

INVENTORY ON THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Country report 2023 Republic of 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
-----------------------------	----

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

The draft new Law on NQF defines 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 public document from an authorised institution. The VNFIL arrangements include four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

The draft new Law on NQF postulates that VNFIL covers 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, whole 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 postulate certification both for vocational and educational qualifications. Educational qualifications can be obtained through the formal education system leading to a diploma providing an access to both labour market and mobility in formal education. Vocational qualifications could be obtained 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. After the adoption of the new Law on AE, both types of qualifications would be possible to be acquired through VNFIL.

The main stakeholders involved in the development of VNFIL system are the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) and Adult Education Centre (AEC), together with the Coordinative Body and Working Group on validation. There's also an active role of 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 Development of Education (BDE) and providers of education for adults and VNFIL services. The 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 packages for information, advice and guidance for candidates, as well for monitoring of the validation processes.

With the adoption of the draft new laws on AE and on NQF, which is expected to take place soon, the legal basis for the VNFIL arrangements will become effective. With that, the stakeholders will start the implementation of validation measures.

2 National perspective

2.1. Overarching approach to validation

The existing national legislation provides prospective basis for the 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 most recent development in the area is the preparation of new draft legislation, namely the draft new laws on NQF and AE. They clearly postulate VNFIL and provide the basis for the establishment of important VNFIL arrangements. The draft legislation and the related strategic documents postulate that the implementation of 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' (Roadmap, MOES & AEC, 2016). The Roadmap, together with the 'Guide note on VNFIL processes' and the 'Handbook for assessment in the context of validation of non-formal and informal learning' - provide guidance for establishing the VNFIL arrangements (these documents are explained in the country Inventory on VNFIL for 2018).

The Roadmap suggests the following priority target groups for VNFIL:

- people without completed basic (primary) education;
- people with relevant skills and competences who are with low or without officially recognised qualifications;
- unemployed persons and those (including women with families) wishing to return to the labour market following employment breaks;
- persons returning to the country who have acquired relevant skills and knowledge whilst living or working abroad.

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

The Strategy on education 2018-25 (MOES, 2018) proposes to establish the VNFIL measures that would allow for horizontal and vertical mobility within the education system and the labour market, and defines VNFIL as one of the priorities within the Strategy's pillar dedicated to adult education.

In 2022, MOES adopted the Development Concept for Establishment of Regional Vocational Education and Training Centres in North Macedonia (RVETC) (MOES, 2022b). The Concept document served as a legal basis for transformation of three VET schools in the cities of Tetovo, Kumanovo and Ohrid in RVET Centres. The description of the process and criteria of selection is provided in the section 9 (on quality assurance). These institutions continue to provide formal VET, but in addition, each of these RVETCs established a sector for development of AE and VNFIL. The coordinators of these sectors for AE and VNFIL are nominated from the staff in the schools/centres, and when the new Law on AE will be adopted by the Parliament, they are expected to start with implementation of concrete arrangements and first cases of VNFIL for candidates.

In November 2022, the MOES adopted the new Concept document on secondary education for adults (MOES, 2022a). Similarly to the Concept on primary education for adults (adopted in 2016), VNFIL in the document is postulated as one of the main pillars of adults' secondary education, and concrete arrangements and goals, both in formal and non-formal education, are proposed. This concept document envisages 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 study programmes, and how they could be further incorporated into the national standards and expected learning outcomes. The document also proposes a methodology for upgrading and evaluation of knowledge and skills of adult candidates based on the VNFIL principles, which could serve as a practical guide in implementation of the validation processes.

With support by the European Training Foundation (ETF), in 2022, the national authorities prepared a National Implementation Plan (NIP) on monitoring the implementation of EU Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) and of the Osnabrück Declaration from 2020. The NIP placed the VNFIL arrangements among the priorities that should be supported and monitored.

Significant developments in the area of VNFIL are foreseen with the draft new laws on NQF and AE, which are in advanced phase of processing and are expected to be adopted soon by the Parliament.

