



Research Article

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An Analysis of the Recognition of Prior Learning System in Vocational Education and Training Sector

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the current state of the Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) system in the Republic of Kosovo and critically assess institutional policies for the establishment of an effective VNFIL system at the national level. In achieving the research objective, structured interviews with key representatives of central and local Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions are conducted and key policy documents are analyzed. The study discovers that the Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) system is in progress of development in the VET sector only and is at its infancy stage. Building on the best practices of more developed countries, relevant legal provisions and operational tools for the provision of VNFIL services have been developed and six institutions have been accredited, but the services have not yet been delivered to candidates. The complexity of the accreditation system, rigid and bureaucratic administrative requirements and financial implications associated with the accreditation process of institutions and with the enrolment process of candidates have been identified as the main obstacles for the operational arrangements of an effective VNFIL system. The study contributes to the advancement of the understanding and the significance of validation of skills through the VNFIL services and advocates for the need to establish a robust and sustainable VNFIL system in line with European practices.

Keywords: Learning, validation, institutions, policies

1. Introduction

Learning takes place in various forms. Formal learning which is usually offered by the institutions and leads to formal certification is only one of the ways that is available to learners. Informal and

non-formal learning are other approaches that people use to learn. Informal learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills through life and work experience and non-formal learning includes learning which takes place through planned activities that are offered to school leavers and in company learning (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2015).

Unlike formal learning which leads to a recognized qualification, informal and non-formal learning, if not validated, do not result into an institutionalised certification. Hence, the skills and experience gained as part of informal and non-formal learning need to be validated. The process of validation according to the EU Council Recommendations (2012) refers to the “confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard” (p.5).

In the context of Republic of Kosovo¹, the validation of informal and non-formal learning has been mainly developed by the Initial and Continuous Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). TVET refers to different components of education and training that help young generations to acquire academic knowledge, attitudes, practical skills, and understandings relevant to a wide range of occupational sectors within the economy and society (Eichhorst, Rodriguez-Planas, Schmidl and Zimmermann, 2015). In most cases, TVET provides youth with practice-oriented knowledge and skills required in specific occupations as compared to general education that is more academically oriented. The authors argue that TVET is frequently seen as the remedy for enhancing the prospects of young individuals who may not possess the means, abilities, or drive to pursue advanced education.

TVET plays an important role in shaping the attitude and habits of young generations, which results in an enhancement of their functionality in society. Therefore, an effective TVET improves the lives of the community and economy in general (Uwaifo, 2009).

Acknowledging the importance of the TVET and the validation of skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning in the competitive job market, this paper critically examines the current state of the validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning (VFNIL) system in Kosovo, and the institutional policies introduced for the establishment and implementation of an effective VFNIL system at the national level. The study also investigates the impact of the VFNIL system on the education sector and the employment of the youth in the country.

2. Literature Review

TVET was reported to be the solution to different educational problems in developing countries, like Kosovo (Tilak, 2003). For instance, some occupations in developing countries and the global economy expect that secondary school graduates possess certain skills. In addition, with the implementation of TVET the unemployment of secondary school and college graduates would be reduced. Therefore, researchers have suggested that these problems in developing countries could be minimized by changing or innovating the secondary education curriculum, hence, establishing and improving the TVET system.

TVET is a form of learning and training meticulously tailored to enhance the economic and societal needs for the youngsters who are interested in developing themselves (Eze and Okorafor, 2012). Considering that TVET is key to effective development strategies, UNESCO (2004) believes that “TVET must be master key that can alleviate poverty, promote peace, conserve the environment, improve the quality of life for all and help achieve sustainable development (p.79)”.

¹Kosovo is one of the Balkan countries located in the South-Eastern Europe. The Balkans region encompasses an area situated to the east of the Adriatic Sea, extending between Italy and Austria to the northwest, Albania and Greece to the south, and sharing borders with Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria from the northeast to the southeast. The Balkan states include Bosnia and Herzegovina (capital Sarajevo); Croatia (capital Zagreb); Kosovo (capital Pristina); Macedonia (capital Skopje); Montenegro (Podgorica); Serbia (capital Belgrade) and Slovenia (capital Ljubljana).

