from the relevant national institutions to financially cover VNFIL from the state budget.

However, there have been some significant developments in VNFIL since the 2018 Inventory. As explained above, there is major progress with the draft new laws in most of the VNFIL-related fields. In addition, several important strategic documents have been adopted. On the practical side of matters, in accordance with the Roadmap, and the Strategy of education 2018-25, AEC piloted the VNFIL process - for the 'Waiter' qualification in 2020-21. Seven candidates successfully finished the process and were awarded with a certificate, positioned at level 3 of the NQF (EQF level 3). There were also plans under the same initiative, to pilot the 'Facade worker' qualification, but due to lack of interested candidates (mostly due to the fact that employers do not require employees to have any certificates), no certification was awarded (Adult Education Centre, 2021).

³ This project represents complementary technical assistance to the Sector Reform Performance Contract (SRPC) in Education, Employment and Social Protection (EESP) with the purpose of providing overarching capacity support to the key line ministries and stakeholders as well as undertaking ongoing and systematic monitoring and assessment of the sector reform process.

More information available at: <https://eu4youth.mk/en/objectives-pourpuses-expected-results/>

⁴ According to the EU Council Recommendation on Individual learning accounts, the latter should allow people to accumulate and use training entitlements over a set period, to be defined at national level, so that they can take up longer or more costly training or train during economic downturns, in response to emerging skills needs. Individuals should be able to preserve their individual training entitlements independently of their labour force or professional status and across career changes, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0773&from=EN>

2.2. Validation in education and training

In accordance with the NQF, education and training systems recognise two types of qualifications: educational and vocational. Educational qualifications can only be obtained through the formal education system, and they relate to all levels of education (primary, general secondary education and VET, and higher education). In formal VET, qualifications consist of two parts: 1. vocational learning outcomes, and 2. learning outcomes related to general education at a particular level – as defined by the national standards. Candidates who enrol and finish formal VET are awarded with a diploma providing them with access to both labour markets and other areas of formal education. Vocational qualifications can be obtained either through formal VET or non-formal education and training. Candidates obtaining vocational qualifications through non-formal education are awarded with a certificate providing them with access to labour market, but not to other areas of formal education. An example for vocational qualification awarded with a certificate is ‘Electrician’, and for an educational qualification – ‘Electrical technician’.

The NQF bill paves the way for candidates to be able to obtain all qualifications up to NQF level 5B through validation. It means that VNFIL will cover formal primary education, secondary education and IVET, postsecondary education, and non-formal CVET and other forms of AE. With regard to higher education, the Law on Higher Education vaguely allows for validation, but there is no specific document or initiative, to further legislate on the matter or otherwise make it operational.

VNFIL arrangements are coordinated nationally. Sectoral commissions and the VET Centre are expected to provide their input into planning the future VNFIL measures. Their contribution should be in bridging gaps between qualifications and VNFIL and developing appropriate validation methods and measures. The Regional VET Centres are also nationally coordinated by MOES, although they have a certain degree of autonomy in creating policies and practices with regard to the needs of the regional labour market.

The bills on AE and NQF both state that candidates could obtain full or partial qualifications through VNFIL, equivalent to those obtained in formal education. Given that the bill on NQF gives further detail on the modules of a qualification as an independent and encircled unit of learning, or part of an educational programme, this will respectively allow candidates to obtain them through VNFIL, too.

The bill on AE further regulates the certification processes. It proposes that VNFIL is possible both for vocational and formal education qualifications. Article 20 states that for vocational qualification obtained through VNFIL, the candidate will be issued a certificate for that vocational qualification with a supplement to the certificate (describing the modules, credits and learning outcomes that have been validated). Certification of modules (based on qualifications standard) would also be possible. Such certificates do not allow for vertical mobility in the educational system. For qualification at an educational level, a candidate will be issued with an official public document or diploma for a level of education they have completed. This document is equivalent to the one issued in formal education and allows for students to switch to similar courses (departments) in VET, and to move on from VET to formal higher education, or into the labour market. Validation for an education-sector qualification can only come from the institutions for formal education, verified by MOES as an adult education provider.

The draft Law further postulates that VNFIL arrangements should generally adhere to four stages (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification), as was applied in the piloting process of VNFIL. The pilot scheme was carried out by AEC from April 2020 to June 2021. However, it must be noted that this was the period of heavy restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and schools were closed for a long time. The process of VNFIL took longer than it should be and cannot be considered as typical.