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

The draft new Law on AE (MOES, 2023b) includes a distinct chapter dedicated specifically to VNFIL, which defines the procedures, phases and conditions. It states that the VNFIL arrangements are available to persons: above 16 years of age for validation at NQF¹ level 1 (primary 9-year education); above 17 years of age for validation at NQF level 2 (secondary education); above 18 years of age up to NQF level 5B. Regulations of this law referring to vocational qualifications should become operational within a period of six months after the adoption of the law, while for educational qualifications - within one year after the adoption of the law.

Other essential developments are planned with the implementation of the EU-funded Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) project 'Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education'². The project started in September 2021, with the period of implementation of 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 the country. The four main tasks (components) of the project are:

- Task 1: Mapping and review of VET delivery in the 5 regions with the aim to support implementation of the Concept on RVETC for establishment of 2 new Regional VET Centres
- Task 2: Implementation of the system for VNFIL in the country as an important path towards providing quality education for adults
- Task 3: Improving the system for post-secondary education with newly developed curricula, in line with the labour market needs
- Task 4: Compatibility of the national system of VET and AE with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET

The task on VNFIL includes selecting five qualification standards from the NQF, which will be offered and 'tested' for validation. The selection of qualifications was based on several criteria: importance of the qualifications for the certain regions (and RVETC) where they will be validated, shortage of skills in the region(s), and positive estimations that there will be candidates who are interested. The selected qualifications from 5 different sectors are: Hairdresser/hairstylist, Auto body repair technician, Baker, Bee breeder, and Dressmaker. In cooperation with the sectoral commissions, the project aims to revive the standards for qualifications, making them more relevant for the labour market and for use by the potential candidates.

¹ NQF levels are equivalent 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), that 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/>

The main activities of the project are:

- to nominate teachers from the selected RVETCs who will be part of the commissions for validation in that Centre;
- to announce a Call for providers and to deliver a training for assessors in VNFIL;
- to improve assessment of competencies and effective quality assurance;
- to promote VNFIL among individuals;
- to carry out capacity building activities on monitoring of VNFIL.

The expected project result related to VNFIL is to develop and upgrade the system for VNFIL helping individuals to obtain proper and official certification, which will further support their employability and career prospects.

Another VNFIL-relevant project supported by EU which is currently being implemented is named 'EU for Youth'³. It is 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 through VNFIL. Among other activities, the plan is to revise and prepare six standards for qualifications for 'testing' VNFIL. Two qualifications per RVETC were selected from the sectors covered by each of 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 shall have priority in 'testing' for VNFIL.

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

Up to date, there are no arrangements in the country specifically directed towards implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. Current regulation does not recognise possibilities for validation to be financed by an individual learning account⁴ or similar financial scheme. However, projects targeting persons with low education attainment that included validation elements have been implemented (see the examples of good practice below).

Developments of the VNFIL arrangements face some serious challenges and potential barriers. One of them is that the labour market (employers) in many sectors do not require certified employees for the jobs they offer, what undermines the motivation of the potential candidates to apply for VNFIL in order to get a certificate. Next, in many instances (mainly in the national education-related institutions) there is a lack of trust that the validation process could provide the quality of formal education, which would result in an insufficient support provided to the arrangements. Another reason is that awareness about the benefits from VNFIL is still lower than expected, after almost a decade of developments in the field. Furthermore, financing is still not thoroughly discussed, what is probably due to the lower readiness of relevant national institutions to financially cover VNFIL from the state budget.

However, some significant developments in VNFIL took place 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 were adopted. On the practical side of the matters, in accordance with the Roadmap, and the Strategy of education 2018-25, during the years 2020-2021, the AEC piloted

³ This project represents complementary technical assistance to the Sector Reform Performance Contract (SRPC) in Education, Employment, Social Protection (EESP) with the purpose to provide 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>

the VNFIL process - for the qualification 'Waiter'. Seven candidates successfully finished the process and were awarded with a certificate, positioned at level 3 of the NQF (EQF level 3). Under the same initiative, it had been also planned to pilot the qualification 'Facade worker', but due to lack of interested candidates (mostly due to the fact that employers do not require certified employees), no certification was awarded (Adult Education Centre, 2021).

