

INVENTORY ON THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Country report 2023 Serbia

Disclaimer

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1 Introduction

In Serbia, the term 'recognition of prior learning' (RPL)¹ has been adopted and is legally equated with the term 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' (VN FIL) in accordance with European recommendations². VN FIL is defined as an adult education activity based on the principles of lifelong learning, equal opportunities for inclusion regardless of personal characteristics (age, gender, race, nationality, etc.) and orientation towards learning outcomes that builds competences defined by the qualification standards. On the official websites³ intended for users, it is described as an alternative way of obtaining qualifications – for knowledge and skills that someone already possesses, which they learned outside the formal education system.

The concept began to develop in 2015 when the framework for the introduction and development of the VN FIL system was created. The efforts continued in 2019 when the VN FIL procedures were piloted within the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) 2014 project⁴, which aims to modernise the system of qualifications, connect qualifications with the labour market, and establish a system for VN FIL. The National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS) enabled the development of qualifications standards which describe the learning outcomes that have to be achieved in order to obtain a certain qualification. The same standards are used for the validation of prior learning and skills acquired through work and life.

The VN FIL procedure is currently being implemented in the field of vocational and adult education. The rulebook foresees the assessment of key competences in the general education field as well, but it has not yet been applied since the standards of key competences are still to be developed. The key VN FIL implementing bodies currently are: the Ministry responsible for education, the Qualifications Agency (QA), the Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE) and the primary and secondary schools with the status of Publicly Recognised Organisers of Adult Education (AEPRO).

The VN FIL system in Serbia is in its initial phase. Until recently its implementation was piloted in the context of education for work. It is certainly conditioned by the needs of the labour market and the priorities set by the national strategies. However, there are still numerous challenges for the national VN FIL system, such as increasing the number of VN FIL service providers, the inclusion of labour market stakeholders and assessing the possibility of introducing VN FIL in higher education.

¹ RPL is a term used in Australia, South Africa and Scotland (Despotovic, 2022); The term is also used in Europe though in a slightly more 'overarching' way and especially in higher education <https://www.eua.eu/resources/news/918-recognition-of-prior-learning-launch-of-project-to-establish-a-european-network.html>.

² Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29>.

³ <https://prosveta.gov.rs/prosveta/srednje-obrazovanje/obrazovanje-odraslih/priznavanje-prethodnog-ucenja/>.

⁴ Project 'Development of an integrated system of national qualifications in the Republic of Serbia' 2019-2021

2 National perspective

2.1. Overarching approach to validation

The development and implementation of the VNFIL system in the Republic of Serbia is based on the Law on the National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS), the Law on Adult Education (AE), the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, the Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia 2030⁵ (SDERS), the Strategy for Employment in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021 to 2026⁶, the Economic Reform Programme 2023-2025 (ERP)⁷ and the bylaws:

- Rulebook on the methodology for the development of qualification standards;⁸
- Rulebook on detailed conditions regarding programmes, personnel, space, equipment and teaching aids for acquiring the status of a publicly recognised organiser of adult education activities;⁹
- Rulebook on standards and the way of implementing the procedure of recognition of prior learning;¹⁰
- Methodology for the development of training programmes based on qualification standards.¹¹

Both the Law on NQFS and the Law on AE set out VNFIL as an adult education activity in the context of lifelong learning, providing opportunities for further learning. The Law on NQFS regulates the area of qualifications and its links with the labour market and serves as a basis for implementing the concept of lifelong learning, developing recognition/validation processes in non-formal and informal learning, and increasing competitiveness in the labour market.

The VNFIL system has passed the pilot phase and the corresponding regulations have been adopted but have yet to be systematically incorporated. They regulate the procedures, standards, instruments, and organisation of validation, the planning of the assessment, the portfolio evaluation, the organisation of exams, the evidence of success and issuance of certificates, the terms of accreditation of service providers (i.e. AEPRO), and the monitoring and quality control of VNFIL processes.

According to SDERS, the adoption of the VNFIL processes is essential for the further development of lifelong learning policies, emphasising the need to improve coverage and accessibility to adult education and to expand the network of education providers.

The Annual Plan for Adult Education (APAE), which the Government adopts every year in accordance with the Law on AE, is one of the main instruments for planning and monitoring the achievement of adult learning goals that are set in the strategies, thus embracing VNFIL activities implemented under the IPA

⁵ 'Official Gazette RS', No 30/18, 23 June 2021, <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SROVRS-2030-1.pdf>.

⁶ 'Official Gazette RS' No 18, 1 March 2021, <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/ispravka/2021/36/1>.

⁷ <https://www.mfin.gov.rs/dokumenti2/program-ekonomskih-reformi-erp>.

⁸ 'Official Gazette RS' No 156, 25 December 2020, <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2020/156/4/reg>.

⁹ 'Official Gazette RS' No 89, 27 October 2015,

<https://azk.gov.rs/Biblioteka/Centri/JPOA/Dokumenta/PRAVILNIK%20O%20BLIZIM%20USLOVIMA%20U%20POGLEDU%20PROGRAMA%202021.pdf>.

¹⁰ 'Official Gazette RS' No 148, 10 December 2020, <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2020/148/3/reg>.

¹¹ <http://noks.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Metodologija-za-razvoj-programa-obuke-zasnovanih-na-SK.pdf> EU project 'Education to Employment – E2E', Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

2014 Action. So far, the Annual Plans for Adult Education from 2016 to 2022 have been prepared, as well as their reports for 2018 and 2021.

In Serbia, there are a significant number activities and initiatives that support adults in acquiring a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills according to the recommendations of the 'Upskilling Pathways', but for now they do not cover VNFIL. To mention a few: the Functional Basic Education of Adults (6 080 participants in 2021), Education and Training Programmes for vulnerable groups, Internships for the unemployed with secondary education, etc.