The main strength of the current VNFIL arrangements is that they are conceptualised as a comprehensive system covering all sectors and areas of education and training up to NQF level 5B, which allows candidates to move between the sectors, and gives flexibility in planning arrangements in the best interest of the candidates and society as a whole. At the same time, there is a significant

challenge related to the validation of skills for the general-education part of the qualifications. All subjects in formal VET consist of vocational and general education parts. Whilst validation of the vocational competencies is a part of the ongoing discussions and documents, there is still lack of discussion about validation of the general education competencies.

Good practice in developing VNFIL arrangements for persons at high risk of social exclusion

Validation in penitentiary institutions

MOES with support from UNDP and in cooperation with the country's penitentiary institutions, has organised activities in the last 3 years that are good examples of developing VNFIL practices for marginalised groups. The aim was to offer youth and adult inmates at various prisons the opportunity to have a second chance at education, combined with arrangements similar to validation. The measure was implemented for vocational and primary education. The programmes for vocational education at NQF levels 1 and 2 and, educational programmes prepared for primary education of adults were used as a reference point for validating skills. The latter is equivalent to 9-years of primary education, which is based on learning outcomes and structured into six levels.

Activities

1. Vocational trainings

309 inmates (51 women) took part in the activities carried out in both man's and woman's sections of the prisons in Idrizovo (near Skopje), Stip, Kumanovo and Prilep.

2. Primary education for adults

Teachers from two primary schools were engaged in this activity carried out in two prisons: the woman's section of the prison in Idrizovo, and the prison in Stip. In total, this reached 67 inmates (16 women). Almost all of them showed progress of at least two levels of the programme. Three persons from the prison in Stip completed the final sixth level of the programme.

3. Primary education for young offenders

Since May 2017, five teaching cycles of activities have been carried out in the penitentiary institution for young offenders in Volkovija. On average 18 juveniles were reached in each cycle. The number of young people fluctuated due to frequent changes in their status, prison breaks or/and transfers to different institutions. All candidates showed progress of at least two levels after the programme. Five young offenders finished the sixth level of the programme. A sixth cycle is in a preparation phase.

At the beginning of the process, candidates were assessed with regard to their previously acquired knowledge using the instruments prepared for that purpose. Candidate achievements served as a basis to continue with further educational support and teaching, aiming to reaching the higher levels of the programmes. Before the start of the measure, the staff/teachers followed a short training course on the specifics of work with inmates.

Activities in all cases lasted up to 9 months, depending on the prior knowledge of the candidates, their individual pace of progress, and (no less importantly) on external circumstances related to servicing the sentence or switching facility.

Once the Law on AE passes and establishes the legal basis for VNFIL, it is expected that certificates issued for finishing the sixth level of primary education for adults programme will be recognised and equalised with the public documents issued for finishing the formal primary education. This will open up the possibility of further study or access to the labour market.

Source: MOES and UNDP

2.3. Validation in the labour market

Since the related legislation is pending adoption there are no significant VNFIL arrangements in the labour market sector yet, and there are no standardised tools that can be used in the validation procedures specifically in this sector. However, some activities that are similar, or indirectly related to VNFIL, are common for the sector. Among them are some arrangements used by the ESA, Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, and the Chambers of Crafts.

Employment advisors in ESA offices regularly conduct interviews with all registered unemployed adults. For these interviews, they use the instrument developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). During this activity, the advisor builds up a profile of the candidate's competency, taking into consideration her/his formal education and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, as well as the candidate's aptitudes and job interests. Based on this data, the ESA calculates the candidate's 'index of employability' and develops her/his 'Individual plan for employment', which is used in further communication and cooperation with potential employers. These Individual plans are created and kept in ESA's electronic database. The official standards for occupations and qualifications are used throughout the process. Based on the similarities with the VNFIL processes, experiences in developing these plans could be used in future VNFIL arrangements in the sector.

The Economic Chamber of North Macedonia - in cooperation with employers/companies - initiated measures aimed at assisting its companies in recruiting a competent workforce. As an illustration, recently the Chamber delivered training in advanced methods of baking for unemployed bakers with previous experience in the occupation. This process included identification and assessment of the prior knowledge and skills of the candidates, and where successful, finished with appropriate certification. In the private sector, many enterprises organise similar internal training courses to improve their workers' skills. Those courses probably include some validation-like measures but there is no available data to document such cases.

Another example was the "TRAINEE" project (Market-oriented skills for energy-efficient construction) implemented in the period from May 2018 to October 2020. Through a process based on recognition of previous knowledge and skills and further training upon completion of qualification, 369 construction professionals were certified in 9 occupations:

- Electrical installer with skills for implementing energy efficiency measures (63 candidates);
- Heating, cooling and ventilation installer with skills to implement energy efficiency measures (64 candidates);
- Facade designer with skills for implementing energy efficiency measures (55 candidates);
- Roofer with skills to implement energy efficiency measures (61 candidates);
- Carpenter with the skills to implement energy efficiency measures (60 candidates);
- Installer of solar thermal collector systems (21 candidates);
- Engineer with the skills to design solar thermal collector systems (10 candidates);
- Installer of photovoltaic systems (22 candidates) and
- Engineer with skills in designing photovoltaic systems (13 candidates)⁵.

