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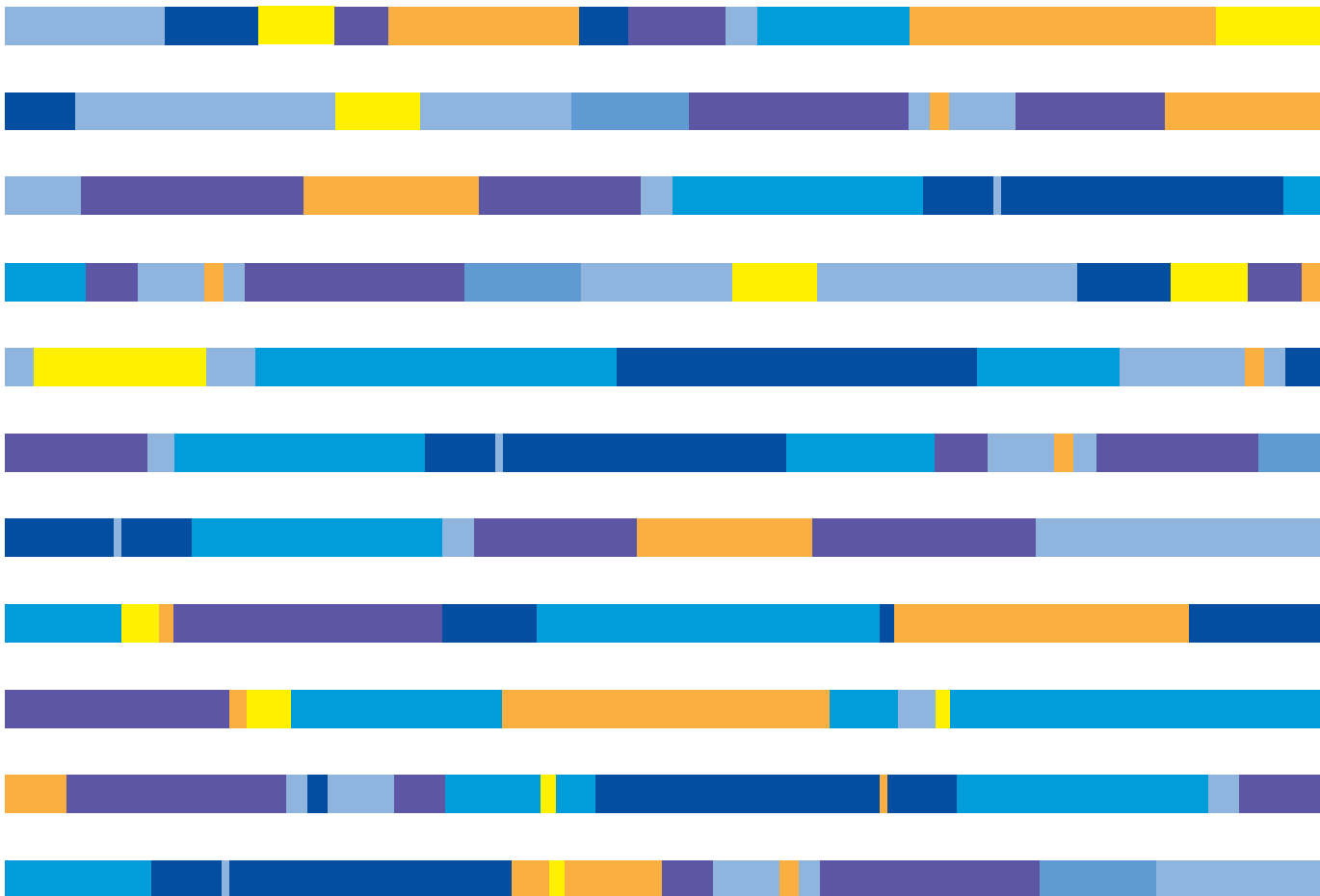
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European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update

COUNTRY REPORT:
SLOVAKIA

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1 Abstract

Compared to the situation in 2018, there have been no substantial changes in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Genuine validation is not in place in any of the three sectors (education, employment services, youth work) and there has not been a change to make it legislatively backed. However, the envisaged piloting of four-stages-composed validation started funded by ESF. Institutionally it is constructed as follows: The State Institute of VET is hierarchically highest as it is under the current terms of piloting the 'authorising body' heading the network of 'authorised institutions' organising validation examinations in respective areas, supported by a group of 'authorised persons' (portfolio assessors). A group of 'National guarantors' is supposed to guarantee the quality of validation procedures in their area of specialisation. Neither internal nor external quality assurance processes are in place. Counselling services for those interested in validating the acquired learning outcomes are also not established. Neither self-assessment tools nor enough advisors for skills audits are available. The pilot will show what support will be needed in the future to support the creation of a portfolio of evidence and what systemic changes will have to be set by legislation. The new law on lifelong learning, which is supposed to establish validation in accordance with the 2012 Council recommendation, is in delay due to the dismissal of the government and will be adopted by the parliament resulting from the elections in September 2023.

2 Introduction

There is no official definition of validation adopted yet. An unofficial definition is available in a draft of the new Act on lifelong learning (LLL) that is currently being discussed internally. The draft law, envisaging the development of validation from the national perspective, explicitly indicates that the Slovak qualification framework (SKKR) should be instrumental for the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). It should allow every individual to have recognised learning outcomes or units of learning outcomes represented by their knowledge, skills and competences. One of the articles explicitly states that the validation procedure consists of:

- a) identification of learning outcomes;
- b) documentation of learning outcomes;
- c) assessment of learning outcomes;
- d) issuance of a document on the assessment of learning outcomes.

The 2019-2023 National ESF project 'System of verifying qualifications' (SOK project) is aimed at developing a comprehensive validation system. Its specific objectives are to establish structures and set mandatory procedures for lifelong learning with an emphasis on validation and to pilot in practice the system of validation nationally referred to as the system of verifying qualifications and their parts (units of learning outcomes).

On 24 November 2021, the government approved the Lifelong learning and counselling strategy for 2021-30 (further LLLCS 2030). According to this document and subsequent action plan for 2022-24 approved by the government on 20 April 2022, the National Qualifications System (NQS) and the Slovak Qualifications Framework (SKKR) should be revised and the validation system backed by the new Act on Lifelong learning and amendment of the Act on Higher Education to achieve Goal 5: Increase the efficiency and flexibility of the qualification system of the Slovak Republic (Thematic area 1.5) of the LLLCS 2030.

The development after 2018 led to the recognition of the need to build a validation system compatible with the 2012 Council Recommendation, which was previously absent. This can also be seen in the definitions embedded in the draft legislation. The aforementioned LLLCS 2030 and related expert discussions clearly identified the need to make SKKR functional via the introduction of a robust quality assurance system encompassing all segments of the lifelong learning system. A detailed quality assurance model is currently in place only in higher education. A quality assurance model covering the fourth sub-framework of SKKR encompassing labour market driven so-called professional qualifications is missing. It should be backed by the new Act on Lifelong learning currently under preparation, otherwise, the validation system will not be reliable, and it will not even be possible to create good connections between different sectors – formal education, the labour market and the third sector and to make assessment results portable.

A strong point of the aforementioned SOK project which is piloting validation processes on selected qualifications of the National Qualifications System is institutionalisation: a network of authorised institutions, and creation of registers of authorised persons and national guarantors of validations. The weak point is insufficient attention paid to quality assurance procedures and counselling services for clients interested in the validation of their prior learning.