Looking at the bigger picture of the impact of TVET in the current global economy, researchers suggest that the current industries require more skilled staff to compete with international markets (McGrath,2002). In this context, the skills that TVET offers in addition to general education, provide a positive impact on human capacity and economic development.

2.1 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Modern economic advancement relies extensively on knowledge and expertise, and it also requires accessible learning opportunities. Consequently, learning can be viewed as the consequence of additional activities, interactions, and experiences across a diverse range of settings, contributing to the development of fresh knowledge. (Billett, 2010).

The concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) according to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop,2015) assumes that working individuals must acknowledge the importance of continuously enhancing competences including knowledge, skills, attitude, and aspirations, because these competences are constantly developing.

Undoubtedly, individual and social competences developed through non-formal and informal learning can provide a great advantage to people and the economy. However, in order to render these skills measurable and evident, states, educational institutions, training organizations, societal collaborators, and other pertinent entities have been summoned to collaborate and collectively formulate protocols for assessing non-formal and informal learning pathways. Additionally, the validation of non-formal and informal learning empowers individuals to leverage the results of their informal learning experiences, enabling them to unlock forthcoming educational or occupational prospects (Cedefop, 2015).

The validation process enables people to recognize, record, evaluate, and certify their skills. Candidates must be able to demonstrate what they have learned, use this learning in their career and for further education and training. Their chances on the job market may improve as a result, and new employment possibilities may arise (Duvekot, 2014). Additionally, validation may provide easier access to additional education and training opportunities as well as exempts candidates from specific training modules or degree requirements.

According to the EU Council Recommendations (2012), the validation of prior learning could be measured using four main steps, including; 1) identification- through specific experiences that an individual has shown; 2) documentation - by making those experiences visible; 3) assessment - of those experiences using standardized tests and 4) certification - of test results by offering official qualification.

Since the publication of European Guidelines on VFNIL in 2009 and the endorsement of the EU Council Recommendation in 2012, some of the countries that have advanced in the establishment of effective VFNIL system are mainly European members (Cedefop, 2015), such as Sweden (Anderson and Fejes, 2011) and Finland (Karttunen, 2019).

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research design through content analysis and structured interviews. The approach refers to the “systematic research method for analyzing textual information in a standardized way that allows evaluators to make inferences about that information” (Crowley & Delfico, 1996, p.7). The authors note that the approach enables researchers to classify the key ideas from the materials examined through identifying main themes, issues, and topics. It also helps summarize the formal content of written material and describe the attitudes or views of the author of that material.

To sample respondents, nonprobability-purposive and judgment sampling methods which involved respondents “who are most advantageously placed or in the best position to provide the information required” (Sekaran, 2014, p. 277) are used.

Data were collected in two stages: the first stage included the analysis of legal framework and strategies which regulate the VET sector. This included the National Legal Framework, i.e. Law on VET sector (2013), several Administrative Instructions endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) of Kosovo, key strategic documents (Kosovo Education Strategic Plan - KESP 2017-2021; and KESP 2022-2026), policy papers of various local and international organizations such as Reports of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and various reports of donor-funded projects involved in the development and improvement of the VET sector and the provision of RPL services in Kosovo.

Secondly, researchers conducted interviews with the key representatives of the most relevant institutions directly involved and responsible for the establishment, provision, and monitoring of RPL services at local and central level in the country.

3.1 The interview process

The interview questions were composed following the funneling approach (Sekaran, 2014), which covered general concepts in the VET sector and RPL process, before proceeding with other more advanced and in-depth questions. The questions were prepared in English language. The English version was translated into the Albanian language and used in the interview because all the interviewees were more comfortable to speak and share the information in Albanian². Two of the researchers who are proficient in both English and Albanian verified the reliability of the translation with the original before using the instrument. Researchers then transcribed the results of the interview into English before extracting the main themes for analysis. At the request of the interviewees, the interviews were not recorded.