The Chamber of Crafts (as described in the 2018 Inventory) in cooperation with employers carries out some measures that are similar to VNFIL. During the process of licencing handcrafters, the panel that evaluates the candidates may assess and recognise prior knowledge and skills.

⁵ <http://trainee-mk.eu>

The main purpose of the initiatives described above is to provide the labour market with competent workforce. These institutions regularly cooperate with industry sector commissions and the VET Centre, and their experiences may add specific value in developing the VNFIL system for the labour market.

Lack of validation arrangements in the labour market can be explained by the fact that many employers in the various sectors do not require certificates for the respective qualifications/occupations when employing people. Other authors have also noted that a barrier in establishing VNFIL measures could be the low demand in the labour market for formal qualifications (Maurer, 2021; Werquin, 2013).

2.4. Validation in the third sector

Taking into consideration that the related legislation is still pending, there have been no significant developments in VNFIL arrangements in the third sector since the last Inventory. However, some initiatives have the potential to contribute to the scaling up of the VNFIL system.

Open civic universities for lifelong learning⁶ - as third sector organisations - provide non-formal training for various occupations, mainly for adults. In practice, training is usually adapted and tailored to the competency that the candidates already possess.

The MLSP in coordination with the Government developed the 'Plan for implementation of the Youth Guarantee 2020-2022'⁷. It is important to note that VNFIL was included as one of the benchmark measures in the Plan (although such measures were not implemented due to the pending status of the legislation). Even though it is a government measure, it is expected to lead to a significant boost for youth organisations and NGOs to use the opportunity to introduce their own VNFIL-related activities for a wide range of people who are not in employment education or training (NEETs). Considering that third sector organisations are usually more flexible and adaptable, we can expect a growth in initiatives for cooperation with the labour market and schools and colleges for the purposes of skills validation.

⁶ According to the Law on Open civic universities for lifelong learning (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 2011), OCULLLs provide services in formal education for youth and adults (in primary and secondary education for adults), vocational training for adults, as well as services in non-formal education and training for adults directed to qualify people for work and for personal development.

⁷ The Youth Guarantee is a programme supported by the EU which allows young people up to the age of 29, who are not employed or involved in education or training (NEETs), to receive a suitable job offer, to continue their education or to be involved in any of the active employment programmes and measures, in a period of 4 months after their registration as unemployed persons in the Employment Service Agency (Source: ESA).

3 Links to national qualifications framework (NQF)

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established by the Law on NQF in 2013 and referenced to the EQF in 2016. The NQF serves as an instrument and platform for managing the system of qualifications, defining qualifications and partial qualifications⁸. Its hierarchical structure provides a guide to candidates on how they could move through different levels and types of qualifications. It regulates the requirements and procedure for developing standards for qualifications and occupations, the process of establishment and mandate of sectoral commissions, developing a national register of qualifications and administering the register of qualifications. The NQF register of qualifications is active⁹, with the number of qualifications slowly growing.

In accordance with the EQF, NQF is structured into eight levels. The vocational and educational qualifications explained in section 2.2 are used in all subsectors of education and training, the labour market and the third sector. For many stakeholders, mainly in the formal education institutions, it is still challenging to accept the possibility of awarding qualifications without attending formal education. However, as described in part 2, the new bill on NQF introduces the possibility for candidates to obtain them through validation.

The NQF promotes learning outcomes. It suggests the qualifications to be structured in terms of learning outcomes translated in credits. With the implementation of the VNFIL arrangements, it is expected the learning outcomes are recognised equally as in cases when qualification is obtained through education and/or training.

The new bill on NQF clearly sets out the modular structure of qualifications. On the other hand, micro-credentials¹⁰ are a new idea in North Macedonia, still to be discussed among relevant stakeholders.

One important development is that the new bills on AE and NQF call for the outcome of validation (certificate for vocational qualifications or diploma and government document for an educational qualification) to be equivalent to the one obtained through formal education.

