

STEAM Stars

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Intellectual Output 4:

A3. Recognition of prior learning and non-formal and informal learning



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Introduction

This document provides an overview of the approaches to the validation of non-formal and informal learning within and between partner countries of the STEAM Stars project. This report aims to identify similarities and differences between those countries and make recommendations for the recognition and incorporation of non-formal and informal learning in the STEAM Stars Open Campus.

1. Recognition of Prior Learning and Non-Formal and Informal Learning

Learning throughout life is a key route to personal development and acknowledging such learning can increase the value of citizens' achievements and their potential contributions to society. Despite this, the influence of traditional forms of education remains strong, with non-formal and informal learning often ignored and undervalued (Cedefop, 2015). According to the European Council's *Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Council, 2012):

- a) **Formal learning** means learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma. It includes systems of general education, initial vocational training and higher education.
- b) **Non-formal learning** means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present. It may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers; [...] in-company training, structured on-line learning (e.g., by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations.
- c) **Informal learning** means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective.



2. EU Frameworks of Reference for the Recognition of Prior Learning, and the Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

A number of European frameworks and tools are available for the documentation and recognition of prior learning, and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Some of these are summarised below.

[Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#)

In 2012, the European Council published the **Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C398/01)** which encouraged Member States to implement procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in line with their national education systems by 2018. These arrangements aimed to 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.

In this regard, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), developed the **European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning** (Cedefop, 2015), providing advice for individuals and institutions responsible for initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation. The first set of European guidelines were published jointly by the European Commission and Cedefop in 2009. Acknowledging the positive reception of these guidelines, the Council Recommendation of 2012 invited the European Commission to regularly review the guidelines. The guidelines published in 2015 were the first update since the 2012 Council recommendation and they were elaborated through extensive consultation with stakeholders at European, national and regional levels. The guidelines acknowledged that any solution must be fit for purpose and that arrangements need to be designed according to the particular context in which they operate.

The **European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018** provided an updated overview on how validation was being used at national, regional and local levels in Europe, reporting on the progress in implementing the 2012 Recommendation by Member States. The 2018 inventory was particularly significant because it was the first after the 2012 Council recommendation had established a goal date of 2018 for completion.

[Berlin Declaration on Validation of Prior Learning \(VPL\)](#)

The **3rd Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) Biennale** that took place in May 2019 resulted in the development of the **Berlin Declaration** which aspired to be an international benchmark for validation systems and intended to establish a common language and common goals among practitioners, stakeholders and policy makers in Europe. The VPL community set out to define overarching principles for achieving a comprehensive and functional VPL-system in Europe and beyond, in order to empower VPL.



The Berlin Declaration is divided into six sections, which correspond to the three policy tracks of the 3rd VPL Biennale. The conference participants worked diligently towards the common aim of providing the VPL community with a founding document. The Declaration was intended to serve as a grassroots call to action for stakeholders and policymakers to make validation policies more bold, effective, and inclusive.

European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)

The EQF serves as a translator, allowing national qualifications to be more easily understood across Europe, increasing worker and learner mobility and facilitating lifelong learning. Because the approach is based on learning outcomes, it provides the scope to develop an integrated approach to the promotion and validation of nonformal and informal learning. In particular, as a result of the implementation of the EQF Recommendation, most Member States are developing comprehensive national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes, a development that lays the ground for the implementation of validation systems at national level.

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

ECTS is the credit system for higher education used in the European Higher Education Area, involving the 46 countries engaged in the Bologna Process. It has established a system of credits as an appropriate means of promoting widespread student mobility. ECTS credits are a key element of the Bologna Framework for Qualifications, and are compatible with the EQF. ECTS credits are based on the workload students need to have in order to achieve expected learning outcomes that describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning. They relate to level descriptors in national and European qualifications frameworks. Each learning outcome is expressed in terms of credits, with a full-time student workload ranging from 1500 to 1800 hours for one academic year; one credit generally corresponds to 25-30 hours of work.

European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

ECVET is a system for the accumulation and transfer of units of learning outcomes in vocational education and training in Europe. It provides a common methodological framework that can be used to describe qualifications in terms of units of learning outcomes with associated points. It is not intended to replace national qualification systems, but to achieve better comparability and compatibility among them. ECVET applies to all outcomes obtained by an individual from various education and training pathways that are then transferred, recognised and accumulated with a view to achieving a qualification. This initiative makes it easier for European citizens to gain recognition of their training, skills and knowledge in another Member State. Its goal is to promote international mobility and lifelong learning opportunities.



