EQAVET Peer Review on 'The new system for validation of results of non-formal education and informal learning in Slovakia and its quality assurance processes' - Flash Report

EQAVET Peer Review in Slovakia

The seventh EQAVET Peer Review took place on 21-23 November 2022 in Bratislava, hosted by the State Vocational Education Institute (SIOV) and Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport. Seven EQAVET Network members from Belgium-Flanders, Czechia, Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia acted as peers. The Peer Review focused on the recently designed Slovakian system of validation of non-formal education and informal learning (VNFIL) in terms of quality assurance. The feedback from peers, based on their knowledge of implementing similar reforms in their countries, will feed into adjustments of the system itself as well as modifications of the underpinning legislation under preparation in Slovakia.

Validation of results of non-formal and informal learning and its quality assurance processes in Slovakia

To kick-off the meeting, the State Vocational Education Institute (SIOV) presented the enabling conditions for the new system of validation in Slovakia. In recent years, Slovakia implemented several important measures to complement its national model of validation of non-formal and informal learning including:

- ✓ In 2015, the **Slovak Qualifications Framework (SKKR)** was created as well as the **National Qualification Register**.

- ✓ In 2017, the **Referencing report of the SKKR towards the EQF** was accepted by national and European authorities.

- ✓ In 2020, the **ESF-funded project "The System for Verification of Qualifications"** was launched with the aim to set-up and pilot the system of validation in Slovakia.

- ✓ In 2021, the **Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance 2021-2030** was adopted with five main drivers: flexibility, open educational paths for citizens, supporting the importance of all forms of education, inclusivity and quality. The Strategy refers to the introduction of new systemic elements for the recognition of prior learning and defining the main tools of this system. The Strategy also requires from national bodies to draft a new **Act on lifelong learning**. The Act is under preparation and should be submitted to the government for adoption in the first half of 2023.

The new system of validation in Slovakia

The host later detailed the four institutional components of the new system.

- ✓ The **Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport** has the role of authorising authority and 'conductor' of the system. They grant authorisations to authorised institutions and authorised persons, accept applications for authorisation, maintain public registers of the three other institutional components and control their compliance, and are in charge of quality assurance.

- ✓ **National guarantors** are experts in the field of qualifications in their respective disciplines who guarantee the professional level of the authorised persons and the validation process itself. They develop qualification assessment manuals and professional training programmes for authorised persons, chair the examination board, assess portfolios and are responsible for examination procedures.

- ✓ **Authorised persons** are natural persons that are authorized to perform the activities of a member of the examination committee for qualification verification. They can be teachers and trainers, self-employed experts, interested persons from VET centres or representatives from educational and professional institutions They evaluate the candidate's portfolio, take part in the examination committee, communicate the progress of the examination to the authorised institution and ensure the process of qualification verification.

- ✓ **Authorised institutions** are institutions authorised by the Ministry to conduct examinations for validation. They provide advice and assistance to candidates, ensure the recognition of the units of learning outcomes (ULOs) based on the portfolio of the candidates, ensure the staffing of the examination committee and equipment, inform candidates about their results, issue certificates of qualifications, maintain an electronic register of candidates in examinations, track graduates and cooperate for the monitoring and financing of the exams.

In line with the EU guidelines, the validation process is organized in four steps: identification of (ULOs); documentation of ULOs; assessment of ULOs; and validation of ULOs.

The system of VNFIL is monitored in four areas: quantitative indicators, quality of exams, financial and personal demands of exams and tracking of exam participants. Results of the pilot project "The System for Verification of Qualifications' will be used for instance to determine the most relevant qualifications in the future system and achieve a more targeted promotion.

Institutional elements of the new system of validation

Selected representatives of the national guarantors, authorised persons and authorised institutions participating in the pilot project were invited to provide insight on their role.

A national guarantor for qualifications in the sector of tourism explained that the new system had several advantages for its field as most of the occupations in tourism are not integrated in formal education, such as housekeeping. The system of validation allows for instance employees to check their skills and support their career development and to harmonise the system of certification of non-formal education.

An authorised person in the sector of administration decided to take part in the pilot to address the problem of skills matching and shortages. The system allows candidates to provide their skills thanks to flexible portfolios and obtain positions through the recognition of prior learning.

A representative of the National Association of Real Estate Offices in Slovakia explained that her organisation decided to become an authorised institution because there are no formal education for relevant qualifications in the real estate sector in Slovakia. The pilot is perceived as an important and logic step in the development of lifelong learning in the country.

Candidates in the system of validation

Candidates for VNFIL should be aged 18 and have completed compulsory schooling. If candidates do not know which qualification they wish to verify, coordination point services are available to provide information, advice and support. If candidates know what qualification they

wish to verify, they can turn toward authorised institutions. To verify their qualification, they must create a portfolio demonstrating their skills which is submitted to an examination board. If candidates have some gaps to obtain a qualification, they must go through an exam process.

In the pilot project, the Ministry developed an information campaign in collaboration with social partners covering the twenty-four professional sectors in Slovakia, allowing for a complete overview of the labour market. The Ministry is also working with smaller companies to ensure trust and participation in the system. The pilot project aims to identify the sectors who need the validation system the most. The information campaign is conducted on a plurality of platforms and tools including leaflets, meetings, or newspapers articles.

Peer Discussions

The Slovakian hosts presented their new system for validation for non-formal and informal learning with the aim to get feedback from the peers on their pilot project before implementing the system and adopting their new legislation on lifelong learning. At the end of the meeting, the peer reviewers shared their initial feedback on the new Slovakian system for validation of results of non-formal education and informal learning and its quality assurance processes.

Peers agreed that all four phases of validation are covered in the new system and the efforts are made to engage with social partners and promote the system to the public are promising. Peers suggested to strengthen the relationships with labour market actors at government level, further develop the support provided to candidates and plan system evaluation in a few years. The host and peers also exchanged on the challenges related to the transition between the pilot project and the implementation of the system.

Regarding quality assurance processes, peers highlighted that the system appears to be backed by a coherent national skills strategy with clear goals for the VET system. Roles and responsibilities of the different actors were defined in line with the corresponding procedures outlined in the EU guidelines for validation. Peers suggested to develop quality standards with external and independent checks. They also encouraged the further development of SMART indicators at system level and mentioned the possibility of a mandatory counselling process to support candidates more extensively throughout the validation process.

A comprehensive feedback report will be drafted and shared with the Slovakian hosts. The feedback in the peer reviewers' report will help to inform the national stakeholders on further improvements.

The EQAVET Peer Review initiative 2022 - 2023

The 2020 Council Recommendation on VET called upon the EQAVET Network to develop a specific methodology for EQAVET peer reviews, with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level in the Member States. Over the course of 2021, with the support of DG EMPL and the EQAVET Secretariat, the EQAVET Network agreed on a joint methodology and prepared a Peer Review Manual.

The Quality Assurance National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs) from 21 Member States have agreed to take part in the first phase of the EQAVET Network's peer review initiative. The Slovakian Peer Review was the seventh out of nine Peer Reviews that are scheduled to take place in 2022. Twelve further peer reviews are planned to take place in 2023.