ANALYSIS ON THE VNFIL DATA IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Romania has introduced the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) mechanism since 2004. However, the mechanism should be further developed, especially in relation to the quality assurance, to make the validation more effective, reliable and credible to the stakeholders. For example, it is very important to improve the evidence-based approach to the validation of NFIL by developing tools of collecting and analyzing relevant data from the target groups. To achieve this, we analyze and report in this paper different statistics of the target groups (e.g. candidates tested by the assessment centres) using the database developed by the National Qualifications Authority. Available data for the VNFIL are not too many but this situation is expected to improve in the years to come. That is why use the data collected during the past several years. In this paper, among other statistics the authors have investigated whether the candidates results (pass/fail) differed based on certain period of the year when they took their examinations using the VNFIL procedures. The assumption was that during holidays more than usual (competent) Romanians working abroad come to the country and apply for getting the professional competence certificate. In addition, the study is focused on dissemination and awareness raising activities to inform potential beneficiaries (including the Romanians abroad) about the benefits of the validation process, especially for those with a poorer qualification level, for whom the certification of professional competences could become a real opportunity for better insertion on the labour market.*

Key words: *Adult education, validation procedures, non-formal and informal learning, evaluation centres, levels of qualifications, European Qualifications Framework, descriptive statistics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is an important part of the adult education. It is addressed to persons who have not completed a certain level of the formal education system (e.g. primary education, VET schools etc.) and who, for example, have not acquired the basic competences or who do not have a professional qualification. In this article we will refer to the latter category of adults. Within this category we will discuss how adults with knowledge and skills obtained in non-formal contexts (NFIL) can validate them and thus obtain a certificate of competences / qualification. Adults can be evaluated, for validation, in the centers of assessment of professional competences authorized by the National Qualifications Authority (NQA).

In 2004, the legislative framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning was introduced in Romania. Since then, the VNFIL system has continued to develop both in terms of legislation, and especially, its implementation. The validation of non-formal and informal learning is part of the educational policy of lifelong learning. For example, the national lifelong learning strategy (2015–2020) specifies the main directions for VNFIL development and identifies solutions regarding the ways of informing and advising

stakeholders, their access to the process of evaluating professional competencies, granting financial incentives (governmental, local or European), including measures the for disadvantaged groups [6].

The National Qualifications Authority is the public institution that, among other tasks, coordinates the entire activity of VNFIL. In 2014, the National Accreditation Center (NAC) was created within NQA as a specific structure responsible only for validation of the prior learning. This is one of the measures to implement the LLL strategy mentioned above. In the last years, the main activities of the National Accreditation Center have focused on improving the legislation, developing the human resources involved in the validation process and increasing the quality of VNFIL process.

The evaluation of the interested persons (e.g. the candidates) in order to validate their professional competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts is carried out in 37 evaluation centers located throughout the country. Depending on its capacity, a center offers assessment services in one or more occupation / qualification. Validation is offered for qualification levels 1–3 National Qualifications Framework (NQF) / European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

2. INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

In Romania the VNFIL falls under the responsibility of the National Qualifications Authority which is an

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institution coordinated by the Ministry of Education. The institution was established in 2011, by the Law of National Education, through the reorganization of the former National Council for Adult Training – a tripartite body in charge of coordinating the validation of vocational skills gathered in other contexts than formal.

The main benefit of this institutional change consists of the establishment of linkage between the validation system and the National Qualification Framework. Also, the NQA approves the occupations standards which are the baseline documents of the validation process. Thus, the organizations dealing with the VNFIL are as follows.

National Qualifications Authority coordinates the validation activities at national level by defining:
- policy and strategy;
- legislation and guidance;
- coordination with other institutions and stakeholders.