Except for one interview which was held virtually as the respondent was temporarily located outside the country, all other interviews were conducted face-to-face between 5 and 26 September 2022. On average, each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, except for one interview which consumed 1 hour and 35 minutes.

Overall, a total of eight (8) interviews with thirteen (13) relevant representatives of central and local VET institutions were conducted as presented in the table below:

Table 1- List of interviewees included in the study according to their institutions

Nr	Institution	Nr of Interviewees	Code of the interviewees
1	Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI)	1	I1
2	Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (AVETA)	1	I2
3	National Qualifications Authority (NQA)	2	I3
4	Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK)	1	I4
5	Centre of Competence (CoC)	2	I5
6	Vocational Education and Training Institutions (IVET)	5	I6
7	Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)	1	I7
8	Chamber of Commerce	1	I8
	Total	13	

² Albanian language is the native language of the citizens of Kosovo.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Structure of the VET sector and institutional arrangements

The VET sector operates through a network of 61 VET public schools and six Centers of Competence (CoCs) which represent 56% of the total public education institutions in the pre-university education level, seven public Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) operating under the remit of the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK), and several private providers as shown on Table 3.

Table 3- Number of education institutions in VET sector

Component	Numbers	%
Total nr. of institutions in pre-university education	1,047	
Nr of institutions in upper-secondary education	120	11.5%
Nr. of public VET schools	61	56%
Nr. of CoCs	6	
Nr. of VTCs	7	N/A

Source: Authors' compilation based on the data from MESTI/Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS, 2022).

Public VET institutions enroll most of the students (53%) compared to the general education institutions (e.g., gymnasiums) in which 31,031 students pursue their education (see Table 4).

Table 4- Number of enrolled students in public pre-university institutions

	Total	%	Gymnasiums	%	Public VET schools	%
Nr of students in upper- secondary education	67,138	100%	31,031	47%	36,107	53%
Male	34,306	51%	13,227	43%	21,079	58%
Female	32,832	49%	17,804	57%	15,028	42%

Source: Authors' compilation based on the data from KAS (2021).

4.2 Main institutions governing the VET System

The VET sector is managed by the central and local authorities including the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI), National Qualification Authority (NQA), Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (AVETAE), Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK), Municipal Education Directorates (MEDs), Vocational Education and Training (VTCs), private enterprises and Chamber of Commerce. The MESTI develops the necessary legislation and strategic policies, whereas the NQA's main role is the management of the accreditation process and quality assurance of the VET institutions. The EARK through its VTCs and local employment offices provide employment services while Chamber of Commerce and private businesses support policy makers through their active consultative and participative roles. AVETAE is responsible for the management and administration of the six Centers of Competence and acts as an advisory body to the MESTI regarding policies of education and vocational training and adult education in Kosovo.

4.3 Legal framework regulating the Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the term used in Kosovo to refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) and is defined in the Law for VET as “the process of evaluating the knowledge, skills, or wider competencies which an individual has previously acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning. This practical knowledge shall be used to give possibility of advancement to a person or exemptions from part of a course or credit towards a qualification” (Article 2, point 1.28)

As recommended by the EU Council Recommendations (2012), that countries should no later than in 2018 have in place arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, Kosovo has developed the legal framework in which the provision of RPL is based. The legal provisions include the Law for Vocational Education and Training (No. 04/I-138), Law on National Qualifications (No. 03/L-060), the National Qualifications Framework, Administrative Instruction for Prior Learning Recognition (No. 31/2014), Administrative Instruction on Criteria and Procedures for the Accreditation of Institutions that Implement Recognition of Prior Learning in Kosovo (No. 09/2019) and RPL Policies and Procedures developed by the National Qualifications Authority (NQA).

Besides the legal framework, the development of the VET sector is also referred to the Kosovo Education Strategic Plans (KESP, 2011-2016) and KESP (2022-2026). The latest strategy includes the VET system as the third strategic objective.