An amendment of the Act on employment services (5/2004) from 6 December 2022 has changed the VET and lifelong learning governance architecture. Previously, the Alliance of Sectoral Councils (ASC) was just an advisory tripartite body of the labour ministry and an umbrella institution of sectoral councils with some responsibilities in the area of employment and active labour market policies. ASC is now an association of legal entities that ensures and coordinates the creation and updating of not only the National System of Occupations created under the surveillance of the labour ministry but also the National System of Qualifications created until now under the surveillance of the education ministry. Pursuant to the § 35b of the Act on employment services (5/2004) ASC should:

- a) support the alignment of the system of lifelong learning with the current and future needs of the labour market;
- b) be actively involved in solutions for setting up the system of lifelong learning so that it meets the requirements for employees on the labour market, development tendencies, current and anticipated innovation trends;
- c) determine the standards of professional knowledge, professional skills and abilities for performing work activities in jobs on the labour market;
- d) cooperate with the education ministry in the creation and updating of qualification standards.

Moreover, ASC proposes to the education ministry changes to the conditions of 'verification of qualifications' (§ 35b (1) g)). It is too early to assess the impact of this change on the validation procedures as ASC is still under construction and it is not yet clear how these new stipulations will be translated into the new education sector legislation. On the one hand, a powerful ASC could help to overcome the current fragmentation of management, on the other hand, it remains unclear what the expertise of the ASC will be and whether it will have the experience and know-how necessary to rightly apply new responsibilities in practice.

3 National perspective

3.1 Overarching approach to validation

There is no National Skills Strategy in terms of a governmental strategy paper with such a title. At the request of the education ministry, who asked the OECD to make use of its expertise to support policymaking in lifelong learning and skills development, an international project started with an initial conference held on 29 January 2019. OECD presented crucial findings and recommendations of the 'National skills strategy' (OECD, 2020a) on 27 January 2020 together with the distribution of the summary of the report. A full version of report (OECD, 2020b) was published in the OECD portal, however, its impact on the development of a new lifelong learning strategy was limited despite reference to it.

LLLCS 2030, which can be seen as a genuine National Skills Strategy, was approved by the government (Education ministry, 2021a) as late as 24 November 2021. This delay was caused by the parliamentary elections in February 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic. LLLCS 2030 focuses on four thematic areas: qualification system; basic skills and civic education; lifelong learning and counselling, and motivation of citizens for lifelong learning; and building a system of skills management and identification of lifelong learning needs. It proposed 51 measures divided into thirteen thematic units among which the following are directly relevant to the skills development and validation agenda:

- 1.4. National initiative for basic skills improvement and pilot intervention programmes.
- 1.5. Slovak Qualifications Framework and National Qualifications System.
- 1.6. System of validation of non-formal education and informal learning.
- 1.7. Increasing the flexibility of the qualifications system with smaller qualifications and micro-qualifications (micro-certificates).
- 1.14. Individual Learning Accounts as a tool for individualised support of individuals in further education (requalification) and a pilot scheme for strengthening adults' motivation to participate in learning.
- 1.15. Individual learning accounts under the competence of the education ministry as a tool for individualized support in further education/retraining.

In the part 1.15, the strategy explicitly states that the current system of validation 'does not fully respect the Council Recommendations', that 'a national validation system that includes all four parts, i.e. identification, documentation, assessment and certification, needs further development of the tools', as the 'only possible way to obtain a certificate confirming professional competence at present is passing an examination'. It further explicitly calls for the implementation of all four stages of the validation and its introduction 'at all levels of the education system above lower secondary education from EQF/SKQR2 to EQF/SKQR7' (Education ministry, 2021a, p. 30).

It follows from the above that genuine national and regional policies on validation are not operational and therefore interlinking with employment, youth, or migration policies is also not in place: there are only some partial connections. As was reported in 2018, only some activities have been developed that are partially relevant for validation such as verifying professional competence according to the Lifelong Learning Act (568/2009) or 'Bilan de Competences for a Career Development' in the public employment services. See more on this in the Box 1 'Qual-n -Guide' Project of the previous 2018 Country report.

Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) were for the first time brought on the national scene by the Learning Slovakia strategy paper (Group of experts, 2017) and subsequently embedded in the National program for the development of education (NPDE) adopted by the government (Education ministry, 2018). However, the piloting of ILAs planned by NPDE did not take place. LLLCS 2030 again elaborated on this

issue, for example, it proposed the preparation of the pilot scheme of ILAs and the creation of a web/mobile application and the necessary software and hardware infrastructure to manage the ILAs system. However, the implementation may be threatened by the expected austerity policies caused by the recent sharp increase in public sector debt. Instead of genuine ILAs with the possibility of accumulation of means and wide reach, simple retraining for the labour market financed by labour offices, maybe in the form of one-time vouchers seems to be viable. While ILAs were originally intended also for covering the costs of counselling services including skills audits relevant to the validation, no substantial progress is visible so far. A new paper discussing the implementation of ILA and micro-credentials was published by the State Institute of VET in March 2023 (Gálová et al., 2023). It has suggested a definition and national terminology of micro-credentials supporting a dual approach: Softly regulated micro-credentials per se ('mikrosvedčenie') and strongly regulated 'micro-qualifications' ('mikrokvalifikácie') as a specific case of micro-credentials. It also suggests ways of using digital badges.

A database of 46 qualifications that can be obtained according to the Act on Lifelong learning is maintained by the education ministry within a so-called Information system for further education (ISDV) platform (<http://isdv.iedu.sk/Qualifications.aspx>). This database and the validation procedure were induced by the need to recognise prior learning of practitioners not having a qualification certificate interested in running a regulated business. Therefore, a dominant share of these qualifications entitles a person without a formal qualification certificate, in particular a certificate of apprenticeship, to run a regulated business by the Trade Licensing Act (455/1991). Some other qualifications, such as lecturer (ISCO-08 2320), are not yet prescribed by law and seen as an asset in the labour market.

A database of qualifications that can be obtained as a consequence of piloting the validation system within a SOK project is maintained by the State Institute of VET (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/instrukcie-pre-zaujemcu-o-overenie-kvalifikacie>). This validation is not backed by the legislation yet and the experience from piloting should help in the development of the new Act on Lifelong learning.

As of 31 December 2022, 178 assessment manuals were elaborated covering 178 out of 330 preselected qualifications of the NQS (www.kvalifikacie.sk) and 35 qualifications were awarded to applicants. By the end of 2022, there were 41 qualifications in the list of qualifications (and assessment manuals) ready for piloting.

The SOK project involved piloting four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment, certification) as also envisaged by the legislation in the pipeline. The first stage of validation within the SOK project is an assessment of learning outcomes clustered in units of learning outcomes. That can be done by self-assessment or under the institutional assistance of the State Institute of VET, SOK project coordinators or an authorised institution for respective qualification. Genuine skill audits were piloted within the public employment services activities exploring the international approach of the aforementioned 'Bilan de Competences', but they were not translated into the education sector.

The absence of a skills audit is a major weakness of the VNFIL procedure as applicants are not offered sufficient support concerning the identification of their skills gap. Documentation and assessment stages are based on the creation and defence of the portfolio of evidence created without a skills audit. Cooperation with counselling services of labour offices failed, despite initially envisaged. Strengths and weaknesses of quality assurance, as well as validity of certificates are discussed in detail later.

3.2 Validation in education and training

There is no national system for validation established yet. No regional system is envisaged, but a national system is under development capitalising on the experience of two activities with validation aspects:

- a) awarding the Certificate of partial or full qualification pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning (568/2009) as a result of a successfully completed examination to verify (validate) professional competence to perform work activities according to the qualification standards and therefore to start own business pursuant to the Trade Licensing Act (455/1991);
- b) piloting a new validation system within the ESF project 'System of verifying qualifications' (SOK project) set by a 'Guide for creation of assessment manuals' (further validation guidelines) that should fully reflect the 2012 Council Recommendation and that is interlinked with the new Act on Lifelong learning already under discussion that should back a new comprehensive national system for validation.

