



Country report

Bulgaria

2016 update to the European inventory
on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Author: Mariya Dzhengozova

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1 Introduction and Evaluation

1.1 Abstract

Since 2014, Bulgaria has moved a step forward towards a uniform legal framework regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. A new Law on Pre-school and School Education has been adopted including a whole chapter on recognition, equivalence and validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) was also amended regulating the procedure of validation. Additionally, a special Ordinance e.g. 'Ordinance No. 2 on the conditions and procedures for the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences' was approved by the Minister of Education and Science.

An overall strength of the existing validation arrangements is the introduction of a systematic approach of validation in VET with clear allocation of responsibilities between public institutions and social partners. In recent years, the involvement of social partners in validation procedures increased. National employers' organisations (such as the Bulgarian Industrial Association, Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Bulgarian Industrial Capital Association) and employees' organisations (i.e. the Confederation of independent trade unions in Bulgaria and Confederation of Labour 'Podkrepa') were partners in the project 'System for validation of non-formal acquired professional knowledge, skills and competences (2013-2015) – New opportunity for my future'. The project made a valuable contribution to the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms related to assessment of evidence of previous learning. In fact, this is the main initiative since 2014. Other grassroots initiatives have been either recently launched, or are little known and still do not have results. Also, it should be noted that it was only in 2014 when the VET Act was amended aimed at introducing legislative basis for validation of prior learning in the field of VET and in 2015 when the Ordinance on the conditions for validation entered into force. The time period between 2014/2015 and 2016 is too narrow for a variety of grassroots initiatives to happen. Furthermore, the planning and implementation of such initiatives require resources as well as 'social acceptability', e.g. the validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal training and informal learning is still new for the Bulgarian society and it needs time in order to be perceived as a 'normal' practice and become established.

The existing validation arrangements may be improved through providing more opportunities for training of validation practitioners; optimising data collection practices regarding results of validation procedures; and, development of a consistent framework for the allocation of funds for validation.

1.2 Main changes since the 2014 update

Regarding compulsory education, the draft Law on Pre-school and School Education (mentioned in the 2014 inventory report) was adopted in October 2015 and will enter into force in August 2016. As stated earlier, it includes a whole chapter dealing with recognition, equivalence and validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning (Art.165-170, SG 79/2015).

The Vocational Education and Training Act (VETA) was amended in July 2014 adopting the procedure of validation (Art. 40, SG 61/2014). Furthermore, 'Ordinance No. 2 on the conditions and procedures for the Validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences' was approved by the Minister of Education and Science. The Ordinance (in force from January 2015) defines: 1) the stages of validation; 2) the requirements to the members of the validation commission (assessors); 3) some requirements regarding the procedure of validation; and, 4) types of validation certificates to be issued. Furthermore, an institutional framework (in VET) with clear allocation of responsibilities and coordination between public institutions and social partners has been set in place (SG 96/2014).

Regarding the sector of higher education there have been no developments since 2014. Some aspects of validation, in terms of awarding credit units and access to higher education, are covered by the Higher Education Act. Although there are some good practices, for example, recognition of learning outcomes of vocational colleges by higher education institutions, still more needs to be done.

Overall, the changes that have taken place since 2014 are positive for the further development/implementation of validation – they can be considered as a step forward towards the elaboration of a uniform legal framework on validation. Based on validation experiences made within the VET sector, the validation system may be extended to general and higher education.

According to the Law on Pre-school and School Education, validation is the assessment and the recognition of an equivalence between competences acquired through non-formal training and informal learning, and the requirements for a particular class, stage or level of education and/or professional qualification. Validation also includes the issuing of the corresponding official document, which provides access to general education, VET or facilitates access to the labour market (Art. 166, SG no. 79/2015).¹

VETA (as amended) defines validation as the establishment of equivalence between vocational knowledge, skills and competences (acquired through non-formal or informal learning), with State Educational Requirements (SER) related to a specific professional qualification (Art.40, SG No.61/2014). SERs specify the learning outcomes necessary for the acquisition of a vocational qualification.