⁸ Partial qualifications cover a subset of the modules included in a full qualification. They prepare the holder for simpler occupations or for a narrower scope of tasks. Taken from Cedefop (2020). National qualifications frameworks developments in Europe 2019. Qualifications frameworks: transparency and added value for end users. Luxembourg: Publications Office. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/105773>

⁹ The Register is available online at: <https://registar.mrk.mk/registri-kvalifikaciji/>

¹⁰ Micro-credentials could help certify the outcomes of small, tailored learning experiences. They make possible the targeted, flexible acquisition of knowledge, skills and competences to meet new and emerging needs in society and the labour market and make it possible for individuals to fill the skill gaps they need to succeed in a fast-changing environment. They can, where appropriate, complement existing qualifications, providing added value while not undermining the core principle of full degree programmes in initial education and training. Micro-credentials could be designed and issued by a variety of providers in different learning settings (formal, non-formal and informal learning settings), <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials>

4 Standards and reference points

The VNFIL arrangements and the related legislation state that validation processes should use the same standards for qualifications and occupations as those in the NQF. The NQF specifies that a standard for occupation consists of a description of the competency needed for a certain job, and that it refers to both formal and non-formal education and training. A standard for qualification includes all information describing the level of qualification, which occupation the qualification is based on, requirements for finishing certain level of formal education, learning outcomes and criteria for assessment of learning outcomes, number of credits, and possible levels for mobility in formal education.

The draft regulations state that standards should be used as guiding reference in all stages of VNFIL: for identification and mapping of relevant knowledge and skills; for documentation of relevant information about the candidate; as a reference against which the assessment of the candidate's competencies will be evaluated; and for appropriate certification. According to the draft new Law on NQF, qualifications should be evaluated and revised every 5 years – for the purpose of quality assurance and adapting to the changes in the relevant sectors. All the subsectors of education and training, the labour market and the third sector should use the same standards for qualifications and occupations.

Of the 16 economic sectors included in the NQF, 15 sectoral commissions have been established (except for the sector of arts). The Register consists of 110 qualifications standards (mainly VET qualifications). Standards for occupations are organised into 16 sectors, consisting of 360 standards in total.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in the validation arrangements and their coordination

The structure at the institutions and their roles in developing and implementing VNFIL procedures have not changed since 2018 (see the 2018 Inventory). The main stakeholders are MOES, and AEC, together with the Coordinating Body and Working Group on validation. In accordance with the Roadmap and by an official Decree from the Director of AEC, the Coordinative Body and the Working Group on VNFIL were established in 2018. The Coordinating Body consists of 14 members, with the president and vice-president coming from MOES. The other members are representatives of AEC, the VET Centre, MLSP, ESA, BDE, Open civic universities for lifelong learning, Centre for Lifelong Learning, Economic chamber, and Chamber of Crafts (for more details see the 2018 Inventory).

They will receive support from the Ministry responsible for labour, VET Centre, the MQF National Board, Sectoral commissions for qualifications, ESA, BDE, and education and training providers and private providers in their respective roles. Labour market organisations, local government offices, and social partners are also expected to have an important role, which still needs to be defined.

The Law on AE assigns the leading roles in the VNFIL arrangements to MOES and AEC. MOES will have responsibility for the overall policy on VNFIL and overall management of its implementation, as well as the main role in verification of institutions as providers of education for adults and VNFIL services.

The position of AEC has become more important in recent year as arrangements for VNFIL develop, giving the lead executive role in validation measures. AEC will be responsible for developing VNFIL measures and providing technical and capacity-building support to the implementation. Furthermore, AEC will be responsible for designing and delivering the training courses for the VNFIL practitioners, preparing information packages and advice and guidance for candidates, as well for monitoring the implementation of the validation processes.

The VET Centre with its advisors will be responsible for developing and revising qualification standards, occupational standards (i.e. requirements for assessing qualifications) and vocational-related documentation required in the VNFIL process.

6 VNFIL service providers

The current legislation in force and the legislation which is being prepared allows various institutions and organisations across all subsectors of education and training, the labour market and the third sector to become VNFIL providers, but they all need to meet the same requirements.

According to the new draft Law on AE, providers will need an accreditation from AEC for VNFIL. The precondition for an institution to be accredited is to prove that it has appropriate space, equipment and staff. The Minister of Education will issue the Norms and standards for accreditation, based on proposals from AEC, the VET Centre and BDE. Crucial among the requirements is that the provider-applicant will need to have hired at least one licenced advisor for VNFIL and at least one assessor from the respective sector/qualification for VNFIL. The applicant will cover the costs for the accreditation process, which are not specified yet. AEC maintains a register of accredited VNFIL providers. For the validation of educational-type qualifications, the provider needs to be verified by MOES as an institution allowed to provide adult education. In the context of the formal education, the Regional VET Centres are expected to have the leading role in developing good practices on validation, as well in supporting other providers with appropriate expertise and experiences.