The pilot programme implemented under the IPA 2014 engaged low-skilled persons and those in need of basic qualifications, based on an analysis of labour market needs and unemployment records by the National Employment Service (NES). Intensive cooperation between the competent ministries (employment and education) and other relevant institutions (primarily the NES and educational institutions) is recognised as crucial for the further implementation of VNFIL, as almost one third of registered persons on the NES records are people without qualifications.

Since the VNFIL system in Serbia is still in its early stages of development, financial schemes such as individual learning accounts are not applicable.

At the policy level, possible obstacles/risks such as lack of information of potential candidates and social partners about the VNFIL procedures have been identified, and activities to mitigate the adverse effects of these risks are foreseen: these include organising meetings and information sessions to inform potential candidates and social partners about the VNFIL procedures¹².

2.2. Validation in education and training

VNFIL is set in the framework of AE and lifelong learning, which is part of the education system in the Republic of Serbia. The legislation provides a broad platform for AE, which is achieved through formal and non-formal education, and informal learning. In this sense, it includes all learning opportunities undertaken by younger and older adults who are outside the regular cycle of education. The Law on AE states that AE is based on AE curricula or parts of appropriate programmes for regular students by which adults acquire key and vocational competences as well as qualifications needed for personal and professional development, work, employment, and socially responsible behaviour. Through the VNFIL procedure, learning outcomes and competences are assessed as part of the selected qualification standard, among which are key competences which belong to the general part of primary and vocational education for adults. However, the assessment of key competences has not yet taken place as part of the VNFIL processes because the standards of key competences are yet to be developed. Their development is planned within a forthcoming EU IPA 2020 project¹³. Accordingly, for the time being the VNFIL has been implemented only within the framework of adult and vocational education.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MOESTD), IIE and QA have a national coordinating role, and the coordination of VNFIL is established entirely at the national level. The regional principle is included in the sense of examining local needs, e.g. collecting data on potential candidates and providers who can perform validation.

However, the regulatory framework provides for a regional approach. In order to monitor the achievements of AE more effectively, the Law on AE provides for an opportunity for the establishment of Councils for AE by local self-government units. The self-governments may provide financial resources for Councils, or Councils could also be formed as part of existing local social economic councils or employment councils. This possibility represents an opportunity for further the development of VNFIL according to the needs of local labour markets.

¹² Economic Reform Programme 2023-2025 (ERP).

¹³ Project *Increased offer and diversification of accredited informal training courses and adult training service providers*.

The NQFS defines VNFI as one of the ways to obtain a qualification and thus the VNFI and NQFS systems are linked. A qualification obtained through the process of validation/RPL in the labour market is equivalent to a qualification obtained through formal education and provides further access to formal education¹⁴. In this way, it is possible to acquire the entire qualification, confirmation for several competences (for one occupation), or one competency at the 2nd, 3rd and 5th levels of the NQFS. Credit transfers according to the NQFS apply only to higher education and is not applied within the VNFI.

The concept and procedures of VNFI generally adhere to the four stages of validation (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification) as illustrated in the example below.

Example of a procedure for the RPL (VNFI)

The first step is informing the candidate. The interested person submits an application to the appropriate school/AEPRO for acquiring information on the procedure for VNFI. The counsellor for VNFI schedules an introductory meeting based on the person's application. It is necessary for the interested person to bring his/her curriculum vitae at the introductory meeting, which should contain relevant data on education, work and life experience. Based on the CV, the counsellor identifies the competences or qualification standards as a potential reference for VNFI. If the candidate does not have a CV, the adviser helps the candidate compile it with the support of the Europass CV tool. The counsellor also introduces the candidate to all aspects and requirements of the procedure – assessment methods, counterparts in the procedure, assessment plan, deadlines, subsequent costs, etc. The introductory meeting is free of charge.

The second step is acquiring the status of candidate for VNFI. If, after the introductory meeting, the interested person decides to start the procedure, they submit a request to the school for VNFI, acquire the status of candidate and receive the right to counselling and guidance. The mutual rights and obligations between the school/AEPRO and the candidate are determined by the contract.

The third step is self-assessment of the candidate, collection of evidence, and creation of the candidate's portfolio. The candidate receives a self-assessment form from the adviser and instructions for gathering evidence of learning outcomes and competences for the creation of a portfolio. Within 30 days (this deadline may be extended), the candidate collects and submits evidence of his/her relevant life and work experience and submits it to the adviser. Evidence can be diplomas, certificates, licences, employer references, work reports, and proof of work, i.e. samples and photos, videos of the candidate performing a specific job, a statement from the candidate, a completed educational programme, meeting minutes, action plans, acknowledgments, etc. The counsellor and evaluator from the school, together with the candidate, analyse the collected evidence of previously acquired learning outcomes and competences and determine the evidence that is related to the standard of qualifications, after which an assessment plan is developed and an appointment is scheduled for the evaluation of learning outcomes and competences.

The fourth step is the assessment of the candidate's learning outcomes and competences. It is carried out by a 3-member commission formed by the school/AEPRO. The

¹⁴ At the end of the VNFI procedure, by successfully passing the exam, the individual acquires a qualification or part of the qualification (a vocational competence or a group of competences that compose a certain vocation). Based on the record from the exam, the school issues a certificate of the achieved standard of qualifications as a whole, if the exam tested all learning outcomes (competences) or approval for a partially achieved standard of qualifications (vocational competences or vocation) if the exam tested selected competences. The form and content of the certificate are prescribed by the (2022) *Rulebook on the type, title, and content of forms and the method of keeping records and the name, content, and appearance of the forms of public documents and certificates in adult education*. In this way, the certificate obtained through VNFI is equal to the certificate of formal education.

commission consists of two evaluators from the school and one evaluator from the corresponding economic sector.

The fifth step is an exam to assess the achievement of learning outcomes and candidate competences. The candidate receives the notification of the exam date at least 15 days before the exam. Tasks can combine multiple learning outcomes and competences, regardless of the assessment method (written test, oral test, checks in a real/simulated work environment, etc.). For each task, regardless of the evaluation method, the candidate is evaluated as 'passed' or 'failed'. The commission determines the grade by majority vote. The candidate has passed the exam if he/she is rated as 'passed' for each task. The parts of the exam (written test, oral test, practical work) can be organised on different days, but it must be completed within 10 days from the day of the first part of the exam.

