



Benefits of validation for the individual – *The case of Romania*

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Importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning at European level

Since validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) arrangements are still not broadly developed in all European countries, the AVA consortium wonders whether the value of VNFIL is actually acknowledged by key stakeholders in the EU. This article provides some evidences that VNFIL enables one step up in professional and educational lives of individuals and thus calls for a quicker and more effective planning and implementation of the validation systems in the EU.

In each Member State (MS), VNFIL differs in term of participation, costs, structure as well as involvement of stakeholders.

EU-wide initiatives provide guidelines and recommendations on key issues, but national policy-making remains essential in integrating these into specific contexts and in developing a coherent long-term strategy. VNFIL at national level is often dependent to political priorities and thus easily subjected to governmental changes. While some MSs are sensitive to results of international assessments of learning outcomes and comparative studies of learner performance and thus tend to be open to progresses towards validation, others are still a bit resistant to the idea of comparing qualifications obtained from different educational systems. This concern can be overcome by putting the individual at the centre of the process and by involving the educational community into the planning and implementation process in order to develop a holistic and coherent approach to the issue.

In its Recommendation issued in December 2012, the Council of the European Union acknowledges that validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socioeconomically disadvantaged or the low-qualified¹.

Learners' participation depends not only on motivational factors, usefulness or relevance, but also on the accessibility of systems and the communication strategy adopted to promote them. The poorly developed recognition and transfer mechanisms between the non-formal and formal systems are likely to decrease the motivation and add to the costs, when it comes to make a certificate or diploma further recognised by the public authorities. Many learners may be unwilling to invest in a form of recognition that does not offer social and professional benefits comparable with those of formal education.

¹ ROM-ACT guide for providers and civil society organisations - http://rom-act.eu/IMG/pdf/rom_act_en.pdf



Information and guidance services need to be customized to the situation and needs of different target groups. The main reason to undertake the path of VNFIL for disadvantaged and marginalized groups is the access to the labour market.

The potential of VNFIL in contributing to the skills shortages that occur when the demand for knowledge, skills and competences exceeds the supply of the labour market is clear. This results in a situation in which large numbers of job vacancies go unfilled, even though the general unemployment rate may often be high. In the majority of the countries knowledge, skills and competences are often present but are not visible because they are not recognized.

However, the benefits of validation for the individuals are much broader than that: validation is a key tool to promote lifelong learning, to ensure more flexible learning pathways, to encourage learners and build their self-confidence as well as to create a more comprehensive understanding of competences². Non-formal adult education providers are fundamental in that sense: their role should be better recognized and their potential to outreach to and support of learners at risk of social or professional exclusion more exploited.

VNFIL can be also very useful from the point of view of volunteering activities. Volunteering is an opportunity not only to be socially active and to feel part of a community, but it is certainly is a natural learning environment, where it is possible to acquire new skills and knowledge, and where it is possible to experience concretely lifelong learning. The validation of competences gained through volunteering can be a way of empowerment and raising self-esteem for volunteers and makes volunteering more attractive especially to individuals keen to enhance that learning and raise their human capital potential. Particularly interesting in the present time are key competences that can be gained and then transferred into a professional context.

The following two chapters will introduce the current Romanian situation of VNFIL, while the last one will focus on the individual benefits of the validation process.

VNFIL in Romania

Romania has a VNFIL system based on the Governmental Ordinance 76/2004 which laid down the foundation for the validation centers as institutions accredited by the CNFPA (merged in 2010 under the new institutional framework of National Authority for Qualification) to conduct assessments for the recognition of a professional competence based on occupational standards. The Ordinance also made reference to the importance of evaluating and recognising competences gained through non-formal and informal learning. Between 2004 and 2014, CNFPA / ANC accredited about 159 validation centers for 150 professions. These centers were responsible for assessing competences in various fields: social

² EAEA response to the proposal for a council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning - http://www.eaea.org/media/policy-advocacy/validation/2012_eaea_response_validation.pdf



assistance, agriculture, construction, administration and public services, information and communication technologies, tourism, hotels and restaurants, retail, the food industry, forestry and wood processing, and welding.