National Accreditation Center (NAC) established in 2014 as a specialized body within the NQA whose major responsibility is to authorize the assessment centres and certify the evaluators involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning of adults. The NAC has the following tasks [1]:
- authorising, monitoring and controlling the assessment centres;
- revising the legislation for learning acquired in non-formal and informal contexts;
- supporting the coherence in implementing the national policies in non-formal and informal learning, through effective coordination of relevant stakeholders and dissemination of good practices;
- improving the evidence-based approach to the VNFIL by developing tools of collecting and analyzing relevant data from the target groups;
- managing the register of certificates issued by the local assessment centres;
- managing the register of authorised assessment centres;
- managing the register of evaluators of professional competences, assessors of the evaluators and external evaluators.

Assessment centers of professional competences are public or private bodies, with legal personality, which are authorized by the NAC to carry out the process of evaluation of the candidates, in order to validate their professional competences. The authorization procedure consists of two stages: (i) elaboration of a self-assessment report made by the evaluation center; and (ii) the NAC performs the external evaluation of the center, by verifying the information in the evaluation report (including through field visits) and proposes the NQA to authorize / not authorize the center. Also, during the authorization period, NCA monitors the activities of the assessment centers. For example, the centers must report every three months statistical data on: the number of graduates and occupations for which they obtained the certificates of professional competences, the evaluation tools used for each candidate, the name of the evaluators and the period of the evaluations, etc. Currently, there are 37 nationally authorized assessment centers.

The costs of the evaluation services are paid by the candidates who opt for VNFIL. These costs differ from one assessment center to another and from one qualification to another. However, validation services are free for certain categories of adults. Thus, the unemployed are supported to pay the assessment fee by the unemployment insurance fund. According to the legislation, any registered job seeker has the right to benefit, free of charge, of information, counseling and validation services provided by the National Agency for Employment at county level. Moreover, the assessment centers in the National Agency for Employment network are also financially supported for authorization from the unemployment budget.

Sectoral Committees are social dialogue organizations of public utility with legal personality, organized at the level of the branches of activity and representing the employers' associations and trade unions. Among other duties, they validate the qualifications and occupation standards used in VNFIL.

3. DESCRIPTION OF VNFIL MECHANISMS

In Romania, the organizational structure of the VNFIL mechanism is rather centralized (Fig. 1), even though, after authorization, the evaluation centers have
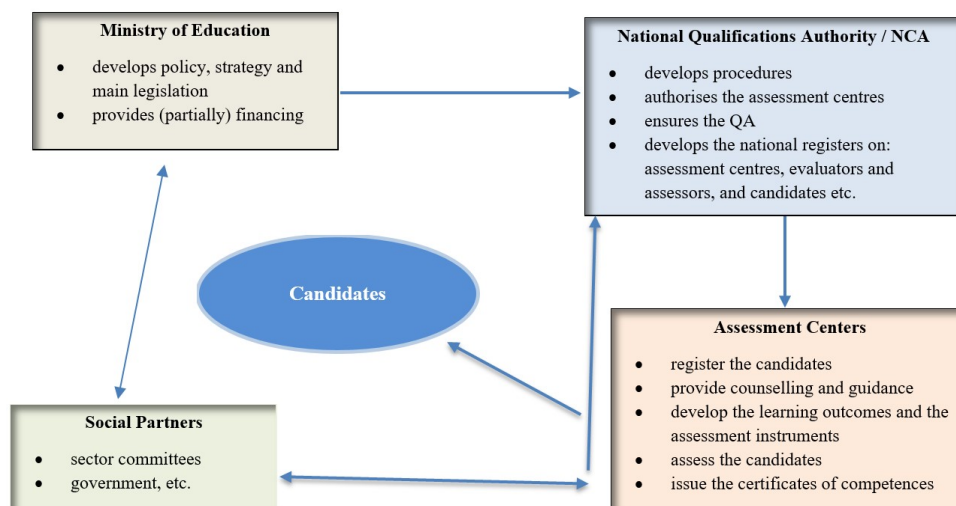

Fig. 1. VNFIL organizational structure.

autonomy in carrying out the evaluation processes and issuing certificates of competences. As can be seen, the National Qualifications Authority, through the NCA, has the role of coordination, monitoring and control at national level. The evaluation centers implement the VNFIL policy and methodologies defined at national level. These are developed by the NQA and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and, in some cases, by the Ministry of Labor. The advantage of having a centralized national approach to validation policy is to ensure consistency in terms of cross-sectoral recognition of validation processes, based on learning outcomes. Moreover, the NQA approves the occupational standards and inform the training standards, which are the basis of the validation process. Based on these, the evaluation centers define the learning outcomes for each qualification and elaborate the related assessment instruments.

The social partners also have an important role. For example, the sectoral committees contribute, among other things, to the development of occupational standards and to the dissemination of VNFIL information to its members.

In 2012 the CE issued a recommendation that until 2018 the member states make arrangements for introducing the validation of non-formal and informal learning, by taken into account the countries' specificity [3]. An important aspect of the 2012 EC recommendation is that validation is a four-step process: identifying, documenting, evaluating and certifying learning outcomes. Accordingly, the VNFIL process in Romania includes:

a) *Identification* of learning outcomes.

Validation starts with identifying the knowledge, skills and competences (responsibility and autonomy) – the learning outcomes – obtained by a person / candidate in different contexts. Through the advisory activity, the evaluators of the evaluation centers identify with the candidates the learning outcomes obtained previously based on the competences, tasks and duties defined by the occupational standards.

b) *Documentation* of learning outcomes.

The documentation follows the identification phase and involves providing evidence of the assessment results obtained by a candidate. This can be achieved by analyzing the candidate's portfolio by the evaluator. Among other things (e.g. CV, education and training documents, references from employers, etc.) the portfolio should include video recordings of work samples.

c) *Assessment* of the learning outcomes. The assessment of professional competences has the following main features [4]:

- it should be voluntary;
- it should be carried out in accordance with established occupational standards; the evidence of professional competences should be gathered through the application of different methods of evaluation applied in various contexts and on different occasions;
- the assessment should be independent of formal professional education and training, meaning that it can take place outside a formal education or training program;

- the assessment of each unit of competence should conclude with a result for the candidate - "competent" or "not yet competent".

The principles guiding the assessment of professional competences are the following:

- Content validity: the evaluation is based on evidence of professional competence assessed on the basis of activities described in the occupational standard.
- Credibility: the evaluation of competences employs certain methods that lead to the same results on a consistent basis.
- Impartiality: the evaluation allows the participation of everyone interested in validation, without the existence of vested interests.
- Flexibility: the evaluation is adapted to the needs of candidates and to the particularities of the workplace.
- Confidentiality: the information regarding the manner and the result of the process sits with the beneficiary; and.
- Simplicity: the process of evaluation is easy to understand and can be easily applied by all involved persons.

The *methods/instruments* used in the assessment of professional competences include self-evaluation, direct observation, oral test, written test, project-based evaluation, simulation or structured observation, reporting or evaluation by others. The assessment instruments should be elaborated in accordance with four main principles:

- validity (the instrument actually measures what it aims at measuring);
- accuracy/fidelity (the instrument provides consistent results used in different contexts and by different assessors);
- fairness (the instrument does not favour any socio-economic group to the detriment of other groups);
- objectivity (the instrument produces the data based on facts and gives, usually, a single correct answer).

The relationship between the principles and methods / instruments of assessment described above is presented in the Table 1.

d) *Certification* of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification. After successfully pass of examination taken at an assessment center a candidate receives a certificate of competences for either partial of full competences of an occupational standard. The certificate has national recognition. If the candidate demonstrated the full range of competences then her/his certificate is equivalent with the same certificate obtained through formal education (e.g. formal

Table 1

The relationship between principles and methods in assessing the professional competences

	Validity	Accuracy	Fairness	objectivity
Content validity	x			
Credibility	x		x	
Impartiality				x
Flexibility			x	
Simplicity				x

initial VET or continuous training), called certificate of qualification.

Also, the NFIL certificate of competences is internationally recognized provided the Hague apostille is attached to it.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Until recently, available data were not too many and not very reliable. This was mainly due to the lack of a national database to centralize the information received periodically from the assessment centers. However, data availability on the VNFIL is expected to improve in the years to come due to the database on graduates under construction.

Since the introduction of the VNFIL in Romania (2004) more than 100,000 persons obtain a (or a new) qualification. The Table 2 shows the statistics of the last four years.

From the data in Table 2 (also see footnote 2) we can conclude that the number of persons increased year by year. Taking into consideration that the number of the assessment centers stayed the same it means that more people are interested to get their competences certified through VNFIL. However, the number is still too small compared to the need of the skilled workers on the labor market. One of the causes is discussed in paragraph 5 of this article.

If one looks at the gender distribution (Table 3), it is quite natural that the number of male graduates will be much higher than for female graduates. A possible explanation is that the most required qualifications at the assessment centers are in the construction's field (see Table 3).

However, also in this case we see an increase of several percent of the number of women who chose this type of validation.

Table 2

Number of persons who obtain qualifications 2016−2019

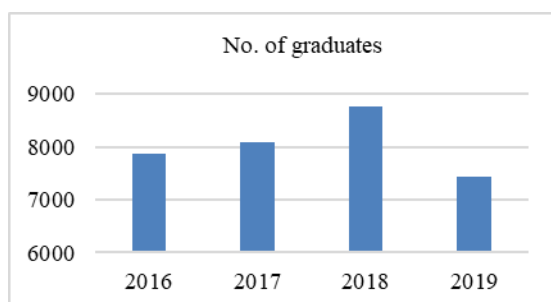| Year	No. of persons
2016	7865
2017	8096
2018	8760
2019[2]	7425

Fig. 2. Graduates of 2016–2019.

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[2] Data available until 10/31/2019. According to estimation (based on the month average so far) by the end of the year the number of graduates will exceed 9000 persons.

Table 3

Percentage of persons who obtain qualifications 2017−2019 by gender

%	2017	2018	2019
Male	75.70	71.30	70.75
Female	24.30	28,70	29.25

Table 4

The most demanded qualifications 201−2019

Occupation title	No. of persons
Machine man on earthmoving machinery	2460
Plumber	1374
Cook	923
Electrician in construction	813
Worker for harvesting trees	728
Auto mechanic	643
Nurse	596
Welder	486
Carpenter	477
Bartender	468

Looking now at Table 4 we observe what the big difference is between the demands for the different domains. Thus, we note that: (i) 5 of the first 6 qualifications are in the field of construction and (ii) the number of graduates for the qualification from the first position ("Machine man on earthmoving machinery") is almost double compared to those from the second position ("Plumber").

The findings of a 2015 study show a different tendency in the demand of qualifications [2]. Thus, while in this study the first position is still the same as above, the other three positions are occupied by different qualifications, namely carpenter, trade worker and mason/plasterer. This shows a change in the type of qualifications required during the last years.

Next, we investigated some statistics to answer the following research question: is the number of candidates of the assessment centers, for a certain period of the year (e.g. July-August), influenced when the Romanians working abroad usually come to the country, for example on holiday? To find out the answer to the question we selected the last two years (2018 and 2019), for which we calculated the annual average of the candidates and the average of the months of July-August (Table 5).

The null hypothesis of our investigation assumed that the independent variable (year period) had no effect on the dependent variable (number of candidates), e.g. there is no difference between the two means μ_1 and μ_2, respectively, while the alternative hypothesis assumed that the year period has an effect on the number of candidates e.g. the means are different.

a) *Null hypothesis*: H_0: $\mu_1 = \mu_2$ means are equal;

b) *Alternative hypothesis*: H_1: $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ means are different.

Table 5

Average number of candidates

	2018	2019
Annual average (μ_1)	730	742.5
July-August average (μ_2)	629	668

As noted from the data of Table 5 the null hypothesis has not been confirmed. That means a certain period of the year influences the number of candidates but in the way of decreasing their number, not increasing it.

5. DISSEMINATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

As part of the implementation of LLL strategy the NQA, through NCA, organizes a series of workshops and meetings involving all stakeholders focused on dissemination of information, practices and raising the awareness. The work of the validation centres is insufficiently promoted, therefore examples of good practice achieved by the centres have been disseminated, as well. Other means of communication and information includes dissemination on NQA and assessment centers website, leaflets, Facebook news, and e-mail communications.

The main awareness raising activities organized for the campaign of the VNFIL are the workshops and meetings with the participation of all relevant stakeholders. Their role was twofold [5]:

a) *Dissemination for raising awareness* has been focused on exchanging / sharing information about the adult learning policy and strategy as well as the validation of non-formal and informal learning to support the coordination among the relevant stakeholders. During 2018, four workshops/meetings were organized in 4 regions (Centre – Brașov; South Muntenia – Târgoviște; South East – Constanța; and South West Oltenia – Craiova) with the participation of representatives of the validation centres, sector committees, education and training providers (including universities), employers and experts from National Qualifications Authority.

b) *Dissemination for understanding* aimed to determine a deeper understanding of stakeholders about specific issues of adult education, especially about RPL, and the project's objectives, activities and expected results. Three workshops/meetings were organized in 3 regions (South Muntenia – Târgoviște; South East – Constanța; and South West Oltenia – Craiova) with the participation of representatives of the education and training providers (schools, universities and regional resource centres), employers and experts from the NQA.

A special attention has been given to EPALE, the EU information platform. The NQA staff has contributed to the inputs on EPALE platform (e.g. monthly average of 10 posts about the VNFIL in Romania).

6. ISSUES CONCERNING THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OF THE VNFIL

The quality assurance system for VNFIL can be viewed from two perspectives. First, the QA is based on input indicators (e.g. human and material resources of the centers, the profile of the evaluators, the conditions of access of the candidates, the evaluation tools, the regulations, etc.), process indicators (e.g. the evaluation methods used, the competences evaluated, the counselling process of candidates etc.) and output indicators (e.g. no. of graduates, type of certificates granted, etc.). Secondly, from the institutional point of view, the quality assurance system has two components: the internal one - represented by the authorization self-evaluation reports of each center, the monthly and quarterly reports of the centers to the NQA / NAC, the use of the internal verifiers to monitor the assessment process within a center - and the external one – represented by the authorization, monitoring and control activities of the assessment centers performed by the NQA / NAC, as well as the use of quality assurance tools (e.g. the control chart, the statistical data analysis etc.).

Quality assurance is also achieved through transparency. In this regard, in addition to the existed Register of evaluation centers, two new registries were created in 2018, namely: the Registers on VNFIL evaluators/assessors and the register of graduates.

Another means to further develop the QA of the VNFIL is the continuous improvement of the legislations. For example, the installation of the audio-video recording of the evaluation activities by each assessment centre is in progress.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Romania has introduced the VNFIL mechanism since 2004. However, the mechanism must be further developed, especially in relation to the quality assurance, to make the validation more effective, reliable and credible to the stakeholders. For example, the administrative capacity of the existing validation centres (one of our target groups) should be improved and their coordination with the relevant stakeholders of adult education be continuously strengthened to increase the rate of low qualified adults certified through VNFIL. The NQA / NAC is ensuring the coordination between the assessment centers, the sectoral committees, the education and training providers, and employers, by creating the necessary platform for exchange of information, practices, promoting the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Thus, the administrative capacity of the existing validation centres would be improved and their coordination with relevant stakeholders can be insistently strengthened to increase the rate of adults certified through VNFIL.

Moreover, we are focused on dissemination and awareness raising activities to inform potential beneficiaries (including the Romanians abroad) about the benefits of the validation process, especially for those with a poorer qualification level, for whom the certification of professional competences could become a real opportunity for better insertion on the labour market. To achieve this, we are in a process of developing an ICT tool containing a large database and a facility to analyze and report different statistics of the target groups necessary, among other, to make the adult education policy more evidence-based.

On the other hand, our future actions will be directed to: (i) increasing the capacity of the evaluation centers; and (ii) standardizing of the assessment instruments on each qualification.

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