How to use previous learning in upskilling

Toolkit for implementation of the process of recognition of prior learning



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Purpose of the Toolkit

People are gaining knowledge every day, and this happens always and everywhere. Every experience gained leads to new skill, knowledge and / or competence.



Although learning usually takes place through formal education, which is always organized, planned and with clearly defined goals, much of the knowledge is acquired through non-formal or informal education. Informal knowledge is often equated with the experience gained from everyday life.

Recognizing and validating the RESULTS of non-formal and informal learning makes human values more visible and therefore more valuable.

This text is a guide through the process of validating informal and informal learning and is intended to:

- Assessors
- candidates and potential candidate s
- employers
- accredited training providers



What is recognition of previous knowledge and skills?

The process of Recognition of Prior learning (RPL) aims to enable both recognition and validation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through nonformal or informal learning. It is a process by which the candidate's existing knowledge and skills, regardless of the way they are acquired, are evaluated and validated in relation to the required competencies that a given occupation should contain. Competences may be in accordance with national occupational qualifications or accredited training programmes.

According to the EU Report on the Progress of the Non-formal and Informal Learning Process 2012 and the Recommendations of the Council of Europe, the process of non-formal and informal learning validation is defined as:

Validation of non-formal and informal learning enables candidates to demonstrate knowledge acquired outside formal education and training and to apply this learning in their careers and further education.

Benefits

Candidates who have acquired experience, skills and knowledge but do not have a formal certificate of competence are often unable to benefit from their competences and often need unnecessary training to obtain qualification and formal proof of their abilities.
Through the process of Recognizing of Previous Knowledge and Skills as a tool for validating non-formal and informal learning, a review and evaluation of the past experiences of the applicant (acquired either through previous nonformal training or informally in everyday life, at the workplace, through professional activities, hobbies or self-study) is conducted. It is a process by which the results of nonformal and informal learning will be recognized, validated and valued.

RECOGNITION of previous knowledge and skills offers multiple benefits to both candidates and employers





RECOGNITION of previous knowledge and skills offers multiple benefits to candidates because:

- Candidates get the opportunity to certify their knowledge and skills in a quick and easy way
- There is no time and financial cost to carry out unnecessary training
- It enables professional and personal development of the candidate
- It enables career advancement
- Increases employment opportunities
- Having a certificate increases the competitiveness and value of the person on the labor market

The BENEFITS for employers are also significant:

- Effective identification of employee skills
- Helps identify new skill needs
- Reducing the time needed to train employees to reduce duplication in learning
- Increased motivation and interest in the work of employees
- Developing new ideas and opportunities for company development as a result of positive employee reflections
- Increasing the competitiveness of companies employing validated personnel

Truths and myths about the process of recognition

The process of recognition of previous knowledge and skills and its implementation can be accompanied by various challenges and obstacles, which are mainly the result of erroneous beliefs or falsehoods.
Dealing with such misconceptions and lies associated with the process of recognition is particularly important in understanding the importance and opportunities offered by the process.

Myth 1 "It is not possible to get a full qualification with the RPL process"	Yes, it is. The most important thing is to provide a sufficient amount of evidence that confirms the candidate's competence for a given qualification.
Myth 2 "Recognition can only be realized on the basis of documented evidence - diplomas"	The subject of recognition is the knowledge and skills that the candidate possesses. They can be corroborated by documents, but also proven in other ways, by other forms of evaluation, such as interviewing, observation at work or testing.
Myth 3 "Qualifications obtained through the RPL process are not the same as those obtained during the training"	The qualification (and the certificate) obtained through the RPL are identical, whether the candidate has undergone training or his / her abilities have been assessed by recognizing an existing knowledge and skills.
Myth 4 "Recognition is a long and complicated process"	Not true. The RPL is a process that consists of defined steps and phases, but in any case it is shorter than the duration of the training. The duration of the process will depend on both the candidate and the types of evidence he or she provides.
Myth 5 "Recognition is expensive for candidates"	The process of RPL within TRAINEE project is free of charge for all candidates. Candidates will obtain a Certificate for Qualification for the relevant occupation for which they have submitted a relevant proves.

