

INVENTORY ON THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Country Factsheet 2023: North
Macedonia

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Context and stage of development

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is not yet operational in North Macedonia. The draft new Law on the national qualifications framework (NQF) defines VNFIL as a process for recognising learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning, in accordance with previously stated criteria and standards, including certification with a government-recognised document from an authorised institution. There are four stages to VNFIL: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The NQF is the basis for the implementation of VNFIL. The validation processes should use published standards for qualifications and occupations included in the NQF as a reference at all stages of VNFIL. The standard for an occupation consists of a description of the competencies needed for a certain job and refers to both formal and non-formal education and training. The standard for a qualification includes all the information describing the level of qualification, which occupation the qualification is based on, requirements for finishing a certain level of formal education, number of credits and potential pathways within formal education.

The draft new laws on adult education (AE) and on NQF provide for certification for vocational qualifications in non-formal VET, as well as for educational qualifications in general secondary education and formal VET. Educational qualifications can only now be obtained through the formal education system, but it will be possible to obtain them through VNFIL once the bill on AE is passed. In formal VET, qualifications consist of vocational and general-education learning outcomes. Candidates who enrol in and finish formal VET are awarded a diploma providing them with access to both the labour market and mobility in formal education. Vocational qualifications can be obtained either through formal VET or non-formal education and training. Those obtained through non-formal education will lead to a certificate providing access to the labour market, but with no possibility of accessing further levels of formal education. Once the AE bill passes into law, people will be able to obtain vocational qualifications through VNFIL.

The NQF bill sets out plans whereby VNFIL will be possible for qualifications in both formal and non-formal education up to NQF level 5B, the equivalent of EQF level 5 (NQF consists of eight levels corresponding to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework), including: formal primary education, secondary education and IVET, postsecondary education, as well as non-formal CVET and other forms of AE.

The certification for levels of general education will be equivalent to documents issued in formal education, which will allow for horizontal and vertical mobility in the educational system and the labour market.

Policy and regulatory framework

Current legislation only mentions the possibility for VNFIL arrangements. Since the last Inventory (2018), draft new legislation on NQF, VET and AE has been prepared (expected to pass into law soon) which, together with several related strategic documents, provides the conditions for widescale implementation of VNFIL measures.

The Strategy on education 2018-25 consists of a pillar dedicated to adult education and VNFIL. It proposes VNFIL measures that would give people horizontal and vertical mobility within the education system and the labour market.

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) adopted the Concept for Establishment of Regional VET Centres (RVETCs), which was the legal basis for converting three VET schools into RVETCs. Two further RVETCs will be established in the future. Each RVETC will feature a department for development of adult education and VNFIL.

The draft new Law on NQF postulates obtaining qualifications through VNFIL. In addition, the draft new Law on AE consist of a chapter on VNFIL that specifies the procedures for and phases to validation and under what conditions it can take place. It states that VNFIL is available to anyone over 16 years of age for validation at NQF level 1 (9 years of schooling – NQF levels are equivalent to EQF levels); over 17 years of age for validation at NQF level 2 (secondary education); and over 18 up to NQF level 5B.

The recently adopted Concept of secondary education for adults in the Republic of North Macedonia¹ document conceptualises secondary education for adults based on the key competencies (as recommended by the Council of the EU) and learning outcomes, where validation plays an important role.

VNFIL as a pathway to acquiring qualifications is also included in the latest Youth Guarantee² Implementation Plan. In this document, VNFIL is incorporated into labour market policy targeting young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

The two principles the government followed in prioritising target groups for validation were the current/future needs of the labour market and the support to be provided to the unemployed and people with low qualifications.

¹ Ministry of Education and Science. (2022a). *Concept Document on Secondary Education for Adults*. Skopje: Ministry of Education and Science. This document entered into force by Minister of Education and Science decision no. 13 - 14147/1 of 23.11.2022.