A certificate of partial or full qualification is issued by an educational institution authorised to organise such examinations to verify (validate) professional competence by the education ministry. It is possible only concerning 46 qualifications listed on the dedicated website (<http://isdv.iedu.sk/Qualifications.aspx>). Nevertheless, certificates issued pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning are not equivalent to the qualification certificate from the initial VET. Thus, the validation of non-formal and informal learning or in fact predominantly validation of prior learning directly in the workplace focuses on easing access to the labour market, but not entering formal education. Therefore, to prevent misunderstandings we will speak in this case further about the certification of 'professional competence'. Detailed data on these certificates in time series are in Tables 1 -3 in part 8.2.2.

The SOK project set priorities of lifelong learning in 24 sectors of the national economy and identified:

- a) qualifications and qualification standards that need to be revised or created;
- b) existing labour market relevant qualifications worth inclusion in validation piloting.

330 qualifications from the NSQ were preselected for piloting, of which 178 qualifications were complemented by assessment manuals, a prerequisite for validation. Validation is in progress with automotive a priority. The qualification of 'assembly worker in mechanical engineering production' and the automotive sector has a dominant share in all participants with already validated or to be validated learning outcomes in 2023.

Awarding of qualification due to the recognition of prior learning according to the Act on Lifelong learning is not carried out according to VNFIL's four stages. All applicants must pass an exam organised by an education institution authorised by the education ministry. However, no training completion is required before the exam. The educational institution organising the examination may not demand the completion of its own training as this is explicitly forbidden by law. Nevertheless, the dominant share of applicants are graduates of labour market training organised for job seekers within labour market policies of labour offices. Experienced applicants with long-term practice on a relevant job applying for validation without retraining are a minority below 15%.

The SOK project explicitly declares its intention to adhere to the four stages of validation, but it is only partly in place in the current practice of piloting. In essence, it covers the last three stages only. The first stage was hampered in the period of piloting by the lack of counselling services to applicants. Applicants are instructed to evaluate their knowledge, skills, and competence, to compare them with the units of

learning outcomes for the selected qualification and then create a portfolio of evidence.

The portfolio of evidence as a support tool for validation will only be defined in the draft of the new law on Lifelong learning. In the SOK project, the following working definition is used in validation guidelines: 'The applicant's portfolio is a record of all relevant documents and evidence of acquired units of learning outcomes (ULO) by the applicant. It must contain all relevant evidence of the achieved ULO that confirms the individual's CV and career history, in the form of the required documents and/or samples of work products/work activities' (Group of SOK project workers, 2022, p. 120). Although the initial stage of validation should in general start with the identification of knowledge skills and competences prescribed by the qualification standards, the SOK project approach is different. Assessment manuals for respective qualifications have transformed qualification standards into ULO and validation, therefore, refers to fulfilling relevant ULO. The first experience from the SOK project clearly indicates that improvement concerning the first stage of validation needs to be addressed as working with the portfolio is a novelty, for non-academics in particular. Working with a portfolio caused difficulties for some applicants but also for some authorised institutions.

Experience with portfolios in the education sector (see Box 1) also has an impact on the SOK project. The Association of Adult Education Institutions (AIVD), which is one of the authorised institutions piloting validation, confirmed that the peer discussion among validation commission members and the applicant on the applicant's portfolio has been a dominant approach within the examination of fulfilling standards of the 'Further education lecturer' qualification. It is attributed to the dominant share of experienced lecturers, often active academics, among applicants. AIVD also indicated that micro-demonstration of lecturing skills has been applied only in some cases of applicants without a persuasive history of lecturing. AIVD offered support to understand the work with portfolios also in other sectors.

According to the estimation of the SOK project manager, only about 20% of applicants defending their portfolio are subjected also to examination, and 80% of applicants receive the certificate without examination, based on the submitted portfolio only. The piloting of validation is still in progress with regard to various qualifications and precise data will be therefore available after the end of the SOK project.

The 'SOK point' consultancy at the State Institute of VET (SIOV) is only appropriate for providing administrative assistance and is not specialized for self-evaluation support or specific support for the creation of portfolios related to specific qualifications. Services aimed at the skills audit and special instruments in support of self-evaluation are not available within the SOK project. However, such support is important, because the quality of the portfolio determines whether or to what extent the applicant will have to take the exam. The authorised institution must notify the applicant no later than 10 calendar days before the exam, which units of learning outcomes it recognises and which will need to be demonstrated as part of the qualification exam.

The validation guidelines further explicitly set that formal control of the applicant's portfolio is carried out by the authorised institution, within the second stage of validation 'documentation', while the assessment of the content of the applicant's portfolio is carried out by the examination commission, within the third stage of validation - 'assessment of ULO'.

It is explicitly listed what kind of documents are eligible and the attributes of 'formal control of the portfolio' and the 'assessment of the content of the portfolio' are precisely prescribed (see more in part 10). The resulting 'Certificate of the professional qualification' (of the fourth sub-framework of SKKR) will be backed by the new Act on Lifelong learning. Currently it contains the reference to the Act on Lifelong learning (568/2009). In the case of some professions, for example, cook, the

qualification acquired through validation is not equivalent to the cook qualification acquired through formal education of the second sub-framework of SKKR (see more in part 3). In contrast to former, the latter also entitles the certification holder to advance to subsequent formal studies.

Box 1 Portfolio of evidence

The idea of the portfolio was for the first time introduced by the Act on pedagogical and professional staff (138/2019) in connection with attestation tests in the process of career progress of teaching staff and other education sector professionals. Recent practice related to the new model of professionalization and in-service training indicates that portfolio-based processes need time for appropriate implementation and the legislative backing is only the first step: § 60 (2) of the aforementioned legislation stipulates that the attestation portfolio is a set of documents on the acquisition of professional competences required for inclusion in a higher career level, which are mainly documents on education and completion of an education program, documents proving the creative activity of a pedagogical employee and a professional employee or a confirmation of the use of the required professional competences acquired through self-education or the performance of work activities, issued by the school director. Related decree no. 361/2019 on education in professional development clarifies the details of the portfolio assessment, stipulating that the assessment is prepared in accordance with the professional standard and that after evaluating the submitted documents on the acquisition and use of the required professional competences, it will decide on the completeness of the demonstration of professional competences and the list of professional competences, which were not proven in the attestation portfolio.

The documents proving the acquisition and use of the required professional competences must be organized in the structure of the professional standard according to the areas: pupil, educational process and professional development, while a list of documents indicating their affiliation to individual professional competences is given.

Further details are provided by the guidelines of the attestation authority National Institute of Education and Youth (NIVAM) that was established in 2022 by the merger of several institutions of the education ministry, including the public in-service training institution Methodological-Pedagogical Centre (MPC), whose teacher trainers continue to work within NIVAM. This internal document 'Guidelines for the organization of attestations' clarifies that the attestation procedure consists of 'the defence of the attestation portfolio and the attestation exam, which are carried out in the form of a professional discussion on the acquired and used professional competences' (which are prescribed by the professional standard).

3.3 Validation and the labour market

There are no specialised validation initiatives organised by PES, neither on national nor regional levels. No information is available about private initiatives, in particular enterprises. It is assumed that companies validate prior learning of employees or even some unemployed people, however for the purpose of appropriately performing tasks in the workplace only. There is no evidence of a growing relationship to formal education and there are no incentives to support this. Businesses are of course primarily interested in filling vacancies. Nothing related to validation is a subject of collective labour agreements.