The sixth step is the issuance of a public document and certificate. The school/AEPRO issues a corresponding public document (certificate or approval) to the candidate who passes the exam. To a candidate who does not pass the said exam, the school issues a certificate of learning outcomes and/or competences recognised in the process of RPL, and the adviser for RPL recommends the further steps necessary for the candidate to reach the standard of qualifications as a whole.

Source: <https://prosveta.gov.rs/prosveta/srednje-obrazovanje/obrazovanje-odraslih/priznavanje-prethodnog-ucenja/>

At the outset, the VNFIL processes are complex and require plenty of time and commitment from candidates who are outside the regular education system. For workers with lower or non-existent qualifications, the chances of finding a decent job would be significantly higher if their previously acquired knowledge and experience could be recognised, namely by obtaining a public document/certificate providing them with greater chances of employment in the labour market, but also mobility through overall education system.

2.3. Validation in the labour market

The labour market applies additional education and training measures, but so far the labour market actors have not been included in the VNFIL processes and did not participate in the pilot programme with schools. Their future participation in the VNFIL procedure is planned within the forthcoming EU IPA 2020 project.

The employer surveys conducted by the NES once a year assess the current and future needs of employers for qualified persons and the needed knowledge, skills and competences. The Strategy and the National Employment Action Plan provide for the implementation of employment policies and programmes aimed at the development of human capital, among other objectives, through short trainings to increase the competences of unemployed persons¹⁵, enabling them to acquire knowledge and skills.

¹⁵ In the last quarter of 2021, persons without qualifications or with a low level of education accounted for 34.3% of total registered unemployment, persons with secondary education accounted for 51.6%, and persons with higher education accounted for 14.1%.

Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs and NES

According to the Action Plan for the period from 2021 to 2023 for the implementation of the Employment Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2021 to 2026, the implementation of the following additional education and training measures was planned for 2022:

- Professional practice, with a projected coverage of 4 200 unemployed persons;
- Internships for the young people with higher education, with a projected coverage of 600 unemployed persons;
- Internships for the unemployed with secondary education, with a projected coverage of 550 unemployed persons;
- Acquisition of practical knowledge, with a projected coverage of 860 unemployed persons;
- Training for the labour market, with a projected coverage of 500 unemployed persons and 500 unemployed persons with disabilities;
- Training for persons without a high school diploma and persons completing primary education according to the model of functional primary education for adults (FOOO), which are conducted by publicly recognised organisers of AE activities (AEPRE) and/or secondary vocational schools that issue a publicly recognised certificate, with a projected coverage of 200 unemployed persons;
- Specialist IT training in accordance with the needs of the labour market;
- Training at the employer's request - for the unemployed, with a projected coverage of 600 unemployed persons;
- Training for the needs of employees (increasing competences, acquiring missing knowledge, abilities, and skills of employees for the needs of the workplace and to maintain employment);
- Functional basic education for adults with a projected coverage of 1 500 unemployed persons.

Source: Annual plan for adult education 2022¹⁶

Previously, in the absence of accredited trainings, the NES had to engage training service providers who could not provide participants with a public document/certificate, but only an internal confirmation of the acquired qualification. In order to ensure the quality of training and the acquisition of market-relevant competences, a significant shift was made in the development of training according to qualification standards developed by the QA¹⁷. In this way, employers as well as the unemployed have clear information on the learning outcomes that are confirmed by each qualification, occupation, or professional competence within the qualification. In order to increase the number of education service providers and accredited training programmes, it was necessary to motivate institutions to become accredited as AEPRE. During 2021, through the cooperation between the MOESTD and the 'Education to Employment'¹⁸ project, standards for self-evaluation and external evaluation of the AEPRE were developed and the AEPRE approval process was further developed. However, there are still numerous non-formal training providers with varying capacities who are yet to implement relevant standards and regulations allowing for the award of a formal qualification.

At the beginning of 2023, AEPRE status had been conferred to 139 institutions (primary and secondary vocational schools, and other organisations such as companies, business associations, national

¹⁶ <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Godisnji-plan-obrazovanja-odraslih-2022-final.pdf>.

¹⁷ (2020 Aleksic, Arandarenko, Ognjanovic).

¹⁸ <https://znanjemdoposla.rs/en>.

workers' universities, institutes, etc.), for a total of 575 training programmes for adults.¹⁹ In 2021, a further 47 institutions received AEPRO status for a total of 151 new training programmes intended for adults, representing a significant and growing trend in the number of organisations and accredited programmes compared to previous years²⁰.

AEPRO can be a school or other organisation that has an approval/decision on verification from the MOESTD regarding the fulfilment of the conditions for acquiring the status of AEPRO. These conditions cover the teaching programmes, personnel, space, equipment, and teaching aids, including the accessibility of teaching and programmes for people with disabilities. The procedure for obtaining the status of AEPRO is prescribed by the Law on NQFS and Law on AE, and the procedure partially differs depending on whether it is a non-formal education programme or a VNFIL activity. Approval of AEPRO status for the implementation of AE activities for other organisations is managed by the QA. The procedure in which schools acquire the status of AEPRO is specific due to the application of the provisions on extended activity as regulated by the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System.

2.4. Validation in the third sector

VNFIL has not yet been implemented in the third sector. However, there are various initiatives in the third sector for youth organisations of various types that are supported by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS) through activities such as training programmes, expert forums, and round tables. Since 2010, MOYS has enabled a large number of youth associations and informal youth groups to undergo training in the field of project writing and implementation (developing project ideas into project proposals, implementation, and reporting) and project cycle management. Every year, as part of the 'Youth are the law'²¹ programme, a public call is published for the submission of project ideas by youth associations and informal youth groups for the implementation of volunteer projects aimed at contributing to the life of young people in the local community. MOYS also supports raising the capacity of young people for more active involvement in EU programmes such as Erasmus+.