² The Youth Guarantee is an EU-supported programme that gives young people up to the age of 29 who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) a suitable job offer or the chance to continue their education or be involved in any of the active employment programmes and measures on offer within 4 months of registering as unemployed (Source: ESA).

Institutional setup and collaboration

The main stakeholders in this establishing phase of the VNFIL system are government organisations and agencies (MOES and Adult Education Centre (AEC)) together with the Coordinating Body and Working Group on validation. The Coordinating Body consists of 14 members, with the president and the vice-president from MOES. The other members are representatives of AEC, the VET Centre, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), Employment Service Agency (ESA), Bureau for Development of Education (BDE), Open civic universities for Lifelong Learning, Centre for Lifelong Learning, Economic chamber, and the Chamber of Crafts. There is also an active role for the Macedonian Qualification Framework (MQF) National Board, the sectoral commissions for qualifications and adult education and VNFIL service providers. The labour market, trade unions, employers and the third sector still have a minor role in VNFIL developments, which is probably due to the delays in the legislation reforms and consequent lack of legal basis for many of the prospective validation measures.

MOES is responsible for the overall policy and management of VNFIL, as well as for the verification of adult education providers/colleges. AEC has the leading role in the implementation of the measures and is responsible for developing VNFIL arrangements, training for VNFIL practitioners, preparing information packages and advice and guidance for candidates. AEC is also responsible for: accreditation of the providers to ensure that they fulfil requirements for VNFIL services; certifying of the VNFIL practitioners (advisors and assessors) and monitoring the validation processes.

For now, it is mainly MOES and AEC coordinating the rollout of the VNFIL system. When the VNFIL legislation comes into force, coordinating implementation is supposed to fall to AEC and the Coordinating Body on validation. Validation of prior learning will be offered in each of the RVET Centres.

Beneficiaries and impact

The main target groups prioritised for validation include people who have not completed their basic education; people with few or no qualifications; unemployed people and those wishing to return to the labour market; people returning to the country who have acquired relevant skills and knowledge abroad and people with in-demand skills.

Given that the legislation is still not in force and VNFIL is not available to candidates as standard, there are no available relevant statistics on VNFIL as of yet.

As part of preparations to bring in VNFIL, AEC piloted a validation process in 2020-21 for a qualification to be a waiter. Seven candidates successfully finished the process and were awarded a certificate at level 3 on the NQF (EQF level 3) that would otherwise be issued after a short training programme by a provider.

Eleven qualifications from various sectors have been selected to test the validation processes under the two IPA projects currently being carried out in North Macedonia.

Challenges and opportunities

A potential barrier in developing VNFIL is the slow pace at which the legislation is passed. Consequently, implementation on VNFIL measures is running late, keeping awareness about validation and its benefits minimal. In addition, this situation breeds a lack of trust in validation among certain relevant stakeholders (i.e. educators and employers).

It has not yet been decided how validation procedures will be funded, which is another challenge to its development. Although it seems clear that validation costs will need to be subsidised for certain target groups, no financial schemes or incentives for the validation providers or employers have been put forward.

Current and draft legislation does not specify models for validation of the general-education part of formal VET qualifications, which could be a barrier to implementation in the education sector, hampering mobility in the education system and the labour market.

Significant potential for the development of VNFIL arrangements comes from the inclusion of qualifications from formal education up to NQF level 5B (EQF level 5). RVET Centres now have the potential to grow into modern hubs for quality validation procedures. Their departments for furthering VNFIL and adult education could provide conditions for producing quality validation practices and highly competent staff. In addition, the existing practical guidelines on validation clearly define the roles, processes and criteria for the providers and practitioners. They need to be continuously revised to keep pace with the developments in the field and provide continued quality assistance to all involved in VNFIL.

VNFIL is further supported by two IPA measures: (1) EU4Youth³ budget support and (2) the Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education⁴ project.

³ <https://eu4youth.mk/en/what-we-do/>

⁴ <https://mkvet.mk/about-the-project/>