PES support education ministry initiatives on validation, including the SOK project (see part 7.2), however, the goal of PES is employment and not qualifications and VNFIL per se, which is the agenda of the education ministry. Working with personal portfolios to facilitate access to the better-targeted retraining of individuals is relevant for improving the efficiency of labour market training and was more strongly visible at the end of the previous decade. Now a change in labour market policies is visible Experience with Repas and Kompas programmes for job seekers (see more in part 2.3 of the 2018 Country report), led to expanded service and transformation into a

typical voucher scheme: Employed people, self-employed, working pensioners and even mothers on maternity leave are also eligible, after registration with the labour office, for a learning voucher within the national project 'Don't lose your job - get trained'. Thus, dominant labour market training is initiated by individual learners themselves as visible from the dedicated website (https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/kn/aktualne-oznamy/narodny-projekt-nestrat-pracu-vzdelavaj-sa.html?page_id=1165703) and from information for interested people (https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/buxus/docs/SSZ/OAOTP/Narodny_projekt_Nestrat_pracu_vzdelavaj_sa/Zakladne_informacie_k_vzdelavaniu_ZoZ_v_ramci_NP_Nestrat_pra_cu_-_vzdelavaj_sa_3.pdf).

The 'Bilan de competences (BC)' methodology, originally adjusted to the Slovak conditions within the Transfer of Innovation Leonardo da Vinci 'Qual-n-Guide' project (see Box 1 in the earlier 2018 Country report) was further piloted as an instrument of labour market policies within ESF projects. PES provided this specific counselling within the framework of the national ESF project 'Support of individualized counselling for long-term unemployed'. From the beginning, i.e., from December 2018 to 31 December 2020, BC counselling was provided to 11 299 long-term unemployed people. From 10 March 2020, this activity was interrupted in accordance with the measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and from 1 June 2020 it was partially resumed for those clients who were already included in the counselling first, to allow them to complete it (Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, 2020, p. 21).

According to the internal unpublished data of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, there were 8 635 clients completing BC with an input/output analyses report containing assessment of their 16 features together in four areas: Identity and motivation, Strengths/potential, Horizons and planning, Networking, and relationships. The overall evaluation showed a significant increase in the ability to manage one's career and increase one's employability. For example, in the item 'Client can describe his own strengths' (Strengths/potential area) 40.80% of clients were assessed positively at the start, while 90.26% at the end of BC counselling, thus accounting for an increase of 49.47 percentage points.

Promising impact was reported also concerning disadvantaged groups (Senčáková, 2020). However, after the end of the project in 2021, the number of BC counsellors available to PES decreased, both because the training of BC advisors does not continue in Slovakia anymore and because the majority of trained BC advisors are in private services outside PES. In March 2023, the labour offices had at their disposal only 29 BC counsellors nationwide, who can provide clients with this specific counselling, according to the official data of the national authority. In 2020 - 2023, PES participated in the Erasmus + project 'Compass Inclusive!' making use of the BC counselling for the disabled, that resulted in the valuable learning lessons (see Box 2 for more).

It is necessary to increase the number of trained BC counsellors, especially if, as previously thought, BC counsellors should also be used for VNFIL. They could, in particular, support improving the career management skills of those who have problems identifying their skills and personal values and to clarify the potential to apply them to the labour market.

Box 2 Compass Inclusive!

KA2 Erasmus+ Project 'Compass Inclusive! –'Modification of the Competence Balance based on the French Model for raising the employability of people with handicaps' (<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2020-1-SK01-KA204-078384>) was managed by the Newport Group, Slovakia in cooperation with BKS Uspech, which originally transferred the FECBOP (European Association of Centres of BC) know-how and BC counselling into Slovakia (see Box 1 in 2018 Country report), and the Centre of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, which introduced it into PES practice and partners from France,

Germany and Hungary. Four material outputs in five languages (French, German, Hungarian, Slovak and English) are available:

- a) The toolbox of useful tools is adapted to the special needs of physically disabled clients, which should be helpful to expand BC counselling.
- b) The handbook for BC counsellors, which provides counsellors with the most important contexts, practical information, approaches and information on specifics of the adaptation of the original BC for implementation suitable for people with disabilities.
- c) The modular training material for BC counsellors, which was tested in practice during the pilot training within the project to equip them to serve the physically disabled.
- d) Manual for employers, which contains an overview of the legal framework and social welfare framework for the employment of physically handicapped disabled, as well as social benefits and financial subsidies for employers when employing physically disabled and that should facilitate the employment of people with disabilities.

Twelve participants from partner organisations were retrained as BC Counsellors for the physically disabled, two of them from Slovakia who also tested adjusted BC counselling in working with disabled clients. The French partners were instrumental in providing their extensive experience with BC, while the Hungarian partner brought valuable insights into dealing with vulnerable and disadvantaged clients.

The establishment of a BC counselling centre in the eastern Slovakia city of Trebišov that is in process of audit and certification by FECBOP, can create conditions for improving counselling services and in future also VNFIL for disadvantaged in Slovakia.

3.4 Validation and the third sector

There has been no substantial progress since 2018. It must be repeated that the terms 'non-formal and informal learning' are rarely used compared to the term 'non-formal education'. Moreover, according to the Youth work Act (282/2008) definitions in § 2, this term is within the context of youth work considered a 'further education' aimed at 'gaining new knowledge, practical experience, competences and skills needed for youth work'. Thus, the terminology is not in line with the 2012 Council Recommendation.

It is often stressed that young people are engaged as volunteers and youth leaders in children's and youth organisations, but also in leisure centres, houses of culture or community centres and are actively involved in the process of planning, decision-making and implementation of various events and projects for children and youth. At the same time, it is stressed that as part of this activity, they acquire or develop some competences that are often not learned during formal education, and which can improve their professional and social success. Indeed, in policy papers as well as in policy discourse it is often emphasized that during formal education 'some competences are not learned'. However, despite some amendments the Youth work Act still does not cover the validation and terms equivalent to validation are not used in relation to VNFIL in a way suggested by the 2012 Council recommendation.

On the other hand, some progress can be expected from the new strategy paper. After two years of consultation processes in which more than 300 subjects from all over Slovakia were involved, the Strategy of the Slovak Republic for the Youth for the years 2021-2028 was adopted (Education ministry, 2021b), replacing the strategy for the years 2019-2027 adopted by the previous government. In measure 4.1.5, the strategy proposes to 'support the recognition of skills and competences young people obtained through volunteering from the system of formal and non-formal education and the labour market' and monitor 'programs and alliances for the recognition of volunteering' as an indicator of the fulfilment of the measure. The strategy does not

assume an increase in resources from the state budget, so the implementation of this measure is accompanied by two risks. The first follows from the fact that the main source of funds will be Erasmus + and ESIF with the characteristic disadvantages of the project cycle. The second risk is related to the declaratory nature of the measure. Similar measures have been proposed in the past. For example, a study by experts in community policy and the field of youth (Kaliňák et al., 2019, p. 42) also suggested 'supporting the recognition of skills acquired through volunteering by young people by the system of formal and non-formal education and the labour market'. It must be also highlighted that this document is useful in practical terms as it has annexes on sample contracts and certificates of volunteering. Annex 3: Sample report of volunteer activity and Annex 4: Sample confirmation of volunteer activity are not only useful tools, but also have the potential to be used in validation, in the creation of a portfolio of evidence, as well as starting points for discussion for the specification (and its need) of identifying relevant learning outcomes.

It is also necessary to note that the Erasmus+ program is important not only by financing projects and supporting Youthpass (see data in part 8.2.2). Erasmus+ guidelines bring a definition of lifelong learning, which explicitly speaks on learning in all its forms, whether formal, non-formal or informal, taking place at all stages in life and understanding validation in the sense of the 2012 Council Recommendation. Explicit stressing of four phases of validation played an important role under the current situation of the vague legislative environment.