EU guidelines for RPL

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been part of the European policy agenda since 2001 when the Commission defined lifelong learning as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. Since the Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training a series of initiatives have been taken to develop European tools and instruments in the area of lifelong learning:

The fundamental principles underpinning validation:

- Validation must be voluntary.
- The privacy of individuals should be respected.
- Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.
- Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.
- Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals.
- Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
- The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
- Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation.
- The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
- The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

Phases of the process of RPL

The designed process for Recognition of Prior Learning within BUILD UP Skills BEET was a six-phase process, and is fully compatible with the recommendations for necessary phases of VNFIL issued by the European Training Foundation –ETF.

The multiple outcomes of validation, ranging from formal qualifcations to enterprise- internal proofs of acquired competences, are all united through their efforts to increase the visibility and value of the learning taking place outside classrooms. To clarify the basic features of validation, the recommendation identifes four distinct phases:





Identifcation

Validation necessarily starts with the identifcation of knowledge, skills and competence acquired and is where the individual becomes increasingly aware of prior achievements. This stage is crucial as learning outcomes differ from person to person and will have been acquired in various contexts: at home, during work or through voluntary activities. For many, discovery and increased awareness of own capabilities is a valuable outcome of the process.

Documentation

Documentation will normally follow the identifcation stage and involves provision of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired. This can be carried out through the 'building' of a portfolio that tends to include a CV and a career history of the individual, with documents and/or work samples that attest to their learning achievements. Validation needs to be open to various evidence types, ranging from written documents to work samples and demonstrations of practice. This evidence must provide suffcient insight into the learning outcomes acquired: simply listing job-titles or positions will not be enough. The portability of evidence is crucial and requires some degree of coordination at national and European level. A situation where every validation provider.

Assessment

Assessment is normally referred to as the stage in which an individual's learning outcomes are compared against specifc reference points and/or standards. This can imply evaluation of written and documentary evidence but might also involve evaluation of other forms of evidence. Assessment is crucial to the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In some cases, certifcates based on validation are perceived as inferior to those awarded by traditional courses and programmes. To counter such perceptions, which in some cases refect the relative novelty of validation, tools and processes must be presented in as transparent a way as possible. Building mutual trust is closely linked to the existence of robust quality assurance arrangements ensuring that all phases of validation, including assessment, are open to critical scrutiny.



Certifcation

The fnal phase of validation is linked to the certifcation – and fnal valuing – of the learning identifed, documented and assessed. This can take different forms, but is commonly the award of a formal qualifcation (or part-qualifcation).



The centrality of the individual

The frst European principle for validating non-formal and informal learning puts the individual at the centre of the process. It insists that the process of making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and competences held by an individual is carried out in a way that remains voluntary and that the results of validation remain the property of the individual.

Whether the context of the validation process is work, social communities or higher education, whatever the purpose, the individual is always at the centre. Validation systems need to acknowledge the fact that it is the choice of the individual to decide to take the frst and crucial step to explore the possibilities of at least documenting their learning.

Communication strategies about the benefts of validating non-formal and informal learning, explaining how the system works, can motivate the individual to take control of the process. Individuals who engage with validation as a candidate beneft from personal outcomes such as improved confdence and self-esteem. These soft outcomes may help an individual to gain access to formal education and/or employment, or simply to take on more variety or responsibilities within their current role in society.

Counselling and guidance

Learners and employees are likely to be more effective in recognising their prior learning if they are given support to identify how their previous learning links with the requirements for the job role or the qualifcation or learning programme against which they are seeking recognition.



It is not possible to establish a single process for validation that will accommodate the needs of all candidates. It is widely accepted that the system needs careful tailoring to the needs of the individual and this is, at least partially, achieved by providing information, advice and guidance at the right times.

