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# Overview of the Validation Process for Non-Formal and Informal Learning in North Macedonia's Adult Education Area

**Abstract:** Recognising non-formal and informally acquired knowledge, as recommended by the Council of the European Union, can promote employability and mobility, as well as increase motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in socio-economic contexts. Recognizing non-formal and informal learning is an important aspect of national lifelong learning programmes, bridging the gap between adult education and formal education. It improves individual competitiveness, employment opportunities, and social cohesion.

The evolving labour market demands adaptable and transferrable skills and competencies as technology, markets, and organisations evolve, creating a new work environment. Employees who resign from or lose their jobs must be able to transfer their knowledge and experience to a new company, industry, or even country.

Validating non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) can significantly boost individuals' self-esteem and overall well-being, motivating them to pursue further education and improve their employment prospects. This contributes to a more open and adaptable education and training system that fosters social inclusion and builds more cohesive societies.

**Keywords:** adult education, validation, skills, training, lifelong learning

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## Introduction

Validation is the process of identifying, assessing and recognising the broad range of skills and competences individuals develop throughout their lives and in various contexts, e.g. through education, work, and leisure activities (European Commission 2001). Validation is essential for recognising and valuing learning experiences throughout an individual's life. Change has become a constant feature of contemporary working life. Whether by choice or necessity, most employees will change jobs and careers multiple times over their working lives. As technologies, markets, and organisations evolve, the ability to transfer and adapt skills and competencies to new working environments is crucial. Employees who resign or are made redundant should be able to transfer their skills and knowledge to different companies, sectors, or countries.

Validation, first and foremost, recognises the diverse knowledge individuals acquire. This learning, often gained outside formal education and training—at home, in the workplace, or through leisure activities—is frequently overlooked or ignored. Validation helps learners leverage the outcomes of their non-formal and informal learning for further education learning or employment opportunities. (Cedefop 2015: 14)

The goal is to recognise an individual's overall knowledge and expertise, regardless of where it was acquired. Employers need to manage their human resources effectively, individuals need to value their own abilities, and society needs to maximise existing knowledge and experience to avoid duplication of effort and wasted potential.

The validation of learning acquired outside traditional educational frameworks has become increasingly important in education in recent years. Recognising complex knowledge gained across diverse fields presents challenges for educational institutions, which require rigorous quality assurance processes for evaluation and validation.

Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly important for adult education policies. Adult education involves integrating learning outcomes from diverse settings and contexts. Its full potential can only be achieved if non-formal education and training are recognised and valued.

The concept of validating prior learning is not new to adult education. Key figures in the field have long emphasised the importance of this type of learning and the need to consider it when developing and implementing curricula (Knowles, 1980). Therefore, validating learning acquired outside the formal system can play a significant inclusive

role in promoting inclusion by offering adults who have been unable to complete their formal education, or access it in the first place, the opportunity to have their knowledge and skills assessed and recognised.

The greatest benefit for individual adults is the opportunity to improve their educational and employment status. Recognition of their competence can enable them to pursue further education or move to more competitive roles in the labour market. Validation can also motivate adults to train for a different occupation, unrelated to their previous formal education.

### **Adult Education System in North Macedonia**

Adult education in North Macedonia is governed by the 2008 Adult Education Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 16/2009). It aims to promote lifelong learning for individuals of all ages, enhancing educational mobility for both young people and adults, and fostering active collaboration between educational institutions and the community. In 2008, the government of the Republic of Macedonia established an independent body responsible for adult education: the Adult Education Centre (AEC). The AEC is responsible for the following (Adult Education Act, 2008:4):

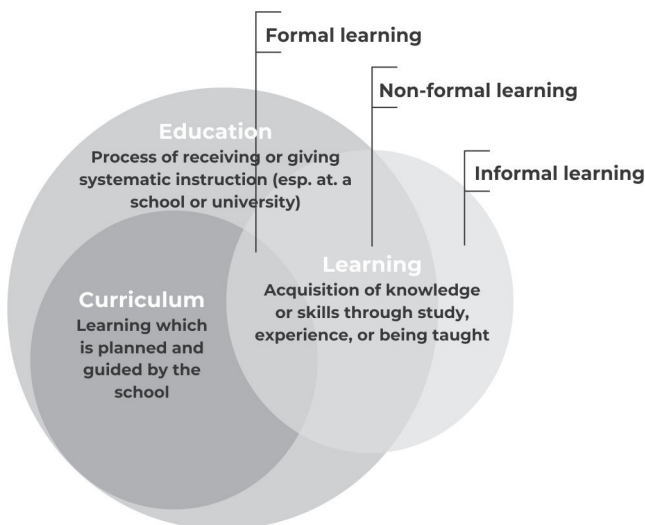
- Improving adult education to align it with technological and social developments;
- Supporting social partnership at all levels and stages of planning, developing, and delivering adult education;
- Linking adult education with employment within lifelong learning framework;
- Developing a European dimension in education;
- Preparing educational strategies.