The Slovak version of Erasmus+ Program Guide 2023 (EC, 2022, p. 12) explicitly speaks on the recognition and validation of skills and qualifications ('uznávania a potvrdzovanie zručností a kvalifikácií') and the Slovak version of the European Solidarity Corps Guide 2023 (EU, 2023, p. 8) explicitly speaks on the recognition and validation of learning outcomes ('uznávania a potvrdzovanie vzdelávacích výstupov').

The thematisation of non-formal and informal learning in the guides (despite a controversial Slovak terminology: 'neformálne vzdelávanie' and 'informálne učenie sa') and the connection with the priorities of the program puts pressure on the projects. In addition, the organizations submitting volunteer projects themselves must describe the volunteer education system in their applications. An interviewed specialist highlighted the Erasmus+ project which brought a manual in support of non-formal learning in youth work (Pešek et al., 2020), see also Box 3, and the so-called 'EVS portfolio' template of the Institute for Youth Support and Development (V.I.A.C.) created to support the professionalization of young people in European volunteer service.

Nevertheless, all validation initiatives in this sector are still fragmented without legislative backing of genuine validation composed of four stages (identification, documentation, assessment, certification) and without support for interlinking to formal education systems.

Box 3 Handbook of non-formal learning

Partners of the KA 2 Erasmus+ project 'Handbook of non-formal education (Quality of work with youth)' (YouthWatch and Luducrafts, Slovak Republic, and Association of Non-Formal Education, Czech Republic) justified the project by identifying a lack in both countries of a comprehensive basic methodological support intended for youth workers on how to prepare, implement and evaluate non-formal learning activities in youth work.

The output of the project is the methodical handbook (<https://www.slabikarnfv.eu/sk>), which has been freely available online since April 2019 and can also be purchased in printed form. In the handbook, the theory of what is most essential for quality non-formal education in youth work is accompanied by examples from practice and practical exercises. As a supplement, an e-learning tool is available on the topic of setting educational goals. Specialists in the field of 'Youth' of NIVAM consider this manual as opening the door to the

debate on the setting of procedures of validation non-formal learning in the field of work with youth.

4 Links to credentials and qualifications

There is a Slovak qualifications framework (SKKR) composed of four sub-frameworks (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/katalog-skkr>). The fourth sub-framework of labour market driven qualifications is the most relevant for the validation piloted within the SOK project. Certification at the end of validation refers to this sub-framework as only certificates of professional qualification are awarded. It is not yet possible to receive the certification of qualifications of the other three sub-frameworks (general education, initial VET, higher education) via validation.

SKKR is not yet fully functional as there are no procedures created to enlist a qualification into the National Qualification Register (NQR) after the classification of this qualification by the SKKR level, based on a comparison of learning outcomes represented by prescribed qualification standards and SKKR descriptors. Qualifications received after completion of accredited higher education programmes are by default accepted for the third sub-framework of SKKR and could be all enlisting into NQR in the future. Similarly, qualifications resulting from completion of secondary VET schools are by default accepted for the second sub-framework. This should be the case also after the envisaged segmentation of current 'large' formal VET qualifications of the second sub-framework resulting in the emergence of 'smaller' qualifications (e.g., interlinked with VET modules) envisaged by the lifelong learning strategy. No changes are being prepared yet regarding the first sub-frame in terms of segmentation or accepting any kind of credentials. Only, the intention to supplement the SKKR level 0 was officially announced.

SOK project works with units of learning outcomes (ULO) only as components of respective qualifications, thus no portability or acceptance of independent ULO has been piloted so far.

It must be also again stressed that learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal means are validated and certified only for the purpose of the labour market, without impact on the access to the formal education of the school system. Thus, no progress between different levels and types of education is possible as a consequence of validation so far.

Current validation activities are irrelevant as regards the schooling regulated by the Education Act and the Higher Education Act. Certificates issued after validation refer to the Act on Lifelong learning. The SOK project piloting validation in four stages works with 'certificates of professional qualifications and the validation based on examination of the professional competence works with 'certificates of full or partial qualification'. The former is based on selected qualification standards defined in the National System of Qualifications (about 300 out of 1 000 enlisted in NQR according to the project goals), the latter on qualification standards of 'further education' (ISDV portal). Interlinking both registers is envisaged in case of overlap with only one qualification register as the final solution. The new Act on Lifelong learning will abandon the earlier definitions of full and partial qualifications and will work with the notion of the professional qualification of the fourth sub-framework.

A new policy paper published by the SIOV in March 2023 has discussed the future role of micro-credentials (MC), including their role in ongoing efforts to make the education and qualifications system more flexible and introduced also a proposal of the national definition of the micro-credential based on the dual conception of MC as minimally regulated and fully regulated in case of the ambition of issuing institutions to consider this MC as certifying a qualification. In such a case, SKKR will apply, with regulation based on a quality assurance system to be set by the new Act on Lifelong learning. Qualifications regulated by sectoral legislation and awarded by varying sectoral authorities (including for example in welding or nuclear energy where

international harmonisation and strict rules already apply) are not interlinked with SKKR and not enlisted in the NQR. SKKR makes it possible, and the fourth sub-framework was designed to cover any kind of qualifications not regulated by the education (school) system. SKKR design allows the development of a comprehensive NQF covering all types and levels of qualifications, but this option is still open and legislatively not yet addressed.

5 Standards

There were four sets of standards developed as commented in detail in the 2018 Country report. This explains the reasons for their creation and the differences between educational standards, occupational standards, qualification standards of the 'further education' system (ISDV), and qualification standards of the national qualification register (NQR) created together with the national qualification framework SKKR. Qualification standards of the ISDV portal are relevant for the examination of professional competence, predominantly entitling to start a business regulated by the Trade Licensing Act.

Some qualifications of the NQR were selected to prepare assessment manuals to pilot validation within the SOK project. However, no individual learning outcomes of selected qualification standards are subject to validation. Instead of this, units of learning outcomes (ULO) are identified based on relevant qualification standards. These ULO, represented by assessment criteria in the form of itemised abilities to perform, are contained in assessment manuals.

Other standards are not relevant. Educational standards could be relevant for the validation of formal qualifications, but these were not covered by piloting (see more in part 3). The pilot has an impact only on the NQR and ISDV qualification standards, which currently differ not only in the reason for their creation but also in the granularity of the learning outcomes. The first experience from the piloting indicates the need for alignment and/or revision of standards. It is envisaged that both databases of qualification standards (placed and maintained in different portals) will be interlinked. The initial comparative studies (Vantuch et al., 2013, 2014), drew attention to the challenges already before the creation of the SKKR and NQR:

- a) redundancy caused by the creation of alternative sets of standards,
- b) the inconsistency in granularity of standards,
- c) the need for agreement on the conceptual basis for the revision of the qualification system in line with the shift to learning outcomes in curricula design.

It was also suggested that the exclusive normative function of qualification standards and SKKR must be supported by assessment manuals and that the occupational standards should be permanently revised to reflect technological change and division of labour in the workplace to subsequently inform education and qualification systems.

Occupational standards that were developed earlier than qualification standards and that were for a comparably longer period funded from ESF are more visible and they are also preferred by public employment services within counselling and skills audit practice over qualification standards. More attractive and better maintained occupational standards and a National System of Occupations are aligned to ISCO 08 four-digit occupations and therefore systemically not suitable for the traditional qualification system. Qualification standards should have the highest 'market value' as they are considered legally binding, but qualification standards and the National Qualifications System portal are without substantial revision functionally unsuitable. This dilemma, despite criticism, lasts almost ten years.

