Desk research about learning outcomes for prior learning recognition to see recent situation

Toolkit for RPL

Task A1 – IO1: Learning Outcomes Report in structured matrixes

Report – Bulgaria

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Main characteristics of the adult education and training system

The National Lifelong Learning Strategy defines the strategic framework for state education and training policy 2014-2020, aimed at achieving the European goal of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It sets out the main policies and aspects for developing the adult learning system.

At national level, specific measures are being implemented to build an adaptive adult education and training system. It covers all the educational and qualification levels of general, vocational, higher education and adult learning and in all its aspects - formal, non-formal and informal learning.

An educational approach is in place that helps adults to continually develop as protagonists capable of coping with change and insecurity. Measures to be taken are related to the development of an educational environment that enables adults, regardless of their personal, social or economic situation, to acquire, enrich and develop their specific skills and key competences throughout their lives and their employability.

The aim of the strategy is to ensure a sustainable, harmonious and diverse learning environment for representatives of vulnerable groups, including adults with special educational needs and chronic illnesses as well as those disadvantaged with a view to ensuring equal opportunities and access to quality education and training, a more complete realization on the labour market.

Efforts are being made to develop labour market-responsive education and training and to assume joint responsibility for the preparation and implementation of curricula, the improvement of career guidance practices as well as the provision of formal education and training, the informal training and self-learning through the introduction of a validation system for learning outcomes.

Among the main challenges is to encourage the acquisition by all citizens of universal key competences such as learning, initiative and entrepreneurship skills, cultural awareness, and soft skills such as teamwork, decision-making, for conflict resolution, etc.

Institutional framework responsible for Adult education in Bulgaria:

- Ministry of education and science

  - Support of the adult training centres and monitoring the processes

- National Agency for vocational education and training

  - Support of the vocational training and adult centres

  - Monitoring and control of the process

- Ministry of labour and social policy

  - Organization of information campaign

- Employers organizations

  - Acquaintance of employees regarding "validation" and "recognition of prior learning" opportunities

- Trade unions

  - Acquaintance of employers and citizens with the required information

There is no official statistics with regards to Adult training by EUROSTAT, the existing one is related to primary, secondary, VET and higher education only. The Bulgarian Ministry of Education has been requested to provide such information but for the time being such is not existing officially.

Adult learning programs support the acquisition and continuous development of the nine key core competences for adult learning recognized by RPL processes in Bulgaria:

- Competences in the field of Bulgarian language;

- Communication skills in foreign languages;

- Mathematical competence and core competences in the field of natural

- Sciences and technology;

- Digital competence;

- Learning skills;

- Social and civic competences;

- Initiativeness and entrepreneurship;

- Cultural awareness and creativity skills;

- Skills to support sustainable development and a healthy lifestyle.

There are no official stated quantitative and qualitative targets regarding the RPL process according to the official legislative framework in Bulgaria.

State-of-the-art of the recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning

Legislative framework:
- Regulation №2, 2015 , of the conditions and procedure for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences (Minister of Education and Science)
- Strategy for development Adult Training in Bulgaria 2015-2020
- National strategy for Lifelong learning 2014-2020

In Bulgaria, there is no national system for validation covering all educational sectors. So far there are validation arrangements for general education and VET (as regulated by the corresponding legislative Acts), but not specifically for adult education. The adult training centres are following the similar approach to the one in general education and VET.

The Bulgarian national qualifications framework (NQF) for lifelong learning (BQF) was officially adopted by the Council of Ministers in the beginning of 2012. The referencing report was adopted by the Minister for Education and science in March 2014. According to the referencing report, one of the aims of the BQF is to facilitate the validation and recognition of prior learning including non-formal and informal learning and workplace training (MES 2013:13). At this stage of development, the BQF is restricted to qualifications from the formal education and training system.

The BQF is structured according to learning outcomes, described as knowledge, skills and competences for each qualification level.

According to Ordinance No 2, for each person who has applied for a validation procedure an individual consultant shall be allocated who assists the candidate throughout the validation process. The consultant is responsible for the preparation, completion and delivery of a candidate's portfolio and personal information in the archives of the validation institution as well as the preparation and registration of the certificates following a successful validation procedure [Art. 11 (4), SG 96/2014].

The Centres for Information and Vocational Guidance may be a referral to validation in their provision of career guidance.

Various validation projects offer free of charge consultations with stakeholders on the possibilities of validation. For example, in the 'New chance for success project' the Employment Agency provided assistance to the Ministry of Education and Science and the regional education authorities to inform and motivate jobseekers for inclusion in literacy courses or courses for completion of classes from basic education.

There have not been any recent changes in terms of policies, strategies or laws relating to validation of non-formal and informal learning in Bulgaria since the 2016 Inventory. Bulgaria has made an overall progress towards the principles of the Council Recommendation since 2012 as follows.

1. Validation arrangements including recognition of prior learning (RPL) currently exist in relation to general, vocational and adult education. They are linked to the national qualifications framework and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework.

2. Information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for validation and RPL, as well as on the relevant procedures, are available to individuals and organisations and are free of charge. Making more use of these services could however be encouraged. This depends, though, on the interest and motivation of people and organisations to get involved in validation.

3. Disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, benefit from validation and RPL arrangements predominantly in general education e.g. the project 'New chance for success' (2014-2020) provides literacy courses as well as courses for completion of classes from basic education.

4. For each registered unemployed person at the Local Office Directorates of the PES, labour mediators (advisors) carry out an informal skills assessment as a matter of RPL (i.e. based on the personal profile, interviews and individual tests labour mediators identify competence gaps and prepare an individual action plan).

The informal skills assessment could be used for the purposes of validation, however, the tools applied (assessment forms, interviews) should be developed in accordance with state educational standards

5. The validation of non-formal and informal learning and RPL is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible - for each person who has applied for a validation procedure an individual consultant shall be allocated who assists the candidate throughout the validation process. The consultant is responsible for the preparation, completion and delivery of a candidate's portfolio and personal information in the archives of the validation institution.

6. There are no explicit indicators related to quality assurance of validation. Ordinance No.2 stipulates that validation institutions have to put in place internal quality assurance system for validation, however, further specifications are not provided. The 'New opportunity for my future' (2013-2015) project has made a valuable contribution to the development of internal quality assurance measures. For example, a 'Manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning' was developed, including methodological guidelines and validation tools.

7. Legislative acts do not include specific provisions related to the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process. Training is sometimes provided within specific projects (e.g. 'New opportunity for my future'), depending on the project aims.

8. In relation to vocational education and training, qualifications and parts of qualifications obtained through validation comply with state educational standards.

9. The use of European Union transparency tools, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass for documentation of learning outcomes is not popular in Bulgaria.

An overall strength of the existing RPL arrangements is the introduction of a systematic approach of validation with clear allocation of responsibilities between public institutions and social partners. The

introduction of validation arrangements in general and adult education is also an important achievement.

RPL and validation is not very popular among private sector stakeholders in Bulgaria. Even those who are aware of it are rather sceptic about using it. This can be explained by the fact that validation procedures are lengthy and the costs have to be fully covered either by the employer or the person undergoing the procedure (an exception are European co-funded projects, but there are only a small number of these which are currently lacking). In some sectors like tourism and security, employers may have a higher interest in investing in validation due to specific occupational requirements.

There are two conflicting trends. On the one hand validation is visible in certain national strategies. For example, one of the main priorities of the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) is to introduce a learning outcomes validation system in order to ensure equality of formal education and training, non-formal training, and informal learning. Also, the Adult Education Development Strategy (2015-2020) defines the building up of a system of validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning as a priority in the context of lifelong learning.

On the other hand, individuals do not make great use of opportunities made available through validation. This can be explained with the fact that costs should be covered by the person undergoing a validation procedure (except in EU financed projects) or by employers who in general have little interest in getting involved in validation.

Given that validation is not very popular among employers, the certificates acquired through it are sometimes mistrusted e.g. they differ by title and description compared to the general certificates issued in VET.

Description of the recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning process

Stages of RPL in Bulgaria:

The validation stages

1) Consultancy

IDENTIFICATION
2) the candidate application
3) identification of professional knowledge, skills and competencies, which can be validated
4) the definition of the profession (from the Catalogue of vocations)

DOCUMENTATION
5) comparison of the candidate's competences with the stated in SES professional knowledge, skills and competences
6) collection of evidence for the candidate competencies - portfolio

*7) additional training (if necessary)

ASSESSMENT
8) exams - in theory and practice of the profession

CERTIFICATION
9) certification

NATIONAL AGENCY FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The Labour Office Directorates (LODs) of the Public Employment Agency provide an informal skills assessment carried out by labour mediators at the LODs. It aims to support labour market integration, self-development and/or educational progression. The measure is managed at system level and implemented nationwide across regions.

For each registered unemployed person labour mediators develop a personal profile (e.g. acquired level of education, training courses attended, and previous work experience). Based on the personal profile as well as interviews and individual tests (filled in by the individual) the labour mediator identifies competence gaps, which allows for the preparation of an individual action plan. The action plan includes motivation measures, career guidance, key competence or vocational training and subsequent job placement.

The informal skills assessment forms part of the three-step process (i.e. Step 1, skills assessment / audit; Step 2, Learning offer; Step 3, validation and recognition), as described in the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation. However, in the Bulgarian context, validation may not necessarily be Step 3, but Step 2. For example, if after the skills assessment a person is re-directed to take on literacy courses and/or classes from basic education, the competences acquired have to be first validated before the person can proceed with further levels of education.

According to data provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, in 2017 more than 10,300 unemployed (with funding from the state budget) were included in training programmes based on the skills assessment carried out by labour mediators. In 2018 resources are provided for the inclusion of 10,660 unemployed in training.

Apart from the Labour Office Directorates, the Centres for Information and Vocational Guidance offer skills assessment in the context of career guidance.

Available tools

According to *Regulation №2, 2015 of the conditions and procedure for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences:*

- In order to prove the acquired professional knowledge, skills and competences declared for validation, the candidate submits copies of documents held by him / her together with the originals for reconciliation – record of service, social security book, education diplomas, attestations, references, certificates for previous professional qualification and certificates from previous professional trainings, artefacts, photos of artefacts, etc.

- The application form, the certified copies of the documents, other evidence and the completed CV are included in the portfolio. The candidate's portfolio also includes the documents generated during the validation procedures - a timetable for validation, additional training topics, etc.

Annex from a Handbook for validation of professional qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning (developed within

the project "System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences" (2013-2015) – "New opportunity for my future")

| Competency №…….. | | | | | | |
| *(the exact name of the SES competence for acquiring qualification)* | | | | | | |
Number and name of the learning outcome, according to SES	Evidence of the content of the applicant's portfolio (number by order and type of evidence)	Assessment of evidence	Commission decision (recognised)	Commission proposal for complementing of the knowledge and skills (additional learning / training)	Actions for proving knowledge and skills theoretical test, case study, essay, practical test, etc.)	Commission decision after actions for proving knowledge and skills (recognised /not recognised)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

In the project "System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences" (2013-2015), more than 1300 people (Adult trainers and social partners' representatives) were trained.

Learning outcomes of the training include:

- Ability to work with state educational requirements in relation to the assessment of a candidate's potential for RPL and validation;
- Ability to support a candidate in the selection of a relevant occupation in which his / her knowledge, skills, and competences can be validated/recognised;
- Ability to guide a candidate on how to collect and prepare evidenced-based documentation for the RPL validation;
- Ability to verify the legitimacy of the documents and assess the acquired knowledge skills and competences;
- Ability to elaborate a candidate's individual validation plan;

- Manual for adult centres for validating non-formal and informal learning.

Nevertheless, the components of the EU definition are integrated within the Bulgarian one. For example, the first stage (identification of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by a candidate) corresponds to the stage of 'identifying', as defined in the EU Recommendation. This stage includes the following sub-stages.

1. Determination of the professional field and profession (according to the list of professions) in which the person wishes to validate his/her professional knowledge, skills and competencies.

2. Preliminary comparison of the declared professional knowledge, skills and competencies with the learning outcomes included in the state standard of the selected profession.

The comparison covers:

– analysis of the evidence collected and submitted by the person (collection of evidence relates to the stage of documenting, as defined in the EU Recommendation),

– verification of the declared professional knowledge, skills and competencies for which he/she cannot present evidence or the evidence does not correspond to the learning outcomes in the state standard.

3. Guidance on additional training in the case of disparity between the professional knowledge, skills and competencies declared by the person and the learning outcomes in the standard.

4. Verification of the acquired professional knowledge, skills and competencies after completing the additional training; it is made sure that the missing professional knowledge, skills and competencies have been acquired. This can be based on the certificate obtained by the training institution delivering the additional training.

5. Examinations pursuant to Art. 36 and 37 of the VETA (this stage corresponds to assessment in the EU Recommendation):

- state exams in theory and practice of the profession for the recognition of vocational qualification degree;

- examinations in theory and practice of the profession for the recognition of professional qualification for a part of a profession.

The second stage (recognition of professional qualification degree or partial professional qualification) corresponds to the stage of 'certifying' as defined in the EU Recommendation.

Both stages are consecutive and individuals can undertake them in combination. At any moment and according to his/her will, a candidate can suspend the validation procedure; in order to re-start it he/she has to submit a new application at the institution performing validation. There are no validation arrangements linked to OER.

Conclusions

An overall strength of the existing RPL and validation arrangements is the introduction of a systematic approach of validation with clear allocation of responsibilities between public institutions and social partners. The introduction of RPL and validation arrangements in general and adult education is also an important achievement.

The existing validation arrangements may be improved through:

- development and adoption of a consistent framework for the allocation of funds for validation e.g. the lack of financial resources negatively affects the sustainability of existing grassroots initiatives and impedes the launch of new ones;

- development and adoption of indicators related to quality assurance of validation;

- better cooperation with the private sector;

- linking career guidance provided by PES and RPL validation – for example, cooperation between the services may be encouraged (PES could be a referral for validation);

- regulating the provision of training opportunities for validation practitioners e.g. through the update of state standards Bulgaria is gradually introducing the learning outcomes approach in curricula and assessment. Therefore, in the future, validation practitioners may have to take specialised training on learning outcomes-based assessment;

- creating a uniform data collection system integrating data submitted by the different validation institutions e.g. Adult education and training centres. Currently data is available only for vocational education and training centres.

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