The EU Erasmus+²² programme, which finances mobility and cooperation projects in the field of education, youth training, and sports, has been implemented in the country since 2014. Serbia has been a full member of EU Erasmus+ since 2019 with the status of third country associated with the Programme, and since 2021 it has been in a new 7-year period, until 2027. One of the objectives of the Programme is to support the educational, personal, and professional development of individuals in the field of education, youth, and sports through lifelong education. Legal entities, i.e. institutions and organisations that directly or indirectly deal with education, can participate in the Erasmus+ programme.

Youthpass, as a recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning is used by youth organisations in Serbia since 2007.²³ Although it cannot certify skills as part of the qualification, it is widely used by individuals and organisations as a confirmation and documentation of skills acquired through voluntary activities and youth projects²⁴.

Since 2014, Foundation Tempus has been responsible for the implementation of the education component of the extensive Erasmus+ Programme for education, youth and sport. During 2021, the Foundation awarded 18 projects in the youth sector.²⁵

¹⁹ <https://prosveta.gov.rs/prosveta/srednje-obrazovanje/obrazovanje-odraslih/javno-priznati-organizatori-obrazovanja-odraslih/>.

²⁰ APAE Report 2022.

²¹ <https://www.mos.gov.rs/vest/online-platforma-mladi-su-zakon?lang=lat#>.

²² <https://erasmusplus.rs/erasmus-program/o-programu/>.

²³ <https://youth.rs/archives/356>.

²⁴ <https://www.youthpass.eu/en/search/?search%5Bquery%5D=Serbia&search%5Bsubmit%5D=>.

²⁵ Annual report for EC 2022.

3. Links to national qualifications framework (NQF)

The regulation of the VNFIL system started with the legal solutions in the field of AE. After the adoption of the Law on NQS, the institutional system of NQFS was established. The modernisation of the qualifications system is an integral part of the EU accession negotiation process and is included in Chapter 26 of the *acquis - Education and culture*, with a link to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and workforce mobility. The NQFS enables the systematic identification, creation, and arrangement of qualifications in accordance with the requirements of the labour market and lifelong learning. All qualifications that can be acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning as well as through the VNFIL process, are classified and described in detail by levels and sectors of education. Therefore, the NQFS is an open system which accommodates various routes for obtaining qualifications and opportunities for horizontal and vertical mobility including academic and labour mobility.

The NQFS is used by all interested stakeholders from the sphere of work and education, state institutions, public services and funds, companies, AEPROM, experts in career guidance, counselling, and employment, developers of education and training programmes, schools, teachers, instructors, students, and examiners.

National qualifications are classified according to complexity into eight levels and four sub-levels. The first five levels refer to general and vocational education, while the sixth, seventh, and eighth levels belong to higher education. Each level of qualifications is defined by a description of skills, abilities, and attitudes needed to perform the job or for further education.

Traditionally, qualifications in Serbia are acquired through the formal education system. As a result of the introduction of more flexible ways of obtaining qualifications, new legal solutions in the field of AE regulate the way of recognising qualifications in the informal system. The implementation of the NQFS, in addition to the formal way of acquiring qualifications in primary, secondary, and higher education, opens the possibility of establishing a system for VNFIL. The Law on NQFS foresees VNFIL for obtaining qualifications at level 1, 2, 3, and 5. Qualifications and competences (vocational and key) can be acquired through non-formal education, through AE activities, primarily for the purpose of training, improving, or changing profession or job, in accordance with the qualification standard of the AEPROM.

Essentially speaking, there is a difference only in the paths or methods of acquiring qualifications:

- Formal path - qualifications are acquired by attending a programme in the system of formal primary, secondary, or higher education, after which a diploma or certificate is issued;
- Non-formal path - qualifications are acquired in the AE system, in different forms, most often through training after which a certificate or approval is issued;
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning - qualifications are acquired on the basis of work or life experience, through a special procedure, after which a certificate is issued or approval for a certain parts of qualification.

The NQFS register is active, easily accessible online, and regularly updated. The list of qualifications, which includes more than 4 600 qualifications, represents one of the basic instruments for monitoring compliance of the needs of the labour market and education. All qualifications included in the NQFS are classified within the NQFS Register²⁶, which is publicly available on the NQFS portal of the Agency for Qualifications, and which consists of:

- the sub-register of national qualifications for the purposes of managing data on qualifications, classified by level and type, in accordance with the National Qualification Classification System (NQCS), which is based on the international standard of education classification (ISCED 13-F);

²⁶ <https://noks.azk.gov.rs/pretraga-registara/pretraga-nacionalnih-kvalifikacija.html>.

- the sub-register of qualification standards for the purposes of managing data on qualification standards;
- the AEPRO sub-register for the purposes of managing data on AEPRO for which approvals have been granted or revoked, approved AE activities and employers where AEPRO carry out their practical work.

At the moment²⁷, there are 1 497 active and 3 189 archived qualifications presented in the register. The active qualifications are a part of the current educational offer, while the archived ones are those qualifications that were acquired in the past and are still relevant for employment, since they are held by those who are active in the labour market.²⁸

The NQFS register enables the qualification system of the Republic of Serbia to be transparent, comparable, and accessible to all citizens. In addition to navigating the register, the NQFS portal also enables the electronic submission of initiatives for the development and adoption of qualification standards, which digitises and accelerates the process of proposing new qualifications.

The number of qualification standards is increasing continuously. In 2020, 32 qualification standards were developed. In 2021, a total of 61 qualification standards were developed and 29 proposals were submitted, in accordance with the methodology for developing qualification standards.

The NQFS promotes learning outcomes, ensuring that the education system builds on the competences defined in the qualification standards. The NQFS refers to learning outcomes in the educational context, the market context, and the individual context. In education and training programmes, they describe what learners know and are able to do upon successful completion of the programme, and prescribe corresponding assessment criteria. They also guide individual learners and educational programme implementers in the teaching and learning processes and in the selection of the learning methodology. In the context of the labour market, learning outcomes can be used for job advertisements, employment contracts, as well as various aspects of human resources management. They are also used as a representation of the competence and competitiveness of individuals, in the agreed forms of curriculum vitae describing the acquired learning outcomes (e.g. supplement to diplomas, Europass curriculum vitae, etc.).