The Alliance of Sectoral Councils (ASC) redefined in December 2022 by the amendment of the Act on Employment services is being created by voluntary independent professional associations of representatives of employers, trade unions, educational institutions, state administration bodies and local self-government bodies, and open also to the inclusion of other members. The ASC should be newly responsible for ensuring and coordinating the creation and updating of the National System of Occupations and the National Qualifications System.

6 Institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

There is no change in the role of institutions that are involved in the validation resulting in issuing of certificates of partial or full qualification pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning (568/2009) confirming 'professional competence' and entitling to start a business pursuant to the Trade Licensing Act (455/1991).

New institutions emerged within the SOK project aimed at the piloting of new validation explicitly declaring coherence with 2012 Council Recommendations on VNFIL: authorising body and authorised institutions.

The authorising body (AB) accepts applications of institutions for entitlement as a so-called 'authorised institution' (AI), registers the necessary documents confirming the fulfilment of the established criteria and conditions, and issues decisions on granting or failure to grant authorisation. The tasks of the authorised institution were specified in detail with regard to 41 qualifications at the time of writing this report. The authorisation decision is issued for a period of five years, and an extension can be requested before the expiration of the valid authorisation.

Authorised institutions (AI) create conditions for the work of validation examination commissions. The list of appointed AIs with the period of validity of their appointment is publicly accessible (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/register-autorizovanych-institucii>). AB grants authorisations also to authorised persons (AP) and appoints national guarantors (see more in part 8.1). AP may or may not be among the AI employees.

The authorising body (AB) is currently the SIOV, but prospectively, according to the new draft Act on Lifelong learning, it will be the education ministry, unless it delegates this power to another body. SIOV also serves as so-called SOK point offering information and administrative guidance on validation.

7 Outreach, awareness raising, provision of information, advice and guidance

7.1 Outreach and awareness-raising

There is no need for specific awareness-raising campaigns concerning validation-type procedures bound to Act on Lifelong learning as these have been in place since 2013. The SOK project was, however, different and started awareness-raising campaigns on validation via leaflets (see one of leaflets at <https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/informacie-pre-zaujemcu-o-overenie-kvalifikacie>) and promotion on the dedicated website such as 'Qualification without returning to school desks' (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/novinka-detail/245>) or informing about first results of validation 'We have the first who passed qualification verification' (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/novinka-detail/342>). In addition to traditional instruments, social networking is heavily used, Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/Statnyinstitutodbornehovzdelavania>) and Instagram (@siov.sk) of the State Institute of VET in particular presenting leaflets or short success stories.

Promotional materials were offered to labour offices to attract job seekers and cooperation with NGOs and job agencies was aimed at activities with groups at risk. After initial contact with more than 200 people through the personnel agency Manpower (explanation of validation and help in filling out participant cards), interest in the exact date of the validation examination was very low (approx. six people). However, no specific outreach measures were envisaged. The project primarily targeted unqualified people already possessing skills demanded by the labour market.

7.2 Information, advice and guidance

The main provider of information and administrative advice is SOK Point (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/node/234>) placed at SIOV. This coordination point offers:

- a) information, advice and support on qualification verification (validation) in general;
- b) initial support in choosing a qualification and creating a portfolio.

More detailed information on the portfolio is offered by the external partner of the project and its network of coordinators providing specialised guidance on the portfolio and who collects portfolios from individuals interested in validation before submitting it for final processing to the relevant validation commission.

PES also provide information about opportunities for validation to registered job seekers, if appropriate. Since job seekers are one of the target groups of the SOK project, SIOV signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Centre of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. Directors of employment services departments and heads of mediation and labour departments from labour offices throughout Slovakia were informed about the piloting validation and the possibility for job seekers to obtain all validation services, including a qualification certificate for free during the duration of the project.

There is no online platform available and validation users communicate with SOK point, coordinators and eventually with authorised institutions (organising validation examination) via telephone and email. Only administrative guidance is offered to validation users (on opportunities for validation, benefits of validation, and validation processes) with specific counselling envisaged in the future, particularly concerning groups at risk. Although BC counselling (see more on this in Part 3.3) proved potential to become valuable support in the first stage of validation or in the pre-validation

phase it was not used in the SOK project due to a lack of capacities and due to specific often highly motivated clients not needing specific counselling.

While initial predominantly administrative guidance can be offered in the future by SIOV and its decentralised units (former 'dual points' created in support of promotion of dual VET), capacities for specific counselling (e.g., skills audit) and mentoring are lacking. It was not the subject of piloting. Thus, there is no establishment yet of monitoring after validation developments to get feedback and also the provision of follow-up service to individuals in need of additional counselling or remedy. This depends on future policy decisions and the new legislation.

8 Validation practitioners

8.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The officially declared (<https://www.kvalifacie.sk/institucionalne-sucasti-sok>) institutional components of the system of validation according to the SOK project are authorising bodies, authorised institutions (see part 5 for more), and two types of officially recognised validation practitioners: national guarantors and authorised persons.

National guarantors (NG) are top experts in the field of qualifications in individual fields and sectors of the economy. They participate in the preparation of the documentation setting up the validation (or its update), they are a guarantee of the professional level of the verification process itself, and they are always the chairpersons of the validation examination commission. The criteria for education and experience of the national guarantor (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/node/238>) are defined for individual sectors of the national economy (23 at the time of writing this report), taking into account the specificity and demands of individual sectors. The list of appointed NG (85 at the time of writing this report) with the period of validity of their appointment (lasts five years) is publicly accessible (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/register-narodnych-garantov>).

Authorised persons (AP) are entitled to assess portfolios of evidence in accordance with the evaluation manual created in the project and to act as a member of the validation examination committee. The qualification requirement is at least secondary education with the 'maturita' school leaving certificate (ISCED 354) or a certificate of apprenticeship and at least five years of professional experience linked to the given qualification. They were selected from among VET teachers and other education institution staff and private specialists who successfully passed the training to acquire competence for the performance of the examiner in the validation examination commission, which they completed during the project. The list of appointed APs (74 at the time of writing this report) with the period of validity of their appointment is publicly accessible (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/node/241>).

No other validation practitioners are officially declared in the project, with prescribed qualification requirements and piloted duties. Information and administrative guidance is offered by the SOK point, although specialised counselling is not yet in place. NGs being respected experienced professionals cover the duties of validation managers, although currently without specialised retraining concerning validation processes. Other validation specialists, including those who will be responsible for quality assurance of validation processes and prevention of conflicts of interest, should be discussed after the project evaluation and taken into account by the new Act on Lifelong learning.

8.2 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

When applying (<https://www.kvalifikacie.sk/node/253>) for an appointment as NG and granting authorisation for AP, the support of a professional or employer organisation was an advantage. These organisations could also independently propose candidates for NG and AP. No specific training was prescribed for NG, in contrast to AP who must complete an obligatory training composed of two components. The first component has been accredited by the education ministry and is compulsory for all AP. The second component is specific and covers specialisations of respective AP. The training was designed and provided by SOK project specialists. No continuing training was envisaged, but the piloting might result in recommendations to rethink the professionalisation and in-service training of both NGs and APs.

8.3 Qualifications and experience

The prescribed level of qualification and experience is requested only from two types of validation practitioners: authorised persons (assessors) and national guarantors as explained in more detail in parts 7.1 and 7.2. There are no mandatory requirements for other practitioners, in some cases (internal/external officers for validation/quality check) positions do not yet exist.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding and costs

There is no change in financing validation pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning (568/2009). The maximum fee for examination to verify (validate) professional competence to perform work activities and run the business pursuant to the Trade Licensing Act (455/1991) is EUR 300 as set by the Act on Lifelong learning. Validation within the SOK project is free of charge. In the future, a fee for validation will be set by the new Act on Lifelong learning.