2.2. Validation in education and training

In accordance with the NQF, education and training system recognizes two types of qualifications: educational and vocational. Educational qualifications could be obtained only through formal education system and they refer to all levels of education (from primary, general secondary education and VET, to higher education). In the context of formal VET, they consist of two parts: 1. vocational learning outcomes, and 2. learning outcomes related to general education appropriate for the particular level – defined by the national standards. Candidates who enrol and finish formal VET are awarded with a diploma providing them with an access to both labour market and mobility in formal education. Vocational qualifications could be obtained through both formal and non-formal education and training. Candidates obtaining vocational qualification through non-formal education are awarded with a certificate providing them with an access to labour market, but without a mobility in formal education. An example for vocational qualification awarded with a certificate is 'electrician', and for an educational qualification is – 'electro-technician'.

The draft new Law on NQF postulates that candidates would 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 the higher education, the Law on Higher Education vaguely allows for validation, but there is no specific document or initiative, which further regulates the matter or makes it operational.

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

The draft new Law on AE and the draft new Law on NQF postulate that candidates could obtain full or partial qualifications through VNFIL, equivalent to those obtained in formal education. Taking into consideration that the draft new Law on NQF further defines modules of a qualification as an independent and encircled unit of learning, or part of an educational programme, it will respectively allow candidates to obtain them through VNFIL, too.

The draft new Law on AE further regulates the certification processes. It postulates that VNFIL is possible both for vocational qualifications, and for qualifications at an educational level. Article 20 states that for vocational qualification obtained through VNFIL, the candidate will be issued a certificate for vocational qualification with a supplement to the certificate (describing validated modules, credits and learning outcomes). Certification of modules (of the standards of qualifications) 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 finished level of education. This document is equivalent to the one issued in formal education and allows for horizontal mobility between similar study programmes (sectors) in VET, and vertical mobility from VET to higher education in the formal education, as well in the labour market. Validation in the case of qualification on educational level may be performed only by the institutions for formal education, verified by the 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), what was applied in the piloting process of VNFIL, too. The piloting was carried out by AEC from April 2020 to June 2021. However, it must be noted that this was the period of severe constraints due to COVID-19 pandemic and schools were closed

for a long period, hence, the process of VNFIL took longer than it should be, and could not 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 for mobility between the sectors, and in planning arrangements in the best interest of the candidates and the society. At the same time, there is a significant challenge related to the validation of the general-education part of the qualifications. All subjects in formal VET consist of vocational and general-educational 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 under high risk of social exclusion

Validation in penitentiary institutions

MOES with support of UNDP and in cooperation with the penitentiary institutions in the country, in the last three years organised activities that are good examples of developing the VNFIL practices for the marginalised groups. The aim was to offer to convicted juvenile delinquents and adult prisoners from several penitentiary institutions an opportunity to participate in activities comparable to a second chance education, combined with arrangements similar to validation. The measure was implemented in the sectors of vocational education and primary education. As a reference points for validation, the programmes for vocational education for NQF levels 1 and 2 were used, and, educational programmes prepared for primary education for adults. The latter is equivalent to 9-year primary education, which is based on learning outcomes and is structured in six levels.

Activities

1. Vocational trainings

309 imprisoned persons (51 women) participated in the activities carried out in both male and female sections of the prison in Idrizovo (near Skopje), prison in Stip, prison in Kumanovo and prison in Prilep.

2. Primary education for adults

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

3. Primary education for convicted juveniles

Since May 2017, five cycles of activities were carried out in the penitentiary institution for juveniles in Volkovija. On average 18 juveniles were included in each cycle. The number of included juveniles fluctuated due to frequent changes in their status, escapes or/and moves in different institutions. All candidates showed progress of at least two levels of the programme. Five juveniles finished the sixth level of the programme. The sixth cycle is in a preparation phase.

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

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 important – on external circumstances related to the process of servicing penalty or changing penitentiary institutions.

After adoption of the Law on AE and establishing the legal base for VNFIL arrangements, it is expected that certificates issued for finishing the sixth level of the programme for primary education for adults are recognised and equalised with the public documents issued for finishing the formal primary education, and allow for vertical mobility in the educational system and 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 the VNFIL arrangements, are common for the sector. Among them are some arrangements used by the ESA, Economic Chamber of North Macedonia, and the Chambers of Handcrafts.