It is clear that even before a decision is made to seek validation, candidates need to know what is the added value, what to expect, what standards have to be met and what form the evidence of learning outcomes needs to take. Similarly, at the end of validation, or of certifcation, evidence suggests a candidate will want to know of potential routes to further qualifcation that are available.

The whole process of validation is between these two points where candidates will need information, advice and guidance support.

RPL assessment methods

According to the guidelines the methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools used in assessing formal learning. When used for validation, tools have to be adopted, combined and applied in a way which Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose.

A broad classification of the assessment methods is given below. Some specifc validation processes may make use of more than one of these approaches to achieve greater validity, reliability, fairness and ftness for purpose of results.

1. Debate

Candidates can, by taking part in debate, confrm their capacity to sustain a considered argument and demonstrate depth of adequate knowledge of a subject. The debate also offers a context where they can demonstrate communication and social skills.



2. Declarative methods

Here candidates makes an evidence-based statement about their learning by responding in writing to preset criteria designed to help them be evaluative. The ability to use critical refection is important and therefore this method is used in conjunction with other methods.

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3. Interview

Interviews may be particularly useful in areas where judgement and values are important. Interviews usually accompany other tools for a more complete assessment of a candidate and to allow for commentary and clarifcation.

4. Observation

A third party assesses the candidate's behaviour in a particular setting: there is an opportunity to observe real practice. Assessment criteria are set in advance. This method does not proscribe collaboration with colleagues or fellow learners. Depending on the context, it may be complicated to set up and can be time consuming and costly.

5. Portfolio method

A portfolio is an organised collection of materials that presents and verifes skills and knowledge acquired through experience. It is of particular relevance to validating non-formal and informal learning because it allows the individual candidate to contribute actively to the collection of evidence and also offers a mix of approaches strengthening the overall validity of the process.



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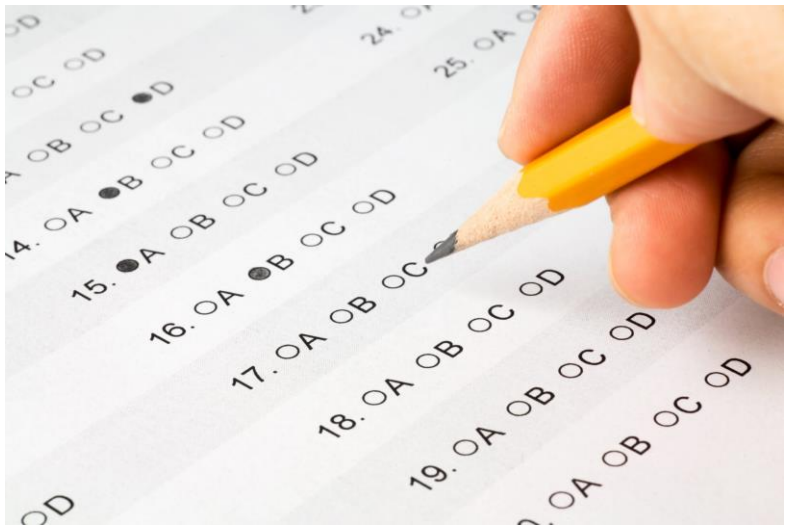
6. Presentation

Here a candidate makes a formal presentation to a panel of experts. This form emphasises communicative and analytical skills as well as ability to structure complex information clearly.



7. Simulation and evidence extracted from work

Here a candidate performs in a structured situation modelled on real life. The method allows for testing complex interacting skills sets. It requires clear assessment criteria and may be costly.