In Romania, there are no national level statistics regarding the number of people certified, each center maintaining its own statistics. Hence, according to the data obtained from AFACOV Consulting Group SRL – one of the largest validation centers in Romania accredited for 36 professions and which up to now evaluated 15.289 persons – the most sought-after occupations are:

1. Machinist on earthmoving machinery – 2.268
2. Carpenter – 1.438
3. Trade worker – 1.416
4. Mason, plasterer – 1.020

Considering the 2012 recommendation of the European Union Council regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning (“... disfavored groups, including the most exposed citizen to unemployment risk or to uncertain forms of employment, are specifically targeted by the validation system so that their participation in lifelong learning and the access to the labor market can be improved ...”), a large part of the evaluation centers are oriented towards opportunities offered through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013 (POSDRU), which facilitates the free evaluation for the categories of disfavored groups.

With regard to VNFIL acquired in volunteering activities, in Romania a “Guide for competences recognition acquired through volunteering” was developed within the framework of the European Year of Volunteering (Working Group for Recognition of Competences gained through volunteering, 2011), which is set out in the National Strategy for the Development of Volunteering in Romania.

Financing

The financing for the evaluation and certification of competences acquired through methods other than formal can be realized through self-payment, European projects, or through financing by the employer firms/ institutions.

The self payment category includes especially persons that wish to have bigger opportunities in the labor market, especially abroad.

The most often encountered category of financing is through projects – financing through FSE (European Social Fund) – POSDRU 2007-2013. People are motivated to participate because they benefit from informational activities and adequate guidance, and even from mediation on the internal labor market. All groups, but especially the disadvantaged ones, benefit from these opportunities.



The employment agencies approach unemployed persons and work in partnership with multiple evaluation centers for competences regarding the re-qualification of the unemployed in professions demanded by the labor market.

Some of the employers became aware of the fact that this is an opportunity to evaluate and certify a certain employees, who despite being unqualified are proficient in their jobs. More and more often these employers reach out to evaluation centers for competences for the certification of their employees. However, from discussions with these employers, it became apparent that there is a fear that employees benefiting from training and evaluation afterwards change their job.

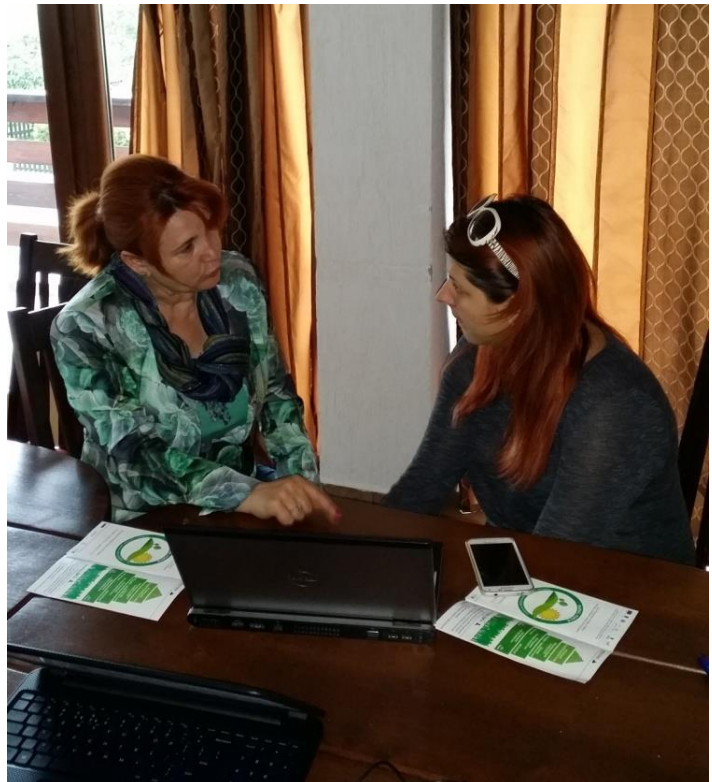
Opinions of beneficiaries

The Asociația 'EUROED' initiated a micro-research in the period May – June 2015 to analyze the impact of the evaluation system for informal and non-formal competences on the direct (evaluated persons) and indirect (employers) beneficiaries. The design of the research included both interviews with beneficiaries, case studies and interview with employer.

a) Interviews with beneficiaries of the validation system for non-formal and informal competences in the context of the European project

The 'EUROED' Association implemented in the period April 2014 – September 2015 information sessions, professional guidance, as well as evaluation and certification of professional competences acquired in ways other than formal ones, in the frame of the European Project "RURAL FORCE – FORMare, CErtificare, sanse in plus la angajare" POSDRU/135/5.2/S/128962, co-financed through the Social European Fund. The target groups are disadvantaged persons in the rural area, namely persons in search for employment, inactive people and persons working in the subsistence agriculture.

Until June 2015 there were 103 people from the above mentioned categories that benefitted from the services for evaluation and certification of competences obtained





in other ways than formal ones. Among the 33 occupations for which we offer evaluation services, most people were evaluated for the following professions: mason-plasterer, machinist on earthmoving machinery, chef, trade worker, touristic pension administrator, plumber for technical-sanitary and gas installations, carpenter.

We conducted several interviews in order to better understand the motivation and the benefits obtained by our participants following the validation of competences obtained through non-formal and informal ways. The interviews were based on the following questions:

- ✓ Did you know about evaluating competences acquired in ways other than formal ones?
- ✓ How and when did you learn your profession?
- ✓ What was your experience at the evaluation center?
- ✓ What benefits do you consider you have following the validation?
- ✓ Would you recommend to other people that they evaluate their competences?
- ✓ Do you consider that a person in search for employment has better chances to find a job after going through this learning and evaluation process?
- ✓ Did the validation of professional competences acquired in ways other than formal help you:
 - Find a job
 - Work with the same employer but as a qualified hire
 - Receive a better salary
 - Advance in your career
 - Have more self-confidence
 - Personal development
 - Others
- ✓ Is there something else you would like to mention pertaining to this subject?

The first person interviewed was a 36 year old woman searching for work from the Moeciu village, a mountainous area with high touristic potential. She was evaluated as a chef.

“For me, it was an amazing experience. I did not know that there is such a possibility to evaluate competences that I acquired elsewhere than in school. In the beginning I did not believe in this opportunity, but after thorough discussions with the experts at Asociatia ‘EUROED’ I became curious and decided that it is worth trying, since I have nothing to lose.”



I learned the skills needed to be a chef throughout time. Ever since I was a young girl in primary school I enjoyed helping my grandmother who used to cook for the whole family, which was very numerous. I liked cooking so much that I could barely wait to come back from school. When I had arrived home, I would throw my backpack and my school uniform and would run to my grandmother in the kitchen. I bake sweets



with great pleasure and I like improvising. Even as a child, my dream has always been to open a teahouse and to serve home-made cakes. I believe in my dream and I am optimistic that I will someday manage it. Right now I made the first step in that direction: obtaining my chef diploma.

For the evaluation exam I went to the center for evaluating competences. I thought that I will be nervous because I never participated in something such as this, and on top of that, I was in someone else's kitchen, not in mine where I was used to cooking. But, in the end, everything went well. Of course I was very nervous but the evaluators knew how to motivate us and how to talk to us, so that we can surpass our nervousness and prove what we truly know.

I consider that it is very important to have a diploma, both for me as a person because I have more confidence in myself now, but also for the people I come in touch with. Shortly after the evaluation, I managed to find employment as a chef at a touristic pension in the area. I am very proud of this achievement.

I strongly recommend others that are experienced in a profession, regardless which one it may be, to participate in this evaluation process because the diploma obtained helps greatly and offers you more chances in the labor market.

However, unfortunately a lot of people don't know about this opportunity and it would be very important to offer them the information.

Thank you! It was an important step for me – you never know what life has to offer and it is important that you have a diploma and that you continue improving yourself, and especially that you continue to do what you enjoy doing.”