Europass

The Europass is a set of online tools and information which provides learning and skills support (following on from the Europass Skills Passport online portfolio, which was available until 2019). The tool provides a personal online Europass Library in which users can record their “work, education and training experiences, language skills, digital skills, information on projects, volunteering experiences, and achievements” (Europass, n.d.) as well as any supporting documents.

Europass also supports users in the creation of CVs, cover letters, and personal statements, drawing attention to their skills and abilities, including those acquired outside formal education and training. The structure of the Europass serves to encourage identification and recognition of learning, and therefore competences and qualifications levels, which consists in an important step towards full recognition, validation and certification.

Youthpass

Youthpass is a tool for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning which is achieved as part of the youth projects funded by the European Commission. It is part of the European Commission’s strategy to foster the recognition of these types of learning.



3. Basic Validation Features for Developing and Implementing Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

The 2012 **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** proposed the development of a procedure including the following elements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, while allowing each individual to benefit from any of these, individually or in combination, depending on his or her needs. The distinction between these four phases is crucial to making validation arrangements flexible and fit for purpose.

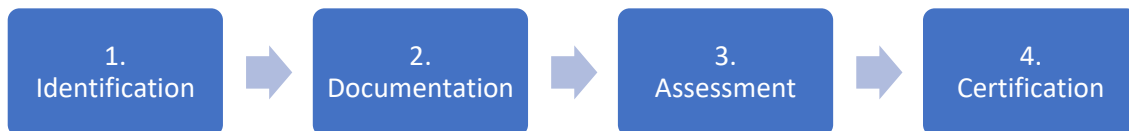


Figure 1: Phases of validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Council, 2012)

1. IDENTIFICATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning

This stage is critical since learning outcomes vary from person to person and can be obtained in a variety of settings, such as at home, at work, or via volunteer activities. Advisers and counsellors who can engage in a discourse with the candidate and direct him or her to acceptable options and tools will be needed regularly during the identification phase. However, in some countries this stage is supported using standardised ICT tools enabling self-assessment. In this initial phase the individual must be made aware of the costs and benefits of validation, compared to further education and training.

2. DOCUMENTATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning

The second stage involves provision of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired. Documentation can be done through 'creating' a portfolio, which typically consists of a CV and a professional history of the individual, as well as documentation and/or work samples attesting to their learning accomplishments. Validation must be accessible to a variety of evidence formats, including written documentation, work samples, and practice demonstrations. Common formats for the presentation of learning experiences, as demonstrated by Europass, can aid this transfer and promote better understanding of these outcomes.

3. ASSESSMENT of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning

In this stage, the individual's learning outcomes are compared against specific reference points and/or standards (tests, evidence from previous work, examination of portfolios, demonstrations, etc.). This stage is crucial to the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. As validation is about capturing diverse individual learning



experiences, assessment tools need to be designed to capture and assess the learning specific to each individual and the context in which that learning took place.

4. CERTIFICATION of the learning identified, documented and assessed

Certification can take different forms but is commonly the award of a formal qualification (or part-qualification). A summative evaluation confirming the attainment of learning outcomes against a specific standard is required for validation to reach the certification stage. This process must be overseen by a reputable authority or organisation.



4. Country-specific Approaches to Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

In this section, the state of play and overview of validation practices and arrangements of non-formal and informal learning in each partner country is provided. The information is extracted from the country research in relation to the principles outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation (Cedefop, 2020).

Country	Education	Labour market	Third sector
United Kingdom - England and Northern Ireland	VA in 3 sectors: IVET, HE, AE	VA in place	Information not available
Ireland	VA in 4 sectors: IVET, CVET, HE, AE	VA in place	Specific projects
Netherlands	VA in all sectors	VA in place	Specific projects
Spain	VA in all sectors	Not applicable	VA in development
Turkey	VA in 2 sectors: CVET, AE	VA in place	Specific projects

*VA: Validation Arrangements; IVET: Initial Vocational Education and Training; HE: Higher Education; AE: Adult Education; CVET: Continuing Vocational Education and Training

Figure 2: Description of validation arrangements by country (Cedefop, 2020)

United Kingdom

The four countries which constitute the United Kingdom – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – have different qualifications frameworks and, accordingly, different ways of recognising non-formal learning. In March 2014, the Qualifications Frameworks in the UK report **Recognising Non-Formal Certificated Learning within and outside Qualifications Frameworks in the UK, the Netherlands and Finland** reviewed the ways in which each UK nation recognised non-formal and informal learning. The report also included case studies from Finland and the Netherlands, countries which are “considered to be well advanced in recognising non-formal learning” (p. 11).