Individual Learning Accounts (ILA) are not in place yet and piloting ILA originally envisaged by the NPDE was postponed. Furthermore, voucher-type schemes seem to be currently preferred over genuine ILA allowing for accumulation of annual allowance. The newest voucher-type labour market policy signals an open door for covering the cost of validation from PES. Within the national project 'Don't lose your job - get trained', vouchers are predominantly used for labour market training but can be used also for covering counselling services. This is not the case yet, but in the future, the lack of financial support could prevent disadvantaged groups from entering validation.

Validation arrangements are not included in collective labour agreements.

9.2 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.2.1 Validation trends

It is still too early to judge to what extent is validation used. Little is known about the number of those who might be eligible for validation in the future.

Time series from 2013 are available regarding verifying (validation) professional competences according to the Act on Lifelong learning, see Tables 1-3 in part 9.2.2. Table 1 shows a gradual increase in the number of certifications with a decrease in 2021, undoubtedly as a result of the pandemic, followed by an even greater increase in 2022. Two qualifications, wellness worker - massage services and men's hairdresser/barber, experienced a boom in recent years, as soon as the procedural conditions for validation were created. Overall, the table demonstrates that the highest numbers are for professions where mastery can be acquired via learning on the job and where there is strong competition or volatility in the labour market. These data reflect an interest in self-employment rather than employment.

Detailed data on the SOK project piloting validation that started in November 2022 and continued in 2023 will be available in September 2023. Only preliminary data on qualifications and sectors are therefore presented in Tables 4 and 5 in part 9.2.2. These data indicate that mechanical engineering-related qualifications and the automotive industry are dominant. There are no data regarding the number of individuals who have entered, gone through, and succeeded in the different four stages of validation. Under current conditions of highly motivated participants, no substantial differences can be expected, in contrast to the future, with possible efforts to expand the validation to people from disadvantaged groups. In September 2023, full data on the number of interested participants, the number of defending portfolios of evidence and the number of certified ones will certainly be available broken by age cohort, prior formal education, level of qualification and sex.

The number of issued Youthpass certificates (Table 6) has gradually increased with a temporary decrease during the pandemic, followed by a strong recovery in 2022.

9.2.2 Validation users

The following table presents a number of awarded certificates of professional competences pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning validating prior learning outside the formal system. These certificates enable starting a business if ISCED 353 or 354 certificate of apprenticeship is required. It substitutes for that purpose the formal qualification obtained pursuant to the Education Act, although without recognition of the respective education level. Thus, this certificate is not equivalent to a certificate from formal education, e.g., the ISCED 353 certificate.

Table 1 Numbers of certifications of professional competences in 2013-2022

Qualification	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	All**
Manicurist	171	212	202	203	286	336	344	307	193	292	2 546
Beautician	134	162	134	142	211	249	286	367	279	379	2 343
Pedicurist	167	177	172	184	244	221	252	247	172	215	2 051
Hair stylist	53	91	71	68	95	95	125	163	140	166	1 067
Wellness worker - massage services							31	95	146	408	680
Confectioner	9	24	44	31	52	56	57	67	79	76	495
Cook	31	38	32	25	29	34	46	40	40	41	356
A maltster and a brewer		32	23	35	23	21	42	16	27	20	239
Men's hairdresser barber						23	42	52	52	62	231
Chimney sweeper			69	46	44	33		6		32	230
Plumber	9	7	7	17	15	13	26	19	23	30	166
Roofer	22	23	18	5	11	12	10	14	18	4	137
Baker	10	8	13	4	8	12	11	8	22	13	109
Lecturer			2	7	4	18	10	23	19	9	92
Mason	5	10	9	13	8	9	12	4	12	8	90
Tiler						17	20		19	12	68
Carpenter	12	5	6	2	2	7	3	3	3	9	52
Insulator	9	10	6	2	5	4	1	2	3	4	46
Carpenter	2			1	4	4	7	9	9	8	44
Construction tinker	5	4	7	1	3	3	1	1	3	3	31
Goldsmith/jeweller									10	11	21
Car repairer							1	3	5	4	13
Floor man							7		4	1	12
Waiter	1	1	4								6
Butcher - smoker		1					1	1	2	1	6
All	640	805	819*	786	1 044	1 167	1 335	1 447	1 280	1 808	11 131

*Additional 2 312 qualifications were certified in the project 'CVANU', (see more in the 2018 Country report); ** Number of holders is lower than the number of awarded certificates as some people were interested in receiving more certificates, to cover more professions.

Source: Education ministry (ad hoc data)

The following table shows that most users are middle-aged. An explanation or a reasonable hypothesis could be that at that age they already have enough experience in the profession and at the same time possess the motivation for becoming independent and starting a business.

Table 2. Certificates of professional competences in 2016-2022 by sex and age cohorts

	18-26	27-35	36-44	45-53	54-62	63-	All
2018	245	403	308	175	33	3	1 167
Males	46	80	55	40	10	1	232
Females	199	323	253	135	23	2	935
2019	285	454	375	179	41	1	1 335
Males	79	90	69	34	14		286
Females	206	364	306	145	27	1	1 049
2020	275	486	435	216	33	2	1 447
Males	63	73	90	39	8	1	274
Females	212	413	345	177	25	1	1 173
2021	265	445	324	198	46	2	1 280
Males	71	111	78	65	16		341
Females	194	334	246	133	30	2	939
2022	350	608	511	251	80	8	1 808
Males	90	135	111	63	31	4	434
Females	260	473	400	188	49	4	1 374
All	1 420	2 396	1 953	1 019	233	16	7 037

Source: Education ministry (ad hoc data)

The significantly higher representation of women in eight out of ten of the most attractive qualifications results from the fact that the most of these qualifications relate to typically female professions. The following table demonstrates this misbalance distribution on the first ten most attractive qualifications.

Table 3. Holders of qualification by sex

Qualification	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		All*
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Beautician	4	245	8	278	12	355	16	263	12	367	1 560
Manicurist	8	328	12	332	7	300	4	189	14	278	1 472
Wellness worker – massage services			12	19	38	57	57	89	134	274	680
Pedicurist	14	207	12	240	8	239	8	164	15	200	1 107
Hair stylist	30	65	45	80	45	118	40	100	36	130	689
Confectioner	8	48	7	50	8	59	6	73	4	72	335
Men's hairdresser, barber	22	1	36	6	42	10	43	9	46	16	231
Cook	22	12	23	23	29	11	25	15	31	10	201
Lecturer	2	16	3	7	6	17	2	17		9	79
Baker	4	8	1	10	3	5	8	14	5	8	66

* Number of holders is lower than the number of awarded certificates as some people were interested in receiving more certificates, to cover more professions.

Source: Education ministry (ad hoc data)

The following table presents users who were interested in validation of their learning outcomes resulting from non-formal or informal learning within the SOK project.

Table 4. The number of applicants registered for validation within the SOK project as of 31 December 2022

(Sub)sector	Number of applicants
Furniture production	15
Raw material extraction and processing	20
Automotive	237
All	272

Source: SOK project management

In automotive it was predominantly about the qualification 'the assembly worker in mechanical engineering production'. Automotive is the dominant sector also in 2023 according to submitted applications: 1 700 out of all 2 162 applicants, thus 79% are automotive industry and engineering related.