In order to better prepare the providers for their roles in VNFIL, AEC has designed training modules for VNFIL practitioners. In addition, the IPA project (described in section 2.1) is expected to implement measures dedicated to building the capacity of providers and VNFIL practitioners alongside activities supporting the development of new adult education programmes.

Good practice on inter-sectorial cooperation in developing VNFIL arrangements

Validation in marginalised communities

MOES with UNDP support and in cooperation with the local NGO DROM (working in the field of non-formal education and support provided the marginalised Roma community in the city of Kumanovo), has worked to increase the levels of education of local Roma people. The initiative aimed to offer a chance to people with little education to improve their level, using arrangements similar to validation. All the activities were carried out in two primary schools in the city.

The NGO DROM identified the members of the marginalised Roma community in Kumanovo with low education attainment. Like the good practice we saw in prisons, they were offered a chance to be included in an education/validation process involving education programmes prepared for primary education for adults. As explained earlier, the programme is equivalent to 9-years of schooling, is based on learning outcomes and is structured into six levels. Candidates were first assessed on their level of previously acquired knowledge and skills. The results of this assessment were used as a starting point for further training delivered by teachers from the schools involved.

52 Roma (22 women) were included in the activity. The competency of the candidates varied greatly in the beginning. Some of them were illiterate, while some had substantial knowledge, and needed to fill some gaps in order to achieve the sixth and highest level of the programme. Some needed to learn the Macedonian alphabet. During the initiative, all candidates made progress of at least one or two levels. They were all awarded with special certificates which included a description of the learning outcomes achieved.

Twelve women and 12 men succeeded in achieving the (highest) sixth level – equivalent to 9 years in primary education and received certificates with a supplement describing the learning outcomes. Once the Law on AE comes in force and establishes the legal basis for VNFIL arrangements, it is expected that these certificates will be recognised and equated with the government-approved documents issued for finishing formal primary education. This will open up the possibility of further study or access to the labour market.

Source: MOES and UNDP

7 Information and guidance

7.1. Information, outreach and promotion

The approach to information, outreach and promotion described in the 2018 Inventory has not changed. AEC is the main provider of information to beneficiaries - potential candidates, the labour market and other relevant stakeholders. As it is planned, the first and most important contact point for the potential candidates should be the so called 'information points', where candidates could receive initial information and directions for further steps in the validation process (free of charge). Various institutions with their units countrywide could fulfil such role: the units of ESA, validation service providers, VET schools, open civic universities for lifelong learning, non-governmental organisations, etc.

Until adoption of relevant legislation, AEC is serving as a source of information for anyone interested in the process. In addition, MOES promotes the opportunities that VNFIL can offer to target groups through specific activities, as in the cases described as a good practice.

In recent years, AEC has run VNFIL awareness campaigns. It held a seminar in 2019 to raise awareness about the VNFIL processes and its benefits, and 15 representatives took part from different institutions, organisations and projects: MOES, MLSP, AEC, VET Centre, Secondary vocational school for construction, Secondary vocational school for tourism and catering, Lifelong learning Centre, ESA, BDE, Public University Joska Svestarot in Strumica, and the Education for Employment Project. During the seminar, the participants were introduced to the VNFIL arrangements, and the opportunity to learn more about the whole process and potential measures through practical exercises. The purpose of the seminar was also to gather the key stakeholders together in order to discuss the current status of VNFIL in North Macedonia and the possibilities for developments. There was a focus on mechanisms for quality assurance in VNFIL, and on the comparative EU policy review.

In its other initiative, AEC sub-contracted an EU expert to develop the Strategic plan for a public awareness campaign about VNFIL opportunities and benefits. The Plan targeted the authorities, training providers and other relevant social partners. It included information sessions and proposed a complex combination of the tools needed to reach various target groups for VNFIL.

Promoting the benefit of VNFIL is among the main tasks that come under the remit of the IPA project implemented in cooperation with MOES 'Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education', described in section 2.1.

7.2. Advice and guidance¹¹

Advice and guidance are an integral part of the VNFIL arrangements. AEC is responsible for creating the advice and guidance procedures and materials. The 'information points' described in the previous section will serve as a first point of contact for advice and guidance on validation for candidates. Candidates will be able to get more comprehensive advice and guidance from the advisors for validation at the VNFIL providers. The aim of the advice and guidance aspect in VNFIL is to support candidates in their preparation for VNFIL, during all stages of the process: in self-assessment and identification of the relevant competency and aptitudes, and in linking the candidate's competence levels with the standards,

¹¹ Lifelong/career guidance includes 'a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used.' Guidance is in fact an umbrella term that encompasses counselling as well as activities such as informing, coaching, teaching, assessment and advocacy (See, The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (2014). Lifelong Guidance Policy Development: Glossary, <http://www.elgpn.eu/publications/browse-by-language/english/elgpn-tools-no.-2-llg-glossary/> and Council of the European Union, (2008). Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/educ/104236.pdf).

preparing documentation for the skills they possess, building a portfolio, and preparing for an assessment. Advice and guidance tools are not yet available online.

The validation providers will offer advice and guidance services about VNFIL for an as yet unspecified fee. For the time being, the national authorities have not discussed or specified methods for covering these costs.

8 Validation practitioners

8.1. Profile of validation practitioners

The arrangements for VNFIL practitioners have not changed since the last Inventory. The overall role of validation practitioners is determined by processes of identification, documentation, assessment and documentation. The key tasks of practitioners are expected to be focused on information for potential candidates about validation, advice and guidance through the process, and assessment of their competency. The new bill on AE only calls for 'assessors for validation' who will be part of the VNFIL assessment commissions.

8.2. Qualification requirements

The Handbook on assessment in VNFIL describes the requirements for practitioners involved in the validation processes. It states that advisors in VNFIL are expected to possess the communication and technical skills to be able to give advice effectively. Assessors in VNFIL are expected to be skilled in observation and assessment, interviewing, evaluation, as well as being competent in portfolio assessment, testing candidates, and in developing of assessment tools. For both profiles, it is expected from that practitioners have 'substantial experience' in the sector which is subject to validation.

The draft new Law on AE lays out that the assessment of the competency of the candidate for the purpose of VNFIL is performed by a commission formed by the VNFIL service providers. All validation practitioners need to be certified by AEC. In order to be certified, applicants for validation advisor positions need to take part in AEC-organised training in advising on VNFIL. Similarly, applicants for validation assessors position need to enrol in a training on assessment in VNFIL. AEC maintains the Catalogue of certified advisors and assessors. These qualification requirements are the same for the practitioners in all sectors and subsectors.

The VNFIL assessment commission is composed of three assessors: one certified assessor employed by the provider, and two certified external assessors for validation, who should be appointed by AEC, on the request of the provider, from the AEC Catalogue.

During the recent years, AEC has developed standards for qualification 'Assessor in VNFIL' and 'Advisor in VNFIL', and these should become fully operational the relevant laws are passed.

8.3. Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

AEC designs and provides trainings on the VNFIL processes for all candidates to become advisors and assessors in VNFIL. These trainings do not form part of formal teacher training. As described in section 8.2, training is mandatory for advisors and assessors in VNFIL.

Current legislation does not cover continuous professional development for VNFIL practitioners' skills, and it is not part of the measures for the VNFIL quality assurance.

The provision of training and support by AEC to validation practitioners is the same for VNFIL advisors and assessors in all sectors.

Currently, under the 'Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education' IPA Project (described in section 2.1), important activities in the area of developing competencies of validation practitioners are planned. Among them are: revision of training programs for assessors and advisors; designing and delivering training programs in VNFIL for 20 professionals from the RVETCs and VET schools, university professors, mentors from companies, sectoral committee members, representatives from AEC and VETC who will be engaged in conducting the validation procedures. Training will include a topic on preparation of qualification standard for adult learners:

designing modules, defining learning objectives per module and defining relevant assessment methods per units of learning objectives.

9 Quality assurance

The quality assurance mechanisms for VNFIL are generally defined in the new bill on AE and in the Methodology document on VNFIL processes. These mechanisms are designed to cover VNFIL across all sectors.

The main mechanisms that are expected to assure quality are embodied in the procedures described in the previous section on the VNFIL practitioners: VNFIL would be delivered only by providers verified by MOES for adult education and accredited by AEC as providers for VNFIL; VNFIL services will only be offered by advisors and assessors certified by AEC.

In order to assure high-quality validation process, the Handbook on VNFIL processes and the Methodology on VNFIL offer guidelines on:

- assessment process, tools and methods
- advice and guidance procedures
- identification procedures
- documentation procedures
- certification procedures

The Methodology on VNFIL details how to ensure continuous improvement of the VNFIL services. It states that the providers and the parties involved in VNFIL should carry out the following measures:

- internal quality assurance of the activities they undertake, i.e. evaluating whether the assessments they have carried out are valid, reliable and feasible, whether the assessors made consistent and correct assessments, and whether the records of assessments are verifiable and kept for external inspection;
- external quality assurance, including checking whether all VNFIL providers make consistent and correct assessments and whether their internal quality assurance procedure is effective.

The new bill on AE lays down that AEC and BDE are responsible for monitoring the quality of VNFIL procedures.

It is expected that Regional VET Centres will contribute significantly to the development of quality assurance mechanisms and high-quality practices in validation.

The selection of which VET schools were to be converted into Regional VET Centres, was made in accordance with several pre-defined criteria for quality assurance and relevance. This process consisted of several stages, with an evaluation of requirements set out in the Concept document on establishing RVETCs (MoES, 2022b).

In the framework of the above mentioned “Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education” IPA Project, a “Peer Review Model with Procedures and Tools for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Quality Assurance of VNFIL” was developed.

10 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

10.1. Funding

Current and new draft legislation does not clearly specify how validation services are funded. The new draft legislation broadly calls for the costs for validation to be covered by either the state or local government budget, international donations or by the candidates themselves. The draft law on AE also intends for the national Council of Adult Education to 'propose the financing for VNFIL in certain vocational qualifications', and 'in cooperation with local government offices to decide on the network of institutions for AE and for VNFIL'.

Past and current practices of reskilling (requalification), which could be perceived as having some links to validation, have been funded from various sources depending on the particular interests or goals. These included: by interested companies, international donors or candidates themselves.

Development of VNFIL arrangements in the recent years has massively relied on international funding, mostly from ETF, EU IPA funds, and UNDP. Currently, EU-funded IPA projects (described in section 2.1.) financially cover some further developments to VNFIL arrangements. All these internationally funded initiatives have played an important role in laying the groundwork for VNFIL system in the country. The national government and the relevant institutions have been supporting and maintaining these measures.

However, if financial support is not systematically ensured, that might prevent certain underprivileged groups from entering into the validation procedures. Considering that international funding is not sustainable, thorough planning of financial schemes for the validation processes is an imperative.

10.2. Distribution of costs

As explained in section 10.1., VNFIL services will include fees, which would be covered by number of sources, depending on the decisions by the authorities and international donors.

Fees will be calculated using the costs for delivering the VNFIL measures, plus the fees for the VNFIL practitioners for their participation in the commissions.

After the adoption of relevant legislation, the authorities should thoroughly discuss and specify the distribution of costs and any exemptions from fees.

10.3. Evidence of benefits to individuals

Taking into consideration that the relevant legislation has not been passed into law and VNFIL is not operational yet, there are no official cases of validation to provide evidence of benefits. The only evidence is from the VNFIL pilot process (described in section 2.2.) and the examples of good practices (described in 2.2. and 6) which are not representative enough to draw conclusions.

10.4. Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

10.4.1. Validation trends

Since the VNFIL arrangements are not operational yet, there are no statistics on validation.

10.4.2. Validation users

Since VNFIL is not operational yet, there is no information on trends around validation users in terms of gender, age, employment status, previous qualifications etc.

10.4.3. Validation and disadvantaged groups

The strategic documents on VNFIL assume that after the adoption of the relevant legislation, the authorities will discuss and decide on priority target groups for validation measures. It is expected that this prioritisation will include people with competency in high-demand sectors, the long-term unemployed, people with few or without qualifications, people with no primary education, etc.

11 Validation methods

The validation methods set out in the Handbook for Assessment in the context of VNFIL, and Methodology for validation processes as described in the 2018 Inventory have not changed.

Validation, as it is designed in these documents, is primarily based on a portfolio of evidence, combined with a simulation of working practice or observation of job tasks/practice. Depending on the case, it may be combined with a debate, declarative methods, interview, presentation, tests or examinations.

AEC has developed guidance for preparing a portfolio – it is a useful tool in the preparation and delivery of the validation process.

Once the relevant legislation is adopted and the VNFIL is operational, it will be possible to tailor the validation methods to fit different contexts, target groups and purposes.

12 Use of ICT in validation

Although the validation system is still not operational, the draft legislation and Methodology for validation processes include the use of ICT in validation practices. Digital tools are expected to be used at all stages and for all activities seeking to identify, document, assess and/or certify competency of candidates, as well in keeping records of it. It is expected that the AEC will make tools available online.

The draft Law on AE calls for online databases to be established to register and keep track of the learning achievements of individuals and their certification, as well as for the catalogues for the verified and accredited VNFIL providers and certified VNFIL practitioners.

The Methodology for VNFIL processes lays down that personal data during validation should be kept secure and come under a strict privacy protection regime.

13 The position of validation in society

Since 2018, key developments in VNFIL legislation took place, which is a precondition for bringing in a VNFIL system. Prior to 2018, legislation considered validation only in the non-formal education sector and certifying vocational qualifications. Since then, the new NQF and AE bills and legislation on VET have been drafted with the Concept on RVETCs. These include validation arrangements in formal education too, which is an important change in the perception and acceptance of VNFIL by the authorities in the country. This change will allow for broader horizontal and vertical mobility of potential candidates in the education system and the labour market. In this context, it would be important to foster a common understanding of this possibility among stakeholders and to develop proper procedures and tools for validation of the general-education parts of these qualifications.