The employment advisors in the ESA units regularly conduct interviews with all registered unemployed adults. For the interviews, they use the instrument developed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). During this activity, the advisor performs a 'profiling' of the candidate's competencies, taking into consideration her/his formal education and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning, as well as the candidate's aptitudes and job interests. Based on this data, 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. Throughout the process, the official standards for occupations and qualifications are used. 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 the employers/companies - initiated activities aimed at assisting the companies in recruiting competent workforce. As an illustration, recently the Chamber delivered trainings in advanced methods of baking for the unemployed bakers with previous experience in the occupation. This process included identification and assessment of the prior knowledge and skills of the candidates, and if successful, finished with an 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 the frames of a project's certification—in 9 occupations:

- installer of electrical installations 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 Handcraft (as described in the 2018 Inventory) in cooperation with the employers performs some measures that are similar to VNFIL. During the process of licencing handcrafters, the commission that evaluates the candidates could perform some forms of assessment and recognition of the prior knowledge and skills.

The main purpose of the described initiatives is to provide the labour market with competent workforce. These institutions have regular cooperation with the vocational sectoral commissions and the VET Centre, and their experiences may add specific value in developing the VNFIL system in the labour market.

Potential lack of validation arrangements in the labour market can be explained with the fact that many employers in various sectors do not require certificates for the respective qualifications/occupations when employing people. In this context, 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 has been no significant developments in the VNFIL arrangements in the third sector since the last Inventory. However, some actors and initiatives have potential to contribute to the scaling up of the VNFIL system.

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

The MLSP in coordination with the Government developed a '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 Governmental measure, it is expected to lead to a significant boost for youth organisations and NGOs to use the opportunities to introduce the VNFIL-related activities for a wide range of persons who are not employed or involved in education or training (NEETs). Considering that the third sector organisations are usually more flexible and adaptable, we can expect a growth in initiatives for cooperation with the labour market and educational institutions for validation purposes.

⁵ <http://trainee-mk.eu>

⁶ According to the Law on Open civic universities for lifelong learning (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 2011), OCULLs 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 toward qualification 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 with the Law on NQF from 2013 and was 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, development of 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 in 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 draft new Law on NQF introduces the possibility for the candidates to obtain them through validation.

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

The draft new Law on NQF clearly postulates the modular structure of qualifications. On the other hand, micro-credentials¹⁰ are a new idea in the country, still to be discussed among relevant stakeholders.

Important development is that the draft new laws on AE and on NQF postulate that the outcome of validation (certificate for vocational qualifications, as well diploma and public document for an educational qualification) will 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-kvalifikacij/>

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 related legislation postulate that validation processes should use the same standards for qualifications and standards for occupations as those registered in the NQF. The NQF defines that a standard for occupation consists of description of competencies needed for a certain job, and 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 define 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 five years – for the purpose of quality assurance and adaptation 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 standards for occupations.

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

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

The structure of institutions and their roles in developing VNFIL systems and implementing VNFIL practices have not changed since 2018 (see the 2018 Inventory). The main stakeholders are the MOES, and the AEC, together with the Coordinative Body and Working Group on validation. In accordance with the Roadmap and with an official Decree of the Director of AEC, the Coordinative Body and the Working Group on VNFIL were established in 2018. The Coordinative Body consists of 14 members, with president and vice-president from MOES. The other members are representatives of the AEC, the VET Centre, the 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 by 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 with their respective roles. Labour market organisations, units of local government, and social partners should also have an important role, which still needs to be defined.

The Law on AE assigns the leading roles in the VNFIL arrangements for the MOES and AEC. The 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.

With the developments in the VNFIL arrangements in the recent years, the position of the AEC in the system has become more important, getting the lead executive role in validation measures. The AEC will be responsible for the development of the VNFIL measures and for providing technical and capacity-building support to the implementation of the VNFIL arrangements. Furthermore, the AEC will be responsible for designing and delivering the trainings for the VNFIL practitioners, preparing packages for providing information, 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 (that way for requirements for assessment of 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 allow various institutions and organisations in all subsectors of education and training, labour market and the third sector to become VNFIL providers, but they all should fulfil the same requirements.