In 2012, the AEC began verifying non-formal adult education programmes. Since then, it has verified around 1,000 programmes across all 15 vocational areas, in accordance with the National Classification of Occupations. Currently, 120 active providers of non-formal education training in North Macedonia have verified programmes with the AEC, representing various municipalities across the country. While participation in non-formal education is increasing year on year, awareness of the benefits of continuing education after completing formal education remains low. Funding for training also presents a significant challenge.

A new draft adult education act is currently undergoing public consultation. Its prompt enactment and clarification of next steps in the reform process are essential. While the government has approved the Adult Education Act, which governs the **validation of non-formal and informal learning**, the parliament is yet to enact it. However, the parliamentary elections in North Macedonia in May 2024 have stalled the enactment process. This delay prevents the adoption of regulations related to the validation of non-formal and informal learning, including the establishment of accreditation procedures for validation service providers and the creation of a register for these providers.

### Definitions of Non-formal and Informal Learning

Interest in distinguishing between formal, non-formal, and informal learning started in the 1960s (Norqvist & Leffler, 2017:236). At that time, there was a growing belief that educational systems were not adapting to the changing needs of society, prompting consideration of how learning needs could be met through diverse learning arrangements. As the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge University Press, 2022) suggests, understanding learning that is not formally structured can inform curriculum development and the organisation of learning within schools (e.g. considering the optimal learning environment, format, and structure).



**Figure 1:** Relationships between the key terms (Johnson & Majewska, 2022)

Figure 1 illustrates the sometimes overlapping nature of the key terms: education, curriculum, and learning. However, learning can also take place outside formal curricular structures. This non-formal sphere, beyond the curriculum, is the focus of our review (Johnson & Majewska 2022: 6).

The European Youth Foundation's definitions of the different types of education (Council of Europe Recommendation 1437, 2000) are as follows:

**Formal education** refers to the structured education system that runs from primary (and in some countries from nursery) school to university level, encompassing specialised vocational, technical, and professional training programmes. Formal education typically includes assessment of acquired learning or competences and is based on a programme or curriculum that may offer limited flexibility to adapt to individual needs and preferences. It usually leads to formal qualifications and certification.

**Non-formal learning/education** refers to planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people, designed to develop a range of skills and competences outside the formal education curriculum. Non-formal education takes place in settings such as youth organisations, sports clubs, and drama and community groups, where young people meet, for example, to collaborate on projects, play games, engage in discussions, go camping, or partake in music and drama activities.

**Informal learning** refers to a lifelong learning process through which individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from the educational influences and resources within their environment and through daily experience. People learn from family and neighbours, in marketplaces, libraries, art exhibitions, workplaces, and through play, reading, and sports activities. The mass media, including plays, film, music, songs, televised debates, and documentaries, are an important medium for informal learning.

### **Research Methodology**

The primary aim of this research is to gather relevant information on the validation process for non-formal and informal learning in North Macedonia. This will be achieved through an analysis of relevant documentation, information, implemented activities, laws, and strategies. To determine the effectiveness of the existing policies, it is crucial to analyse quantitative data and qualitative information regarding those to whom the policies apply.

Data was analysed using a specifically designed protocol:

➤ Protocol for analysing system-regulating documents.

Institutions involved in establishing the validation process for non-formal and informal learning in North Macedonia were asked to provide information on their progress to date. These institutions include Public Institution Adult Education Centre (PI AEC), project coordinators WE Global and Education for Employment, and the Ministry of Education and Science.