England and Northern Ireland

In England and Northern Ireland, there is no national prescribed position on recognising non-formal and informal learning. However, there are several routes through which learners can have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and validated. For England, **Ofqual’s General Conditions of Recognition** (2016) refer to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in relation to regulated qualifications (i.e., most vocational qualifications, together with all main academic qualifications). For Northern Ireland, the **Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessments** (CCEA Regulation, 2017) set out rules for regulated qualifications (outside Higher Education) and are included in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code for HE.

The **Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF)**, introduced in 2015, devolves responsibility from the national level to Awarding Organisations (AOs) and learning providers, meaning that the actual implementation of RPL depends on the providers themselves.



When it comes to formal, regulated qualifications, recognition of prior learning (RPL) is used. RPL is mostly used in vocational education to adapt the learning offering, but it can also be utilised in higher education (HE) for access, exemption, and award. In both England and Northern Ireland, **National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)** provide an opportunity to validate workplace learning. They are primarily aimed at working people and lead to a nationally recognised qualification that demonstrates the competence to do a job to a nationally recognised occupational level. In the **third sector**, there are also several different validation activities. However, there is no structure in place to coordinate the various sectors' validation work.

Wales

The Welsh Government uses the **Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)**, launched in 2003. The CQFW enables the recognition of credit and qualifications across three categories of learning – higher education, vocational and general qualifications, and lifelong learning. It does not prescribe a specific approach or structure, but it is designed to enable providers to create “pathways of progression” (p.4) which are consistent and transferable within Europe and internationally.

Scotland

The **Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)** brings together all mainstream Scottish qualifications, vocational training such as apprenticeships and **Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs)**, and other lifelong learning. The different learning types can be compared to other European qualifications by mapping the SCQF level to EQF level. The SCQF website includes an RPL tool which provides appropriate guidance on how to seek recognition for prior learning, both for employers and for learners.

Ireland

In Ireland, RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from Level 1 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). RPL practices exist in all sub-sectors of education and training (with the exception of the general education sector), across the labour market and in the third sector – though to a lesser degree.

Despite the fact that Ireland does not have a unified national policy on RPL, there are national policies in existence for specific actors and sectors that address specific concerns such as workforce development, diversity, and social inclusion. A variety of RPL solutions for low-skilled, low-qualified, and other types of learners are in place as part of the policy response. In the education and training sector, there are also unified national quality assurance policies and guidelines for RPL in terms of programmes and evaluation, as well as access, transfer, and progression.

The **National Framework of Qualifications** was created in 2003. Learning outcomes became the basis for describing knowledge, skill, and competence to be gained inside provider-led education and training programmes, as well as the learning represented within national framework awards/qualifications.



Education and training have **quality assurance procedures** in place. **National guidelines** for access, transfer and progression enable providers to set up procedures for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These guidelines directly address statutory requirements (**Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012**, Section 56.-3).

The legislation establishes credit accumulation, credit transfer, and identification as well as formal assessment of previously acquired knowledge, skills, or competence by learners.

Technically the legislation also enables **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** to make direct awards to learners, including with the assistance of providers. Learners can obtain complete qualifications at every level of the Framework, partial accreditation in the form of minor awards, credits/exemptions within programmes, credits towards awards, or access to programmes on the basis of prior certified and/or uncertified learning in almost all fields, with the exception of those prohibited by law, through the work of further and higher education and training providers and institutions.

However, even within different departments of the same institution, the capacity to provide identification, documentation support, and assessment locally is inconsistent across all domains of learning and throughout all sectors. The first meeting of a national RPL Network was held at QQI, with the goal of supporting practitioners and creating a platform where best practices can be discussed.

Netherlands

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Netherlands commenced in 1998. Under the umbrella-term EVC (Erkenning van Verworven Competenties or, in English, 'Validation of Prior Learning') such validation was (and still is) intended to take stock of existing knowledge and skills.

In 2013, a proposal was prepared which aimed to solve the shortcomings in VPL concerning its quality, quantity (decreasing participation in VPL procedures and number of VPL providers), and effectiveness. This proposal realised a major shift in the VPL strategy and resulted in a dual VPL system, effective since 2016.

The dual system consists of **two pathways**, one related to the **education system** and the other to the **labour market**, based on the necessity for a qualification in addition to employability. This dual policy broadens the validation opportunities for Dutch citizens.

- The **labour market route**: VPL is geared at career guidance of adults on the labour market. Individuals' prior learning results are verified against industry/organisational requirements or national qualification standards. Individuals' employability is also supported by VPL, whether intra- or inter-sector. Tools are the intake assessment, e-portfolio, the 'ervaringsprofiel' (Experience Profile), competence tests, assessments, workplace observations/performance assessment) etc. If a formal VPL procedure is followed by an accredited VPL supplier, the result is an 'ervaringscertificaat' and/or which can be topped up by a 'vakbekwaamheidsbewijs' (Certificate for Vocational Competence) in order to link with professional standards and competences) or a 'competentiebewijs' (Certificate for Generic and Transferal or Generic Competences).



- The **education route**: Learning outcomes and competences of an individual are validated against national qualification standards. The goal for the learner is to validate his or her formally/informally/non-formally acquired competences in order to obtain a formal qualification. Tools are the intake assessment, e-portfolio, competence tests, ECVET methods, etc. An 'ervaringscertificaat' can be part of the assessment of someone's learning outcomes but is not essential for obtaining exemptions or a partial/full qualification. As the dual pathway is organised there is no longer an exclusive role for the 'ervaringscertificaat'. The awarding bodies for qualifications (in general, exam committees of VET schools, or universities which are only functional within the autonomy of their VET school or university) can also use the other mentioned instruments.

Both routes have a value of their own, either for obtaining a national qualification or for realising career steps at sector or organisation level. The **Dutch Qualification Framework (NLQF)** provides level-recognition for qualifications in the labour market route. With NLQF the relationship between labour market qualifications and formal qualifications becomes more transparent. NLQF is related to the European Qualifications Frameworks (EQF) and aims to support mobility on the European labour market for adults. Private educators have been able to link their qualifications to NLQF levels since 2012.

Spain

Validation is covered in Spain by the **Spanish Strategy for Employment Activation 2017-2020** and the **2018 VET National Strategy**. The latter, which has been recently introduced, anticipates the revision of the procedure for the recognition of professional competences in order to simplify it and make it more accessible through permanent open calls. Additionally, there is an ongoing project to establish a new recognition system for non-formal education covering the entire youth sector, the project '**Reconoce**', which has been approved by the Spanish Youth Institute (INJUVE) and the youth departments of the Autonomous Communities and is expected to be fully implemented in 2019. Spain thus adopts a general approach to validation but adapts it to its different regions, which have considerable autonomy for the deployment of solutions.

Since the approval of the Council Recommendation in 2012, the Spanish government and the regional governments have consolidated the national procedure for the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience and nonformal learning (leading to partial VET diplomas or complete occupational certificates). In addition, universities have devised systems for recognising professional and work experience, for two purposes: access to programmes (for people aged 40 and over) and as credits towards a university degree.

Spain also provides other types of certificates not linked to formal education: '*Certificados de profesionalidad*'. These certificates are in the process of change, becoming gradually integrated into VET and thus having a stronger link between formal and non-formal education and the new demands of the labor market. These certificates are part of the new Organic Law 3/2022, of March 31, on the organisation and integration of VET. This defines for the first time the VET system as a single and joint system, articulated in such a way that it identifies the professional skills of the labour market and responds to them either by facilitating the necessary training that enables the acquisition of knowledge or, where appropriate, recognition of these. The new degree courses within this new VET system are cumulative and ascending training, so that students will be able, in a flexible way and adaptable to their circumstances, to acquire new skills



that they can accredit to access to higher education and even to validate subjects. Likewise, the skills acquired in the professional environment can be officially identified, evaluated and accredited. The accreditation obtained will serve to access higher Degrees.

There are several complementary national policies covering the different validation procedures. The main policies are established in the following legal documents:

- **Act 5/2002 is the legal basis for the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience and non-formal learning**, which is further developed in Royal Decree 1224/2009. The recognition procedure can lead to a full or partial VET qualification, including diplomas issued by education authorities (initial VET) and certificates issued by labour authorities ('Occupational Certificates').
- **Act 2/2006 is the legal basis for the recognition of prior knowledge of adults with regards to competences acquired in secondary education**. It establishes that educational administrations have the responsibility to periodically organise examinations for adults to be able to obtain secondary diplomas (covering general education and VET), without having to follow an education programme. It also regulates admission exams to VET programmes for those who do not meet the usual entrance academic requirements.
- **Royal Decree 861/2010 is the legal basis for the recognition of work experience in the form of credits towards an official university degree**. **Royal Decree 412/2014** is the legal basis of university admission procedures for adults: recognition of work experience to access university programmes for people over 40, and access examinations for people over 25 and people over 45.

Turkey

Since 2006, Turkey has had a VNFIL system (Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning) for vocational qualifications. This system is governed by the **Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA)**, a powerful platform that brings together the government, employees, and companies in the country. The system's ultimate goal is to provide up-to-date qualifications to the workforce and to acknowledge workplace learning.

The **Turkish Qualifications Framework (TQF)** encourages the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The TQF Regulation (2015) mentions Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and includes a special article that calls for the development of specific concepts and methods for prior learning recognition and quality assurance.

The TQF was referenced to the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)** and self-certified to the **Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA)** in 2017, following its adoption in 2015. The relationship between national qualifications frameworks and systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning is addressed by EQF reference criterion 3.

The validation infrastructure is in place, and the current priority is to increase communication, collaboration, and coordination among all essential players. Assessment and certification, as stated in the Council Recommendation on VNFIL in 2012, are in place; however, identification and documentation, as well as tools and other self-assessment approaches, need to go further.

VQA launched VNFIL for newly established vocational/professional qualifications, resulting in the establishment of 170 **Authorised Certification Bodies (ACBs)** by August 2018. Assessment,



evaluation, and certification processes are carried out by ACBs. The **Ministry of National Education's (MoNE) 2014-2018 Lifelong Learning Strategy Document** places a major emphasis on validation processes and encourages widespread usage of validation. The regulation on VNFIL principles and execution, including accreditation, assessment, and evaluation, was released by MoNE in October 2017.

In higher education, VNFIL is still in its infancy. The change of **Law No 2547 (article 44/b)** in 2011 made it a legal requirement in the Turkish higher education system. VNFIL's work with migrants and refugees has begun, and great progress has been made.



5. Recommendations for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning within the Scope of the STEAM Stars Project

Due to the diverse social and cultural contexts of each partner country, the stage of the adoption of the 2012 Council Recommendation is different for each of them. In fact, national approaches to setting up these arrangements vary; while some countries take a national approach, others focus on specific sectors. Opportunities for validation exist across the different sectors of education and extend into the labour market and third sector to different degrees.

Therefore, project partners should identify a successful RPL approach which can be used as reference for the partnership. This RPL approach should embrace a considerable range of beneficiaries and levels of education and training and follow the RPL phases described at 2012 Council Recommendation.

Meanwhile, school teachers, trainers and non-formal and informal educators offering the STEAM Stars curricula should establish an internal procedure for the purposes of identification, documentation, assessment, and certification of non-formal and informal learning.

1. **Identification.** The STEAM Stars project has developed training modules based on learning outcomes. The STEAM Stars curricula validation office should invite the candidates into dialogue with counsellors/advisors, possibly using relevant tools, in order to identify which STEAM Stars competences (learning outcomes) the candidate already possesses.
2. **Documentation.** As a second stage, the STEAM Stars curricula validation office will ask the candidate to provide evidence, so as to synthesise his/her portfolio. Almost every piece of evidence should be taken into account, respecting always the national legislation.
3. **Assessment.** The STEAM Stars curricula validation office will compare the candidate's existing competences with the ones included in the STEAM Stars curricula using relevant assessment methods. In this stage, the candidate becomes eligible to address only the learning outcomes that they need in order to acquire the competences of each STEAM Stars curricula. No written or oral tests are foreseen to complete the assessment.
4. **Certification.** Learners will complete the course and attain its individual competences and will take part in the final certification procedures, e.g., assessment tests, projects, etc. After that, the learner who successfully completes the final exams will achieve recognition of their attainment of the specific learning outcomes and the STEAM Stars competences, and eventually be awarded the STEAM Stars Certificate, together with other learners who have successfully followed the complete STEAM Stars training modules. The same Certifications will be awarded to every learner who successfully completes the course, regardless of their type of enrolment, e.g. full course learner or partial course learner (deriving from prior experience).



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