According to the new draft Law on AE, providers will need an accreditation for the VNFIL arrangements by AEC. The precondition for an institution to be accredited is to prove that it has appropriate space, equipment and staff. In this context, the Minister of Education will issue the Norms and standards for accreditation, on a proposition given by the AEC, the VET Centre and BDE. Among the crucial requirements is that the provider-applicant will need to have employed at least one licenced advisor for the VNFIL services and at least one assessor from the respective sector/qualification for the VNFIL services. The provider-applicant will cover the costs for the accreditation process, which are not specified yet. The AEC maintains a register of accredited providers of the VNFIL services. For the validation of educational-type qualifications, the provider needs a verification by MOES as an institution allowed to provide adult education. In the context of the formal education, the Regional VET Centres are expected to establish the leading role in developing good practices for 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 the VNFIL practitioners. In addition, the IPA project, described in section 2.1, is expected to implement measures dedicated to capacity building of providers and VNFIL practitioners as well as activities supporting 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 to Roma marginalised community in the city of Kumanovo, have organised activities aimed to improve the education level of local Roma. The activity aimed to offer a chance to low educated people to improve their education, using arrangements similar to validation. All the activities were carried out in two primary schools in the city.

The NGO DROM has identified the marginalised members of the Roma community in Kumanovo with low education attainment. Similarly to the good practice in the penitentiary institutions, they were offered a chance to be included in an educational/validation process based on the educational programmes prepared for primary education for adults. As explained earlier, the programme is equivalent to 9-year primary education, it is based on learning outcomes and is structured in 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 involved schools.

Fifty-two Roma were included in the activity (22 women). The competencies 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 highest sixth level of the programme. Some needed to learn Macedonian alphabet. During the arrangements, all candidates showed progress of at least one or two levels. They were all awarded with special certificates which included a description of the achieved learning outcomes.

12 women and 12 men succeeded in achieving the (highest) sixth level – equivalent to formal 9-year primary education, and received certificates with a supplement describing the learning outcomes. After adoption of the Law on AE and establishing of the legal base for the VNFIL arrangements, it is expected that these certificates are recognised and equalised with the public documents issued for finished formal primary education to allow for vertical mobility in the educational system and 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. The AEC is the main provider of information to beneficiaries - potential candidates, 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 (free of charge). Various institutions with their units countrywide could fulfil such role: the units of ESA, providers of validation, 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 any interested in the process. In addition, MOES through specific activities promotes the opportunities that VNFIL can offer to particular target groups, as in the cases described as a good practice.

In the last years, two activities for raising awareness about VNFIL were carried out by AEC. During 2019, a seminar was held to raise awareness about the VNFIL processes and benefits, with the participation of 15 representatives 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 Center, ESA, BDE, Public University Joska Svestarov from Strumica, and Education for Employment Project. During the seminar, the participants were introduced to the VNFIL arrangements, and through practical exercises they had an opportunity to learn more about the whole process and possible measures. The purpose of the seminar was also to gather the key stakeholders together in order to discuss the actual status of VNFIL in the country and the possibilities for developments. There was a focus on mechanisms for quality assurance in VNFIL, and on the comparative EU policy review.

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

The promotion of VNFIL is among the main tasks under 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 methods and materials. The 'information points' described in the previous section will serve as a first contact for advice and guidance on validation for candidates. The candidates would be able to get more comprehensive advice and guidance by the advisors for validation from the VNFIL providers. The aim of the advice and guidance aspect in VNFIL is to support the candidates in their preparation for the VNFIL process, during all stages of the process: in self-assessment and

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 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).

identification of the relevant competencies and aptitudes, linking the candidate's competences with the standards, preparing documentation of possessed competences, composition of portfolio, and preparation for assessment of competencies. Advice and guidance tools are not available online yet.

The validation providers will offer advice and guidance services about VNFIL for some compensation fee. For now, national authorities have not discussed and defined the modalities for covering these costs.

8 Validation practitioners

8.1. Profile of validation practitioners

The VNFIL arrangements for validation practitioners have not changed since the last Inventory. The overall role of validation practitioners is determined by the processes of identification, documentation, assessment and documentation. The key-tasks of practitioners are expected to be focused on information for potential candidates about validation, counselling and guidance through the process, and assessment of competencies. The new draft Law on AE postulates only for ‘assessors for validation’ who will be part of the commissions for VNFIL.