On the whole, the position of validation in society is improving, although a lot still needs to be done. The visibility of validation is higher among governmental organisations and agencies following their increased involvement in the related developments. However, there is not much progress in the visibility and involvement of stakeholders in the context of the labour market, trade unions, employers, the third sector, and probably most importantly – among potential candidates. It is partly due to the delays in the legislation reforms and consequently lack of legal basis for many of the prospective measures. Acceptance of the VNFIL arrangements among the authorities is growing, although trust in validation among many relevant stakeholders is still very weak.

14 Recommendations

North Macedonian policy and strategic documents in the field of education converge with European education policy objectives, but this is not fully backed up by appropriate reforms for concrete regulations and practices in the education system. Policy creators need to be more effective in adopting reforms in VNFIL-related legislation. Further prolonging reforms undermines the development of VNFIL arrangements.

Based on most recent developments, recommendations include:

- Awareness of the benefits from VNFIL for individuals and the North Macedonian economy is still fairly low among various stakeholders in the national institutions, on the labour market, and among the potential candidates for validation. Hence, well thought-out awareness initiatives tailored to specific stakeholders and beneficiaries should take place as soon as possible.
- There are significant disparities in perception of the role of VNFIL in society among the relevant stakeholders, which is related to a lack of trust in the VNFIL arrangements. Policy creators and all the relevant bodies need to strengthen their cooperation and guided by the best interest of society and citizens work on reducing disparities.
- Given that the issue of a lack of trust is mainly caused by a perception that the processes are poor, the relevant stakeholders need to create appropriate quality assurance measures in order to increase confidence in validation arrangements.
- Current regulations do not specify how validation will be funded. Taking into consideration the benefits of validating skills for both individuals and the economy, we recommend development of progressive financing schemes for all parties and target groups.
- VNFIL piloting showed that current qualification standards in the NQF need revision in order to be applicable for VNFIL processes (the same concerns the non-formal AE programs), considering a proper clustering of modules, learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- The current and new draft legislation do not regulate continuous professional development of VNFIL practitioners' skills. We recommend that AEC in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders develops appropriate continuous professional development courses for validation practitioners.
- AEC needs to significantly build capacity in order to respond appropriately to the huge demands expected for VNFIL arrangements.
- The current labour market situation shows that employers often do not request certificates from employees – this means that there is little motivation among potential candidates to enrol for validation of their skills. We recommend that the national authorities and relevant stakeholders in the labour market search for solutions that will increase the value of certification by improving the quality of the qualification it relates to.
- Current and draft legislation does not specify models for validation of the general-education part of formal educational qualifications. In order to avoid bottlenecks when validation procedures are brought in, we recommend that the relevant stakeholders create quality solutions for validation based on the learning outcomes envisaged for general education.

At the same time, there is significant potential for developing high quality VNFIL arrangements. There have been positive developments in the recent years with the reforms in legislation, including arrangements for formal education, which are a solid base for building the system. The legislation makes validation possible in almost all sectors.

Established Regional VET Centres have the potential to form a vital network of resource centres for validation. Their sectors for AE and VNFIL need substantial support in order to serve as hubs for quality validation arrangements.

The existing practical guidelines on validation clearly specify the roles, processes and criteria for providers and practitioners. They need to be continuously revised in accordance with developments in the field to provide continuous high-quality assistance to all parts of the VNFIL system.

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Details of interviewees:

Name	Organisation	Position	Yes/No*
Natasa Janevska	Economic Chamber of North Macedonia		Yes
Sonja Sentocnik	IPA Project "Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education"	Key Expert 2	Yes
Snezana Damjanovska Mircevska	UNDP	National Technical Advisor	Yes
Nadica Kostoska	MOES	Deputy Head of Department European Union, IPA Coordinator	Yes
Konstantin Hristovski	Adult Education Centre	Head of the Department for Advancement of Adult Education	Yes

* Interviewees agree/disagree for their name, organisation and/or position to be referenced in this country report.

17 ACRONYMS

AE	Adult Education
AEC	Adult Education Centre
BDE	Bureau for Development of Education
CVET	Continuous VET
ESA	Employment Service Agency
ETF	European Training Foundation
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IVET	Initial VET
MOES	Ministry of Education and Science
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIP	National Implementation Plan
NEET	Not Employed or in Education or Training
NQF	National Qualification Framework
RVETC	Regional Vocational Education and Training Centre
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VNFIL	Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning