

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLICY APPROACHES RELATED TO NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *As each country has had its own pace in developing arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL), taking into account the Council Recommendation from 2012, the interest in the present article is to analyse and compare policy approaches used in several European countries. The countries selected, namely France, Romania and Poland, have all joined the European Union prior to the issuing of the Recommendation, for which reason it is presumed that the content of the recommendation may have contributed to mobilizing endeavours for validation based on the existing framework. The selection of countries included in the analysis was performed based on a set of criteria that would enable comparison of similar countries in size (territorial, population), as well as type of state government (unitary), while also looking at EU member states that joined the EU at different moments in time. Thus, the present article briefly presents specificities for each country, based mainly on information provided in different European reports (e.g. CEDEFOP reports and database on VNFIL approaches in the respective countries), while also highlighting aspects that could be taken into account as possible improvements in the content of the Romanian policies. Quality assurance for the recent mechanisms is to be further analysed, since the qualification acquired by the individual by use of VNFIL is similar to that obtained in formal education, given possible trust issues related to quality assurance mechanisms for VNFIL. Thus, further analyses may focus on stakeholders involved, and on quality assurance mechanisms within validation systems.*

Key words: *validation, public policy, non-formal learning, informal learning, comparative analysis, assessment and certification.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At European level, relying on a Recommendation from 2012 on validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) [1], EU Member States have developed own mechanisms for validation, due to be set in place by 2018. Such endeavours are meant to enable individuals to obtain validation of skills and competences that have been acquired during work, during various voluntary activities undertaken outside the formal educational system, thus also capitalizing on the value of such knowledge, skills and competences. The developments of such arrangements in various EU member states have raised significant interest, both among practitioners and among researchers.

The present article analyses in a comparative manner various policy approaches used in several European countries in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning. The focus is from the perspective of the individual, in the sense of opportunities and limitations set in policies from various European countries.

Using public policy approach, when referring to public policies, T. Dye's broad definition of public policies is being used, "what government structures decide to do or not to do" [2]. Thus, validation of non-formal and informal learning can be considered as part of a policy promoted not just at national level, but also at European level, given that the Recommendation was approved by the European Council. Moreover, the text of the recommendation sets as goals: "a view to offering individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training – including through mobility experiences – and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning, and with due regard for the principle of subsidiarity".

When discussing about validation of non-formal and informal learning, for the purpose of the present analysis, the definition used for validation is that provided in the 2012 Recommendation, as this embodies agreed-upon decisions at European level in relation to VNFIL. Thus, "validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

1. Identification – through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual;

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2. *Documentation – to make visible the individual's experiences;*

3. *a formal Assessment of these experiences; and*

4. *Certification of the results of the assessment - which may lead to a partial or full qualification" [3].*

The above-mentioned definition makes references related to a process of confirmation that specific learning outcomes have been acquired, to actors involved (authorized body and individual), to quality assurance (e.g. authorization of the structure responsible for conducting the validation process, standards) and to distinct phases for the process of validation, in view of a possible partial or full qualification.

The issue of validating learning outcomes that resulted from non-formal and informal learning has been related more to *"enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified"* [3]. While aware that the interest in validation of VNFIL in relation to low-qualified adults has been reiterated in the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation of 2016 [3], one will rely mostly on the 2012 Recommendation on VNFIL.

The analysis endeavours to identify the possible outcome of the validation, whether it is more oriented towards employability or more towards learning, lifelong learning.

Research studies related to VNFIL in relation to this recommendation have been conducted by CEDEFOP, who provided country-specific analyses during monitoring endeavours, as well as overall monitoring reports in 2014 [4] and in 2016 [5]. Moreover, CEDEFOP also developed a database for VNFIL [6], centralizing data related to implementation of VNFIL in EU countries. Such well-documented reports and database provide relevant data that describe endeavours made at national levels and progress, focusing more on monitoring.

Case studies have been conducted on specific developments in a specific country [7, 8]; moreover, comparative studies have also been conducted [9]. Existing research on validation may focus on specific application of validation, e.g. in higher education [7, 9], or in relation to other issues, such as migration [10].

When looking into international databases such as SCOPUS, the authors could not identify research focusing on VNFIL approaches in Romania, especially comparative analyses.

In the present article, the comparative analysis of the VNFIL policies provides also possible suggestions for improvements, as result of comparative analyses, using experiences of countries with similar dimensions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The analysis focuses on aspects related to framework ensured and policy instruments used (e.g. maximum intervention policy instruments: levels of regulation, from primary to tertiary), actors involved in validation (public or private), mechanisms set into place in the various stages of validation in each of the countries included in the analysis.

The analysis is conducted using relevant data from CEDEFOP European inventory, database and reports on

validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as content of legal acts. The secondary data analysis was oriented towards identifying policy approaches used in selected European Union member states.

1.1. Selection of countries for analysis

The selection of countries has been made taking into account the following cumulative criteria:

1. country belonging the European Union;
2. dimension of the country in terms of population should be similar or larger than to that of Romania, in terms of population (over 19.000.000 inhabitants) and territory;
3. form of organization of the state: unitary state, with competences to regulate the area of education at national level, especially in the area of non-formal and informal learning;
4. one country per category in terms of time of joining the EU – founder / year of accession, taking the one with larger dimensions in terms of population and area.

The criteria have been applied in sequence, each of the criteria delimitating more clearly the selection of the countries included in the analysis. When applying the first three criteria, preselected countries are listed in Table 1.

As result of the first stage of selection, the following countries have been taken into account for analysis: France, Italy, Poland and Romania. Spain was not selected, as the authors considered that unitary state in Spain is de facto federation, given the high level of autonomy granted to communities.

In a second stage of the selection of countries, after applying the second criterion, the following countries were selected: France, Poland and Romania (Table 2).

In the following part, the results of the analysis are presented for the selected countries.

3. VNFIL IN FRANCE

France currently holds a mature system for VNFIL. Thus, one may argue that the 2012 Recommendation for VNFIL could build upon the French system in providing possible approaches into VNFIL.

The VNFIL-related legal framework has been set into place since 2002, in primary legislation, namely in the Labour code and in the Education code – which in terms

Table 1
EU countries preselected for analysis, taking into account set criteria – Stage 1

Country	Population (as of Jan. 1, 2018)	Area	Type of state	Status for analysis
France	66,926,166	632,833	Unitary	Selected
Germany	82,792,351	357,386	Federal	Not selected
Italy	60,483,973	301,338	Unitary	Selected
Netherlands	17,181,084	41,543	Unitary monarchy	Not selected
Poland	37,976,687	312,685	Unitary	Selected
Romania	19,530,631	238,391	Unitary	Selected
Spain	46,658,447	504,030	Unitary monarchy	Not selected

Data source: statistical data taken from Eurostat (2019)

Table 2
EU countries preselected for analysis – Stage 2

Country	Membership to EU	Status for analysis
Germany	Founder	-
France	Founder	Selected
Italy	Founder	Not selected
Spain	1986	-
Poland	2004	Selected
Romania	2007	Selected
Netherlands	Founder	-

of policy instruments implies maximum intervention from government towards validation.

The VNFIL framework in France is a public sector initiative, a process of validation of experience – Validation of Experience Acquisitions (VAE) – within which *"Anyone engaged in the labor market has the right to validate the acquired experience, particularly professional, for the acquisition of a diploma, a title with a professional goal or a qualification certificate listed on a list drawn up by the national joint committee on the employment of a professional branch, registered in the national directory of professional certifications referred to in Article L. 335-6 of the Education Code"* [11]. VAE may result in awarding full qualification or credits.

The validation is related to prior experience for anyone who has worked for at least one year in a professional, salaried, non-salaried or voluntary activity related to the subject of his / her application may request the validation of his prior experience to justify all or part of the knowledge and skills required to obtain a diploma or title or certificate of professional competences issued on behalf of the State [12].

VAE may be used for any qualification listed in the national repertory of vocational qualifications, as long as the candidate fulfils the minimum requirements for eligibility. The national repertory covers the following types of qualification: initial VET, post-secondary VET, sectorial professional certificates delivered by chambers of commerce and trade and higher education. Thus, one may use VAE to obtain a qualification of up to level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework [13].

The main method for validation in VAE is portfolio. Thus, in order for an individual to go through VAE, one should prepare a file/dossier that describes one's professional experience. Then, one will be put in professional situation in front of a jury or one will present to the file to the jury. In both cases, the jury will discuss with the candidate. The jury debates and makes a decision of total validation, partial or a refusal of validation.

In the stage of identification, as of January 1, 2015, one can benefit from professional development advice (CEP).

In the stage of documentation, one needs to prepare a dossier that shows the competences. In addition, one may benefit from skills audit (*bilans de compétences*), which is used to support workers (and some jobseekers) in analysing and documenting competences, aptitudes and motivation, with a view to defining a professional or retraining project. Workers are entitled to a skills audit as part of their individual right to benefit from continuing training.

In the stage of assessment, the candidate meets a jury. Their interviews, based on the portfolio; the candidate debates with the jury. The evaluation methods used may vary depending on the provider and the type of qualification concerned (each awarding authority is responsible for defining the methods used). Other methods used are observing real or simulated work activities. For example, as part of the procedure used in the ministry in charge of employment, the evaluation includes a simulation of the work environment (called evidence tests) before a jury, which also evaluates the file submitted by the candidate.

As for certification, the decision of the jury related to total validation provides the holder with certification of the same value as that obtained through formal education and training. In the case of partial validation or refusal of validation, the candidate may receive additional support from the professional development counsellor.

The whole process lasts between eight and twelve months, from the definition of the project (identification) to the validation tests before the jury.

The individual, in case of an employee, may seek the help of the employer. One is however not required to notify the employer with regard to the VAE procedure.

Monitoring system has been put in place, with yearly statistical data provided on number of people that have used VAE and their profile. In France, statistics on the take-up of the VAE procedure also covers initial VET qualifications.

In addition, there are other forms of validation, such as validation of professional experience (VAP 85 – since 1985). In this case, the result of the validation procedure is not a diploma, but access to higher education training for candidates that would not fulfil the requirements otherwise.

One may argue that the goal of the VNFIL in France policy is also oriented towards education, towards validation of learning in view of obtaining a qualification. In this case, validation of non-formal and informal learning can provide benefits also in formal learning, by award of credits.

In addition to maximum level of intervention policy tools, through legislation, other policy tools are used to stimulate use of VNFIL, such as information / awareness raising. The central government shares the responsibility with employers, trade unions, educational institutions, and employment services, who all play active role in awareness raising.

Given the fact that the VAE system is mature, the number of people using it is rather high. Thus, in 2017, almost 40.500 candidates went through the VAE procedure, of which over 24.000 received a full validation [14]. More almost half of them were granted by the Ministry of Education. In terms of groups that use validation, CEDEFOP's database [6] confirms that low-skilled are included and benefit from validation – in 2011, 53.2% of applications were for lowest level of qualification [6].

4. VNFIL IN POLAND

In Poland, prior to 2012, the validation framework in place were related to the craft system. Following the

impetus from European level, regulations related to validation are to be found in Law on Integrated Qualifications System from 2015, in which validation is defined as *"assessment whether the person applying for a given qualification, regardless of the person's learning method, has achieved a separate part or all of the learning outcomes required for that qualification"* [15]. Thus, validation is closely linked with the national qualifications framework, focusing on vocational education and training in general. The aforementioned law also establishes the requirements for the bodies that carry out the validation and certification, the rules for obtaining the certification authorization, the principles for quality assurance [16].

Validation takes the form of external examinations which are organized at primary and lower secondary school, upper secondary school and basic vocational school (ISCED 3), corresponding to EQF levels 3–4.

Moreover, amendments to the Act on Higher education from 2014 introduced regulations on VNFIL for access into higher education, in order to recognize prior learning in cases where relevant professional experience may shorten the learning cycles for programs of EQF levels 6 and 7 [16]. In such cases, in addition to requesting the diploma from the previous level of education, there are different requirements in terms of professional experience of at least 5 years prior to access in Bachelor degree program, while three years professional experience are requested for Master degree. In such cases, the university senate has the responsibility to organize the process of recognition of learning outcomes [16]. As the regulation is recent, and the approach is innovative for Poland, further testing is required in terms of its usage in bringing adults with working experience back into higher education programs, while reducing the duration of their studies. Possible revisions may be required.

Information related to breakdown on all stages of validation is scarce in existing CEDEFOP database [6] and report on Poland [16]. Thus, for first stages of validation, related to identification of skills, unemployed or people at risk of unemployment may benefit from an initial profiling of skills, during in-depth interviews, together with support from an advisor. The skills audit provides information for an individual action plan that includes professional qualifications, skills and competencies that must be filled or acquired in order to find employment [16]. Such profiling and skills auditing is not performed specifically for VNFIL, as the unemployed person or job seeker receives information on skills and competences that are to be acquired, be it in formal or non-formal and informal learning.

As portfolio is one of the most frequent methods used in validation, one may assume that such portfolio is developed during documentation stage.

The assessment is conducted during external exams. Thus, the central examination board is in charge of the examinations confirming a qualification in a profession, including extramural exams for people who have completed basic education and have been trained or worked for at least two years in a profession [16].

Given that the validation is based on exams, duration of validation procedures are influenced by the planning of the exams, no approximate duration has been estimated in existing reports.

While monitoring elements have been developed, with statistical data collected by the central examination board since 2012, experts report the lack of comprehensive monitoring systems, at various levels.

One may argue that validation in Poland is more oriented towards the labour market, towards validation of skills and competences in view of career development. Nevertheless, the recent change from 2015 aiming towards including validation as means for reducing cycle duration, thus embedding VNFIL in higher education brings about innovative approach towards attracting adults back to continuing their education or to requalifying. Yet, there regulations are for access only, VNFIL is not used during the higher education studies, based on recent work-related experiences, during studying – one may wonder whether it is actually possible to work and study in the same time, not just discuss whether one may use VNFIL during higher education studies.

The development of the system in recent years enabled involvement of different stakeholders, public actors; private ones and the third sector are all involved in validation. For example, in the stage of information, it is possible for skills audits to be carried out also by non-public employment agencies on the same basis as in the case of labour offices.

As in the case of France, low-skilled are also among the target groups for validation, and represent a large percentage of the people using validation, especially since older mechanisms involve lower levels of qualifications.

In addition to legislation, awareness related to validation is promoted, by actors involved. Yet more coordinated efforts should be made, more targeted towards the target groups [6].

5. VNFIL IN ROMANIA

First endeavours to support VNFIL date back to 2004, based on tertiary legislation (ministry order) [17] Further endeavours are made in Law no 1/2011 for national education [18], with appropriate procedural steps being issued by the National Qualifications Authority, in charge of coordinating the validation activities at national level, defining the policies and methodologies. The National education law (art. 345) defines validation as *"the process by which it is confirmed that the learning outcomes evaluated, acquired by a person, correspond to the specific requirements for a unit of learning outcomes or a qualification"*. Moreover, the importance of VNFIL from the perspective of lifelong learning has been emphasized in a dedicated chapter, relying on learning outcomes approach.

Recent tertiary legislation has been issued, further developing quality assurance system for VNFIL, in relation to minimum certification criteria for staff involved in validation (e.g. evaluators of professional competences, assessors of evaluators, external evaluators).

The relation to the NQF is also highlighted in relation to VNFIL. Thus, endeavours to regulate aspects have been conducted up to tertiary legislation, with approval of the National Register for Professional Qualifications, which brings together, in one registry, descriptions of all qualifications, obtained in formal and also in non-formal

and informal context. Thus, as in previous cases, there are links between VNFIL and the National Qualifications Framework, which is one-to-one with the European Qualifications framework.

Institutional arrangements set in place include setting up the National Accreditation Centre (NAC), within the National Qualifications Authority, with responsibilities related to the authorization of assessment centres and practitioners in validation of non-formal and informal learning of adults.

The validation system is intended especially for adults and persons who do not tend to return to the formal system. Validation is linked with the occupational standards that relate to continuous vocational and educational training qualifications. Thus, the level of government intervention is high, including regulations (primary, up to tertiary), standards, institutional mechanisms set in place [19].

The actors involved are public sector ones, private sector ones and third sector [6]. The interest in validation in its various stages varies from one category of actors to another. Thus, the legal framework covers all stages in the public sector; the third sector is more focused on identification and documentation, in view of raising awareness with regard to benefits of VNFIL; the private sector is more focused on assessment, which is used to measure progress.

In the public sector, the legal framework is covering all stages, whilst in the private sector, the HR departments are more focused on assessment in the recruitment and selection phase, but also assessment as a tool to measure progress. The third sector promotes to a higher degree the approach of identification and documentation, focusing on the awareness raising of the benefits of non-formal and informal learning among beneficiaries.

In the stage of identification and documentation, public services of information, counselling are provided by the National Agency for Employment and its structures at county level for any registered job seeker. Such services are designed for registered job seekers. In case of using private sector assessment centres, counselling services may also be provided within such centres [19].

In the stage of assessment, the candidate meets the evaluator, who verifies the proofs from the candidate's file in relation to the requirements of the occupational/professional standard. The methods used in the assessment stage include *"self-evaluation, direct observation, oral test, written test, project-based evaluation, simulation or structured observation, reporting or evaluation by others"*.

In the stage of certification, the candidate may receive a certificate of competences for either partial or full competences of an occupational standard. The certificate has national recognition. If the candidate demonstrated the full range of competences, the certificate is equivalent with similar certificate obtained through formal education.

The interest in validation, although increasing from previous years, is still at low levels. Beneficiaries are low-skilled adults [19].

In the framework set for validation, private actors (companies) obtain authorization as assessment centres. The interest is closely related to market, as authorization is obtained by each centre for a specific occupation, if the

market does not request it, then people would not be interested in using such services. Thus, the orientation of the policy towards the market is rather high [19].

Nevertheless, awareness both among possible entities that could act as assessment centres and among beneficiaries should be raised further, with more coordinated efforts of involved stakeholders, in view of providing validation for a wider range of occupations.

The VNFIL approach is market-oriented. Mechanisms for VNFIL in education have not been put in place; there is no credit system in place yet for vocational education and training with application in VNFIL.

6. CONCLUSIONS

When looking into policy endeavours related to VNFIL, one may notice the fact that the Council Recommendation for VNFIL was approved in 2012 and the three countries included in the analysis joined EU before the respective recommendation. In such case, one may expect that some of the EU countries may have already included specific regulations in their legislation – such was the case in all three countries. Nevertheless, the recommendation contributed in each of these countries to encouraging further development / optimization of validation mechanisms.

In each of the analysed countries, institutional arrangements have been set into place at national level, to ensure that coordinating institutions can promote consistency in measures related to validation, and coordinate validation across education and labour market. Older systems, such as the case of France, relies on public sector actors, while Poland and Romania, which have been developing their VNFIL systems in recent years, include more actors to conduct validation, to take part in validation endeavours.

One of the issues discussed is related to whether the 2012 Recommendation approaches validation in view of career development and lifelong learning of the individual. In the case of France, one may argue that this goal can be achieved using the current system, for Romania and Poland, the focus is more towards labour market, towards enabling low-skilled adults to integrate in the labour market. While in Poland VNFIL-related approach has been recently also in higher education, in Romania, validation is possible in relation to CVET, in relation to a specific qualification, based on occupational standards.

Thus, qualification levels accessed by use of VNFIL vary from country to country, with France enabling use of VNFIL up to EQF-level 8 in education, Poland recently regulating use of VNFIL for access in higher education in order to reduce duration of studies and Romania taking into account EQF-level 3 of qualification for VNFIL in relation to labour market (not for formal education).

Given existing experiences from France, Romania could take into account promoting more the use of portfolio in VNFIL, as proceduralized approach in documentation stage.

Moreover, piloting of VNFIL for qualifications of medium and higher levels could be taken into account, with granting partial relief/exemption, in strict correlation with quality assurance mechanisms.

Quality assurance for the recent mechanisms is to be further analysed, since the qualification acquired by the individual by use of VNFIL is similar to that obtained in formal education, given possible trust issues related to quality assurance mechanisms for VNFIL. Thus, further analyses may focus on stakeholders involved and on quality assurance mechanisms within validation systems, from standards used for validation professionals, to standards used in validation to institutional mechanisms in place for quality assurance.

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