Validation is a visible part of national learning strategies particularly in relation to lifelong learning. For example, the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) foresees the introduction of a system for validation of knowledge, skills, and competences attained through non-formal training and informal learning until 2018. In addition, the National Strategy for the Development of VET for the period 2015-2020 defines validation as a priority axis in the context of lifelong learning. The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014-2020) defines validation as a 'process of confirmation by an authorised body that a certain person has achieved learning outcomes measured vis-à-vis the educational and professional standards and the assessment standards'.

As already stated in the 2014 inventory report, the development of a system for validation focuses on the VET sector; nevertheless, the methods and tools developed can be transferred to other educational sectors once they have been tested. Therefore, from a short-term point of view, validation in Bulgaria is developing from a sectoral perspective and from a long-term point of view – from a national perspective. In relation to the VET sector, the model of validation is characterised by a centralised (top-down approach), which intends to involve (as much as possible) all relevant social partners. The decentralised (bottom-up approach) will be more useful in higher education, given the academic autonomy of Bulgarian universities.

Bulgaria still does not have in place a uniform legal framework or national system, policy or strategy on validation which encompasses all educational sectors. Nevertheless, a progress is noted through the adoption of the Law on Pre-school and School Education, the amendment of VETA as well as 'Ordinance No. 2 of the conditions and procedures for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences' (hereafter Ordinance No. 2).

A persistent challenge (since 2014) continues to be the low level of public awareness concerning the possibilities provided by validation procedures. A possible solution could be the organisation of an enhanced campaign in this area and the promotion of the benefits of validation.

¹ Translated by 3s

The formulation of ‘units of learning outcomes’ in the SERs by profession is a prerequisite for implementing the procedure of validation and awarding of credits both in training (or validation), thus leading to the acquisition of a vocational qualification degree or professional qualification for part of a profession.

Ordinance No. 2 regulates monitoring (supervision) of validation procedures. According to the Ordinance, monitoring is carried out externally by: 1) regional inspectorates of education – they monitor the following validation institutions: vocational secondary schools, vocational schools, art schools, sports schools, vocational colleges; and, 2) the National Agency for VET (NAVET), which monitors the vocational training centres that are licensed by NAVET. Alongside external monitoring, the institution in charge of validation shall have in place internal quality assurance mechanisms (for example, compliance with qualification requirements for assessors).

Regarding the provision of IAG, the institution in which the person declares willingness to validate their competences, informs them about the purpose and steps of the validation procedure or refers the person to another institution in case it does not organise a validation procedure itself.²

In Bulgaria, a so-called Register of experts on validation³ willing to assist the vocational training centres in the validation procedure was developed. The register includes more than 500 experts according to regions and professions. The experts include both teachers and social partners, who have passed a specific training within the project ‘New opportunity for my future’ (see box below).

‘System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences - New opportunity for my future’ (2013-2015)

The pilot project ‘New opportunity for my future’ (2013-2015) has made a valuable contribution to the development of internal quality assurance measures related to validation procedures. For example, special training has been provided to validation practitioners in order to enhance their ability to compare learning outcomes acquired through non-formal or informal learning with learning outcomes defined for certain vocational qualifications. Among the beneficiaries of the training were representatives of employer and employee organisations, which is an indication for increased involvement of social partners in validation procedures.

In the project a ‘Manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning’ has been developed.⁴ The manual provides methodological guidelines and instruments (e.g. comparative tables) for the assessment of equivalence between competences declared by a candidate and competences defined for a specific vocational qualification (or part of one) in the corresponding State Educational Requirement (SER).

Background information

The project was carried out by the Ministry of Education and Science in collaboration with diverse partners, including state institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Public Employment Agency, National Agency for Vocational Education and Training) and employer organisations, as well as trade unions. ‘New opportunity for my future’ was funded under the Operational Programme ‘Human Resources Development’ e.g.

² Institutions shall provide validation procedures only in relation to professions they are or have been providing training for.

³ The register is available in Bulgarian at: http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/Register_experti_validirane.pdf

⁴ The manual is available in Bulgarian at: http://validirane.mon.bg/docs/Narachnik_f.pdf

beneficiaries did not have to pay for the validation procedures. The total budget amounted to BGN 5 862 200 (approx. EUR 3 million). The target group referred to: persons aged over 16 who wish to validate knowledge, skills and competences, acquired through non-formal and/or informal learning and employees in institutions, organisations and industrial enterprises directly involved in processes related to identification and evaluation of their knowledge, skills and competences. The main goals of the project include:

- creating and testing a system for identification and recognition of informally acquired knowledge, skills and competences;
- enhancing employability through increasing the opportunities for acquisition of vocational qualifications;
- developing legislation regarding the process of identification and recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal training and informal learning;
- issuing certificates to persons who have acquired their knowledge, skills and competences through non-formal or informal learning; and,
- promoting the validation of non-formal and informal knowledge, skills and competences in Bulgaria.

The project was linked to the formal education system, e.g.: candidates have the possibility to acquire a certificate for validation of vocational qualification or a certificate for validation of vocational competences (part of qualification) whereby these certificates have the same value as certificates acquired through the formal education system.

Before 2014, the number of persons who received a certificate for validation was higher due to the fact that the validation procedure was easier to carry out as it was also not regulated. Therefore, the legislative changes (in particular the amendment of VETA and the adoption of Ordinance No. 2), as well as the implementation of the 'New opportunity for my future project' have led to improvement of the overall quality of validation procedures in the VET sector in Bulgaria.

The future developments needed include (information provided by NAVET):

- elaborating the validation system in general and higher education based on validation experiences made within VET;
- increasing the involvement of social partners – there is a need of stronger cooperation and sufficient experience (in methods of cooperation) among stakeholders;
- organising more training opportunities for validation practitioners – through the update of the SERs Bulgaria is gradually introducing the learning outcomes approach in curricula and assessment. The use of (units of) learning outcomes facilitates the implementation of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, in the future, validation practitioners may have to take specialised training on learning outcomes-based assessment;
- rewriting (and updating) the SERs by professions – units of learning outcomes should be closer to the definition of 'working tasks';
- optimising data collection, for example a uniform data collection system can be developed integrating the results achieved by the different validation institutions;
- finding a better way for funding of validation; and,
- organising more information campaigns promoting the benefits of validation procedures.

According to the Law on Pre-school and School education, a person of compulsory school age who is seeking or has received the status of a refugee (under the Geneva convention) can validate competences for a completed period of schooling, class or stage of primary education or for a completed class from the first stage, or first stage of secondary education, where it is not possible to present the relevant documentation (Art. 166, para 6 SG no. 79/2015).

2 National perspective

2.1 Overarching approach to validation

Although in Bulgaria there is no uniform legal framework for validation encompassing all educational sectors, validation is covered in the Law on Pre-school and School Education, VETA and the 'Ordinance No. 2 on the conditions and procedures for the Validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences'.

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. Furthermore, the National Strategy for the Development of VET (2015-2020) defines, as a priority, the building up of a system of validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

Validation is seen as supporting policy goals e.g. in accordance with the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 20 December 2012, the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for the period 2014-2020 foresees the introduction of a system for validation of knowledge, skills, and competences attained through non-formal training and informal learning until 2018. Furthermore, validation will be a key factor for attracting new social groups, which currently have a very low level of participation in lifelong learning (for example, persons without education and qualification). (Information provided by NAVET)

The VET Act (art.40) defines validation process, requirements for educational level of citizens, the type of the certificates issued and determines institutions providing validation. According to the VET Act, candidates have to successfully pass the exams in theory of the profession and practice of the profession in order to obtain certificates for vocational qualification (or part of it) (SG 96/2014). The main difference compared to obtaining an ordinary diploma is that candidates do not need to attend classes from the formal education system (e.g. VET study programmes). Furthermore, the certificates issued by validation have a specific title e.g. 'Certificate for validation of vocational qualification' or 'Certificate for validation of vocational competences' (part of profession) (Art.40, SG 61/2014) and describe validated competences.⁵ In comparison, the certificate obtained through formal education describes subjects and has another title.⁶

According to the Law on Pre-school and School education, a person of compulsory school age, who is seeking or has received the status of a refugee (under the Geneva convention), can validate competences for the completed period of schooling, class or stage of primary education or for the completed class from the first stage, or first stage of secondary education, where it is not possible to present the relevant documentation [Art. 166 (6) SG no. 79/2015].

2.2 Validation in education and training

In Bulgaria, there is no national system for validation covering all educational sectors. There is a sectoral system in relation to VET. Regarding general education, a new law covering validation of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning will enter into force in August 2016. In relation to higher education, at this stage it cannot be said

⁵ A demo version of a certificate for validation is available in Bulgarian at: http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/media/Svidetelstvo_validirane.pdf

⁶ A demo version of a certificates acquired through formal education is available in Bulgarian at: <http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/popalneni-obraztsi-na-dokumenti-izdavani-ot-tspo-za-udostoveravane-na-profesionalno-obuchenie-ili-pridobivane-na-profesionalna-kvalifikatsiya>

whether legal mechanisms for validation of non-formal and informal learning will be introduced in the near future.

According to 'Ordinance No. 2', validation includes two main stages, e.g.: a) identification of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by a candidate; and, b) recognition of professional qualification degree or partial professional qualification (Art.6, SG No.96/2014). These stages are more broadly defined compared to the definition used in the EU Recommendation of 2012: the Recommendation defines four stages, including identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying skills and competences. 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 for vocational education and training) on 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 Educational Requirement (SER) of the selected profession. The comparison covers:
 - analysis of the evidences collected and submitted by the person (collection of evidences 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 SER;
3. **Guidance to additional training** in the case of disparity between the professional knowledge, skills and competencies declared by the person and the learning outcomes in the SER;
4. **Verification** of the acquired professional knowledge, skills and competencies after completed 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 assessing 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 take advantage of 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.

2.3 Validation and the labour market

At this stage in Bulgaria there are no validation arrangements included in collective labour agreements.

On a national level, the pilot project 'System for validation of non-formal acquired knowledge, skills and competences - New opportunity for my future' (2013-2015) was implemented (see box above).

2.3.1 Skills audits

Since 2014, the situation in Bulgaria has not changed, e.g.: there is no legislation and there are no collective labour agreements related to skills audits. Nevertheless, the Public Employment Agency has put in place measures that are similar to skills audits, such as career guidance (provided as a mainstream service), and elaboration of individual plans (within specific projects/programmes).

The Information Consultancy Units of the Public Employment Agency provide career orientation to all citizens. This includes initial consultation, facilitation, and matching of skills and competences of jobseekers with the requirements of current job vacancies. Additionally, information on retraining options is provided. Particularly in relation to unemployed persons, including those from disadvantaged groups, 'labour mediators' working in the local labour offices elaborate an individual action plan, which describes the steps, both for the person and for the mediator, to be undertaken towards job placement and/or training enrolment. The action plan determines the relevant measures and services (e.g. vocational guidance, improving of employability, job search services) that apply for the person. The elaboration of the plan is facilitated through an individual profile, which is drawn up based on a person's individual needs. Skills are possibly identified through the preparation of the individual profile.

There are examples of collaboration between private sector organisations and formal educational institutions, e.g. vocational training centres⁷ carrying out validation procedures can be supported by VET teachers (acting as consultants) who are experienced⁸ in validation issues.

2.4 Validation and the third sector

The situation described in the 2014 inventory report has not changed. Currently there is no system for the recognition of skills and competences acquired by volunteers.

The main difficulties with regard to recognising skills and competences acquired by volunteers relate to limited popularity in the society. For example, the Youthpass certificate is still not known as a document reflecting the informal learning and knowledge of young people acquired under European youth projects. In this context, the National Youth Strategy 2012-2020 foresees the introduction of a 'voluntary license' as an official document certifying the circumstances related to volunteering for young people. There is no information available regarding the progress towards this objective.

A recent initiative is the creation of an online platform, 'Time heroes'⁹, with the support of the private sector e.g. several companies have signed a declaration that they recognise and appreciate volunteering as experience. (Information based on an interview)

3 Links to national qualification systems

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. BQF is one of the

⁷ 90 % of the vocational training centres are private organisations.

⁸ 'Experienced' means that teachers have participated in training for validation practitioners and have experience in carrying out validation procedures.

⁹ <https://timeheroes.org/en/pages/faq>

main documents used in the development of new and the update of old SERs. 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 work-place 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. It is based on the detailed descriptions of the content and expected learning outcomes defined in the SERs.¹⁰ The description of expected learning outcomes in SERs can facilitate validation procedures, particularly at the stage of assessment (MES 2013:91).¹¹

Bulgaria has implemented the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) since 2004 and is on track to implement the European Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) as a part of the implementation of the National Lifelong Learning Strategy. The credit transfer and accumulation were introduced in the VET system with amendments of the VET Act in July 2014 (art.32e). The National Agency for VET (NAVET) is the National Coordination point on ECVET. Its activity is supported by the National expert group¹² for coordination of the activities related to the introduction of ECVET in the national VET system. A part of the work of the expert group is to explore best practices related to testing and deployment of the European system of credit transfer in VET as well as establish contact with international projects teams related to the testing of ECVET.

The formulation of 'units of learning outcomes' in the SERs by professions is a prerequisite for implementing the procedure of validation and awarding of credits both in training (or validation) leading to the acquisition of a vocational qualification degree or professional qualification for a part of profession.

A persistent problem (since 2014) continues to be the low level of public awareness concerning the possibilities provided by validation procedures. Therefore, there is a need for an enhanced campaign in this area as well as promotion of the benefits of validation.

4 Standards

In Bulgaria there are State Educational Requirements (SERs) used in formal education and training and they are the same as the requirements that support the delivery of validation. Assessment and evaluation standards defined in SERs apply also to validation arrangements and are used in the same way. In cases where for a certain profession there is no SER for obtaining a vocational qualification, the curriculum for the respective profession (approved by the Minister of Education) should be applied.

The term 'State educational requirements' is changed with the Preschool and school education act (2015) into the 'State Educational standards'. The term will be changed in VETA also, but SER is still in use.

¹⁰ The State educational requirements cover the national education system (general and vocational education and training) and higher education.

¹¹ A demo version of certificates acquired through formal education is available in Bulgarian at: <http://www.navet.government.bg/bg/popalneni-obraztsi-na-dokumenti-izdavani-ot-tspo-za-udostoveriyavane-na-profesionalno-obuchenie-ili-privobivane-na-profesionalna-kvalifikatsiya>

¹² Representatives of the expert group participate in the European Network on ECVET (ECVET Network), the group of users of ECVET (ECVET User's Group), etc.

5 Organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination

According to the VETA, organisations and institutions involved in validation arrangements and its coordination include:

- Ministry of Education and Science – prepares draft laws on validation procedures, develops guidelines, monitors and provides quality assurance of the validation system;
- Vocational secondary schools, vocational schools, art schools, sports schools, vocational colleges as well as vocational training centres (licensed by the National Agency VET) - provide validation procedures;
- Regional inspectorates of education (which are under the Ministry of Education and Science) – monitor validation procedures in vocational secondary schools, vocational schools, art schools, sports schools, vocational colleges;
- National Agency for VET – provides support to the vocational training centres, monitors and controls the process of validation in the centres;
- Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Public Employment Service – raises awareness and organises information campaigns;
- Employers' organisations – raise awareness among employers regarding 'validation' opportunities and inform their members regarding opportunities and requirements to validate their non-formal or informal acquired knowledge skills and competences;
- Trade unions – inform their members regarding opportunities and requirements to validate their non-formal or informal acquired knowledge skills and competences.

6 Information, advice and guidance

6.1 Awareness-raising and recruitment

VETA (as amended) and Ordinance No. 2 do not regulate the way people are engaged in the validation process. The Ministry of Employment and Social Policy, employer organisations, and employee organisations are responsible for raising awareness among the public in general and within their respective networks. The National Agency for VET (NAVET) and Human Resources Development Centre (HRDC) also participate in the process of awareness-raising through the organisation of information campaigns. Directors of secondary vocational schools and representatives of the Centres for vocational training should also be involved in this process. (Information provided by NAVET.)

Recruitment strategies concerning specific groups are more likely to be developed within particular projects. The 'New opportunities for my future' project used two main recruitment channels: through companies identified by the social partners and through the labour offices of the Public Employment Agency. In the first case, the target group included employees. The companies employed consultants who informed employees about opportunities for validation, the relevant steps and proceedings, and the names of VET course providers. In the second case, the target group included mostly unemployed people. The content of consultation is identical in both cases.

6.2 Information, advice and guidance

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].

Various validation projects offer free of charge consultations with stakeholders on the possibilities of validation. Within the project 'New opportunities for my future' almost 13 000 persons have been consulted on the procedure of validation (up to the end of December 2014).

6.3 Measures to enhance the awareness of validation initiatives and practices amongst guidance practitioners

The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training provides guidance to practitioners involved in validation procedures. Within the 'New opportunities for my future' project, training was provided to more than 1 300 people (VET teachers and social partner representatives). The training aimed to enhance the following abilities of validation practitioners: 1) to work with State Educational Requirements (SERs) in relation to the assessment of a candidate's potential for validation; 2) to support a candidate in the selection of a relevant occupation in which his/her knowledge, skills, and competences can be validated; 3) to guide a candidate on how to collect and prepare evidenced-based documentation for the validation; 4) to verify the legitimacy of the documents and assess the acquired knowledge skills and competences; and, 5) to elaborate a candidate's individual validation plan. In addition, a manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning was developed. The manual describes in detail what needs to be done at each stage of the validation procedure, who is and how they are involved.

In relation to the preparation for examination, this is a responsibility of the candidate. Of note is that SERs include the assessment criteria for the exams of theory and practice of the profession. Therefore, to be able to work with SERs means also to know about the assessment criteria related to each learning outcome. The consultant can put forward this information to the candidate. In cases where additional training has been undertaken (e.g. the consultant identifies that the candidate does not have all learning outcomes as defined in the SER), this may be considered as a form of preparation for the exams.

7 Validation practitioners

7.1 Profile of validation practitioners

The situation in Bulgaria has not changed since 2014, e.g. a general profile of a validation professional has not been defined. Depending on the scope of the measure (in terms of educational sector and occupational fields covered), the practitioners are typically people with pedagogical and academic experience (teachers) and/or specialists within a specific occupational field.

7.2 Qualification requirements

As stated earlier, there is no general profile of a validation professional in Bulgaria and there are no mandatory requirements to undertake training. Ordinance No. 2 stipulates that the individual consultants and the assessors of a candidate are teachers working at the validation institution and they shall meet the criteria for teachers specified in the SER of the vocation, for which validation is carried out. Among the assessors, there may also be external professionals who shall meet the same criteria as the teachers [Art.11 (2-3), SG 96/2014].

7.3 Provision of training and support to validation practitioners

Training and support provided to practitioners is not compulsory in terms of legal provisions however it may be compulsory depending on the specific aims of a project. Since projects have limited duration, they usually provide initial training in the form of a one-off measure. This is the case of the training provided in the 'New opportunity for my future' project, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Science (participants of the training were

approved by the Ministry). Within the same project a manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning was also developed.¹³ The manual can be considered as a long-term measure, as it can be used repeatedly as a guideline by validation institutions.

8 Quality assurance

In Bulgaria, there is no overall quality assurance framework for the validation of formal and non-formal learning. In 2015, Ordinance No. 4 for quality assurance in VET was adopted. There are established rules, requirements and quality assurance criteria regarding all VET providers' activities (incl. validation).

In relation to VET, the stakeholders involved in developing/delivering quality assurance are the regional inspectorates and the National Agency for VET (Art.20-22, SG 96/2014). The regional inspectorates are responsible for monitoring of validation procedures at vocational schools and colleges and NAVET for monitoring at vocational training centres. Both the regional inspectorates and NAVET provide consultation and guidance to validation institutions including methodological and legal documents related to validation as well as examples of good practice. In addition, validation institutions develop internal quality assurance measures, for instance the qualification requirements for individual consultants and assessors (e.g. they should meet the criteria for teachers specified in the SER of the vocation, for which validation is carried out), the possibility of external professionals to be among the assessors.

The 'New opportunity for my future' project has made a valuable contribution to the development of internal quality assurance measures – special training has been provided to validation practitioners in order to enhance their ability to compare learning outcomes acquired through non-formal or informal learning with learning outcomes defined for certain vocational qualifications. The involvement of representatives of employer and employee organisations in the training should be seen as a step to increase the willingness among stakeholders to participate in validation procedures. The project has developed a 'Manual for vocational schools for validating non-formal and informal learning'. The manual provides methodological guidelines and instruments (e.g. comparative tables) for the assessment of equivalence between competences declared by a candidate and competences defined for a specific vocational qualification (or part of one) in the corresponding State Educational Requirement.

9 Inputs, outputs and outcomes

9.1 Funding

In Bulgaria there is no national framework explicitly allocating funds for validation. According to the Regulation amending the VETA, validation procedures can be funded by individuals, companies, and programmes and projects financed by national and regional funds, EU structural funds or funds from the European Economic Area (Art. 23, SG No.96/2014). So far, validation arrangements have taken place within programmes and projects, financed by public funds and co-financed by the European Social Fund. The total budget of the 'New opportunity for my future' project (2013-2015) was BGN 5 862 200 (approx. EUR 3 million). The new project regarding the validation of previous learning is included in the indicative programme 2017-2020 in OP 'Science and education for smart growth'.

¹³ The manual is available in Bulgarian at: http://validirane.mon.bg/docs/Narachnik_f.pdf

9.2 Distribution of costs

Costs incurred by the institutions for establishing, documenting, assessing and recognising the experience of the candidates, as well as for conducting examinations for acquiring vocational qualification shall be paid amounts at a rate determined by the institution, whereby the amounts should not exceed the actual costs. The costs can be covered also by programmes and projects financed by EU structural funds [Art. 40 (11-12), SG 61/2014].

9.3 Evidence of benefits to individuals

According to stakeholders some of the main benefits of validation arrangements relate to the following (Information provided by NAVET).

- Due to the structural changes in the labour market (and in the economy) in the last 20 years, many Bulgarians have jobs that are not relevant to their secondary or higher education. They mainly acquired competences necessary for the job on the workplace. Therefore, validation provides an opportunity to recognise these competences.
- Validation facilitates employability, e.g. it is the fastest way for individuals to receive evidence for their competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, people find it easier to apply for a job when they have a certificate.
- Validation in Bulgaria is important for companies in some specific fields, such as construction and tourism where there are legal requirements for the qualification of the people working in these companies.
- Validation can prevent 'unnecessary learning' and in the case of further training it can shorten the time spent in formal education, also it will reduce costs for individuals and the state.

Information on benefits to individuals is available for the 'New opportunities for my future project' - by the end of 2014 around 13 000 people were consulted about the possibilities of validation and 3 600 of those who started a validation procedure acquired a vocational qualification. (Information provided by NAVET)

9.4 Beneficiaries and users of validation processes

9.4.1 Validation trends

Validation institutions (as determined by VETA) include vocational secondary schools, vocational schools, art schools, sports schools, vocational colleges as well as vocational training centres (licensed by the National Agency for VET). The vocational training centres shall supply data on all documents issued through training and validation to an administrative register developed and maintained by NAVET (Art. 42, SG 61/2014). According to figures from 2015, seven vocational training centres conducted validation procedures; 35 people successfully passed validation procedures, whereby 26 of them received the 'Certificate for validation of vocational qualification' and 9 received the 'Certificate for validation of vocational competences' (part of a qualification).

There is no data regarding certificates of validation issued by VET schools and colleges. In relation to this, an optimisation of data collection may be considered, for example a uniform data collection system can be developed integrating the results achieved by the different validation institutions.

Before 2014, the number of persons who received a certificate for validation was higher probably due to the fact that the validation procedure was easier to carry out as it was not regulated.

9.4.2 Validation users

There is some relevant data collected in the 'New opportunity for my future' project. According to age, the biggest groups of participants who started validation procedures are

represented by people between 35 and 45 years (approx. 2 300) and 25 and 34 years (around 2 100), followed by the group of 45 and 54 year olds (approx. 1 500). A possible reason for this distribution is the greater awareness of validation procedures among people between 25 and 45 years old due to wider use of the Internet. Also in Bulgaria, unemployment is higher among younger people, which motivates them to look for new 'unconventional' opportunities for acquiring a professional qualification and thus entering the labour market. According to employment status, 77 % of the participants were employed, 18 % were unemployed and 5 % were self-employed. The most attractive qualifications were 'cook', 'operator food industry' and 'waiter bartender'. (Information provided by NAVET.)

9.4.3 Validation and migrants / refugees and other disadvantaged groups

In general, there is a lack of validation initiatives addressing the needs of migrants and refugees. This can be explained with the fact that at this stage, the measures available refer to the provision of a 'basic package' of social and educational service (which includes, for example, learning of the Bulgarian language, provision of training for acquiring a professional qualification, as well as provision of subsidised employment). Validation is currently not foreseen as a measure.¹⁴

Regarding the group of unemployed, 18 % of the participants who started validation procedures within the 'New opportunity for my future' project were unemployed.

10 Validation methods

The portfolio method was widely used as a supporting validation instrument within the 'New opportunities for my future' project. This method is also defined in Ordinance No. 2: the portfolio is a set of documents, artefacts, photos, projects, etc., presented by the candidate as well as those created in the course of the validation process to demonstrate professional knowledge, skills and competences of a vocational qualification (or part of it) acquired through non-formal and informal learning (SG 96/2014).¹⁵ In relation to assessment and certification, examination is an obligatory method used for validation purposes; e.g. in order to obtain certificates for vocational qualification (or part of it) candidates have to successfully pass the exams in theory of the profession and practice of the profession (SG 96/2014).

As mentioned earlier, for each person who has applied for a validation procedure an individual consultant is allocated who considers the specific needs of the candidate and supports him/her throughout the validation process. The consultant is responsible for the preparation, completion and delivery of the 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 methods, in particular, the portfolio method and the exams in theory of the profession and practice of the profession are stipulated in Ordinance No. 2. The evidence used in the portfolio may differ according to the characteristics of the way learning has taken place; they can include a labour experience book, social security book, document for educational level, attestations, references, certificates of previous vocational training, artefacts and photos of artefacts. (Information provided by NAVET.) Furthermore, the setting of the practical examination may vary depending on the vocational qualification ('cook' or 'computer operator').

There are no nationally or regionally standardised tools for validation. Nevertheless, there is a project-based example, mentioned in the 2014 inventory report and more extensively described in the 2014 case study. The example refers to the Leonardo da Vinci project 'Validation of self-acquired learning and credits transfer in web design and computer

¹⁴ This is stipulated in the Ordinance adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy on 19 October 2015.

¹⁵ Translated by 3s.

animation' (CREATE). It uses ICT based assessment methods in order to prepare candidates for validation procedures. However, ICT based assessment methods are not used in validation procedures as such.

11 References

11.1 References

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Vocational Education and Training Act, State Gazette No. 68/30.07.1999, last amended SG No.61/2014, <http://www.mon.bg/?h=downloadFile&fileId=38>, [in Bulgarian], 2016-02-11

The term 'State educational requirements' is changed with the Preschool and school education act (2015) into the 'State Educational standards'. The term will be changed in VETA also, but SER is still in use.

11.2 Sources

2014 and 2016 Sources:

- National Agency for Vocational Education and Training
- Student Computer Art Society (SCAS)
- Discussion with stakeholders including representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science at the CREATE final conference



Country report Bulgaria

2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This country report is one of 36 that, together with a synthesis report and thematic reports, constitute the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. It is a reference point for information on validation in Europe. It is organised around the principles defined in the 2012 Council Recommendation that were further elaborated in the European guidelines for validation. This is its sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016).



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020, Email: info@cedefop.europa.eu

[visit our portal www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)