Despite these developments, the provision of RPL services has not been provided and potential candidates are not aware of the RPL opportunities and its process. Considering this, the National Qualification Authority (NQA) with the support of European Training Foundation (ETF) and the international donor-funded projects has taken RPL provision as its priority.

Since 2020 great support has been provided by the project “European Union Support to Vocational Education and Training (VET), Professional Requalification and Occupation (ESVET PRO)” funded by the European Union Office in Kosovo and implemented by the Luxembourg Development Cooperation Agency-LuxDev. According to the official web page of the project (www.esvetpro.eu), one of the main goals of the Project is to establish a national RPL system in the country.

The Administrative Instruction (No. 09/2019) specifies that until 2021, RPL could be provided only in three profiles, i.e., welding, hairdressing and electrical installing. The NQA in cooperation with the project has developed the Recognition of Prior Learning Management System (RPLMS), a digital tool to identify priority profiles in which RPL services can be provided. The objective of this system is to enable potential candidates to register and identify priority profiles for which there is demand to develop arrangements for RPL provision. The system has been launched in March 2022 and according to the interview (I3), as of February 2023, 334 candidates have been registered. The platform is interfaced with the state portal and remains functional free-of charge for the public at its official address <https://njmp.rks-gov.net/>.

Since the legal provisions require VET institutions intending to provide RPL be accredited by the NQA, the latter in cooperation with the project have developed the digital system for accreditation (e-accreditation). Consequently, from 2023 all VET institutions aiming at obtaining accreditation process to provide RPL opportunities shall apply for accreditation via the digital system. To support institutions in this process, specific manuals providing clear guidelines and instructions have also been developed. This was followed by the provision of capacity-development sessions for the staff of central and local institutions, including the RPL practitioners (mentors, coordinators, and assessors).

To ensure the sustainability of the process, several training sessions have been conducted for the external experts who will be part of the teams that will evaluate the applications of VET institutions applying for accreditation as well as for the Master Trainers who will train RPL practitioners in the future. To promote the availability of RPL services, accreditation process and the

digital tools, informative sessions with all national VET institutions have been organized and an awareness raising campaign has been designed. Considering that the private sector plays a crucial role on the validation process, a format of partnership between the RPL providers and business enterprises has been developed. The partnership foresees the inclusion of business representatives in the assessment panels and the usage of business premises during the examination of the candidates.

As a result of the interinstitutional cooperation and commitment, supported by the donor-funded projects, the institutions listed on Table 5 have been accredited for the provision of RPL services.

Table 5- Number of VET institutions accredited to provide RPL services based on the profile and level of qualification

Nr	Institution	Profile	Level
1	Professional Beauty Academy	Hairdressing	III
2	QAP Suda	Hairdressing	IV
3	QAP Gjilan	Welding	III
4	QAP Mitrovicë	Welding	III
5	Kryolan Kosova	Hairdressing	IV
6	Qendra e Trajnimit – Korporata Energjetike e Kosovës	Electric Installer	IV

Source: National Qualification Authority (NQA,2023).

4.4 The importance of awareness raising campaign for RPL

The European Training Foundation (ETF) report on the importance of the awareness raising campaign across countries notes the need and the significance of creating awareness of RPL opportunities to the public. The report notes that there will be only limited awareness among most of potential candidates about the existence of the RPL as an alternative qualification route, process, relevant qualifications, learning outcomes on which they are based and institutions available for information, guidance, registration and provision. Due to the infancy of the RPL subject in the Kosovo, until a successful RPL system is operationalised, candidates and institutions will not be aware of the RPL opportunities.

Information on such opportunities will only be available through creating awareness in the VET system. The role of a joint effort by all relevant institutions with an inclusive and comprehensive approach is of utmost importance. For this purpose, the NQA with the support of the EU funded project and in cooperation with the local stakeholders have designed an awareness campaign plan to be implemented across the country. The campaign targets to reach key institutional beneficiaries and relevant stakeholders with specific focus on candidates and business enterprises.