The following documents were included in the analysis:

- Current Adult Education Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 16/2009);
- Draft Adult Education Act (pending enactment);
- 2018-2025 Education Strategy and Action plan, Republic of North Macedonia;
- 2016-2020 Adult Education Strategy, Republic of North Macedonia;
- Concept Paper for Non-formal Adult Education and Informal Learning in the Republic of Macedonia (2015);
- Roadmap for Implementing a System for VNFIL in the Republic of Macedonia (ETF, 2016);
- Guidance Note on VNFIL Processes (ETF, 2017);
- Specification for the Information/Methodology Package (ETF, 2017);
- Comparative Analysis of Institutional Frameworks, VNFIL Procedures and Instruments in Europe & Recommended Solutions in Macedonian Context (LLC, 2016).

### **Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in North Macedonia**

As a candidate for EU membership, the Republic of North Macedonia must align its policies, legislation, and national systems with EU regulations. The European Union has developed reference tools to support national reforms by defining key competencies, ensuring quality in higher education and vocational education and training (VET), promoting mobility and lifelong guidance, facilitating the recognition of qualifications abroad, and validating non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL).

Member states and other participating countries, including North Macedonia, have agreed to establish a validation structure in accordance with the Council's recommendation (European Council 2012) for the validation of non-formal and

informal learning. This will enable individuals to gain qualifications, or parts of qualifications, based on validated knowledge, skills, and competences.

To this end, the Adult Education Centre and the Ministry of Education and Science, with the support from the European Training Foundation (ETF), produced a roadmap (as an internal document) as a basis for the creation of a concept paper and an action plan to support the development of non-formal adult education in North Macedonia. The Roadmap recommends developing a framework for validating non-formal and informal learning. VNFIL enhances citizens' skills and qualifications contributing to economic and social development and creating improved labour market opportunities.

The roadmap provides guidelines for developing and implementing a national policy for VNFIL. It aims to recognise achievements gained through non-formal education and informal learning, ensuring these are valued by individuals and recognised within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

This roadmap also incorporates validation guidelines (Cedefop, 2015), which indicate that the processes and procedures for VNFIL typically occur in four stages:

**Identifying** the individual's competencies (i.e. learning outcomes) acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

**Documenting** the individual's non-formal and informal learning outcomes, including supporting evidence.

**Assessing** the individual's learning outcomes by evaluating the evidence provided.

**Certifying** the individual's learning outcomes.

Although the processes for VNFIL in North Macedonia began approximately ten years ago, VNFIL has yet to be fully implemented. The newly drafted National Qualifications Framework Act (NQF) defines VNFIL as the process of evaluating learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning against pre-established criteria and standards, including government-recognized documented certification by an accredited body. New draft acts on NQF, vocational training, and adult education have been prepared and are expected to come into force shortly. These, along with several related strategic documents, are prerequisites for broader policy implementation of VNFIL measures.

The draft new Adult Education Act includes a chapter on VNFIL, outlining the procedures and stages of validation, as well as the conditions under which it will take place.

The 2018–2025 Education Strategy includes a pillar dedicated to adult education and VNFIL. Furthermore, in 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) adopted the Concept for Establishment of Regional VET Centres (RVETCs). To date, five RVETCs have been established, each of which should have a VNFIL department. Three more RVETCs are planned, bringing the total number to eight.

VNFIL as a pathway to skills acquisition is also included in the latest Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. This document integrates VNFIL into labour market policies targeting young people who are not in employment, education, or training (NEETs).

VNFIL is also an important component of the new Concept for Post-secondary Education, which is expected to be adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science shortly.

In addition to these documents, the AEC, with support of international donors, has implemented several training programmes related to VNFIL:

1. In November 2018, the AEC a five-day training (AEC, 2018) for trainers of assessors for the VNFIL process. Participants included representatives from various institutions: the Centre for Adult Education, the Centre for Vocational Education and Training, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Employment Agency of the Republic of Macedonia, the State Examination Center, Open Civil Universities, and the Chamber of Crafts Skopje. The training aimed to further develop the capacity of VNFIL evaluator trainers in North Macedonia, focusing on deepening their understanding of the VNFIL process, the different roles involved, various current issues such as communication and portfolio development.
2. In December 2018, a five-day training (AEC, 2018) was held for assessors involved in validating non-formal and informal learning. The training was designed for individuals from education and labour market experts who would participate in the piloting phase of the VNFIL process. (ETF support)
3. Between May 2020 and June 2021, the PI AEC, in cooperation with the Education for Employment project in North Macedonia (E4E@mk), “Lazar Tanev” Secondary School in Skopje, implemented activities related to piloting the validation of non-formal learning for the Waiter qualification (AEC, 2021). Seven experienced waiters with successfully completed the validation process, demonstrating their knowledge, skills, and competences. They were subsequently awarded certificates for the Waiter qualification.