8. Tests and examinations

In the formal process of validating learning, tests can dominate because of their qualities of wide applicability across populations, low costs and high levels of perceived fairness. In general a test is set so that candidates respond orally or in writing to preset questions (and answers). A test provides direct assessment of specifc knowledge and skills. It may advantage candidates with strong written and oral skills and can cause candidate anxiety



Professional competences of practitioners

The recommendation maintains that 'provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors. Trust in validation largely depends on the work carried out by 'front-line' practitioners and professionals directly involved with validation candidates at different stages of the process. These practitioners cover all aspects of validation and include those that offer information, advice and guidance (orientation), those that carry out assessment, the external observers of the process, the managers of assessment centres/procedures, and a range of other stakeholders that have an important but less direct role in the process. Such professionals should be equipped not only with validation competences but also soft skills such as intercultural capacity. This is essential in reaching out to prospective candidates.

Key knowledge and skills of counsellors are:

- Thorough knowledge of the validation process
- Thorough knowledge of the education system
- Capacity to rephrase learning experience into learning outcomes that can be matched with existing standards
- Understanding of the labour market
- A list of contacts (experts) to answer specifc technical questions (social partners and other sector experts).

Assessor qualifcations and experience are a key element in the quality assurance of validation projects. Assessors are generally required to have a fixed number of years of experience in the respective feld; five years is common and assessors could be recently retired professionals, senior managers in the feld, expert representatives of the third sector, and social partners or teachers in the specifc feld, with direct experience in the sector. Training in the validation procedure is also required. Networks of assessors should be set up – where and when possible – to assure professional development and coherent practices.

Key knowledge and skills of assessors are:

- Be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability)
- Have experience in the specifc feld of wor
- Have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conficts of interest)
- Be familiar with different assessment methodologies
- Be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates
- Be committed to provide feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems)
- Be trained in assessment and validation processes and knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms
- Operate according to a code of conduct.

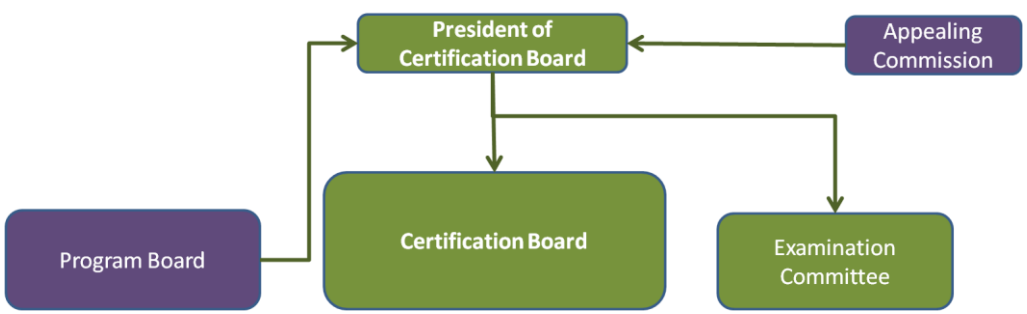


Model of effective RPL process

Organizational structure of certification body

The internationally accepted standard for organizing certification processes is EN ISO / IEC 17024: 2012, which is the standard for "Conformity Assessment - General Requirements for Persons Certifying".

This document and the International Accreditation Forum document, which provides guidance on the implementation of ISO / IEC 17024, recommend the following organizational structure of the certification body.



Certification body

Certification body implements the process of recognition and validation of previous knowledge and skills according to the working procedures.

The certification body consists of Certification Board, Program Board, Examination Committee and Appealing Commission.

Certification Board

Certification Board is the official body that coordinates and controls the implementation of the process of recognition of previous knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal and informal education. Certification Board is competent to make a decision for issuing Certificate for qualification to the candidates who meet the requirements for validation of knowledge and skills, based on the completed appraisal report, which is submitted by the Programme Board, for each occupation separately.

The decision for issuing Certificate is an official document containing: the number of applicants by occupation and number of certified candidates for each occupation which was subject for validation in the process and a list of candidates for which Certificate for qualification is issued.

Certification Board consists of five members nominated according to their expertise in the field that is subject of validation. Certification Board chaired by the President, elected from among its members. The President of the Certification Board is one of the signatories of Certificates for qualification issued by the Board.

Program Board

Program Board is specialized body that organizes and controls the work of the Examination Committees, that conduct the assessment and evaluation of knowledge and skills of the applicants, for each of the occupations. Program Board consists of fifteen experts in the fields of the different occupations.

The Program Board is chaired by the President, elected from among its members. The President of the Program Board is one of the signatories of Certificates for qualification, issued by the Board.

Program Board defines the necessary knowledge and skills that are subject of assessment for given occupation according to the learning outcomes and prepares a list of questions for the test of theoretical knowledge as well as a list of tasks for examination of practical skills of the candidates.

After the assessment procedure, Program Board prepares a report for the results of the assessment for each occupation separately.

Examination Committee

Examination Committee is a professional body whose authority is assessing the knowledge and skills of applicants in the process of recognition. The tasks of the examination committee are:

- receiving applications from applicants
- completing documents in the portfolio of the applicants
- reviewing of the submitted documents
- evaluation of the submitted applications in organized assessment sessions
- scheduling and conducting interviews with the applicants
- carrying out tests for theoretical knowledge and practical exams of the skills and
- preparing reports of conducted assessment sessions.

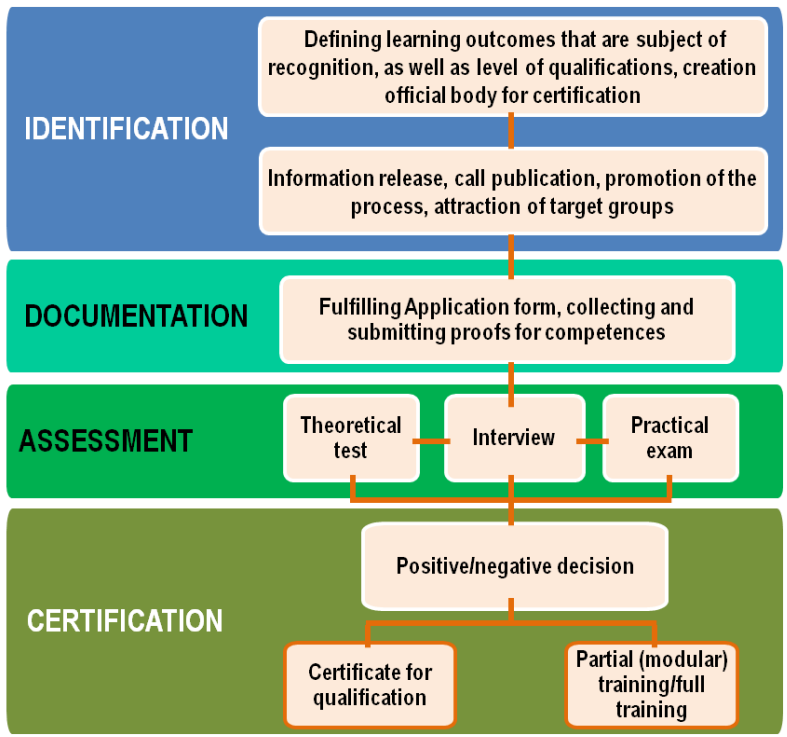
Appealing Commission

Appealing Commission consists of three members nominated by the external organization, in case of training providers to be validation institution it is necessary to be a competent national body (Centre for Adult Education).

Appealing Commission should consider and decide considering the appeals by the applicants referring to the process of recognition of previous learning for energy efficiency, conducted by the Examination Committee. The decision is submitted to the President of the Certification Board for further action.

Procedure for implementation of the RPL

The following is a summary of each of the stages of the process of recognition of prior knowledge and skills learning acquired in non-formal and informal education.



Identification in pratctice

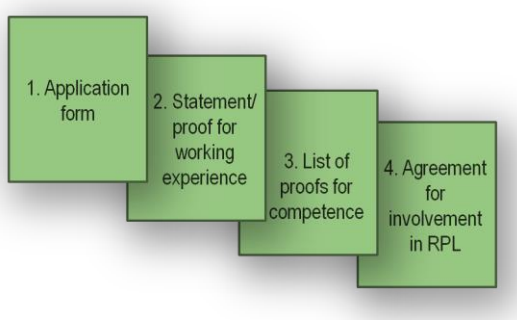
Activities in the first phase, IDENTIFICATION, aim at creating the content of training for upgraded occupations and identifying the competencies needed to gain qualifications. This stage also involves establishing a list of required knowledge and skills that are subject to evaluation, specifically for each occupation, regulated by the standard of upgraded occupation. This stage also aims to introduce the general public to this process, the opportunities it offers and the whole process that it consists of. This stage ensures that information is available and the potential candidates are animated through a proper promotional campaign.

Documentation in practice

The DOCUMENTATION phase consists of application process implemented in several calls. It is of the utmost importance to maintain access to information and openness to support and guidance for applicants in gathering the necessary documentation, evidence, etc., when creating their own Portfolio that applicants submit when applying.

The candidate's Personal Portfolio should contain the following documents:

- Contact information sheet
- Certificate of work experience
- List of evidence provided and evidence of competence
- Agreement / Statement on the voluntary implementation of the recognition and validation process



Assessment in practice

In the ASSESSMENT phase, the evaluation procedure takes place. According to the ETF and CEDEFOP recomendations there are several different methods that can be used for evaluation persons competences in form of knowledge and skills for certain occupation. Based on the practice we sugest that the process of RPL not to be focused only on one assesment method but rather to use individual approeach for different occuation and for different aplicant/learner. Thus the assesment phase shoud consist of different pahtways for guiding the evaluation and obtaining certificate.

In general, for each occupation, competence should be evaluated based on the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills and they should be assessed according to the following scheme:

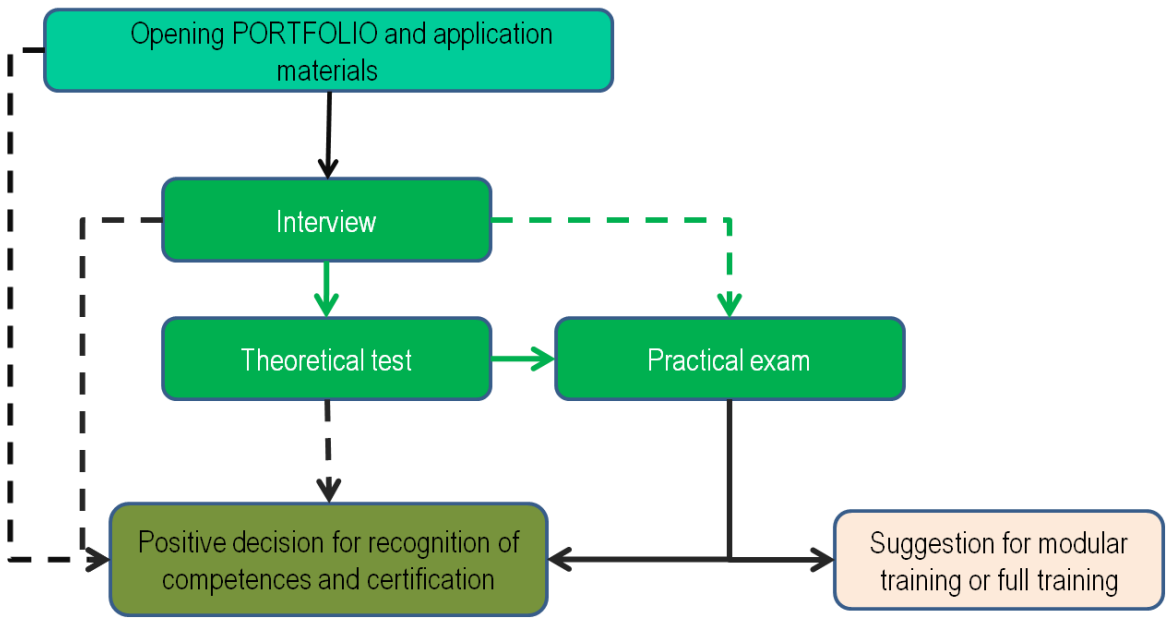
No.	Subject of Grading	Points
1.	Theoretical knowledge	40
2.	Practical skills	60
	Total:	**100**

The evaluation also should evaluate work experience with a number of points, which are incorporated in the practical skills section.

For example, the number of documented years of professional engagement in the field requiring recognition of qualifications may be valorized up to a maximum of 25 points.

The minimum requirement for applying for recognition of skills and knowledge is 3 years of work experience in the area of interest.

The evaluation procedure is prefered to consist of the following steps, which can be applied individually or in combination with each other, depending on the candidate's competences and the evidence provided.



The methodology for conducting the evaluation enables a positive decision to be made on the recognition of the candidate's competences by evaluating the evidence attached to the application (declarative method), which is presented in the candidate's personal portfolio or after the interview (debate and iterview method) with the candidate.
If, after reviewing the Candidate's Portfolio (ethod of protfolio) and conducting an interview, his or her abilities need to be validated, he or she may go for a test of theoretical knowledge (test and examination) and / or a test of practical skills relevant to the upgraded profession (presentation and simulation). The implementation of these exams is described below.

Testing theoretical knowledge

Didactic test consisting of two sets of questions:

- 10 questions about the basic knowledge of the candidate related with the occupation
- 10 theoretical questions specific to a particular professional qualification.

Each of these tests consists of 10 questions with three possible answers, of which only one is correct.

Each correct answer is awarded 1 point for the EQ test and 3 points for the correct answer to the test with specific questions for a given occupation. Wrong answer or lack of answer equals 0 points.

For the process of theoretical testing candidates are provided with Guidelines for Conducting a Theoretical Test. The exam committees that conduct the theoretical knowledge testing work according to the Procedure for Implementation and Evaluation of Theoretical Test.

Practical Skills Exam

Candidates are provided with Guidelines for Conducting Practical Skills Assessment (Document A3, attached).

The exam committees that conduct the practical skills exam operate according to the Procedure for the implementation and evaluation of the practical exam (document P2, attached).

When conducting a practical exam, applicants should receive appropriate instructions and an explanation of the procedure. The practical task, on the basis of which the practical skills are evaluated, selects the candidate at random from the pre-prepared tasks by the exam commission.

In order to take the practical exam the organizer should provide:

- the tools, equipment, materials needed to complete the task,
- personal protective clothing,
- other personal protective items needed, characteristic of a particular qualification.

Certification in practice

Following the evaluation procedure, the next stage of the process of recognition and validation of previous knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal and informal education is the adoption of a Decision, which gives a positive or negative decision to certify the candidate's previously acquired knowledge and skills.

The decision to issue a qualification certificate is made by the Certification Board, on the basis of a proposal from the Examination Committees, submitted through the Program Board.

The result of the process of recognition of priorleraning acquired in non-formal and informal education, which depends on the type of decision taken - positive or negative, may be the recognition of previously acquired knowledge and skills and the issuing an appropriate certificate, or directing the candidate to retraining to acquire the knowledge and skills that are lacking in the candidate's overall competencies or attending full training.

The Certificate of Qualification is issued based on the Decision of the Certification Body of the E&T institotion/syste

ABOUT the Document

The aim of this document is to serve as an open source toolkit for transferring methodology for the process of recognition and validation of prior learning “How to use previous learning in upskilling”, available for use by external users. The process of recognition of previous learning is legal path for obtaining qualification as defined in European qualification framework. Thus, using this procedure for validation of informal and non-formal learning as legal path for certification taking into account knowledge and skills that is usually obtained at workplace and during life. It supports lifelong learning process and acknowledges its achievements.



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