The awareness-raising campaign includes the importance of RPL and its four main steps, information on registration, duration of the RPL process and the key benefits of RPL for candidates, employers (companies and businesses) RPL providers and the society in general.

4.5 RPL and employment

Employment services in Kosovo are provided by the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (EARK) in close cooperation with Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) and local employment offices which operate under the remit of the EARK. The EARK offers services through the six Active Labor Market Measures (ALMM), which include work subsidy, training at work, vocational training, practice at work, self-employment and entrepreneurship promotion and public affairs. Considering that RPL services aim to be a form of employment enhancement and lifelong learning opportunity for adult learners, EARK has - for the first time - included RPL as ALMM. To operationalize this, a

digital module integrated within the Employment Management Information System (EMIS) has been built, the manuals which operationalize all ALMM have been developed and capacity development for the staff of EARK, VTCs and local employment offices have been provided. All of these initiatives are dedicated to the full operationalization of RPL in the country which aim at enhancing employment opportunities for the unemployed and career promotion prospects for uncertified employees.

4.6 Institutional challenges

Despite the numerous benefits that the RPL provides, including the availability as a path to earn qualifications for skills that candidates have, an opportunity to obtain certification for the entire qualification or certain modules, a faster and more flexible route to gain a qualification than via traditional studying path, an opportunity for employment (in the case of unemployed candidates) and career advancement (in the case of employed candidates), more competitive labour market due to more qualified workforce and an opportunity for businesses to receive potential grants and business expansion through using formal qualifications of the staff, the study has identified numerous challenges that have a significant impact for further development of the RPL system.

Firstly, rigid requirements, including financial costs for accreditation and the resistance of public VET institutions to be involved in the accreditation process remain a critical issue. Current legal framework requires all RPL providers to be accredited and the institutions aiming to obtain accreditation shall cover the accreditation costs. Considering the financial situation of the VET institutions and their limited capacities for income generation, public VET institutions have continuously refused to be involved in the accreditation process.

Secondly, the unclear vision of the MESTI and other central institutions on the way forward for the accreditation of public VET institutions. Currently, public VET institutions are not required to be accredited for the provision of education services. However, to ensure the quality and relevance of the VET offer, several demands from various stakeholders for their accreditation have been made.

Thirdly, the study found that RPL services are/will not be free in the country. Current legal provisions foresee the fees to be imposed on the candidates enrolled in the process of RPL and the cost may vary depending on the institution, level of qualification and the study programme.

Fourthly, central and local institutions lack sufficient human resources to expand the implementation of RPL services and monitor the developments in RPL.

Finally, although RPL provides business with more qualified workforce, convincing employers to support their employees with financial and non-financial means remains a challenge.

5. Conclusion

Learning takes place in various forms and institutional settings. Many people possess the skills, competencies and experience for a certain profession that they have gained through their informal learning but cannot prove the skills through any formal qualification or certification. These categories are counted as uncertified employees and face numerous challenges in career promotion; hence, their skills and experience need to be recognized through establishment of formal recognition of prior learning system.

The findings indicate that the Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VFNIL) system in Kosovo is being developed in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector only. Relevant legal provisions and operational tools for the provision of VNFIL services have been developed and very few institutions have been accredited, but the services have not yet been delivered to candidates. The system is facing three critical challenges: the complexity of the accreditation system, rigid and bureaucratic administrative requirements for accreditation and financial implications associated with the accreditation of institutions and enrolment of candidates have been identified as the main obstacles for the operational arrangements of an effective VNFIL

system

Considering the current situation of the education system in general and of the VET sector in particular including the institutional and governance mechanisms that regulate the sector, the study suggests that the country should optimise the support provided by various donor-funded projects currently being implemented in the country for the establishment of a sustainable RPL system. Finally, the country should, in line with the EU Council recommendations and the practices of EU member states simplify the RPL system to address the demand and the needs of the skilled works who are in need of validating their skills and experience.

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