Another person interviewed was a 40 year old man searching for employment who based in the Peris village, a location near to Bucharest.

"I found out about the possibility to validate my knowledge from a friend who participated in this project. For me it was very helpful that I found out about this from him, because otherwise I am not sure I would have ever known. I learned the plumbing profession without necessarily intending it. I worked for a firm as a mechanic locksmith and when we were sent to do sanitary installations, I learned to also be a plumber. Afterwards I was left without work and, together with my brother, I started doing sanitary installations but without having a qualification diploma.

When I found out about the possibility to certify my competences, I was very interested in signing up with the project, especially since it was offered at no cost. I went to the evaluation center where I passed a theoretic and a practice exam. Passing the exam was relatively easy for me since I am very familiar with the profession having worked in the field. It is true than one cannot know everything 100%, but close to it.

I would recommend to everyone who knows a profession to validate their competences. Come for information and come to the evaluation. People should be aware that it is good to have a document that attests what one knows because this way they have higher changes for employment and can receive a better salary both domestically but also abroad.

I received my diploma as a plumber for technical-sanitary and gas installations and I am currently in discussions with an employer to receive a job. The job would be for technical-sanitary installations because for gas installations I need to be authorized by ISCIR (State Inspectorate for Boilers, Pressured Recipients and Installations). I will continue this learning process so that I can also receive the ISCIR authorization, because in order to have a job and a decent livelihood one must constantly improve. "

b) Case studies with beneficiaries from the validation system of informal and non-formal competences before 2014, including items related to age, education level, status of the labour market in the moment of the evaluation process, job and company profile (if it is the case), date of the validation, qualification title for which the evaluation process was conducted, impact of the evaluation process related to the status of the labour market and self-evaluation.

Case study 1:

Name: MR, Age: 53

Education level: 10th grade

Status on the labour market: employed without legal contract abroad

Job: caregiver, cleaning staff



Company: private person

Date of validation: 2010

Qualification: **Caregiver elderly at home**

Impact: employed as **Caregiver elderly at home in a public social institution**

Self-evaluation: I did not believe in the validation system, but I had tried and I succeeded to get a job as a qualified person. It is a great feeling to have the acknowledgement of what you know to do and to get an official certificate

Case study 2:

Name: CR, Age: 43

Education level: 6th grade

Status on the labour market: not employed

Job: -

Company: -

Date of validation: 2013

Qualification: **Foster care, partial qualification**

Impact: participation to a training course for getting the full qualification as a foster care

Self-evaluation: I was aware of my knowledge and my skills during the validation process. I realized that the practice can give you some competences but still you need a theoretical background so I applied to a training course and I got the full certificate. My family is very proud of me.

Case study 3:

Name: AM, Age: 36

Education level: higher education

Status on the labour market: employed

Job: project manager

Company: call center, international company

Date of validation: 2010

Qualification: Trainer

Impact: upgraded as a Human Resource director with coordination of the professional development for the staff as a main responsibility

Self-evaluation: the validation process offered me self-esteem and a great career perspective in relation with the human resources of the company.



c) Interview with employer

MR, General Director, Multinational Company, Bucharest:

“In our company the competences are the most important and we are looking for people with work experience, high motivation and flexibility. The people with the informal and non-formal competences certified have all the proofs to comply with our requirements. We have very positive feedback about our employees with the competences certified and we are open to welcome more people from the labour market with competences acquired in informal and non-formal contexts. We also planned to become an accredited body of competence evaluation in order to promote a system based in real competences.”

Conclusion

The validation process offers increasing opportunities for all people in terms of both career and personal growth. Obtaining certifications that attest the professional skills enables the beneficiaries to increase their relevance on the labour market, have more job opportunities, receive better paid salaries and even change their professional route towards a better, more stable career which lead to a better standard of living. Furthermore, people are not required to spend financial resources and time in vocational training courses. This also offers participants the opportunity to acknowledge the importance of informal and non-formal learning as well as provides them with a higher level of self-esteem and confidence.

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