Table 5. The number of applicants* registered for validation within the SOK project in 2023

(Sub)sector	Number of applicants
Administration, economy, and management	40
Automotive industry and engineering	1 700
Banking, financial services, insurance	32
Pulp and paper, and printing industry	5
Transport, logistics, postal services	30
Electrical engineering	5
Energy, gas, and electricity	5
Metallurgy, foundry, blacksmithing	5
Chemistry and pharmacy	7
Information technology and telecommunications	10
Culture and creative industry	5
Forestry and wood processing industry	25
Business, marketing, gastronomy, and tourism	75
Agriculture, veterinary medicine, and fishing	5
Food industry	10
Crafts and personal services	25
Glass, ceramics, mineral products, and non-metallic materials	5
Construction, geodesy, and cartography	20
Extraction and treatment of raw materials, geology	20
Textiles, clothing, footwear, and leather processing	5
Science, research, education, and sport	43
Public services and administration	25
Water, waste and the environment	50
Healthcare, social services	10
Total	2 162

*Preliminary data as of February 2023

Source: SOK project management

Youthpass is an Erasmus+ Programme tool that supports the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in youth work. Data on issuing Youthpass certificates since 2011 are presented in the table below.

Table 6. Youthpass certificate data in 2011-2022

Year	Certificates issued	Organisations issuing certificates	Projects with certificates
2011	826	77	109
2012	903	73	96
2013	1 602	106	148
2014	1 233	108	131
2015	2 579	109	177
2016	2 863	107	166
2017	2 915	118	162
2018	3 196	112	176
2019	3 580	110	184
2020	1 260	73	107
2021	1 798	70	96
2022*	3 191	97	166

*Preliminary data

Source: NIVAM encompassing former 'Iuventa Slovak Youth Institute' (ad hoc data)

9.2.3 Validation and disadvantaged groups

There are no data about the validation of non-formal and informal learning of disadvantaged groups. Validation according to the Act on Lifelong learning does not make distinction and people at risk due to diverse reasons can equally apply for validation. Similar applies to the SOK project on validation. It must be acknowledged, however, that validation in both cases is not seen as a tool aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups. Focus on disadvantaged groups in the education system is visible only concerning early school leavers and learners from the socially disadvantaged environment (SDE) and certificate on completion of lower secondary education that is currently seen as a qualification of the first sub-framework of SKKR. In response to the criticism of high numbers of early school leavers from lower secondary education among the Roma minority, from marginalised Roma communities (MRC) in particular, and a dramatically increased share of early leavers from education training compared to early 2000s, alternative ways to receiving ISCED 2/ EQF2 certificate were introduced. Pursuant to the amendment of the Education act (254/2008) coming into force from 1 January 2022 and the subsequent education ministry decree (287/2022), there are alternative ways for acquiring lower secondary (general) education (LSE), a specific LSE education programme organised by some regular schools completed by a commission exam:

- a) validating non-formal and informal learning by taking a commission exam without the obligation to participate in the LSE programme;
- b) external LSE testing composed of four sub-tests (languages, mathematics, science, society).

The Act on employment services (4/2005) explicitly specifies disadvantaged job seekers, and these as well as other groups at risk are targeted, but no genuine validation features in the tools of active labour market policies.

10 Validation methods

10.1 Methodologies and methods

There is nothing new to add compared to the 2018 country report on the validation outside the education sector, but also concerning validation pursuant to the Act on Lifelong learning (568/2009). The dominant method, in this case, is examination. The dominant method in the SOK project is creation of the portfolio of evidence and self-assessment of knowledge skills and competences amid qualification standards followed by dialogue/interviews related to portfolio defence. Despite its title, validation examination commissions only rarely complement the interview with genuine examination or direct presentation of skills. Current piloting, however, almost exclusively affects highly motivated applicants. Thus, with efforts to expand the reach, diversification in particular in the first stage of validation (identification) will be inevitable. Specialised counselling services, including for example also BC counselling will be certainly needed.

10.2 Use of ICT in validation

No specific ICT tools facilitating validation (e.g., development of a portfolio of evidence) are in place. In fact, the guidance to interested people on how to document achieving of respective qualification standards is still in the process of development and refinement. Assessment manuals elaborated during the SOK project serve as a first orientation and will definitely need adjustment in the future based on the experience from the pilot phase.

11 Quality assurance

11.1 Quality assurance processes

There is no fully-fledged quality assurance system for validation in place. This applies to all three sectors (education and training, labour market and third sector). There are some quality assurance arrangements for validation in place concerning education and training, but they are focusing on prescribed general quality requirements affecting the selection of key players: AI, NG, and AP (see more in part 7). However, ensuring the quality of respective validation processes remained not addressed. The quality control of validation is currently based on the traditional concept of hierarchical supervision and focuses predominantly on the final phase only: The education ministry, or the authorising body, oversees the course of the final exam, whether it is an examination related to professional competence to start a business or validation within the SOK project.

Neither internal nor external quality assurance processes have been set. Conflicts of interest of the involved players are, therefore, not sufficiently prevented. Reliable, valid, and credible assessment methodologies and tools are fully in hands of National guarantors who preside over all examination commissions in the scope of their responsibility. There are no quality standards, no quality plans, no feedback loop arrangements, and no external observers to provide a quality check on validation procedures. Naming authorised persons (portfolio assessors) by the authorising body is considered sufficient for the prevention of conflict of interest as they are not bound to the authorised institutions organising the examination and benefiting from income from fees (in the future). Assessors are retrained and selected from applicants fulfilling prescribed requirements, but prevention of their failure in performance is not addressed. The malfunction of national guarantors is not expected and so prevention of their failure is not addressed.

Piloting validation within the SOK project will inform lawmakers working on the new Act on Lifelong learning. No doubt the establishment of systems of internal and external quality assurance backed by legislation is an inevitable precondition for trustworthy validation. A universal approach to quality assurance across sub-frameworks of SKKR is also interlinked with the need to make SKKR fully functional.

In November 2022, EQAVET National Reference Point initiated an international system peer review of the newly established validation system within the SOK project. A quality assurance system is seen as insufficiently developed according to the report. Experts recommended introducing external/independent quality assurance elements, backed by an 'assessment manual' for external checks, including external on-site visits and observations, and mandatory self-assessment of the authorised institution. In response to this criticism, national authorities will address this weakness with a new Act on LLL in the pipeline and the missing VNFIL procedures are to be developed within a new ESF project 'Introducing quality management in VET and adult learning' to be conducted by SIOV.

11.2 Monitoring and evaluation

Currently, there are no mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate the implementation and success of validation procedures. This can be explained by the fact that validation is still being tested and the relevant legislation to support VNFIL is still being discussed. However, it would be unacceptable if the new Act on Lifelong learning did not impose the obligation of monitoring and evaluation and did not create the conditions for securing funding for the collection of validation data.

12 The position of validation in society; visibility and trust

Compared to 2018, progress can be seen, as piloting of explicitly declared four-stage composed validation started within the SOK project. It has been added to the exams aimed at verifying (validating) professional competence to enter the business commented on in more detail in earlier reports that were only loosely responding to the European validation initiative. However, it is too early to evaluate the result of the SOK project. There is no doubt that primarily the automotive sector took advantage of the project and thus obviously trusted the SOK project. The project covered the costs of validation and thus neither employers nor employees have any expenses from validation. This could also have played a role. Of course, only time will tell if the employees who were hired from among those who passed the validation process also proved themselves in their work. It would undoubtedly be appropriate to initiate research to identify factors that are relevant both for successful employment after validation and for the success of validation itself and the plausibility of its procedures.

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

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

The European inventory is the product of a long-standing cooperation of the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF on the field. The inventory was endorsed by the [Council recommendation of 2012](#) on validation and works together with the [European guidelines](#) as a tool to support countries in developing and implementing validation arrangements.

A rich source of information, the inventory informs dialogue and learning between countries and stakeholders developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to support Member States so that more learners and workers can acquire and make visible new skills, which will support their career and further learning and improve their quality of life.

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