8.2. Qualification requirements

The Handbook on assessment in VNFIL describes the requirements for practitioners involved in the validation processes. The document describes that advisors in VNFIL are expected to possess communication and technical competences for counselling activities. The assessors in VNFIL are expected to be skilled in observation and assessment, interviewing, evaluation, as well as to be competent in portfolio assessment, testing candidates, and in development of assessment tools. For both profiles, it is expected from practitioners to have ‘substantial experience’ in the sector which is subject to validation.

The draft new Law on AE postulates that the assessment of the competencies of the candidate for the purpose of VNFIL is performed by a commission formed by the provider of the VNFIL services. All validation practitioners need to be certified by AEC. In order to be certified, the applicants for advisors for validation need to take part in a training for counselling in VNFIL organised by the AEC. Similarly, the applicants for assessors for validation need to enrol in a training for assessment in VNFIL. AEC maintains the Catalogue of certified advisors and assessors for VNFIL. These qualification requirements are the same for the practitioners in all sectors and subsectors.

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

During the last years, standards for qualification ‘Assessor in VNFIL’ and ‘Advisor in VNFIL’ were developed by AEC, and they should become fully operational after the adoption of the relevant laws.

8.3. Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

The AEC designs and provides trainings on the VNFIL processes for all candidates for advisors and assessors in VNFIL. These trainings are not integrated in formal teacher training. As described in section 8.2, these trainings are mandatory for advisors and assessors in VNFIL.

The current legislation does not regulate continuous development of the VNFIL practitioners’ competences, and it is not part of the measures for the quality assurance for VNFIL.

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

Currently, in the framework of the IPA project ‘Increasing Attractiveness, Inclusiveness and Relevance of VET and Adult Education’ (described in section 2.1), planned are important activities in the area of developing competencies of validation practitioners. Among them are the following: revision of the existing and piloted trainings programs for assessors and counsellors; and designing and delivering training programs in VNFIL processes 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 the validation arrangements. Trainings 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 draft new Law on AE and in the Methodology on VNFIL processes. These mechanisms are designed to cover VNFIL in all sectors.

The main mechanisms which 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 the providers verified by MOES for adult education, and accredited by AEC as the providers for VNFIL; and the VNFIL services could be offered only by the advisors and assessors certified by AEC.

In order to assure the quality of validation, 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 postulates for assuring continuous improvement of the VNFIL services. Herein, the providers and the parties involved in VNFIL should perform the following measures:

- internal quality assurance of the activities they undertake, in the sense of evaluation whether the assessments they performed are valid, reliable and feasible, whether the assessors make consistent and correct assessments, and whether the records of assessments are checkable 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 is effective.

The draft new Law on AE postulates that AEC and BDE are responsible for monitoring the quality of VNFIL procedures.

It is expected from Regional VET Centres to contribute significantly to the development of quality assurance mechanisms and quality practices of validation.

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

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

10 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

10.1. Funding

The actual, as well as the draft new legislation do not clearly define the financing of the validation services. The draft new legislation broadly postulates that the costs for validation may be covered by: the state or municipalities budget, international donations or by the candidates themselves. The draft law on AE also postulates that the national Council of Adult Education 'proposes the financing of VNFIL for certain vocational qualifications', and, 'in cooperation with the units of local municipalities proposes the network of institutions for AE and for VNFIL'.

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

The development of the VNFIL arrangements in the last years massively relied on international funding, mostly by ETF, EU IPA funds, and UNDP. Currently, the EU funded IPA projects (described in section 2.1.) financially cover some further developments of the VNFIL arrangements. All these internationally funded initiatives played an important role for establishing the basis of the VNFIL system in the country. The national government and the relevant institutions support and sustain these arrangements.

However, if financial support is not systematically ensured, that might prevent certain underprivileged groups from entering 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 various sources, depending on the decisions by the authorities and international donors.

The basis to determine the fees are the costs for delivery of the VNFIL activities undertaken, plus the fees for the VNFIL practitioners for their expert participation in the commissions.

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

10.3. Evidence of benefits to individuals

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

10.4. Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

10.4.1. Validation trends

Since the VNFIL arrangements are not operational yet, statistics on validation trends do not exist.

10.4.2. Validation users

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

10.4.3. Validation and disadvantaged groups

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

11 Validation methods

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

Validation, as it is designed in these documents, is significantly based on portfolio of evidence, combined with simulation of job practice or observation of job task/practice. Depending on the case, it could be combined with a debate, declarative methods, an interview, a presentation, tests and examinations.

The AEC has developed guidance for preparing a portfolio as a useful tool in preparation and delivery of the validation processes.

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

12 Use of ICT in validation

Although the validation system is still not operational, the draft legislation and Methodology of the VNFIL processes postulate for use of ICT in validation practices. The use of digital tools is expected in all stages and activities aimed to identify, document, assess and/or certify competencies 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 postulates that online databases will be established in order 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 providers of the VNFIL services and the certified VNFIL practitioners.

The Methodology of the VNFIL processes postulates that the use of personal data during validation should be safe and under strict regime of privacy protection.

13 The position of validation in society

Since 2018, there are important developments in the sphere of the VNFIL legislation, which is a precondition for establishing a VNFIL system. Until 2018, legislation considered validation only in the sphere of non-formal education and certification of vocational qualifications. Since then, the draft new legislation on NQF and AE, and legislation on VET – with the Concept on RVETCs, 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 the potential candidates in the educational system and the labour market. In this context, it would be important to provide common understanding about this possibility among stakeholders, and to develop proper procedures and tools for validation of general-education parts of the qualifications.

On the whole, the position of validation in society is improving, although still a lot needs to be done. The visibility of validation is higher among the 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, third sector, and probably most importantly – among the potential candidates. It is partly due to the delays in the legislation reforms and consequently due to the 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 vulnerable.

14 Recommendations

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

Based on most recent developments, recommendations include:

- Awareness about the benefits from VNFIL for the individuals and the economy in the country is still on lower level among various stakeholders in the national institutions and the labour market, and finally among the potential candidates for validation. Hence, well-thought awareness raising initiatives tailored to specific stakeholders and beneficiaries should take place as soon as possible.
- There are significant disparities in perceiving the role of VNFIL in the society among the relevant stakeholders, what is associated with the lack of trust in the VNFIL arrangements. Policy creators and all relevant institutions need to improve their cooperation and, guided by best interest of the society and citizens, work on resolving disparities.
- Given that the issue of lack of trust is mainly caused by a perceived low quality of processes, the relevant stakeholders need to create appropriate quality assurance measures in order to increase the confidence in validation arrangements.
- Current regulations do not define the modes of funding validation. Taking into consideration the benefits of validation for the individuals and the economy, it is recommended to develop progressive schemes for financing of all involved actors and target groups.
- Piloting of the VNFIL showed that current qualification standards in the NQF need revision in order to be applicable for the VNFIL processes (as well as for the non-formal AE programs), considering their modules, learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- The current and draft new legislation do not regulate continuous development of the VNFIL practitioners' competences. It is recommended for the AEC in cooperation with other relevant stakeholders to develop appropriate programs for continuous development of the validation practitioners.
- The AEC needs significant capacity building in order to respond appropriately to massive demands expected for the implementation of the VNFIL arrangements.
- The actual situation on the labour market shows that employers often do not request for certified workforce – what is associated with decreased motivation among potential candidates to enrol in the validation arrangements. It is recommended for the national authorities and relevant stakeholders in the labour market to search for solutions which will improve the value of certification in relation to improving the quality of qualification.
- Current and draft legislation do not define modes for validation of the general-education part of the educational qualifications. In order to avoid bottlenecks in the implementation of validation in this context, it is recommended for relevant stakeholders to create quality solutions for validation based on the learning outcomes envisaged for general education.

Potential that should be further developed

On the other hand, there is significant potential for quality development of the VNFIL arrangements. There are positive developments in the last years with the reforms in legislation, including arrangements

for formal education, which are the solid base for building the system. The legislative solutions make validation possible in almost all sectors.

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

The existing practical guidelines on validation clearly define the roles, processes and criteria for providers and practitioners. They need to be continuously revised in accordance with the developments in the field, in order to provide permanent quality assistance to all actors in the VNFIL system.

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Sources

Details of interviewees:

Name	Organisation	Position	Yes/No*
Natasa Janevska	Economic Chamber of North Macedonia	Table Text	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