4. In May 2024, a two-day training programme, supported by the ETF (AEC, 2024), was delivered to staff from the five existing RVETCs. The training introductory concepts related to VNFIL, the building blocks of validation, the validation process, and the roles of validation practitioners. Around 60 teachers from the RVETCs participated. The learning outcomes of this training were to:
- Understand the concept of validation, the validation process, and its stages;
  - Be able to take up a roles and tasks of validation assessors and counsellors;
  - Be able to take necessary further steps to prepare the tools and instruments for the validation process;
  - Become familiar with portfolios as an assessment tool and be able to support the validation candidates in portfolio development.

The information presented demonstrates considerable activity and document preparation towards VNFIL. However, the most important crucial step is the new Adult Education Act coming into force, enabling the implementation of this important process.

Furthermore, the research indicates that, despite VNFIL processes not yet being fully implemented in North Macedonia, substantial progress has been made in legal, policy, and institutional frameworks. Growing training and pilot initiatives paving the way for wider application in the future. The VNFIL roadmap, the establishment of regional centres, and capacity-building efforts all demonstrate clear progress towards a fully operational validation system aligned with EU standards.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

A potential obstacle to VNFIL development is the slow pace of legislative processes, which has resulted in delays to VNFIL and minimal awareness of validation and its benefits. This, in turn, leads to a lack of trust in validation among some stakeholders such as educators and employers.

The aim should be to give greater prominence to skills acquired through professional development and social contributions. The focus should be less on qualifications gained after initial training and more on the outcomes of further training throughout an individual's working life.

Recognising non-formal and informal learning requires taking several steps to increase individuals' effective access to existing systems, ultimately supporting their career choices.

A key challenge for North Macedonia in implementing VNFIL will be gaining recognition from both the labour market/companies. Awareness of VNFIL's benefits for individuals and the North Macedonian economy is currently low among stakeholders in national institutions, the labour market, and potential validation candidates.

Collaboration between all stakeholders and promotion of the process are crucial. Such collaboration between stakeholders is expected to strengthen the use of validation of prior learning, create stable and visible processes, develop a common terminology, and facilitate knowledge exchange. Social partners, such as employers' associations and trade unions, are equally important for achieving policy goals and effective recognition practices.

Another challenge North Macedonia will face (AEC & MoES) is establishing quality assurance mechanisms for VNFIL, as these assurance measures still need to be defined after the enactment of the Adult Education Act.

The AEC currently lacks the capacity (both human and technical resources) to implement the VNFIL process effectively, with only 13 employees, including technical staff). Thus, capacity building is urgently required.

High-quality VNFIL systems have significant potential for development in North Macedonia. Recent legislative reforms have yielded some positive results, such as the established formal schooling arrangements, which provide a strong foundation for building the system. The legislation enables validation in almost every field.

# Pregled procesa validacije neformalnog i informalnog učenja u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih u Sjevernoj Makedoniji

**Sažetak:** Prepoznavanje neformalnog i informalno stečenog znanja, prema preporukama Vijeća Europske unije, može unaprijediti zapošljivost i mobilnost, kao i povećati motivaciju za cjeloživotno učenje, posebno u socio-ekonomskim kontekstima. Prepoznavanje neformalnog i informalnog učenja je važan aspekt nacionalnih programa cjeloživotnog učenja, koji povezuje obrazovanje odraslih i formalno obrazovanje. To poboljšava konkurentnost pojedinaca, mogućnosti za zapošljavanje i socijalnu koheziju.

Tržište rada u razvoju zahtijeva prilagodljive i prenosive kompetencije, jer tehnologija, tržišta i organizacije evoluiraju, stvarajući novo radno okruženje. Zaposleni koji daju otkaz ili gube posao moraju biti u mogućnosti prenijeti svoje znanje i iskustvo u novu kompaniju, industriju ili čak zemlju.

Validacija neformalnog i informalnog učenja može značajno poboljšati samopouzdanje pojedinaca i njihovu ukupnu dobrobit, motivirajući ih da nastave sa obrazovanjem i poboljšaju svoje šanse za zapošljavanje. To doprinosi otvorenijem i prilagodljivijem sistemu obrazovanja i obučavanja, koji podržava socijalnu inkluziju i gradi kohezivnija društva.

**Ključne riječi:** obrazovanje odraslih, validacija, vještine, obuka, cjeloživotno učenje

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