The qualification is seen as formal recognition of acquired competences defined by standards. An individual acquires a qualification when the competent authority determines that he/she has achieved learning outcomes at a certain level and according to a given qualification standard, which is confirmed by a public document, diploma or certificate. By successfully passing the VNFI procedure, the candidate acquires recognition of the qualification as a whole, or the selected learning outcomes and competences determined by the qualification standard, at least at the level of one profession. A candidate who proves learning outcomes and competence in the procedure is issued a corresponding document in accordance with the law and bylaws, namely:

- certificate on the achieved qualification standard as a whole, for qualifications of levels 1-3 and 5 of the NQFS;
- approval of partially achieved qualification standard - at the level of at least one profession covered by the qualification standard;
- certificate on the achieved standard of key competences for the level of basic education of adults;
- certificate on the achieved standard of key competences for the general education part of secondary professional education for adults (which is not in use yet).

²⁷ <https://noks.azk.gov.rs/pretraga-registara/pretraga-nacionalnih-kvalifikacija.html> (accessed on 6.5.2023).

²⁸ Rulebook on the content and manner of keeping the Register of the National Framework of Qualifications of the Republic of Serbia, <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2020/159/17/reg>.

According to the NQFS, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) applies only to higher education, i.e. NQFS levels 6 to 8. One ECTS point corresponds to a total of 30 hours spent to acquire the corresponding learning outcomes. The scope of the qualification is determined by teachers and other implementers for their learning areas, where it is necessary to estimate the time in direct teaching, independent learning, and the time to check the achievement of learning outcomes. Time is estimated for an average successful student/pupil under ideal learning conditions. Once the total time is determined, credit points are determined by dividing the total time by the determined time of one credit (i.e. 30 in higher education). When credit points are not introduced, as it relates to NQFS levels 1 to 5, the scope of the qualification is expressed in terms of duration in years, months, or hours, which represent the total workload of individuals. An applicant of the initiative for the development of qualification standards provides a proposal for the scope of the qualification, along with an explanation of the calculation.

4. Standards and reference points

The main reference point of the VNFIL system in Serbia is the Qualification Standard (QS). For each qualification, there is a standard – a document determined in accordance with the Law on NQFS, which contains a detailed description of the goals and learning outcomes that must be achieved in order to obtain the qualification. The QS contains data on the qualification which determines its level, classification, and evaluation. The QS describes the content of a certain qualification at the national level, regardless of the institution where the qualification can be obtained.²⁹ The QS also represents the basis for obtaining a qualification in vocational education and determines vocational competences for performing work. It is used as a basis for the development of the education/training programme, which is the structural framework for the organisation of the learning process, the basis for the implementation of the programme (teachers, instructors, conditions of learning) as well as the basis of the assessment standards. In this sense, the QS becomes directly or indirectly an instrument for validating education/training programmes. Consequently, the QS represents a reference point in the education and training sub-sectors as well as the labour market. The term education/training programme is equated with the terms teaching and learning plan and programme/curriculum, study programme, and AE programme.

The QA site contains a publicly available overview of qualification standards. There are currently 90 newly adopted QS which are entered in the Register.³⁰

²⁹ <http://noks.mpn.gov.rs/>.

³⁰ https://azk.gov.rs/centri_rkipsv.php.

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

In the previous decades, the demand for new qualifications was driven by the education sector, with the desire to make the educational offer diverse and attractive. In regard to the development of the NQFS system, which also includes the VNIFIL, cooperation was achieved between the most important institutions and bodies in the field of education and the labour market. The initiative to introduce qualifications at the proposal of representatives of employers, the civil society sector, and trade unions, i.e. all those interested in improving the quality of education, is being increasingly developed, and it is expected that it will also be extended to the VNIFIL practices planned by all relevant policies and strategies.

The relevant institutions and bodies responsible for the development and implementation of the VNIFIL system with their roles are: MOESTD – implements the procedure for approving the status of AEPRE for schools, prescribes standards for self-evaluation and external quality control of AEPRE, prescribes the ways of implementing the VNIFIL procedure and adopts the qualification standard; Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs (MoELVSA) – participates with its representatives in Sector Councils; NES – strategies foresee that experts from the economy participate in the VNIFIL procedure; IIE and its CVAE – determines the list of qualifications by levels and types that can be acquired through the VNIFIL, evaluates instruments and standards for RPL, provides training for counsellors and evaluators; QA – gives approval to other organisations to acquire AEPRE status, performs external quality control of AEPRE; Sector councils (SC) – as social partners; primary and secondary schools / AEPRE - accredited performers of VNIFIL procedures with an expert base who participate in the procedure.

The roles of organisations and institutions within the VNIFIL system, career guidance, provision of education and training as well as their interdepartmental coordination are defined by the Law on NQS, the Law on AE, and the previously mentioned strategies and by-laws, such as the Rulebook on standards and methods of conducting the VNIFIL procedure, the Rulebook on the regulation of closer conditions for acquiring the status of AEPRE and about the methodology for the development of competence standards.

The strategies define special goals and the planned activities, such as the formation of a base of experts for the implementation of the NQFS system, i.e. experts from schools and professionals who participate in the VNIFIL procedure. For now, the coordination of the employment service and providers of education, training, and career guidance exists but has not yet developed in the provision of VNIFIL services. The focus is on extending the piloting to other schools and analysing the possibility of applying the procedure in higher education and AEPRE other than schools. Start-ups and social impact enterprises are not among VNIFIL service providers.

6. VN FIL service providers

A school can acquire the AEPRO status for the VN FIL activity only for those qualifications/competences for which it also acquired the AEPRO status for the AE activity. If a school does not have the status of AEPRO for non-formal education, it simultaneously submits a request for extended activity to acquire the status of AEPRO for non-formal education activities and for the acquisition of AEPRO status for VN FIL procedures.

A school/AEPRO that has obtained accreditation for the VN FIL procedure has the obligation to form a Team for VN FIL, which is composed of advisers for VN FIL, evaluators from schools, and evaluators from the corresponding economic sectors. The first two categories of VN FIL practitioners are school employees. For each qualification standard within which the VN FIL procedure is implemented, the school must have at least four evaluators from the school and two evaluators from the corresponding economic sector. When recognition against the standard of key competences is carried out, teachers of general education subjects will be included in the VN FIL Team as evaluators from the school. If there is not a sufficient number of teachers who can be evaluators, the school can hire teachers from other schools who have the necessary competences in accordance with the standards established by the relevant rulebook.

There is no data available on the budgeting of the VN FIL procedure, while data on the financing of AEPRO trainings are available. According to the APAE for 2021, it is observed that the candidates' own resources were the major source of funding for training by the AEPRO. For example, for the implementation of approved programmes in 2021, the sources of funds indicated by accredited AEPROs were candidates' own funds (57%), legal entities (22%), NES funds (9%), local self-government funds (6%), companies (2%), employers who finance continuing training and development of employees (4%).

The VN FIL services are not incorporated as strategic priorities of schools with AEPRO status, but they can be part of the school's strategic development plan.

In the process of approving the AEPRO status, the fulfilment of conditions and standards, i.e. the non-formal education programme and instruments for VN FIL are assessed, as well as the fulfilment of conditions in terms of staff, space, equipment, and teaching aids, quality control, etc. The quality of the AE programme is evaluated by the QA, while CVAE evaluates the instruments for implementing the VN FIL procedure. The QA assesses the staffing requirements for AE activities, and the VN FIL activity is checked by MOESTD or the Provincial Secretariat for Education for Schools from the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The conditions in terms of space, equipment, and teaching aids needed for AE are checked by the educational inspection of MOESTD after receiving a positive assessment of the training programme/instruments for VN FIL. Based on the positive findings of the educational inspector, the QA or MOESTD/Provincial Secretariat issues a decision approving the status of AEPRO. The Agency conducts the external quality control of the AEPRO's work for all adult education activities.

The cost and value of VN FIL services have not yet been defined since in the early phase of the VN FIL implementation the business concept of the schools that are accredited is not yet established. It is up to the schools and VN FIL teams themselves to promote their activities and attract individuals and employers to enter the process.

Within the EU IPA 2014 project, support was provided to schools and their teams for the implementation of the VN FIL procedure through short trainings. The rulebooks stipulate that the members of the VN FIL team should have professional competences for working with adults.

In 2021, after the pilot phase, the Polytechnic School from Subotica, Technical School from Vlasotince and Technical School 'Drvo art' from Belgrade, received accreditation and verification of expanded activity for VN FIL for a total of 10 programmes. In the meantime, one more school has acquired accreditation for VN FIL. Also, six more schools are being trained for accreditation for the VN FIL procedure with the support of GIZ and their Vocational Education Reform Project in Serbia. In the coming period, a study on the possibilities of implementing the VN FIL procedures in 10 accredited

AEPRO that are not schools is planned, and support is also planned to 80 AEPRO for selecting 800 persons for participation in VNFIL within the upcoming EU IPA 2020 project.

7. Information and guidance

7.1. Information, outreach and promotion

The issue of insufficient awareness of possible users/beneficiaries and social partners about the procedures and benefits of VNFIL was identified in the previous section. The aforementioned policies and strategies formulated the information activities about the VNFIL procedures in their action plans.

Some schools/AEPROs provide general information about VNFIL services on their websites, mostly through promotional videos, e.g. Technical School 'Drvo art' and Technical School of Vlasotince³¹.

The accessible and clear websites of MOESTD, QA and NQFS³² provide links with instructions, information and application forms for the VNFIL service providers and for those interested in the procedure. The Guide for acquiring AEPRO status is available online, and it is user-friendly, containing all the necessary information that is stipulated by the rulebooks³³.

Media campaigns as well as field activities towards potential users and coverage of disadvantaged groups have not been covered so far. The responsibility for information, outreach and promotion in VNFIL is not specifically delegated.

With the planned introduction of the new 80 schools in piloting VNFIL procedures, a broad campaign of awareness raising and promotion of non-formal adult education and VNFIL will follow.

7.2. Advice and guidance

A list of accredited schools/AEPROs, and of which qualifications they offer for the VNFIL procedure, can be found in the list of all accredited AEPROs³⁴.

According to the concept of the development and implementation of the VNFIL, the information phase is an integral part of the entire VNFIL procedure.

Individual users can obtain information about the procedure online, on the aforementioned website of the MOESTD. Users can receive personal guidance at the school/AEPRO, free of charge, as part of an introductory meeting with a counsellor. Tips and guidelines during the procedure are intended to support interested persons to prepare for the process. The process begins with informing the interested person about the VNFIL processes and continues with counselling, guidance, and support in self-assessment, collection of evidence, and the creation of the candidate's portfolio. At the introductory meeting, the interested person brings his/her CV, and if he/she does not have one or it is not suitable, the VNFIL adviser helps him/her to compile it with the help of the Europass tool for creating a CV, which will contain relevant data on education, work and life experience and contact information.

³¹ <http://www.drvorart.edu.rs/strana.aspx?id=143>
<https://tsvlasotince.edu.rs/2021/12/15/%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%9a%d0%b5-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%82%d1%85%d0%be%d0%b4%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%b3-%d1%83%d1%87%d0%b5%d1%9a%d0%b0/>.

³² <https://prosveta.gov.rs/prosveta/srednje-obrazovanje/obrazovanje-odraslih/priznavanje-prethodnog-ucenja/>
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³³ <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Vodic-za-sticanje-statusa-JPOA.pdf>.

³⁴ <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fprosveta.gov.rs%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2023%2F05%2F616-SPISAK-JPOA-25052023.xls&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>.

8 Validation practitioners

8.1. Profile of validation practitioners

The profile of validation practitioners is provided by the rulebook on VNFIL. The main roles in validation process are the VNFIL adviser (hereinafter 'adviser'), the school evaluator and the evaluator from the corresponding economic sector. The school evaluator for the validation of key competences is foreseen by the rulebook but this role is not yet applied in VNFIL procedures.

The introductory information meeting is led by the adviser, a person employed by the school. After the person interested to pass the VNFIL procedure acquires the status of VNFIL candidate, the adviser continues counselling together with another team member, i.e. the school evaluator, also employed by the school. According to data from the biography and the interview, the adviser and evaluator identify the qualification standard within which there is a possibility for recognition and inform the user of all aspects and requirements of the procedure. They concern above all: the drafting of the self-assessment form, dealing with evidence needed to develop the portfolio, the content of the candidate report, the candidate's assessment and evaluation plan, learning outcomes and competences that can be assessed within the chosen qualification standard, possible assessment methods such as written, practical test, project, simulation, etc.; documents that can be issued in the VNFIL procedure and opportunities for career development and mobility in the NQFS system if the validation is obtained. The adviser draws up a memo about the interview with the interested person.

On the basis of the completed self-assessment form and the candidate's portfolio, the adviser and evaluator prepare a report containing the learning outcomes and competences that the candidate was able to prove, as well as those that will be the subject of assessment in the exam. They also prepare the assessment plan. It is an instrument that enables the quantitative and qualitative demonstration of the candidate's competences and learning outcomes in the exam. The assessment plan contains tasks for performing practical work (in a real work environment or simulation in the school workshop/laboratory if it is not possible to organise a real work environment), and at least one more way of checking - tasks for assessment through a written or oral test.

The assessment of learning outcomes and of candidate competences is carried out by a 3-member commission formed by the school, composed of two evaluators from the school and one evaluator from the corresponding economic sector. The school evaluator who participated in the creation of the portfolio and report of the candidate cannot be a member of the commission.

8.2. Qualification requirements

According to the standards and the method of conducting the VNFIL procedure, there are mandatory requirements for the VNFIL team members who take part in the procedure. A counsellor for VNFIL can be a teacher or professional associate, employed at the school and should possess the competences of career practitioners, in accordance with the standards of career guidance and counselling services.

The school evaluator is an employed teacher of professional subjects/practical classes at the school who should have at least 5 years of work experience as a teacher and possess appropriate competences for the qualification standard whose achievement is assessed by the VNFIL procedure.

The school evaluator participating in the VNFIL procedure for key competences should be a teacher of general education subjects, with at least 5 years of work experience as a teacher, but this procedure is not yet in use because the standards of key competences have not yet been developed.

The evaluator from the corresponding economic sector should have a qualification of at least the same level as the level of qualification whose achievement is being assessed in the VNFIL procedure and at least 5 years of work experience in an occupation relevant to the qualification whose achievement is

being assessed in the VN FIL procedure. The evaluator can also be a mentor of the employer in dual education.

In addition to the above, the members of the VN FIL Team should have professional competences for working with adults acquired on accredited training programmes for VN FIL as well as for competency-based assessment in vocational education.

8.3. Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

Training for the acquisition of professional competences is organised by IIE through the professional development of teachers. The initial training of practitioners for VN FIL has been developed; it is mandatory and accredited according to the rulebook, but continuing professional development training on VN FIL is not proposed. However, the teachers from school accredited for AEPRO, based on self-assessment, can choose other trainings from the catalogue of accredited trainings, which they might find useful in providing VN FIL services.

9 Quality assurance

The quality assurance framework is provided by the rulebook on VN FIL. The fifth standard for the VN FIL procedure is Quality Control - the school should develop internal quality control mechanisms for the VN FIL procedure. The following instructions for the application of the fifth standard are given:

- The school has an established self-evaluation plan for the VN FIL procedure, which is available to the public.
- Through self-evaluation, the school assesses the quality of the VN FIL procedure, the continuous training and professional development of employees engaged in the VN FIL Team, the conditions by which the procedure is carried out, the satisfaction of candidates, i.e. adults who have passed the VN FIL procedure at the school, as well as employers who participate in the procedure, and also other representatives of the labour market and vocational associations.
- The school is forming a special team for quality assurance including teachers, professional associates, non-teaching staff and representatives of employers who participate in the implementation of the VN FIL procedure.

The quality assurance of the VN FIL procedure is prescribed to be carried out through self-evaluation conducted by the school itself and external evaluation carried out by the QA, in accordance with the law and rulebook establishing the standards for external evaluation and self-evaluation of AEPRO.

IIE is responsible for the competences of teachers who provide VN FIL services.

The VN FIL rulebook includes instructions on assessment processes, tools and methods, assessment criteria, as well as counselling and guidance procedures, documentation identification, certification and appeals procedures. External audit for AEPRO which are not schools will be performed by QA. The standards, procedures, and instruments for self-evaluation and external evaluation of AEPRO will be fine-tuned during the forthcoming EU IPA 2020 project.

10. Inputs, outputs and outcomes

10.1. Funding

The VNFIL is currently financed by the EU and other donor funds. Funding sources are not yet addressed by the existing regulatory framework documents dealing with VNFIL.

Within the project 'Vocational Education Reform Project in Serbia' implemented by GIZ, and its component 'Preparation for Self-Assessment Procedures in VNFIL Processes', capacity building activities in six schools are currently being carried out to support the schools in their application for accreditation as VNFIL providers. In addition, the implementation of the EU IPA Project 'Increased Offer and Diversification of Accredited Informal Training Courses and Adult Training Service Providers' is expected to start during 2023 which, among other components will address the funding mechanisms.

The national government fully supports these initiatives.

10.2. Distribution of costs

For the time being, VNFIL services are funded by projects and the procedure is free of charge for users. As part of the current pilot project financed by GIZ as well as the future EU IPA project, the distribution of costs for VNFIL procedures will be calculated.

10.3. Evidence of benefits to individuals

So far there are no monitoring arrangements of VNFIL and also no evidence of the benefits of the VNFIL processes.

10.4. Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

10.4.1. Validation trends

Considering the current level of development of the VNFIL system, a statistical monitoring of the number of service providers of the VNFIL procedure and the qualifications offered for recognition has not yet been carried out.

10.4.2. Validation users

Not applicable, there are no statistical data on the target groups of the VNFIL procedure.

10.4.3. Validation and disadvantaged groups

For the time being, groups in a disadvantaged position are not covered by special measures for participation in VNFIL processes. In the forthcoming EU IPA Project, in addition to the unemployed and young people, vulnerable groups, non-qualified persons and persons with disabilities are targeted.

11. Validation methods

The most common validation/assessment methods used in VN FIL procedures are self-assessment, fixed-answer and multiple-choice questions, open-ended assessment, dialogue/interview, observation, portfolio of evidence, presentation, simulation and controlled work practice.

Validation methods used so far within the piloting in EU IPA 2014 have proven to be reliable and adapted to the target group.

12. Use of ICT in validation

Digital tools are currently not in use within the VN FIL procedure, but the intention is to include them in the forthcoming EU IPA 2020 project.

13. The position of validation in society

The VNFIL is highly visible and recognised in all relevant national policies and strategies.

The strategic commitment goes in the direction of providing support for the further development of NQFS and the VNFIL system. All of the abovementioned national strategies have foreseen cross-sectoral measures for the improvement of qualifications in accordance with the needs of the labour market.

Among the activities planned for the given period is the continuation of the implementation of the processes and procedures of the VNFIL. For example, the ERP 2023-2025, within its Structural Reform 2: 'Qualifications oriented towards the labour market' by providing support for the implementation of the concept of lifelong learning, expects the positive impact on competitiveness, labour force mobility and comparability of qualifications obtained in Serbia with qualifications obtained in other countries, primarily in the EU.

The SDERS notes that in the current development of the lifelong learning policy, there is a lack of adoption of the processes of RPL. Within its framework of Special Objective 1.8. Improved conditions for lifelong learning, the SDERS is considering the following measures: Development of a system of RPL, transparency and comparability of the qualification system; Encouraging dialogue and developing social partnership; Establishment of Regional Training Centres. The SDERS is also considering the following: Formation of a base of expert evaluators from schools and the economy who will participate in the VNFIL procedure; Training of personnel involved in the VNFIL procedure; Accreditation of schools with AEPROM status for the VNFIL procedures; Analysis of the possibility of piloting the VNFIL procedure in other organisations with AEPROM status; Promotion of the VNFIL concept, monitoring and continuous improvement of the quality of the VNFIL procedures and last but not least, conducting an analysis of the possibility of piloting the VNFIL procedure in higher education, in order to establish this system if it proves possible.

With regard to the awareness and information about VNFIL – there is a general lack of knowledge about the opportunities and advantages of VNFIL, as well as lack of information about VNFIL among employers and representatives of the labour market.

In the current phase of development of the VNFIL system, the education sector was mostly involved at the implementation level, although representatives of relevant institutions from both education and employment participated in the conceptualisation of the approach. Active involvement of the labour market is addressed and their participation in the VNFIL processes is expected in the near future.

14. Recommendations

Potential barriers to the effective implementation of the VNFIL system could involve:

- lack of trained evaluators who perform recognition/validation according to the modernised qualifications standards that cover modern work technologies;
- the discrepancy in the knowledge of teachers/evaluators from AEPRE/schools and candidates who come from the labour market and have experience in performing specific jobs;
- the fact that only schools can currently be accredited as AEPRE for VNFIL procedures;
- general lack of knowledge about the opportunities and advantages of VNFIL;
- lack of information about VNFIL among employers and representatives of the labour market;
- lack of coordination between schools/AEPRE and local employers/economy;
- the user's anxiety toward school and exams, possible previous negative experiences with learning, testing, assessment, the inability of users to express/verbalise their tacit knowledge and skills;
- lack of motivation of school employees to deal with VNFIL, guidance and counselling;
- an expensive process, bureaucratisation and complexity of the VNFIL procedures.

Opportunities could include:

- support from EU IPA 2020 and other donors on the provision of opportunities to expand and improve the VNFIL procedures and services;
- raising capacity/training of evaluators in modern work technologies and performing assessments according to the modernised qualifications standards;
- testing capacities of other service providers in performing VNFIL procedures;
- organisation of events and information sessions to inform potential candidates, employers and representatives of the labour market about the VNFIL procedure;
- fostering local cooperation and creating networks between schools/AEPRE and local employment services and self-governments;
- possibility to include a motivation/coaching module in the training for VNFIL practitioners to strengthen the support to the users throughout the validation process and prevent dropping out;
- enhancing the documentation phase of the validation process and making a better use of the portfolio of evidence for the assessment of competencies to enable recognition based on documentation;
- further testing and improving the recognition/validation procedures.

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Name	Organisation	Position	Yes/No*
Tatijana Glišić Milutinovic	Qualification Agency	Head of the Centre for the development of qualifications and support for sector councils	Yes
Vesna Fabian	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development	Head of the Group for Dual Education and the National Qualifications Framework	YES

Miomir Despotovic	Faculty of Philosophy	Professor, Expert in the Project	Yes
Neda Milanovic	National Employment Service	Sector Director	Yes

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

17. ACRONYMS

AE	Adult education
AEPRO	Publicly Recognised Organiser of Adult Education Activities
APAE	Annual Plan for Adult Education
CV	Curriculum Vitae
CVAE	Centre for Vocational and Adult Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
ERP	Economic Reform Programme
ETF	European Training Foundation
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
IIE	Institute for Improvement of Education
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MoERD	Ministry of Economy and Regional Development
MOYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports
MOESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
NES	National Employment Service
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQFS	National Qualifications Framework of Serbia
QA	Qualifications Agency
QS	Qualification Standard
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning

RS

Republic of Serbia

SDERS

Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Serbia
2030

VNFIL

Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning