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## The recognition of prior learning: validating general competences

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# Abstract

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The recognition of prior learning (RPL) can support upskilling and reskilling opportunities by fostering shorter training times and enabling personalised learning pathways for adults. There are numerous initiatives promoted by the European Union to support upskilling pathways for low skilled adults as well as the validation of all forms of learning. Nevertheless, programmes for the recognition of prior learning are still unevenly spread across Europe and generally aim to help adults enter and progress in the labour market or access continuing vocational education. The recognition of adults' general competences – i.e. cross-field competences that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development – is rare and is almost exclusively available for the purpose of further studies. Thanks to new evidence gathered through desk research and interviews with relevant stakeholders throughout European countries, this paper contributes to shed additional light on the characteristics and country experiences of RPL systems focusing on adults' general competences.

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# Résumé

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La reconnaissance des acquis d'apprentissage peut favoriser les démarches de perfectionnement et de requalification en réduisant la durée des temps de formation et en offrant des parcours d'apprentissage personnalisés aux adultes. Malgré les nombreuses initiatives promues par l'Union européenne visant à soutenir les parcours de renforcement des compétences des adultes peu qualifiés et les possibilités de validation de toutes les formes d'apprentissage, les pratiques de reconnaissance des acquis d'apprentissage sont encore très variées en Europe et visent généralement les compétences pour l'entrée et la progression sur le marché du travail ou l'accès à la formation professionnelle. La reconnaissance des compétences générales des adultes – c'est-à-dire les compétences transversales dont tous les individus ont besoin pour leur réalisation personnelle et pour évoluer dans la société – n'est pas encore très répandue et est presque exclusivement réalisée dans un but de poursuite des études. En se basant sur une recherche documentaire approfondie et sur des entretiens avec les acteurs concernés par le sujet dans plusieurs pays européens, ce document met en évidence les caractéristiques des systèmes de reconnaissance des acquis d'apprentissage axés sur les compétences générales des adultes existants et fournit de nombreux détails sur les expériences des pays dans ce domaine.

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# Table of contents

OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Résumé	5
Executive Summary	8
<b>1 The diverse landscape of the recognition of prior learning</b>	<b>10</b>
A brief history of RPL	10
The European Union's initiatives on recognition of prior learning	11
Mapping RPL practices	14
European practices of recognition of general competences	16
<b>2 International comparison of recognition practices in adult basic education</b>	<b>18</b>
The governance of RPL: who does what?	18
Putting RPL systems into practice	20
<b>3 National experiences across Europe</b>	<b>26</b>
Austria	26
Belgium	30
Denmark	35
Estonia	39
Ireland	42
Italy	44
Luxembourg	47
Netherlands	49
Norway	51
Portugal	53
Slovenia	56
Spain	59
<b>References</b>	<b>63</b>

## FIGURES

Figure 1.1. A mapping of RPL practices	16
Figure 2.1. The main stakeholders involved in RPL process	18
Figure 2.2. Responsibility of the RPL process	22
Figure 3.1. Courses and diplomas offered by the <i>Enseignement de Promotion Sociale</i>	31
Figure 3.2. The education system in Denmark	36
Figure 3.3. The structure of the RPL process in Estonia	42
Figure 3.4. The process of recognition of prior learning in Ireland	44
Figure 3.5. The recognition of prior learning for the labour market in the Netherlands	50
Figure 3.6. Example of exercises included in the Norwegian Digital Learning Arena for a maths course	53
Figure 3.7. The recognition of prior learning by the Qualifica centres in Portugal	55
Figure 3.8. Courses and diplomas offered by the Spanish adult education centres	60

## TABLES

Table 1.1. Timeline of the main EU initiatives on upskilling pathways	11
Table 1.2. The EQF reference levels	12
Table 1.3. Common mappings of RPL practices	15
Table 2.1. Levels of autonomy in the identification, documentation and assessment of competences	20
Table 2.2. The main RPL tools used in adult basic education in Europe	24
Table 3.1. Characteristics of the students enrolled in the Adult Education Initiative in Austria	27
Table 3.2. Example of grid for German Listening Level 1 in Austria	28
Table 3.3. Typology of exercises used in a German, maths and English tests in the framework of basic education programmes	30
Table 3.4. Pedagogical files for two learning units (French and maths) for the attainment of a <i>Certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré</i> (CE2D)	32
Table 3.5. Typology of exercises used in a French and a maths tests in the framework of the coursework for the attainment of the <i>Certificat d'études de base</i> (CEB)	35
Table 3.6. Form used to guide the interview on English competences in Denmark	38
Table 3.7. Typology of exercises used in the tests for the validation of prior learning in English and Danish in Denmark	39
Table 3.8. Key principles of the recognition of prior learning in Estonia	40
Table 3.9. Common dimensions included in most interview templates for enrolment in Level 1 courses	46
Table 3.10. Common dimensions typically included in personal booklets	46
Table 3.11. The template of the request for RPL eligibility check in Luxembourg	48
Table 3.12. Template of the interview for the identification of competences	57
Table 3.13. Objectives and examples of the exercises for the evaluation of prior competences in foreign language and maths	58
Table 3.14. Typology of exercises used in the tests for the validation of prior learning in the Spanish adult education centres	62

# Executive Summary

While access to lifelong learning opportunities should be available to all citizens, many adults experience several barriers that limit their participation in training. In particular, the lack of time to undertake training because of work and family responsibilities is by far the main reason for non-participation. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) can partly address this issue and enhance upskilling and reskilling pathways by shortening the duration of training and offering more personalised learning pathways to adults. RPL also expands access to lifelong learning by creating new opportunities for obtaining qualifications and by recognising the value of existing human capital, especially for disadvantaged groups such as migrants and those lacking basic skills.

However, despite the numerous initiatives promoted by the European Union to support upskilling pathways for low skilled adults as well as the validation of all forms of learning, RPL practices are still unevenly spread across Europe. The majority of RPL systems focus on professional and technical competences for the purpose of entering and progressing in the labour market or accessing continuing vocational education and non-formal on-the-job training. On the contrary, the recognition of adults' general competences – i.e. cross-field competences that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development – is less common and almost exclusively used for the purpose of further studies. This latter type of RPL is also little studied, despite its clear importance for upskilling pathways, including its positive benefits for the individuals – for whom the validation of their past experiences often becomes a central source of motivation to engage in further learning – and for the society – for which RPL represents a stepping-stone to the spread of upskilling strategies. Thanks to new evidence gathered through desk research and interviews with relevant stakeholders throughout European countries, this paper therefore aims to fill the gap in the literature and shed light on the characteristics of RPL systems focusing on adults' general competences.

In systems for the recognition of adults' general competences in basic education, the governance of the process is typically shared between the government and education institutions and training providers. In certain countries, other stakeholders, such as external organisations, social partners, NGOs and the private sector, are also involved. While systems might be different, in the majority of countries studied for this report (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy and Spain) educational institutions and training providers are in charge of the whole validation process. By contrast, in Luxembourg and Slovenia, RPL is conducted entirely by non-training bodies. The Dutch validation system involves, instead, several stakeholders, including employers and the social partners that collaborate with the government in promoting RPL in order to bridge the gap between the education system and the labour market.

Over the last few years, several European countries have issued national regulations for the recognition of prior learning in adult basic education. Yet, in practice, most systems leave great flexibility to the relevant RPL bodies in relation to how the process should be conducted, which tools should be used and what criteria should be taken into consideration. In most countries, guidelines (e.g. templates or instructions) typically exist for the first two phases of the RPL process – i.e. the identification and documentation of prior learning – while education and training institutions typically have large autonomy in the selection and/or creation of the tools used in the assessment phase. The only exceptions are Spain, where guidelines also exist for the assessment of prior learning, and Luxembourg, where the process is entirely conducted by

the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth that analyses and assesses the dossier of applicants through a dedicated internal commission. At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the case of Estonia, where full autonomy is given to the institutions that conduct the RPL process throughout all its different phases.

Overall, European countries tend to use interviews and portfolios to identify and document the competences that adults have acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. These tools help teachers and advisors retrace applicants' learning and professional experiences and capture their motivations for embarking in further studies. While in most RPL frameworks throughout Europe interviews are considered the first step to validation, in countries such as Denmark, Norway and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation of Belgium, applicants are required to compile a portfolio first, before being invited to the interview. In addition, in Denmark, Norway and Slovenia, portfolios are also complemented by one or more self-assessment tools aimed at helping adults reflect about their past experiences and better understand the soft and hard skills that they might need to improve.

By contrast, the assessment phase is very heterogeneous across countries as assessors usually have complete autonomy to choose the format and content of the evaluation methodologies they prefer. As a result, a plethora of tools – such as classroom written tests, oral presentations and real-life simulations – are exploited on the basis of applicant's prior competences and the curriculum of a given education and training programme.

The first chapter of this paper draws a brief history of RPL and presents the main initiatives implemented at the European level for the validation of prior learning. It also introduces a new mapping of RPL practices, which emphasises the types of competences that are covered. Based on this framework, the second chapter identifies common characteristics and differences in the governance and implementation of RPL practices in adult basic education across Europe. The third and final chapter of this paper looks in details at the existing practices for the identification, documentation and assessment of competences in a number of countries including Austria, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation of Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia and Spain. Additional practices from Ireland, the Netherlands, and Portugal are also presented as their regulation makes reference to the recognition of prior learning in adult basic education, although in practice their RPL systems focus more on the labour market.

# 1 The diverse landscape of the recognition of prior learning

## A brief history of RPL

Upskilling and reskilling should be among governments' key priorities in the context of evolving skill needs and changing labour markets. As highlighted by the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, “everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that allow full participation in society and successful transitions in the labour market” (European Commission, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). However, many adults who work or have family responsibilities experience several barriers that limit their participation in training. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) can partly address this issue and enhance upskilling and reskilling opportunities by shortening the duration of training to focus only on skill gaps and offering personalised learning pathways.

Indeed, one of the fundamental principles of the current adult learning system is that knowledge is rooted in experience (Michelson, 1996<sup>[2]</sup>). Contemporary adult education theory recognises the ability of people to learn in a variety of places, times and styles, thereby challenging rigid, subject-centred pedagogies. Yet, the emergence of RPL as a key component of adult education is relatively recent. Until the 1970s, adult learning was generally seen as an extension of the regular, youth schooling system. In the early 1970s, instead, a number of higher education institutions in the United States – like Princeton University in New Jersey – experimented with new admission processes expanding the range of certificates granting entry to courses. Such epistemological shift representing the seminal RPL experiences worldwide was mainly in response to a need of fostering social justice and opening up higher education opportunities to unrepresented student groups (Andersson, Fejes and Ahn, 2004<sup>[3]</sup>).

News of the American experience with RPL in higher education reached the United Kingdom and, at the beginning of the 1980s, several British institutions also experimented with innovative policies extending the types of certificates required to be admitted in university programmes. The term used at that time for RPL in both the US and the UK was “Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning” (APEL). It was not until the end of the 1980s that RPL shied away from playing a role only in admission to higher education and extended to the labour market. The first experiences in this direction are the ones of France, which developed a recognition framework in the area of professional competences, and Australia, which introduced an RPL system connected to the labour market in 1987 (Toop and Burleigh, 1993<sup>[4]</sup>).

Over the last three decades, numerous other countries around the world have introduced policies to recognise adults' prior learning and different institutions have fostered research on the topic, often using different terms to refer to similar practices (ILO, 2018<sup>[5]</sup>), such as:

- VNFIL – validation of non-formal/informal learning (European Training Foundation)
- APEL – assessment of prior experiential learning (United Kingdom)
- APL – assessment of prior learning (United Kingdom and the Netherlands)
- PLAR – prior learning assessment and recognition (Canada)

- RVCC – recognition, validation and certification of competences (Portugal)
- RLO – recognition of learning outcomes (European Commission)

## The European Union's initiatives on recognition of prior learning

In the past few years, the European Union has also paid particular attention to lifelong learning, learner mobility, and upskilling pathways, and issued a series of recommendations that played a key role in shaping the various approaches taken by member countries for the development of national systems for the recognition of prior learning (Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1. Timeline of the main EU initiatives on upskilling pathways**

Year	Initiative	
2008	Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council n. 2008/C 111/01	Establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning
2009	Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council n. 2009/C 155/02	Establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)
2012	Council Recommendation n. 2012/C 398/01	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
2016	Council Recommendation n. 2016/C 484/01	Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults
2019	Council Conclusions n. 2019/C 189/04	Implementation of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults

Source: Authors' elaboration.

For instance, in 2008, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a Recommendation establishing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) – a common reference framework developed to foster mobility of learners and workers across borders and systems.<sup>1</sup> The core of the EQF lies in its eight reference levels defined in terms of learning outcomes, i.e. knowledge (theoretical and/or factual), skills (cognitive and practical) and autonomy/responsibility that individuals should possess at the end of a learning process (Table 1.2). The eight levels span the full scale of qualifications, from basic (Level 1, for example school leaving certificates) to advanced (Level 8, for example Doctorates). In line with its objective of promoting lifelong learning, the EQF encompasses all levels of qualifications acquired in general, vocational and academic education and training, both initial and continuing.

According to the Recommendation, by 2010, all member states should have related their national qualifications systems to the EQF, and by 2012 they should have ensured that individual qualification certificates bear a reference to the appropriate EQF level. Yet, in several countries, implementation of the EQF Recommendation took much longer (Cedefop, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>). For example, in Italy the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour jointly released the National Qualification Framework (NQF) only in 2018, while the Greek NQF has been established with the recent Law n. 4763/2020.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The text of the Recommendation 2008/C 111/01 can be found here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2008.111.01.0001.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2008.111.01.0001.01.ENG) (accessed on 19/05/2021).

<sup>2</sup> Greece's Law n. 4763/2020 is available here: [http://www.et.gr/docs-nph/search/pdfViewerForm.html?args=5C7QrtC22wHUdWr4xouZundtvSoClrL8goX2c34K7tJ5MXD0LzQTLWPU9yLzB8V68knBzLCmTXKaO6fpVZ6Lx3UnKI3nP8NxdnJ5r9cmWwyJWvDvWS\\_18kAEhATUkJb0x1LldQ163nV9K--td6SluQoIKC15UWtF7\\_bt00e9XOKpB6w0y8rsCXCKyfK1zLBM](http://www.et.gr/docs-nph/search/pdfViewerForm.html?args=5C7QrtC22wHUdWr4xouZundtvSoClrL8goX2c34K7tJ5MXD0LzQTLWPU9yLzB8V68knBzLCmTXKaO6fpVZ6Lx3UnKI3nP8NxdnJ5r9cmWwyJWvDvWS_18kAEhATUkJb0x1LldQ163nV9K--td6SluQoIKC15UWtF7_bt00e9XOKpB6w0y8rsCXCKyfK1zLBM) (accessed on 19/05/2021).

Table 1.2. The EQF reference levels

	Knowledge	Skills	Responsibility and autonomy
Level 1	Basic general knowledge	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
Level 2	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy
Level 3	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts, in a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
Level 4	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
Level 5	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
Level 6	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
Level 7	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research; critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	Manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
Level 8	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Source: <https://europa.eu/europass/en/description-eight-efq-levels> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

To make it easier for adults to get validation and recognition of work-related skills and knowledge acquired in different VET systems and countries, in 2009 the European Parliament and the Council adopted another Recommendation urging member countries to apply the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).<sup>3</sup> ECVET allows individuals to accumulate, transfer and use their learning in units, thereby enabling the creation of a qualification at learners' own pace from learning outcomes acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. The system applies to VET qualifications at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework and relies on the voluntary participation of member states and VET stakeholders. While both the EQF and the ECVET are based on common principles such as the focus on

<sup>3</sup> The text of the Recommendation 2009/C 155/02 can be found here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708\(02\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32009H0708(02)) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

qualifications and learning outcomes, and the use of knowledge, skills and competences, their objectives are different, with the former focusing on mobility and the latter on flexibility of VET.

Implementing the ECVET requires the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, which are then brought together in units, that in turn are accumulated to form the basis of qualifications. Assessment, validation and recognition processes must also be agreed, among all those participating, and should respect existing national, regional, sectoral or institutional practices.

In 2012, the European Union fostered the start of a new stage for RPL in Europe with its Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Recommendation shows a strong political commitment to incite member states to establish arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018. Such national arrangements need to enable individuals to “a) *have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated [...]; b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part of a qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences*”. The 2012 Recommendation also introduced the concept of validation as a process encompassing four stages: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification of the competences of an individual. This partition of the process in stages was a key innovation to previous approaches to validation in Europe, as it increased the flexibility and usefulness of validation arrangements (Villalba, 2016<sup>[7]</sup>).

More recently, the 2016 Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways fostered the development of an easily accessible pathway for low-skilled and low-qualified adults to enter upskilling and reskilling opportunities.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Recommendation made provision for a three-step mechanism formed by:

- A skills assessment, which is intended to identify adults’ existing competences and needs for improvement and can take the form of a “skills audit” (i.e. a statement of one’s competences);
- A customised offer of learning and mentoring, which would enable individuals to update skills and fill deficits, aiming specifically at allowing progress towards higher qualifications aligned to labour market needs;
- The opportunity to have their acquired skills, knowledge and competences validated and recognised with the goal of earning a certification and, ultimately, obtaining access to employment.

The European Commission actively supports the implementation of the Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways through funding, mutual learning, generating evidence and building synergies with other existing initiatives. The basic funding tool of the Upskilling Pathways initiative is the European Social Fund. During the 2014-2020 programming period, one billion euro has been also invested from the European Regional Development Fund in educational infrastructure investments, including vocational education and training and adult learning. Furthermore, the microfinance and social entrepreneurship axis of the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) Programme has also been used for upskilling and reskilling adults that suffer from social exclusion (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). For instance, in Greece and the Netherlands funding under the EaSI programme is used for the implementation stages towards Upskilling Pathways reformation. Additionally, EU adult learning national coordinators can receive financial aid through the Erasmus+ programme to implement various activities based on their specific agenda. In particular, “Strategic Partnerships” are often co-financed via the Erasmus+ programme targeted on adults, focused on designing personalised learning pathways for increasing participation, provision of basic skills through high quality learning opportunities, and improving the effectiveness of existing policies.

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<sup>4</sup> The text of the Recommendation 2012/C 398/01 can be found here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32012H1222\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32012H1222(01)) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>5</sup> The text of the Recommendation 2016/C 484/01 can be found here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Besides funding, the implementation of the 2016 Recommendation is supported by the “Mutual Learning and Sharing of Experiences” – a country-clustered methodological approach to upskilling pathways. In practice, ministries of education and labour, social partners, public employment service, providers, and regional authorities get together in a cluster with the main aim of collaborating towards the implementation of the Recommendation stages. Their job is to map out what is already planned, diagnose, describe and analyse the main inconsistencies towards the three steps (skills assessment, tailored learning offer, validation and recognition of skills), and agree on a fruitful collaboration with detailed and prescribed actions (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>).

To ensure that all EU member states put in place the necessary steps to help adults acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills or acquire a broader set of skills by progressing towards an upper secondary qualification, on 5 June 2019 the Council renewed its commitment to support the implementation of the 2016 Recommendation with its Council Conclusions 2019/C 189/04.<sup>6</sup> The document calls upon countries to focus provision specifically on helping beneficiaries to acquire at least the key competences that are relevant for active participation in society and a future employment, as well as ensure that such provision comprises three steps: skills assessment, tailored learning offer, and recognition of skills.

As a result of all these EU-led initiatives, more and more European countries have implemented or are in the process of implementing the 2016 Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways. Most of them integrated it as part of existing lifelong learning, employment or national skills strategies. This is the case for instance of Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Lithuania, and Poland. Other countries, instead, used the Recommendation as the foundation of building on existing legislation and policies for adult education. For example, in France, a Vocational Education and Training (VET) reform is being conducted within the application of the 2018-2022 Skills Investment Plan (*Plan d'investissement dans les compétences*), in which upskilling pathways will be explicitly addressed (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). Finally, some EU member states are implementing completely new and ad-hoc initiatives in line with the objectives of the Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways. Overall, more than 60 European Social Fund (ESF) initiatives exist across Europe implementing the Recommendations, without taking into account some smaller scale Erasmus+ financed projects (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>).

## Mapping RPL practices

While the recognition of prior learning commonly refers to the same process of “identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes against standards used in formal education and training” (ILO, 2018<sup>[5]</sup>) regardless of its name, RPL practices remain very diverse and, over the course of the years, specialists have mapped them in numerous different ways to get a better sense of their heterogeneity. For instance, one way to unravel the complex tangle of RPL practices is by looking at their underlying objective. Three core aims (explicit or implicit) have been identified by the literature (Table 1.3):

- Social justice: RPL is established to foster emancipation and eradicate discriminatory barriers to education under a human rights agenda (Burtch, 2006<sup>[9]</sup>) (Gair, 2013<sup>[10]</sup>).
- Social change: RPL is established to make use of knowledge existing within groups that have had limited access to formal education, and to bring about change within the educational system first and then in the whole society (Harris, 1999<sup>[11]</sup>) (Castle and Attwood, 2001<sup>[12]</sup>).

<sup>6</sup> The text of the Council Conclusions 2019/C 189/04 can be found here: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0605\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019XG0605(01)) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

- Economic development: RPL is established to improve competitiveness, economic development and labour market matching (Andersson, Fejes and Ahn, 2004<sup>[3]</sup>).

The outcomes of the process for the recognition of prior learning can also vary (ILO, 2018<sup>[5]</sup>). For instance, depending on the country, the RPL process might lead to: (1) a full qualification (i.e. formal outcome of an assessment process – e.g. certificate, diploma or title – signalling successful completion of an education and training sequence); (2) a partial qualification (component of a qualification that can be used for renewal or specialisation purposes (Cedefop, 2012<sup>[13]</sup>)); (3) credits/units towards a qualification; (4) an exemption from admission prerequisites; or (5) a certificate of labour market competences.

Finally, RPL systems can also be mapped on the basis of the methods they employ. Four tools are particularly widespread in Europe. Written tests are well rooted in many RPL experiences, mostly as a consequence of traditional schooling practices. Some countries, instead, have a clear preference for dialogue-based tools, such as interviews and portfolios. As argued by Cedefop (2015<sup>[14]</sup>), portfolios are particularly useful to collect materials (e.g. certificates from training courses or voluntary activities, letters from employers, products made by the applicants), providing evidence of the competences that have been acquired through experience instead of formal learning, since they allow learners to reflect on their past experiences and become active participants of the recognition process. Lastly, so-called “authentic assessments” – i.e. simulations of real-life situations – are also adopted by a number of countries to evaluate learners’ competences in contexts that resemble authentic life or work scenarios.

**Table 1.3. Common mappings of RPL practices**

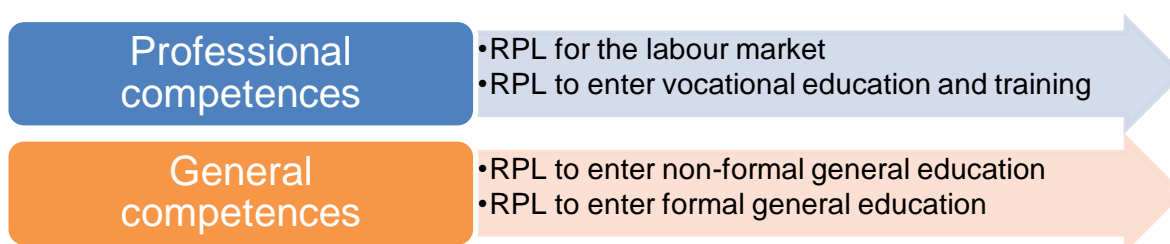
Criteria	Typologies
Aim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social justice</li> <li>• Social change</li> <li>• Economic development</li> </ul>
Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full qualification</li> <li>• Partial qualification</li> <li>• Credits/units towards a qualification</li> <li>• Exemption from admission prerequisites</li> <li>• Certificate of labour market competences</li> </ul>
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written tests</li> <li>• Portfolio</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• “Authentic” assessments</li> </ul>

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Yet, the aforementioned mappings of RPL practices do not take into account the fact the *type of competences* at the centre of the recognition process significantly affects its aims, outcomes and methods. For instance, there are two main categories of competences that can be the focus of validation procedures (Figure 1.1). On the one side, professional and technical competences are the core of many existing RPL systems throughout the OECD area. The recognition of these skills is aimed to either enter and progress in the labour market or to access continuing vocational education and training and non-formal on-the-job training. Given their practical nature, professional competences are often assessed through hands-on, authentic examinations and simulations, and the standards for their validation are typically set in cooperation with public employment services and social partners. Naturally, the role of public professional bodies is even more active when the validation procedures are aimed to facilitate adults’ entry in regulated professions.

On the other side, the recognition of adults' general competences – i.e. cross-field competences that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development (OECD, 2005<sup>[15]</sup>) – is less used by adults in OECD countries, and it is almost exclusively used for the purpose of further studies in the formal education sector. In practice, a validation involving general competences is only rarely part of admission procedures for non-formal general training programmes, and, when it is, its implementation is typically less formalised. By contrast, a few OECD countries have precise guidelines on the recognition of general competences for the purpose of entering formal general education. In fact, in these cases, the adults applying for RPL will attain an official qualification or part of it at the end of their studies, and hence more precise regulation is needed from public authorities in order to ensure a correct (and consistent) application of the validation process.

Figure 1.1. A mapping of RPL practices



Source: Authors' elaboration.

## European practices of recognition of general competences

Numerous previous studies focused (either deliberately or implicitly) on the recognition practices to enter or advance in the labour market (ILO, 2016<sup>[16]</sup>) (NIACE, 2014<sup>[17]</sup>). Very little attention has instead been given to the validation of general competences. This should come as no surprise since information on the topic is relatively scarce and scattered – and when it is available, it usually does not provide enough details to correctly understand the granularity of the various approaches in place in different countries. Implementing recognition systems for general competences seems also to be particularly challenging, which might thus have an impact on the development of these practice across Europe.

Indeed, many obstacles exist to the implementation of RPL for admission to educational programmes. First, compared to RPL for professional competences which is typically undertaken by career guidance centres, the validation of adults' general competences is usually tasked to schools and adult learning providers, whose teaching staff might not have the specialised skills required to identify and assess prior learning. Schools might also have less financial resources to allocate to the RPL process, especially given its high costs in terms of assessors' time, materials and infrastructure. Besides, adults wanting to obtain a general degree at later stages of their lives are often not aware of the possibility of having their basic skills recognised, and this is even more the case for those vulnerable groups that would benefit the most from re-entering the educational system. Migrants, in particular, might not only be completely unaware of the fact that schools can reduce training length by validating their prior learning (including that acquired in non-formal and informal contexts), but they might also not understand the process due to language barriers.

Despite the difficulties in implementation, the recognition of general competences has numerous benefits both at societal and personal level. By making the attainment of qualifications more accessible to a larger spectrum of applicants, this type of RPL essentially becomes a stepping-stone to upskilling and reskilling strategies, and can play a key role in expanding access to lifelong learning opportunities. RPL for admission in adult educational programmes also improves social inclusion by empowering disadvantages groups, and recognising the value of non-formal and informal learning. For individuals, the certificate of validation of prior learning often strengthens self-confidence and becomes an important source of

motivation to engage in further learning. Moreover, RPL reduces the time needed to obtain a formal qualification, which in many European countries is a prerequisite to be hired in certain professions or to access public employment contracts.

The purpose of this report is therefore to fill this relatively significant gap in the literature and examines how RPL is used in several European countries in order to increase the flexibility of adult basic education – an angle even less studied than RPL practices in higher education. Based on desk research and interviews with key national and local stakeholders, the following nine European countries have been identified as having somewhat formalised procedures of recognition of general competences for adult basic education: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia and Spain.

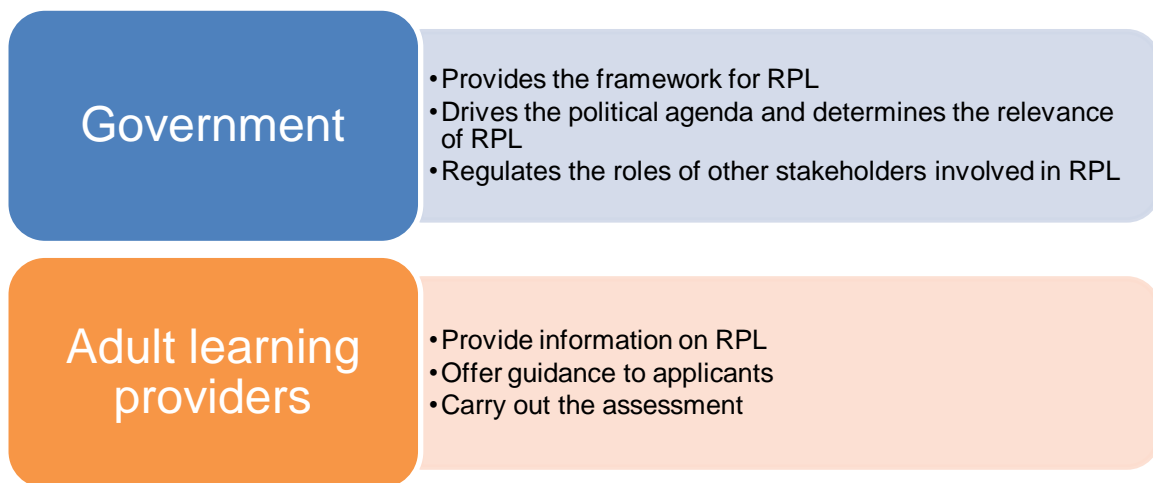
In addition, three other countries – Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal – have been analysed as their national regulations make reference to a recognition of prior learning in adult basic education, although in practice their RPL systems are almost exclusively used for labour market purposes.

# 2 International comparison of recognition practices in adult basic education

## The governance of RPL: who does what?

The governance of the recognition of prior learning varies significantly across Europe, with numerous stakeholders and institutions playing different roles. Coordination and trust among them are fundamental to ensure that the process is transparent and accessible to all population groups, including the low skilled, those who had difficult school experiences and foreigners with poor language skills. Typically, the government and the adult learning providers represent the pillars of the process (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. The main stakeholders involved in RPL process



Source: Adapted from ILO (2018<sup>[5]</sup>).

The government sets the framework and the procedures that govern the RPL system, and determines the roles of the other institutions and bodies that might be involved. In a number of countries, such as Austria and Norway, sub-national governments are also actively involved in the process, defining its characteristics and implementation criteria. By contrast, adult learning providers often represent the first contact point for adults who decide to request a validation of their prior learning. These organisations generally provide information on the different phases of the process and guidance on its possible outcomes. In addition, trainers and mentors provide support in the identification of the relevant experiences that might contribute to shorten the education pathways or enhance labour market opportunities and collect and organise the documentation to prove them. This is for example the case of Denmark, Italy and Spain, where applicants

can make the request directly to the adult education centres that provide guidance and orient them in the process. Finally, in most countries education and training centres are also responsible for the assessment of competences.

Prospective learners themselves are also essential to the process, since they are those who initiate the RPL procedure by contacting relevant institutions and devoting time to collect appropriate documentation and evidence. Their implication in the process has also been formalised in many countries during the last two decades through acts and pieces of legislation that give adults the right to request the validation of their prior learning. In Denmark, for example, among the seven principles that regulate the process, the first two focus on both adults' rights and responsibilities in relation to the validation of prior learning.

In some countries, additional stakeholders are involved in the recognition process and contribute to its promotion and diffusion; this might include:

- External bodies that work independently or collaborate with training and education institutions in conducting the RPL. This is for example the case of Slovenia where providers also include training centres within enterprises and chambers of commerce and industry.
- Trade unions and NGOs, that, through the promotion of RPL, protect the interests of their constituencies and reinforce the link between the education system and the labour market.
- The private sector, that can actively promote the adoption of RPL within their industry or company, or be involved in the assessment of competences especially for RPL for vocational education or for the labour market (see for example Box 2.1 for the case of the Netherlands, where several stakeholders are involved in the process).

### Box 2.1. The wide range of stakeholders involved in RPL in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the private sector and the social partners have built a strong collaboration with government departments and educational institutions in the promotion and implementation of the recognition of prior learning. This has contributed to increasing the requests for validation among different population groups including those who are employed or have voluntary jobs, the job seekers, and adults who want to go back to education and training. In 2000, a national working group, which involved government ministries and the social partners, elaborated national principles for RPL and highlighted its relevance in bridging the gap between the education system and the demand for skills in the labour market. The responsibility for the process, whose quality and compliance are ensured by the Dutch Knowledge Centre (EVC), is split across three main stakeholders:

- RPL accredited organisations which can deliver the Certificate of experience (*Ervaringscertificaat*) – i.e., a document that lists all competences that adults have acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts in the past.
- Formal education and training institutions, that use the Certificate to allow prospective learners to access their learning programmes, obtain exemptions or receive full certifications.
- The private sector, which can orient their staff towards RPL providers for the validation of their competences acquired in the workplace. Some companies or employers' associations can also conduct awareness raising campaigns or become themselves RPL accredited organisations.

Note: A more detailed explanation of the RPL system in the Netherlands is presented in Chapter 2 of this paper.

Source: ILO (2018<sup>[5]</sup>) and interviews with Dutch stakeholders.

## Putting RPL systems into practice

While countries have developed different strategies and approaches to conduct and implement the validation of prior learning, they all have structured the process in four phases in line with the 2012 Recommendations of the European Union:

- The identification phase, whose objective is to establish which competences acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning might be relevant in relation to the content and objectives of the selected programme/training;
- The documentation phase, which consists of collecting and organising the evidence needed to prove that information gathered during the identification phase is reliable;
- The assessment phase, that aims to ensure that the documentation collected corresponds to the actual competences possessed by prospective learners; and
- The certification phase, which represents the final stage of the process and corresponds to the issue of an official document indicating whether applicants have received a full or partial validation. In the first case, the certificate has the same value of a diploma obtained through traditional schooling, while in the second one it indicates what competences are still missing.

This report focuses on the first three phases of the process, since they tend to be more diversified across countries, both in relation to the responsibility of the stakeholders involved and their level of autonomy. In fact, despite the existence of general national regulations for the validation and the certification of prior learning in all countries reviewed in this report, limited guidance is provided on how the process should be conducted in practice, which tools should be used and what criteria should be taken into consideration.

When existing, guidelines (e.g. templates or instructions) focus mostly on the identification and documentation phases (Table 2.1). By contrast, adult learning providers or external bodies are given the possibility to decide the type and content of the tools to be exploited in the assessment phase in all countries except Spain and Luxembourg. In both countries the role of the national or subnational governments is key in the validation process. While in Spain, the Regional Ministries of Education of several autonomous communities prepare the exercises for each test, in Luxembourg the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth has created an internal commission which is in charge of analysing and assessing the dossiers of all applicants. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in Estonia, full autonomy is given to the institutions that conduct the RPL process throughout all its different phases (see Box 2.2 for the similar case of England). Austria and Denmark have autonomy in the identification phase, during which teachers can target the content of the interview on the specific characteristics of prospective learners. All the other countries have guidelines for both the identification and the documentation that can orient teachers in gathering all the relevant information.

**Table 2.1. Levels of autonomy in the identification, documentation and assessment of competences**

	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Austria	Autonomy	Guidelines	Autonomy
Belgium	Guidelines	Guidelines	Autonomy
Denmark	Autonomy	Guidelines	Autonomy
Estonia	Autonomy	Autonomy	Autonomy
Italy	Guidelines	Guidelines	Autonomy
Luxembourg	Guidelines	Guidelines	Guidelines
Norway	Guidelines	Guidelines	Autonomy
Slovenia	Guidelines	Guidelines	Autonomy
Spain	Guidelines	Guidelines	Guidelines

Note: Belgium refers to the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*).

Source: Author's elaborations.

### Box 2.2. The autonomy of adult learning providers in the RPL process in England (United Kingdom)

Responsibility for adult education in England (United Kingdom) is in the hand of the Department for Education, while its delivery is ensured by a wide range of institutions, including further education (FE) colleges, community learning centres, private training organisations and Institutes of Technology. There is no England-wide strategy to recognition of prior learning, which therefore remains of limited use and is mainly conducted in programmes leading to vocational qualifications.

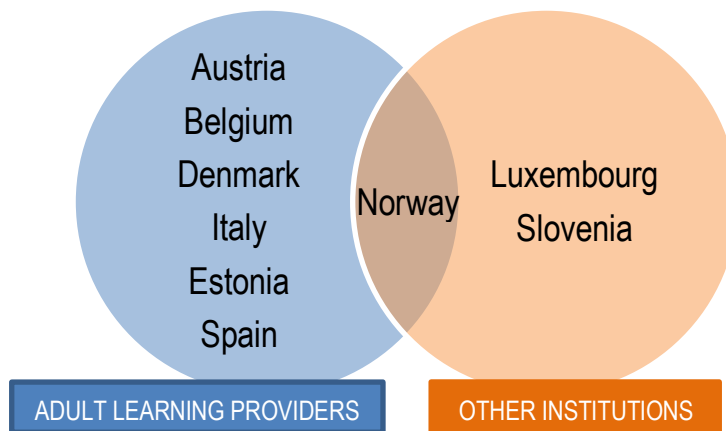
Only for certain non-public organisations, there exist a common reference document mentioning recognition of prior learning. Indeed, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) released a Handbook in 2017 listing a number of key principles that awarding organisations (i.e. private commercial and non-commercial institutions that develop and deliver qualifications after gaining recognised status from Ofqual) should follow when validating part of their learning units on the basis of the competences already possessed by learners: (1) RPL policies have to be open, transparent and clear to learners and users; (2) they have to set out which evidence of prior learning will be required by the awarding organisation; (3) they have to clearly indicate the various stages to be followed in considering an application for RPL and the timelines of each stage; (4) they need to define the criteria which will be used when making a decision about the appropriateness of RPL; (5) they have to identify the range of possible outcomes of an application for RPL; (6) they have to identify any limit on the amount of RPL available for each qualification.

No guidelines, however, are provided to awarding organisations by Ofqual on the tools and methodologies to be used to undertake the validation, leaving them complete autonomy during the process of recognition of prior learning.

Note: The text of the 2017 Ofqual Handbook can be found at this link: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-hand> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

European countries also differ in relation to the institutions that take the lead in the recognition of prior learning process. Among the countries reviewed in this report, three types of settings have been identified: (1) countries where the identification, documentation and assessment are conducted by adult learning providers, which is the case of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Italy and Spain (see also Box 2.3 for the case of France); (2) countries, such as the Luxembourg and Slovenia, where non-training institutions, represented respectively by the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth and the various institutions in charge of RPL, conduct the whole process; and (3) countries, such as Norway, where career guidance centres conduct the identification and documentation, while education institutions prepare the assessment.

Figure 2.2. Responsibility of the RPL process



Note: Belgium refers to the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*). Other institutions might include career guidance centres, government departments, private and non-profit institutions, training centres within enterprises.

Source: Authors' elaborations.

### Box 2.3. The use of RPL in higher education in France

In France there is no regulation for the recognition of prior learning in adult basic education, as the focus of the system has been mainly on progression in the labour market and enrolment in continuing vocational education. RPL in formal education is used almost exclusively for admission to higher education institutions through the validation of professional experience (*Validation des Acquis Professionnels – VAP*). In place since 1985, this specific RPL framework allows applicants without the proper prerequisites to enrol in a post-secondary education programme through the validation of their prior learning. Adults who have at least three years of work experience in the field of the diploma sought are eligible for the VAP regardless of their current labour market status and age.

The VAP process is managed by the education institutions that provide the programme, which determines the documents required and the timeframe for submitting the request. Typically, candidates prepare a dossier which includes a detailed CV and a motivation letter highlighting their prior experiences. While education institutions have autonomy in the implementation of the VAP, the national Education Code states that the validation should take into consideration: i) any training courses attended in public or private establishments, regardless of their duration and method of certification; ii) professional experiences both as wage workers, self-employed or interns; iii) any other relevant knowledge and competences acquired outside the education system. In some cases, candidates have the possibility to meet a counsellor to receive guidance on the choice of the programme and on how to put together the dossier. The dossier is then analysed by a pedagogic committee, which includes members from both inside and outside the education institution and which decides whether the request can be accepted. In some cases, applicants are also invited to an interview to provide additional information.

Note: The text of the decree from the Education Code can be found at this link:

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGIARTI000006436702/1985-08-29/#LEGIARTI000006436702> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Regardless of the institutions that conduct the validation of prior learning, a number of similar tools are used across countries, including those outside Europe (see for example the case of East Asia in Box 2.4) (Table 2.2). In most RPL systems, competences acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts are identified through an interview with an advisor or a teacher that helps applicants retrace their prior experiences and reflect on their value in relation to the content of the programme they would like to enter. Generally, the interview covers both learning and professional experiences and tries to capture the motivations of the applicants. The structure of the interview is relatively flexible and its content can be adapted to the profile of the adults in order to identify their strengths.

During the documentation phase, all countries in this report use a portfolio, i.e. an electronic or paper folder, which is used to collect all the evidence demonstrating applicants' prior experiences. The portfolio includes a variety of documents (e.g. diplomas, certificates from training courses, letters from employers, etc.), and is generally structured in three main areas: i) education, ii) work experience, and iii) leisure and personal activities. In addition, it might include information on motivations and personal goals. In a number of countries (i.e. Denmark, Norway and Slovenia), the portfolio is also complemented by one or more self-assessment tools aimed at helping adults think about their past experiences and have a better understanding of both soft and hard skills that they might need to develop. In Slovenia, in particular, five optional self-assessment online questionnaires have been developed covering topics such as values in life and at the workplace, emotional intelligence, approaches to learning, learning style and learning type.

Yet not all countries follow this order. For instance, while in the general RPL framework the interview is considered the first step to validation, in countries such as Denmark, Norway and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation of Belgium, applicants are required to compile a portfolio before being invited to the interview. In this way, counsellors can examine the relevant information before their meeting and can then require the applicants to gather more targeted complementary material during the interview.

The assessment phase tends to be the most heterogeneous both across and within countries as it includes several different tools – such as classroom tests, presentations and simulations – that can be used either independently or combined. Assessors can decide the type of tools to use on the basis of applicant's prior competences and the curriculum of a given education and training programme. In some cases, observation and simulations are preferred especially for people who do not feel comfortable in taking traditional classroom-based examinations. The content of the assessment tools is often reviewed and updated to correct possible difficulties that applicants might have experienced and to avoid that people already know the tests from previous years. For vocational pathways and for RPL for the labour market practical and real-life tests are also used to validate for examples competences acquired on the workplace.

**Table 2.2. The main RPL tools used in adult basic education in Europe**

Country	Identification	Documentation	Assessment
Austria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written, oral or practical tests</li> <li>• Observation</li> </ul>
Belgium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview after documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written test</li> </ul>
Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview after documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online portfolio</li> <li>• Self-assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written, oral or practical tests</li> <li>• Observation</li> </ul>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written tests</li> <li>• Simulation</li> <li>• Observation</li> <li>• Real-life situations</li> </ul>
Italy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written and oral tests</li> <li>• Real-life situations</li> </ul>
Luxembourg		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	
Norway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview after documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> <li>• Self-assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written tests</li> <li>• Home assignments</li> <li>• Practical tests</li> </ul>
Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online portfolio</li> <li>• Self-assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written and practical tests</li> <li>• Observation</li> <li>• Simulations</li> </ul>
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Written tests</li> </ul>

Note: Belgium refers to the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*).

Source: Authors' elaborations.

### Box 2.4. The recognition of prior learning in East Asia

#### The key role of the interview in the RPL process in Japan

Public institutions called “night-time junior high schools” (*yakan chugaku*) have been established throughout Japan in order to offer free educational opportunities to adults (including foreigners) who have not completed compulsory education or were able to graduate from lower secondary education but were rarely able to attend school and, therefore, would like to re-do their studies. These night-time schools have been mostly established as branches of existing junior high schools, and in the past few years have received important attention from the public authorities. Indeed, in order to further promote the provision of night-time junior high schools throughout the country, since 2016, all prefectures and municipalities in Japan are obliged by law to take the necessary measures to provide learning opportunities for those who have not had enough chances to successfully attain compulsory education. Moreover, in 2017 the Japanese government announced that one third of the salary costs of teachers and staff of the night-time schools were to be borne by the national treasury and not by the local prefectures. As of 2021, 34 night-time junior high schools have been established nationwide, and more are likely to be set up in the next years.

Night-time schools need to take into account the prior learning of prospective students when defining their learning pathways, although there exist no ministerial guidelines governing the process. Before their enrolment in a programme, learners typically have to undertake an interview with the school staff to identify the relevant competences already in their possession. In some cases, schools can also contact the adults' previous education providers to get a detailed understanding of their past learning experiences. On the basis of the information collected through the interview and depending on students'

prior learning, schools can admit applicants directly to the second or third year of the 3-year standard curriculum of night-time schools. No written tests are sat by prospective learners, but the validation of their competences is done entirely based on the interview.

### **Korea's important focus on assessment methodologies for RPL**

In Korea, adults can obtain primary or lower secondary degrees if they enrol in specific government-funded programmes designated by the Metropolitan Office of Education and run by public schools or NGOs such as lifelong learning centres or community welfare centres. As of 2020, there are 263 recognised institutions offering formal adult basic education nationwide: 183 primary schools, 13 lower secondary schools, and 67 institutions covering both levels. The curricula of each of these adult programmes consist of three steps, from level 1 to level 3. Each level lasts one year, with at least 240 training hours per year for primary school and 450 hours for lower secondary. These minimum hours are equivalent to around 18% and 40% of, respectively, the standard primary and lower-secondary education curriculum for the youth, and therefore consider the fact that adult learners already possess numerous competences gained through their previous life experiences.

This prior learning of the adults is typically taken into account through diagnostic evaluations. Such evaluations are conducted directly by the schools to identify the level of competence of adult students and consequently personalise their learning pathways. Depending on the evaluation results, learners can shorten the length of their studies by entering straight at level 2 or level 3 of the programme. There are no official diagnostic tools to assess adult learners' prior learning, although the Ministry of Education and the National Institute for Lifelong Education have produced some guidelines. For example, the Adult Literacy Education Evaluation Manual details various evaluation tools (interviews, observation, tests, portfolios) and operational methods for diagnosing adult learners' competences (Gyeongsangnam Office of Education, 2008<sup>[18]</sup>). Despite these guidelines, though, adult education institutions can evaluate competences through their own tools and methods. Considering adult learners' fear of evaluation, though, evaluation methods such as observation, interviews, and portfolios are often preferred to written tests.

In addition to diagnostic evaluation, Korea also adopted the Lifelong Learning Account System which allows learners to keep track of their learning experiences and translate them into credits. For instance, previous completion of literacy education programmes can result in the validation up to two thirds of total hours required to obtain the official diploma (only the third and last level cannot be validated through prior learning, since it must be completed at the adult learning provider that will issue the diploma).

Source: Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2018), Guide to Establishing and Enhancing Night-time Junior High Schools, [https://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/yakan/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/09/26/1381010\\_01.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/yakan/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/09/26/1381010_01.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022). Lee, Heo and Kim (2016<sup>[19]</sup>).

# 3 National experiences across Europe

## Austria

### Context

The responsibility of adult learning in Austria is shared across the different levels of government (i.e. the federal, state and municipal governments) and a large range of adult learning providers ensure its implementation. To encourage the upskilling and reskilling of low-skilled adults, in 2012 the federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research partnered with the state governments to launch the Adult Education Initiative (*Initiative Erwachsenenbildung*). The project – still ongoing – allocates specific funding to accredited institutions that provide either one of the following types of adult learning courses:

- Basic education programmes: they cover courses to develop German, maths and digital skills, gain basic knowledge of a foreign language and improve soft skills (e.g. learning to learn, problem-solving);
- Courses to obtain the compulsory school-leaving certificate (*Pflichtschulabschluss*, i.e. the qualification obtained at the end of compulsory education): they cover three subjects (German, English, maths) and a module where students receive tailored career guidance as well as two optional subjects to be chosen among creativity and design, health and social care, nature and technology, or foreign languages.

In order to be accredited, adult learning providers – which can be both public and private – have to pass an assessment focusing on three dimensions: i) the characteristics of the establishment (e.g. its mission, organisation, and equipment); ii) the quality of its learning offer (e.g. its management, coaching and counselling provision, evaluations); and iii) the qualifications of the staff and the quality of the training opportunities provided. There are currently 197 accredited institutions that provide basic skill courses and 59 that provide compulsory school-leaving certificate courses. Training centres can also decide to target their offer to specific groups of adults (such as women with a migration background or elderly people), or to complement their standard learning provision with extra courses (for example, with classes to prepare adults for the driving licence exam).

Participation in training is free of charge and is open to the whole resident adult population lacking basic skills or without a compulsory school-leaving certificate, regardless of their nationality and labour market status. Courses are delivered in small groups (i.e. 10 people maximum for basic skills and 20 people for compulsory school-leaving certificate) to ensure students participation and involvement. In the first half of 2020, around 6 600 students took part in the initiative, two thirds of which attended basic education courses (Table 3.1). While people with a migration background represent the vast majority of students for both courses, the gender composition is more mixed, with nearly seven in ten participants in basic skills courses being women, but only four in ten in compulsory school-leaving certificate courses. Students enrolled in

basic skills courses tend to be older (i.e. aged 35 and over) than students enrolled in the *Pflichtschulabschluss* programme, where more than 90% are younger than 35.

**Table 3.1. Characteristics of the students enrolled in the Adult Education Initiative in Austria**

First semester of 2020, values in percentages

		Basic education	Compulsory school-leaving certificate
Gender	Women	67%	39%
	Men	33%	61%
Migration background	Yes	89%	85%
	No	11%	15%
Age group	15 - 35	60%	93%
	35 +	40%	7%
Total participants		4 401	2 166

Source: Adapted from <https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/monitoring/monitoringberichte/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

### ***The recognition process***

Courses provided in the framework of the Adult Education Initiative are tailored to individual needs and provide continuous support to students through coaching and counselling in order to ensure a successful learning experience and improve learners' social inclusion. Yet, while such underlying objectives are common to the two strands of the initiative, the steps leading to the actual recognition of prior learning are slightly different.

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

For basic skills courses, during an initial reception phase, teachers work with prospective learners to identify the competences that might be relevant for the chosen programme and then set individual targets leading to the personalisation of their learning pathways. Providers tend to avoid entry tests but can organise up to 20 individual, face-to-face sessions aimed at identifying skills and providing guidance to low-skilled people.

In addition, most institutions make use of portfolios to document learners' competences, despite the practice not being mandatory by law. While teachers provide key support, learners remain responsible for the elaboration of their portfolios, as the process helps them reflect purposefully on their learning experiences and progress, learn how to document them, set goals and plan further learning objectives. Students can update their portfolios throughout the course and can keep them even after the end of the programme to use them for future training and job searches. Each adult learning provider can elaborate its own portfolio, but a standard template also exists and includes the following sections:

- *Personal information.*
- *Competences at the beginning of the course, learning objectives and skills development process.* This section is typically completed during the reception phase. It lists the relevant prior learning of prospective learners and identifies their personalised learning pathways. The section on the learners' individual skills development process can also be updated on a regular basis.
- *Competences acquired during the course.* This section aims at reflecting more closely on the new competences that learners acquire during their courses (i.e. what students can do now that were not able to do before). It also provides examples on how these new competences could be used at work or in everyday life and helps identify additional learning needs (i.e. what students would like to develop further). Relevant evaluations and comments by the trainers can be added.

- *Additional competences.* This section reviews the skills and competences obtained in informal and non-formal contexts that go beyond the domains of basic education (for example, manual skills or foreign languages). In particular, this section provides information on how these additional competences have been acquired and how students can demonstrate their proficiency in them.
- *Learning log.* This section, which can take the form of a diary, ensures that students remain aware of their learning process and guides them in the identification of challenges they might encounter, solutions to overcome them and results they have achieved.
- *Appendix.* This section includes particularly meaningful documents from the course and from other learning experience that are selected by the student.

As in the case of basic skills courses, the use of portfolio is optional also for school-leaving certificate courses, although there exist no standard template. Students can request the support of trainers in identifying and collecting relevant documentations, and counselling and coaching is often offered to students to help them in the definition of individual learning pathways.

### **Assessment of competences**

While accredited institutions have autonomy in delivering their courses, in 2019 the public authorities behind the Adult Education Initiative elaborated a set of common guidelines to support providers in relation to: i) skills identification and monitoring; ii) skills assessment before, during and after the course; iii) evaluation of learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> These guidelines provide a general framework but reiterate the important role of teachers in choosing whether tests, an observation phase and other types of examinations are needed to assess prior learning. In particular, teachers of basic skills courses can use a standardised grid elaborated by the Adult Education Initiative partners (i.e. the Federal government and the states) to check the correspondence of learners' initial competences with those expected to be attained at the end of the course. In fact, such grid identifies for each course (i.e. German, maths, digital and foreign language skills) a number of sections, sub-sections and the competences that form them – an example of grid is available in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2. Example of grid for German Listening Level 1 in Austria**

Sections	Sub-section	Competences
Listening	Follow a conversation, a story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand frequently used formulas.</li> <li>• Understand common words, names and numbers in simple short conversations spoken slowly and clearly.</li> <li>• Identify the topic in news, especially television news, which contains names, time and place references and a significant amount of common words.</li> </ul>
	Understand oral information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In familiar situations, understand short, simple and clear instructions.</li> <li>• Understand simple information containing time and place information in familiar contexts.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from [https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/fileadmin/docs/Endversion\\_Curriculum\\_Basisbildung.pdf](https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/fileadmin/docs/Endversion_Curriculum_Basisbildung.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>7</sup> Guidelines for basic skills courses can be found at this link: [https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/fileadmin/docs/Endversion\\_Curriculum\\_Basisbildung.pdf](https://www.initiative-erwachsenenbildung.at/fileadmin/docs/Endversion_Curriculum_Basisbildung.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Trainers are not provided with any guidelines on the tools that need to be used to assess such competences, and they have full autonomy to decide whether to adopt tests, interviews, observations or practical examinations on the basis of their experience and students' needs (for example, Box 3.1 presents the process developed by the seven adult education centres of Vienna). However, teachers can use an online platform *Basisbildung und Alphabetisierung* ([www.alphabetisierung.at](http://www.alphabetisierung.at)) to exchange learning material and tests for courses to develop basic German, English, maths and digital skills as well as for the compulsory-school leaving certificate. This content, as well as a helpdesk, can be used also for students who want to practice before taking a RPL test or need more information about the type of training courses available in the area where they live.

### Box 3.1. The competence check of the adult education centres of Vienna

The seven adult education centres (VHS) of Vienna have developed a standardised process to identify and assess competences of prospective learners who want to attend a compulsory school-leaving course. The process is structured in three steps:

1. Prospective learners take a standardised test, generally referred to as “competence check”, which lasts approximately three hours and serves as a first assessment of German, maths and English to guide teachers in determining the right course for the student. The content of the competence check is updated every year by the teachers of each subject and is shared across the various adult centres of Vienna.
2. In parallel, centres require the documentation needed to constitute a portfolio, which includes proofs of learners' previous education and professional experiences.
3. Depending on the information collected in the portfolio and the results of the competence check, learners who are evaluated to be at a lower level than that of the secondary school-leaving courses are required to take a second test. The results of this test will determine at which level learners should enrol.

The information collected through the recognition process is valid only in the adult centres based in Vienna (and not elsewhere in the country) and it is archived only by the centre that conducts it for privacy reasons.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by the Vienna adult education centres.

Table 3.3 provides an example of the types of exercises used by teachers in RPL tests for basic German, maths and English tests. The German test typically comprises four sections (i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking) and includes exercises with different levels of complexity. The maths test often covers logic, numbers and measures, and geometry, and includes exercises such as solving problems, making calculations, and recognising and knowing properties of geometric figures. Finally, the English test is organised in three sections (i.e. listening, comprehension and writing) and consists of a number of exercises such as linking sentences and finding the right words among a list.

**Table 3.3. Typology of exercises used in a German, maths and English tests in the framework of basic education programmes**

German	
Listening	Based on a number of recorded stories of different levels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insert the right information in a text</li> <li>• Answer questions based on the dialogue/ story</li> <li>• Complete a text with missing words</li> </ul>
Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read texts of different levels of complexity and answer questions</li> <li>• Select the right title/ headers for a text</li> </ul>
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a text based on specific instructions</li> <li>• Fill in a form</li> </ul>
Speaking	Themes for the oral exchange might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You meet a person and you want to know more about him/ her</li> <li>• What would you do if you won 1 million Euros?</li> </ul>
Maths	
Mathematical thinking and logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solve problems requiring simple calculations and motivate answers</li> </ul>
Numbers and measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put numbers in increasing or decreasing order</li> <li>• Split numbers in units, tens and hundreds</li> <li>• Write fractions</li> <li>• Compare pairs of numbers indicating their relationship using the symbols &lt;, &gt;, and =</li> <li>• Solve simple calculations</li> <li>• Solve problems related to units of measurement</li> </ul>
Geometry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise geometric figures</li> <li>• Calculate surface and perimeter</li> </ul>
English	
Listening	Based on a recorded dialogue/ story: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• put sentences in the right order</li> <li>• complete a text with the right words</li> <li>• identify among several words those that were listen dialogue/ story</li> </ul>
Comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link questions with the corresponding answers</li> <li>• Write numbers in letters</li> <li>• Match two sentences</li> </ul>
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe images</li> <li>• Fill in the missing information in an invitation card</li> <li>• Fill in a text with missing words</li> </ul>

Note: This table presents different typologies of exercises that can be found in tests for the recognition of prior learning in Austrian adult education centres, and it does not represent a common template used in all centres.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by several Austrian stakeholders.

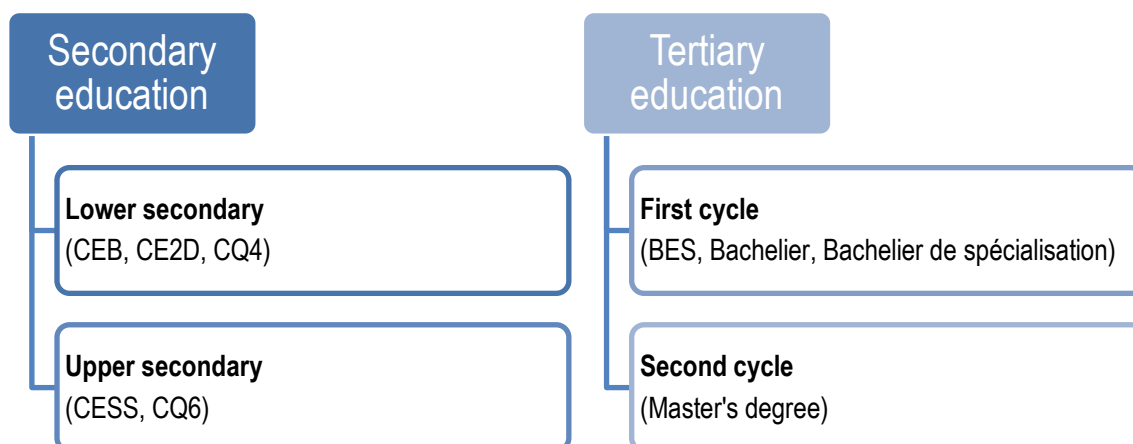
## Belgium

### Context

In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation of Belgium (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*), the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* (EPS) provides upskilling opportunities to the adult population, offering to all people aged 15 and above, regardless of their labour market status, flexible training programmes leading to formal qualifications. Courses cover a wide range of adult learning, from lower and upper secondary education

(such as, respectively, the *certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré* – CE2D – and the *certificat d'enseignement secondaire supérieur* – CESS) to first and second cycles tertiary education courses (such as, respectively, the *brevet de l'enseignement supérieur* – BES – and master's degrees) (Figure 3.1). The EPS operates through more than 150 establishments and counted over 142 000 students in the school year 2018/19, among which the vast majority (eight in ten) attended a course to obtain a lower or upper secondary education degree.

**Figure 3.1. Courses and diplomas offered by the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale***



Note: While the *Certificat d'études de base* (CEB) is typically awarded to children after six years of primary school, adults can obtain it as part of the lower secondary education offer of the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*. In EPS schools adults can also acquire the *Certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré* (CE2D) and the *Certificat de qualification 4* (CQ4), which both correspond to the diplomas awarded to young students after ten years of studies. Similarly, upper secondary education diplomas that are available to adults in the EPS include the *Certificat d'enseignement secondaire supérieur* (CESS) and the *Certificat de qualification 6* (CQ6), both corresponding to the diplomas awarded to young students after 12 years of education. The tertiary education diplomas awarded after the first cycle are the *Brevet de l'enseignement supérieur* (BES), which lasts two years or less and corresponds to Level 5 of the European Qualification Framework (EQF), and the *Bachelier* and *Bachelier de spécialisation*, corresponding to Level 6 of the EQF (duration of three years or less). The highest diplomas delivered by the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* correspond to the Master's degrees (Level 7 of the EQF).

Source: Adapted from <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=27152> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

The education offer provided by EPS schools is organised in learning units (*unités d'enseignement*), thereby allowing flexibility in training provision and compatibility of class attendance with professional activities. Students can attain each learning unit separately, and obtain a certificate of achievement for every unit, or they can enrol in a so-called *section*, which groups together several learning units with the aim of providing adults with the complete set of skills required to acquire a formal degree or a vocational qualification. Only when students successfully complete all the learning units that are part of a *section*, they are awarded with a final, formal diploma.

For each *section* covered by the EPS there is a pedagogical file (*dossier pédagogique*), which defines its objectives and learning units, as well as the diploma awarded at the end of the programme. Moreover, each learning unit has a more detailed pedagogical file, including the following information:

- General and specific objectives
- Skills or qualifications required
- Learning outcomes
- Teaching activities and programme
- Duration
- Profile of the teacher/expert

- Characteristics of the group of students

As an example, Table 3.4 shows the information listed in the pedagogical files of a French and a maths learning units in the framework of the *section* leading to the *Certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré* (CE2D). While specific objectives are strictly related to the subject covered, general objectives are common to both learning units and refer to the broader principles of the EPS. In terms of the requirements for the admission to the learning units, both the ability of the students and their previous qualifications are mentioned. The section on the learning outcomes lists the notions necessary to pass the final examination as well as a number of additional elements that can contribute to improving the final mark.

**Table 3.4. Pedagogical files for two learning units (French and maths) for the attainment of a *Certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré* (CE2D)**

French	Maths
<b>General and specific objectives</b>	
In accordance with the legislation, the general objectives of each learning unit should be:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contribute to individual development by promoting better professional, social, cultural and educational integration;</li> <li>• respond to the needs and demands for training emanating from companies, administrations, education and, in a general way, from the socio-economic and cultural environments.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and process information by developing a critical mind and being part of a citizen perspective;</li> <li>• Develop communication techniques through oral and written expression;</li> <li>• Access other value systems through the discovery of cultural works.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Master the basic notions of isometric and similar figures, the right-angled triangle, the graphical approach to a function of the first degree, algebraic and geometric tools;</li> <li>• Learn the usefulness of mathematics, the scientific approach and the strategy for solving a problem;</li> <li>• Search for and process information by developing a critical mind and being part of a citizen's perspective;</li> <li>• Highlight the contributions of various cultures to the development of mathematics and consequently to scientific evolution.</li> </ul>
<b>Skills or qualifications required</b>	
Ability to: answer simple comprehension questions to find explicit information in a text; present themselves orally and in writing in a continuous text, respecting the criteria of legibility and intelligibility. Or	Ability to use concepts related to: numbers (proportionality, properties of rationals, treatment of data in table form); arithmetic (elementary factoring by highlighting or remarkable product); geometry (remarkable lines of the triangle, Cartesian reference frame, properties of angles); fundamental notions of physics (force, pressure, energy, heat). Or
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Certificate of Lower Secondary Education - CE 1D</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CE1D - Certificat d'enseignement du 1er degré</li> <li>• Certificate of successful completion of the EU "C2D - Scientific Preparation"</li> </ul>
<b>Learning outcomes</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a variety of media;</li> <li>• Select relevant information;</li> <li>• Summarise it;</li> <li>• Present a cultural experience orally and in writing.</li> </ul> Other elements taken into account in the final evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The degree of quality of information processing,</li> <li>• The degree of accuracy of written and oral expression.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate theorems of geometric properties</li> <li>• Use properties of the right-angled triangle to solve calculation or construction problems</li> <li>• Find information about functions from their graphical representation</li> <li>• Use 1st degree functions to model a situation or deal with a problem;</li> <li>• Master algebraic tools (system of equations, polynomials) to solve problems.</li> </ul> Other elements taken into account in the final evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The degree of rigour and consistency,</li> <li>• The degree of precision of the vocabulary used.</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching activities and the programme</b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Justify an answer</li> <li>• Search for information, collect it and keep track of it</li> <li>• Process information by reducing, comparing and presenting it schematically</li> <li>• Present cultural experiences (literary or artistic) orally and in writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise and solve problems related to isometric and similar shapes</li> <li>• Demonstrate and use right-angled triangle properties</li> <li>• Graphical approach to a function</li> <li>• Algebraic tools to solve equations and problems</li> <li>• Geometric tools</li> </ul>
<b>Duration</b>	
Total of 160 hours (128 in classroom + 32 chosen by the teacher)	Total of 120 hours (96 in classroom + 24 chosen by the teacher)
<b>Profile of the teacher/expert</b>	
Teacher	Teacher
<b>Characteristics of the group of students</b>	
Not specified	No more than two students per workstation

Source: Adapted from background material provided by the *Direction générale de l'Enseignement supérieur, de l'Enseignement tout au long de la vie et de la Recherche scientifique – Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.

### **The recognition process**

Thanks to such modularity of training, adults' learning pathways can be personalised by validating their previous, relevant experiences. The EPS offers two types of recognition: the validation of prior learning (*Valorisation des acquis – VA*) and the validation of competences (*Validation des compétences – VDC*). While the latter aims at the certification of skills developed in the workplace and related to a specific profession, the VA aims at the attainment of a diploma for adults who do not have formal qualifications, and hence represents the focus of this report. Indeed, the validation of prior learning is conducted for three main purposes: i) to allow the admission to a learning unit for which the prospective learner does not meet the formal requirements; ii) to validate some of the activities that are part of a learning unit; and iii) to validate an entire learning unit or more. The request for the validation of prior learning is initiated by the student and can be submitted for all learning units with the exception of the final examination.

This process of recognition of prior learning in the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* is formally regulated by a number of decrees that define its objectives, rules and structure, as well as the criteria for the personalisation of learning pathways. In particular, two recent pieces of legislation (the Order of 29 November 2017 and the following Circular n. 6677) have fostered the coordination and harmonisation of the recognition of prior learning practices across different EPS establishments.<sup>8</sup> Several standardised forms are now available to support both the students who want to submit a validation request and the EPS establishments themselves (for example with administrative documents for the admission and the outcomes of the validation request).

### **Identification and documentation of competences**

The process starts with students filling a standardised (and unique for the whole Wallonia-Brussels Federation of Belgium) form for the recognition of prior learning. Such form includes the following information:

- Personal details;
- The list of documents to join to the request, which help identify skills acquired in different contexts:
  - In formal education (e.g. certificates, programme and content of the courses, hours of attendance, internships, etc.);

<sup>8</sup> The Order of 29 November 2017 can be found at this link: [https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/44754\\_000.pdf](https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/44754_000.pdf) while the Circular n. 6677 can be accessed here: [https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/44297\\_000.pdf](https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/44297_000.pdf) (accessed on 02/06/2021).

- In vocation training courses (e.g. learning activities completed and certificates);
- Through professional experiences (e.g. employment contracts, description of the job, Individual Skills Portfolio – see Box 3.2);
- Through personal experiences (e.g. voluntary activity, language skills, self-training, leisure and family activities);
- The reasons for the request, where the prospective students indicate their prior experiences that might be relevant for the programme.

In some special cases, after the submission of their request, students might be invited to an interview with one or more teachers in order to provide additional information on the request and motivate their application, although the interview remain completely optional.

### Box 3.2. The *Cahier Individuel de Compétences* in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation

One of the documents that adult students may join to their request for validation of prior learning to prove their possession of relevant competences to the EPS school is the Individual Skills Portfolio, or *Cahier Individuel de Compétences* (CIC). Jointly created by the EPS together with other key actors of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's adult learning landscape (such as the public employment service, Le Forem), the CIC is a free electronic portfolio of a person's skills. It allows to group and store in one central location various information on one's educational, professional and personal experiences (e.g. education, continuing training, certificates, etc.). It also allows the user to instantly generate a curriculum vitae in the Europass format.

As such, the CIC aims at helping adults to identify, list and structure all their competences, as well as better communicating information about their journey to other people either in a professional context or for a personal project. For instance, besides its use during the VA procedure of the *Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*, the portfolio can be also be used in different contexts, such as when applying for a professional training course or during a job interview. Importantly, the CIC is a personal document: the user is its sole owner, and the one who creates it and feeds it. Its dedicated online platform has been specifically designed to be user-friendly, with numerous examples and clear definitions of all terms used. In addition, the Walloon Regional Training Council offers information sessions to facilitate its use and spread.

Source: <http://crf.wallonie.be/cic/index.php?module=login> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

### Assessment of competences

The students' forms for the recognition of prior learning is then examined by the teaching board (*conseil des études*), which is composed of the director of the EPS establishment and the teachers who are in charge of the learning unit for which the students have submitted the validation request. If the teaching board considers the documents provided by the students to be valid and sufficient, then the request for admission or validation of learning units is automatically accepted.<sup>9</sup> If this is not the case, students are required to take a test.

<sup>9</sup> To ensure to have been enrolled at the right level, students are also monitored throughout the course (i.e. at one tenth and in the middle of its duration). If this is not the case, teachers can decide to move the student to a different class.

Tests are generally written exams that are prepared by the teachers in charge of the learning unit concerned, although they can also take the form of an oral exam upon specific request of the student. Each EPS establishment is allowed to create its own tests, since there is no ministerial regulation or guidelines specifying the format or characteristics of these assessments. Table 3.5 shows examples of exercises used in the French and maths written tests used by one EPS establishment in the framework of the coursework leading to the *certificat d'études de base* (CEB). While for the French test the focus is mainly on reading and understanding, for the maths one exercises are typically more diversified, ranging from basic calculations to more elaborated logic questions and problems requiring more advanced abstract reasoning.

**Table 3.5. Typology of exercises used in a French and a maths tests in the framework of the coursework for the attainment of the *Certificat d'études de base* (CEB)**

French	Maths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chose the right sentences in relation to a specific request</li> <li>• Understand the content of a short sentence and answer questions</li> <li>• Read a short text and complete sentences with missing words</li> <li>• Read a text and answer yes/no questions</li> <li>• Read a text and chose the right answers among a number of options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform calculations (additions, subtractions, multiplications and divisions)</li> <li>• Identify a number that approximate the result of a calculations</li> <li>• Write a number in digits based on its writing in letters</li> <li>• Complete a sequence of numbers</li> <li>• Compose and decompose numbers</li> <li>• Assess whether two calculations lead to the same result</li> <li>• Answer to logic questions and problems</li> </ul>

Note: This table presents the exercises used only in an EPS establishment and it does not represent a common template used also in other establishments.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by the *Direction générale de l'Enseignement supérieur, de l'Enseignement tout au long de la vie et de la Recherche scientifique – Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*.

As the pedagogical files are common to all EPS establishments and define in a detailed way the characteristics of each learning unit, the content of the exams does not differ vastly across establishments. Moreover, the EPS audit service (*Service d'inspection de l'Enseignement de Promotion Sociale*) assesses the compliance of tests with the pedagogical files and ensures that all establishments follow similar criteria.

At the end of the process, if the validation is approved, the student receives the validation certificate (*attestation de réussite valorisation*), which is valid across EPS establishments, allowing full students mobility within the network.

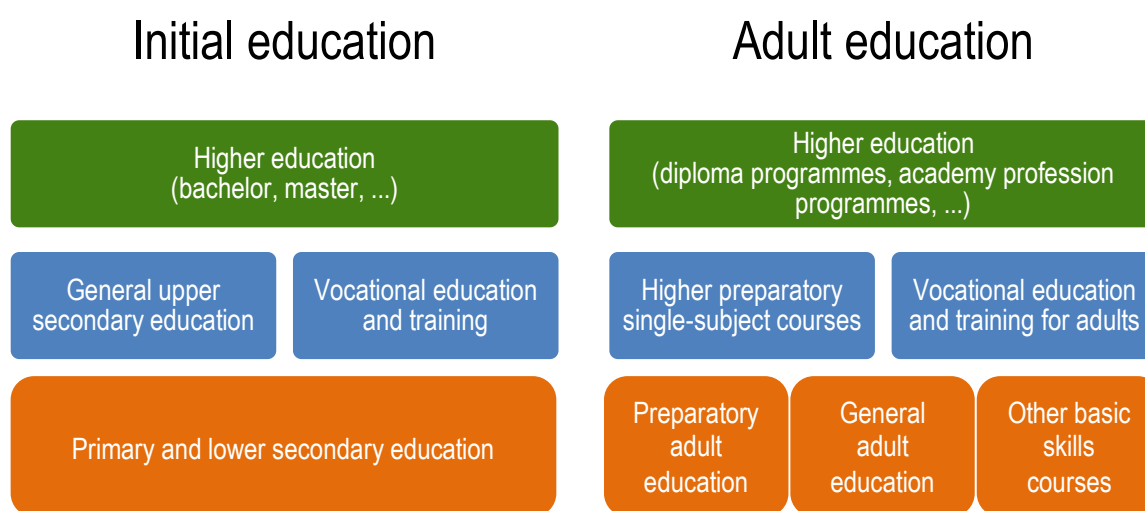
## Denmark

### Context

A wide range of programmes at different education levels are targeted to the adult population in Denmark (Figure 3.2). The Ministry of Children and Education is overall responsible for general and vocational adult education at lower and upper secondary levels, and the 29 adult education centres (*voksenuddannelsescenter – VUC*) and their local branches are in charge of training provision across the country. Despite being self-governing institutions since 2007, VUC centres receive funds from the Danish government and hence need to follow precise rules established by the Ministry. Their learning offer targeting low skilled adults includes the following programmes:

- Preparatory education for adults: this programme aims at improving adults' literacy and numeracy skills. It comprises two axis: (1) the reading axis is composed of four steps and includes classes on reading, spelling and written production; (2) the mathematics axis, instead, is formed of two steps and focuses on understanding numbers, calculation and fundamental mathematical terms.
- General adult education: this programme aims at providing adults who have not completed lower secondary education with the prerequisites for further education as well as with the competences necessary for an active participation in society. The programme focuses on a number of core subjects (i.e. Danish, English, French, German, history, maths, science and social sciences) and several optional courses (e.g. art, basic digital skills, philosophy, physical education), whose content is equivalent to the one of initial education (i.e. the *Folkeskole*). Learners can decide to attend courses one after the other or simultaneously. Upon completion of the programme, centres issue a certificate stating the subject(s) where examinations have been passed, which is equivalent to the school-leaving certificates obtained from the *Folkeskole*.
- Single subject courses leading to the general upper secondary level examination (*HF enkeltfag*): these courses are open to adults having already relevant education at the lower secondary level and focus on a single subject among those that students need to validate to obtain the general upper secondary level examination.

Figure 3.2. The education system in Denmark



Source: Adapted from background material provided by several Danish stakeholders.

### ***The recognition process***

Since 2007, students have the right to request a recognition of their prior learning, regardless of whether competences have been acquired in formal, informal or non-formal contexts, against the curriculum of a given education and training programme.<sup>10</sup> This process, which can lead to the full or partial validation of

<sup>10</sup> The Act no. 556 of 06/06/2007 can be found at this link: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ta/2007/556> and a more recent piece of legislation for credit transfers for prior learning on the basis of an individual assessment in upper education can be found at this link: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/ta/2017/497> (accessed on 26/05/2021).

the programme, is in force nationwide and is based on seven basic principles that have been identified by the Ministry of Children and Education (Ministry of Education, 2008<sub>[20]</sub>):

1. Individuals are able to request an assessment of their prior learning based on the framework and regulations applicable within the individual areas of education;
2. Individuals also have a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of their prior learning;
3. A user fee may be charged for a competence assessment, except for the low skilled;
4. A competence assessment should always be based on the objectives and admission requirements of the education programme in question;
5. The individual's competences should be recognised irrespective of where and how they were acquired, but without compromising the quality of the education and training programmes;
6. The methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome;
7. The result of the assessment should be documented by issuing a certificate.

Yet, in spite of these common basic principles, adult education centres retain complete autonomy in the selection of the appropriate assessment tools for the recognition of prior learning.

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

Students who decide to request a recognition of their prior learning have the opportunity to refer directly to the adult education centres or to start the process autonomously by filling an online portfolio, in Danish or English, through a platform called "My Skills and Qualifications File" (*Min kompetencemappe*, [www.minkompetencemappe.dk](http://www.minkompetencemappe.dk)). The platform was developed in 2007 by the Ministry of Education and collects information on three main areas:

- Education, work and leisure: this area collects specific information about the students' educational background, work experience, courses, volunteering activities, driving license, languages spoken, and leisure activities.
- Literacy, numeracy and digital skills: this area consists of a self-assessment where students indicate their own agreement on a number of statements (e.g. "I am good at using digital tools", "I am good at explaining what I mean", etc.).
- Other competences: this area is also based on a self-assessment but focuses on more personal competences, such as "I like to throw myself into new things" and "I am good at learning new things".

Students can also upload relevant documents, like diplomas, certificates and pictures of their work, or request the platform to retrieve existing official information about training courses attended in Denmark. Based on the template provided by the "My Skills and Qualifications File" platform, some centres, such as VUC Copenhagen, have developed their own online forms.

After the completion of the form, learners can submit it to their preferred adult education centre, which in turn analyses the dossier and invites them to an initial interview to take place within 14 days. Teachers do not receive precise ministerial guidelines on how to conduct the interview, but some centres have created their own subject specific forms. These forms generally include the list of competences to be recognised, a box to tick if the teacher was able to pre-assess them and free space for text to indicate which competences should be assessed in the evaluation phase. For example, Table 3.6 shows a form used to guide teachers in an interview which focuses on English competences.

Table 3.6. Form used to guide the interview on English competences in Denmark

Competences	Please tick	Need to further investigate in the prior learning assessment (Add comments)
<b>Communication</b>		
Understand spoken English on general topics	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Express themselves orally in a coherent language	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Engage actively and immediately in a conversation on known topics	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Express views and arguments	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Read and understand texts in English on topics of general relevance	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Explain the content and views on commonly known topics	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Comment and elaborate on views and opinions	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Present a prepared topic from a written product	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Express opinions and knowledge of a general subject in coherent written form	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Match a typed text to the right recipient	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Language use</b>		
Express themselves orally and in writing in a coherent language appropriate to the recipient, intent, and content	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use synonyms or rewrite when vocabulary is not sufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Master vocabulary in general subjects which makes it possible to participate in a conversation in English	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use an understandable English	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Recognize different types of texts	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Language acquisition</b>		
Be aware of how best to learn English	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Choose appropriate listening, speech and reading strategies	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Choose appropriate writing strategies and apply knowledge about the phases of the writing process	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use basic text analytic terms	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use IT in connection with information retrieval and communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Use dictionaries, grammatical summaries, spell checking and similar linguistic aids	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Cultural and social conditions/study</b>		
Have a basic knowledge of cultural and social conditions in English-speaking countries	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Relate texts on matters in English-speaking countries and on their own culture in general subjects	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Note: This table presents an example of a form used by a Danish adult education centre, and it does not represent a common template used in all centres.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by several Danish stakeholders.

### ***Assessment of competences***

The evaluation of competences is conducted under the responsibility of the teachers of each subject, who can either use the same type of assessment for all students or can tailor it to their backgrounds, with the objective of valuing their strengths more than stressing their weaknesses. There are no national guidelines for the evaluation of prior learning but this needs to be based on the competences required at the end of each programme as identified in the national curriculum. For example, Table 3.7 shows the types and typical contents of the tests that teachers use for the assessment of students' competences included in the English and Danish curricula.

**Table 3.7. Typology of exercises used in the tests for the validation of prior learning in English and Danish in Denmark**

Competences in the national curriculum	Type of RPL assessment	Content of RPL assessment
<b>English</b>		
Read and understand printed and electronic media text and assess them as part of a communication situation	Oral	An interview to discuss a selected text dealing with students' competences and prior experiences
Describe and understand the structure, use and function of language, including using basic grammatical terminology	Grammar test	Based on the selected text, students are asked to rewrite part of it, describe word classes and select/ replace several words
Use the script correctly, varied and personal and complete a writing process	Written essay	Draft a short summary of the selected text and interview
<b>Danish</b>		
Express themselves precisely and adapt the language to the communication situation both orally and in writing Listen actively and be able to engage in conversation, collaboration, discussion and debate	Oral	Make a presentation based on a selected article including information on the communication style, structure, argumentation and language used
Acquire and use Danish grammar for analysis and interpretation of different types of texts	Grammar test	Correct mistakes in a text, use the verbs at the right tense and form, change verbs from the present to the past in a given text
Read and understand printed and electronic media texts and assess them as part of a communication situation Use the written language correctly and carry out a writing process from idea to finished product	Written essay	Write comments on a text from a newspaper

Note: This table presents different typologies of exercises that can be found in tests for the recognition of prior learning in Danish adult education centres, and it does not represent a common template used in all centres.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by several Danish stakeholders.

## Estonia

### Context

The Estonian adult education sector is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research, whose role and competences are defined by the 2015 Adult Education Act.<sup>11</sup> The learning offer to raise basic skills is limited, partly due to the relatively small share of adults with low skills proficiency in Estonia (indeed, the country ranks among the top 10 performers in the PIAAC literacy test scores (OECD, 2019<sub>[21]</sub>)). By contrast, available training courses focus more frequently on the development of the competences needed to continue education at higher levels or improve labour market prospects.

When available, learning programmes to acquire lower levels of formal qualifications (i.e. compulsory and general secondary education) are free of charge and are commonly delivered by the public upper secondary schools for adults. Additional training opportunities more targeted towards basic professional competences are offered by VET schools on a full-time and part-time basis and with the opportunity to enrol in an apprenticeship programme.

### The recognition process

Training providers are responsible for the recognition of the non-formal and informal learning of prospective learners, a system that is generally referred to as VÕTA. The principles of the VÕTA system, which are

<sup>11</sup> The text of the 2015 Adult Education Act can be found at this link: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/529062015007/consolide> (accessed on 08/06/2021).

defined by the national legislation, aim at ensuring a transparent, rigorous and learner-centred process, although they leave full autonomy to training institutions for its implementation (Table 3.8).<sup>12</sup> While the validation process is well developed in VET and higher education institutions, only in recent years efforts have been made to improve its use also by institutions offering lower education.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 3.8. Key principles of the recognition of prior learning in Estonia**

1. RPL is goal-oriented.	1.1. The RPL process is based on the RPL objectives.
	1.2. RPL is uniformly understood by all parties.
2. RPL is based on the needs of the applicant and is conducted on a voluntary base.	2.1. The RPL time frame and other conditions submitted to the applicant are feasible.
	2.2. An institution that assesses and takes into account previous studies and work experience ensures that the applicant has access to the necessary information, guidance and counselling.
	2.3. The applicant has the right to appeal in accordance with the regulations of the educational institution or the procedure for awarding the profession.
	2.4. The applicant will receive feedback at the end of the evaluation process.
3. RPL organisation and methods are reliable and based on educational and professional standards and good practices. Central to this is trust, which stems from societal recognition, well-defined standards and clear information about the evaluation process and criteria.	3.1. The roles and responsibilities of all parties are known and followed in the RPL process.
	3.2. Evaluation methods and procedures are clear and unambiguous.
	3.3. Assessment of previous studies and work experience is based on evidence. The evaluation shall use appropriate evaluation methods and clear evaluation criteria.
	3.4. The RPL parties ensure the protection of data submitted for the evaluation of previous studies and work experience.
4. Assessors and advisors shall be competent, independent and impartial. Independence and impartiality are key factors in the evaluation process and are based on the responsibilities of the evaluators. The roles of evaluators and advisors are clear and separate.	4.1. If necessary, the advisor introduces the RPL procedure to the applicant and instructs the applicant.
	4.2. Evaluators are impartial and independent in their decisions.
	4.3. The assessor knows and follows the principles of RPL assessment. The assessor is a professional in the field being assessed.
	4.4. Assessors and advisors are constantly developing their professional skills.
5. RPL quality assurance is a systematic process based on the principle of continuous improvement.	5.1. RPL quality assurance is a part of the educational process of an educational institution or the quality assurance system of a vocational provider.
	5.2. The educational institution or the provider of the profession regularly assesses the principles of RPL, the competence of assessors and advisors, and the organisation of RPL.
6. The assessment of RPL follows precise and unambiguous assessment principles.	6.1. It is not the existence of experience that is assessed, but what is learned from experience.
	6.2. In the past, in various ways, including the assessment of lessons learned from work experience, its compliance with the learning outcomes of the curriculum or its part (s) or the competence requirements of the professional standard is the most important.
	6.3. The assessment of previous studies and work experience is based on the principle of comprehensive assessment.
	6.4. In the case of RPL, the applicant is not assessed more strictly than a student in regular education.
	6.5. As a rule, non-discriminatory assessment is used to assess previous studies and work experience. The exception is the consideration of previous formal studies that have ended with differentiated assessment, which is based on a comparable assessment system.

Source: Adapted from <https://haridusportaal.edu.ee/artiklid/v%C3%B5ta#v%C3%B5ta-p%C3%B5him%C3%B5ted> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>12</sup> The pieces of legislation regulating the VÕTA system include the 2013 VET Institutions Act (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/505022014002/consolide/current>) and The Adult Education Programme 2016-2019 ([https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/lisa\\_9\\_taiskasvanuhariduse\\_programm\\_2016-2019.pdf](https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/lisa_9_taiskasvanuhariduse_programm_2016-2019.pdf)) (both accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>13</sup> See for example the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, whose objectives include recognising prior learning experiences also at the secondary education level. The text of the Strategy can be found at the following link: [https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/estonian\\_lifelong\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/estonian_lifelong_strategy.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

The procedure for the recognition of prior learning starts with an information session, during which prospective learners get acquainted with the different steps of the process and understand whether their previous competences are suitable for validation. If they consider some of their prior learning relevant to the objectives and the content of the chosen programme, learners can send their RPL applications to the training institution that provides the course. An advisor provides feedback on the application and evaluates whether eligibility criteria are met, after which prospective learners can complete their application by preparing a portfolio. The adults themselves are responsible for collecting the relevant diplomas and certificates, which will then be discussed during a dedicated interview.

Many institutions use both a portfolio and an interview to identify students' relevant prior learning, and make use of the so-called STARR (i.e. Situation, Task, Action, Result, Reflection) method to help adults analyse in depth their previous experiences. The approach of STARR distinguishes five components of students' past experiences, namely: i) "situation" – their academic, personal and work experiences, including information on the context and the duration; ii) "task" – the tasks performed and their objectives and, for work experiences, the position in the hierarchy and level of responsibility; iii) "action" – the actions taken in a particular situation and why they have been chosen among the possible alternatives; iv) "result" – the achievements from each experience, with a particular focus on any new competences that the applicant may have developed; v) "reflection" – the lessons learnt in the various contexts.<sup>14</sup> This approach also contribute to present the different experiences more effectively and can help advisors better identify the competences already achieved by learners and those for which an additional assessment might be needed.

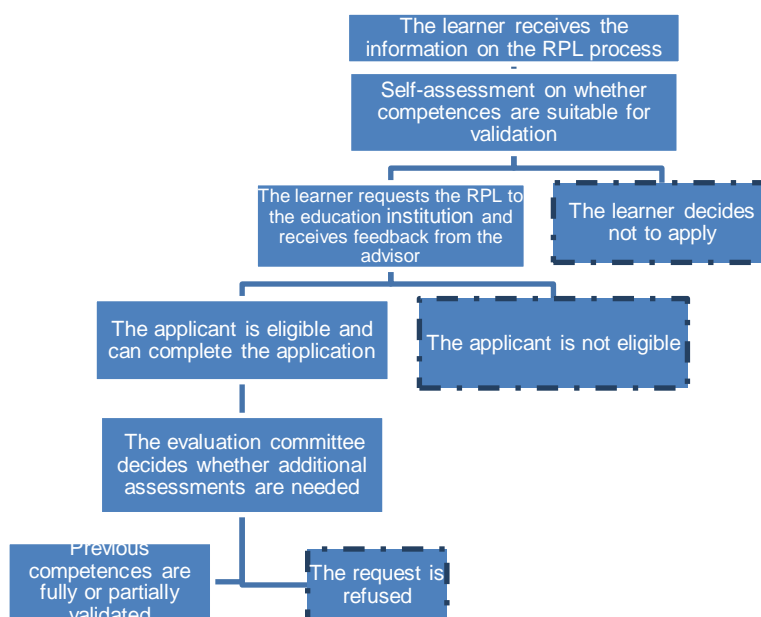
### ***Assessment of competences***

Learners' portfolio is then examined by one or more assessors that evaluate whether the evidence provided is in line with the learning outcomes of the programme. In order to gather more information, assessors can invite the prospective learner to take additional written tests (e.g. open-ended questions, multiple-choice tests and problems) or simulations, observation and real-life examinations for more practical subjects. Schools have complete autonomy in selecting the format and content of their assessment methodologies.

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<sup>14</sup> Guidelines on how to implement the STARR methodology can be found at this link: [https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/starr\\_juhend\\_loplik.pdf](https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/starr_juhend_loplik.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Figure 3.3. The structure of the RPL process in Estonia



Source: Adapted from [https://api.hp.edu.ee/sites/default/files/inline-files/vota\\_hindaja\\_kasiraamat.pdf](https://api.hp.edu.ee/sites/default/files/inline-files/vota_hindaja_kasiraamat.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Ireland

### Context

In Ireland, adult education programmes are managed by the Department of Education and Skills through the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS), and are delivered locally by the Education and Training Boards (ETB).<sup>15</sup> Since 2013, 16 ETB provide a wide range of programmes at different education levels, including apprenticeship and traineeship schemes and courses leading to the upper secondary school diploma (the so-called leaving certificate) or to vocational training certificates. In particular, their learning offer targeting low skilled people includes two main types of courses:

- Basic skills courses focus on the development of literacy, numeracy and digital skills, as well as social and personal competences and the capacity of learning to learn, and are mainly addressed to the unemployed or adults from disadvantaged groups (e.g. migrants, homeless people, ex-offenders, and single parents).
- The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) offers flexible, part-time training courses of a maximum of 17 hours per week or 400 hours per year, which focus on both basic skills and vocational education. Training is free of charge for adults aged 16 and above with less than upper-secondary education or with low literacy skills.

<sup>15</sup> In Ireland, adult education is generally referred to as Further Education and Training (FET).

### ***The recognition process***

The recognition of prior learning in formal adult education is practiced unevenly across Ireland, even if the 2012 Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act makes explicit reference to credit accumulation and transfer, identification and formal assessment of competences previously acquired by learners.<sup>16</sup> The Act specifically identifies Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as the national agency responsible for developing RPL policies, although it leaves full autonomy to adult learning providers (ETB, but also higher education institutions and community centres) to shape their own procedures for the identification and evaluation of competences based on their sectoral specialisations and local needs. As outcomes of the process, training institutions can either grant students with partial or full validation.

The recognition of prior learning is also embedded in more recent policies – such as the “2020 Programme for Government: Our Shared Future”, the “National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030”, and the “National Skills Strategy 2025” – which overall highlight the importance of promoting and standardising the recognition of prior learning across institutions. In addition, a network of practitioners involved or interested in RPL has been created to promote good practices and knowledge-sharing activities, raise awareness, and ultimately develop a coherent framework to inform policy development. As a result, in recent years, ETB have made good progress in relation to the validation of the competences that prospective learners have acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, although RPL in Ireland still focuses mostly on professional competences. In addition, current RPL experiences are mostly linked to specific industrial sectors – relevant examples are the recent experiences carried out by the Kerry ETB in the tourism sector and by the Donegal ETB in the healthcare sector.

ETB retain full autonomy in selecting their procedures for the recognition of prior learning. Their internal guidelines only make a distinction between the recognition of prior certified learning (RPCL), which is formal learning that has already been accredited by an awarding body, and the recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL), which corresponds to competences acquired through learning in non-accredited providers or through personal and professional experiences. The guidelines also highlight the important role of the directors of the education institutions or the programme coordinators in raising awareness of the potential benefits of the recognition of prior learning among staff and students.

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

In most ETB, learners have the responsibility to make the request for the RPCL and RPEL to their programme coordinator within two weeks from the beginning of the course. While they have to include original certificates, results, and, where possible, learning outcomes directly in their RPCL applications, learners can usually receive specific guidance from the RPL mentors to collect the relevant evidence for the portfolios required in the RPEL process. Mentors ensure that this documentation (e.g. resume, reference letters, certificates of attendance, etc.) is consistent with the content of the programme/module for which the validation is requested.

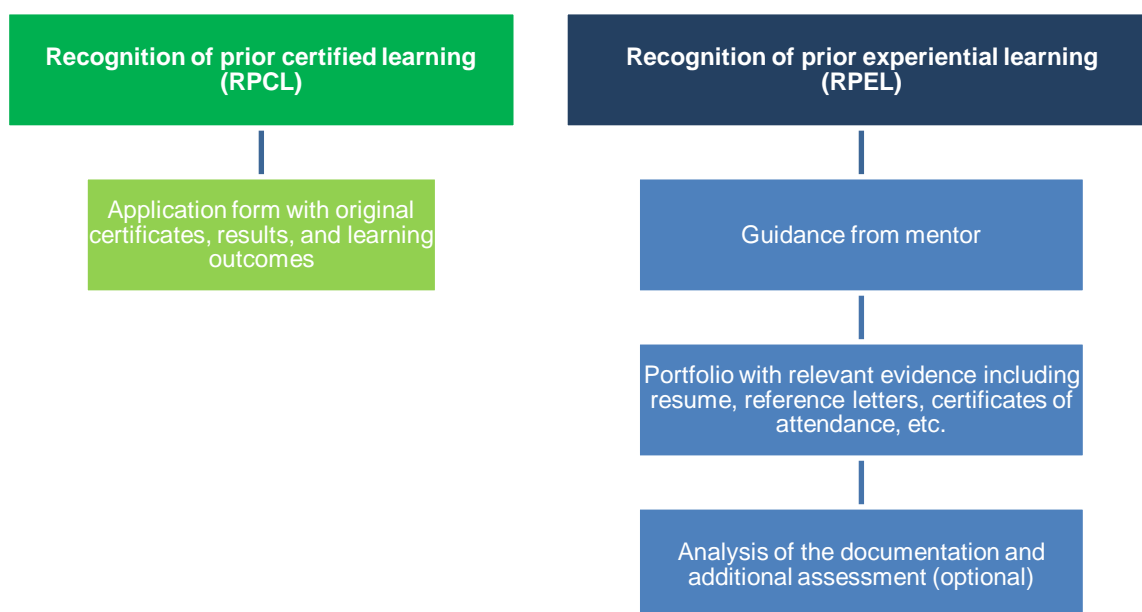
### ***Assessment of competences***

Portfolios are analysed by an assessor appointed by the ETB, who decides whether additional assessment tools – such as examinations, assignments, interviews, or observation – should be used. Training centres retain full autonomy in selecting their assessment methodologies. Figure 3.4 summarises the recognition of prior learning process in the Education and Training Boards in Ireland.

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<sup>16</sup> The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act can be found at this link: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/28/enacted/en/html> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Figure 3.4. The process of recognition of prior learning in Ireland



Source: Adapted from <https://www.kerryetb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FINAL-RPL-V1.2-March-2019.pdf> and <http://tipperary.etb.ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/11/Assessment-Reference-Documents-for-FET.pdf#page=135> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Italy

### Context

In Italy, the responsibility of adult education is under the Ministry of Education, with adult learning opportunities being provided by the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA). CPIA were fully implemented during the school year 2014/15 and are independent educational establishments that, similar to all other public schools in the country, have autonomy in relation to their premises, staff and governing bodies.<sup>17</sup> They serve people aged 18 and above with low levels of education, regardless of their nationality. In addition to literacy and Italian language classes, CPIA offer different types of courses, structured around the following strands:

- Level 1 courses, which are organised in two teaching periods: the First Period corresponds to primary (*scuola elementare*) and lower secondary (*scuola media*) education, while the Second Period corresponds to a certification of basic competences common to the first two years of vocational and technical upper secondary education (*scuola superiore*). Level 1 classes are grouped into four axis: i) Languages axis; ii) Mathematical axis; iii) Scientific-technological axis; and iv) Historical and social axis (for the First Period) or Historical, social and economic axis (for the Second Period).

<sup>17</sup> The Decree n. 263/2012 of the President of the Republic which defines the functioning and the teaching characteristics of the CPIA can be found at this link: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2013/02/25/13G00055/sq> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

- Level 2 courses, which aims at obtaining a technical, vocational or artistic upper secondary school diploma.<sup>18</sup> Teaching is divided in three periods for each field of study: (i) first period, aimed at acquiring the necessary certification for admission to the third and fourth years of upper secondary institutes; (ii) second period, aimed at acquiring the necessary certification for admission to the last year of the courses; (iii) third period, aimed at acquiring a technical, vocational or artistic upper secondary school diploma.

### ***The recognition process***

Given the wide range of users and backgrounds, the CPIA need to identify and assess the wealth of competences and skills that individuals have accumulated over the course of their lives in order to be able to draw up personalised learning pathways and offer tailored learning opportunities. This personalisation of learning pathways, which is one of the novelties implemented through the CPIA, takes place through the process of recognition of competences (*riconoscimento dei crediti*).

The process of recognition of competences and personalisation of learning pathways relies on the organisation of learning into well-defined units. More precisely, the so-called *progettazione per unità di apprendimento (UDA)* splits the courses provided by the CPIA into a set of learning units, each representing the skills (i.e. ability to complete tasks and solve problems), knowledge (i.e. facts, theories and practices related to a specific field of study) and competences (i.e. capacities to use knowledge and skills in personal and professional contexts) that a student needs to obtain in order to complete the course successfully. This allows the identification and assessment of the skills, knowledge and competences that a learner who turns to a CPIA already possesses, thereby offering the possibility of truly tailored learning pathways. A specific Commission (*Commissione per la Definizione del Patto Formativo Individuale*), composed of a number of teachers from the different types of courses and chaired by the Director of the CPIA, is in charge of the process. It can be occasionally integrated by a language mediator for foreign students or by external experts.

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

In the identification phase, the interview and the individual portfolio are used to better understand and document the skills and the background of the students. The interview is structured using a “biographical” approach, which helps identify all relevant experiences (including among others volunteer activities, cultural interests and personal hobbies) that, in addition to the competences acquired in a formal setting, help personalise the learning pathways. The interview includes also a section on the personal motivation and needs that stimulated the student to go back to education.<sup>19</sup> The information gathered through the interview together with the relevant certificates feed into the portfolio which is subsequently used to evaluate the competences of the student.

The templates of interviews for students who want to enrol in Level 1 courses is generally organised in four dimensions as presented in Table 3.9. The first dimension relates to the personal information of the students, including their age and nationality; the second one focuses on their prior learning experience, including previous education, work experience and hobbies; the third section is about the motivations and the reasons behind the adult’s decision to re-enter an education programme and what would be the benefits of attending the course; the fourth section represents the initial step in the identification of

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<sup>18</sup> These courses are provided by partner schools and not directly by the CPIA.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the formal interview undertaken by the Commission to identify the competences of the adult, many CPIA also conduct less structured and more informal interviews during the reception phase in order to better understand the motivations and aspirations of the prospective learners and orient them towards the right course.

competences acquired in informal and non-formal contexts and typically also investigates whether the person has digital skills.

**Table 3.9. Common dimensions included in most interview templates for enrolment in Level 1 courses**

Dimension	Questions/ topics of interest
Personal information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Name and surname</li> <li>Age</li> <li>Nationality</li> </ul>
Prior learning experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education: memories from school, important moments, challenges, reasons for leaving education</li> <li>Work experience: current job, how the person acquired the necessary skills, if the person likes the job</li> <li>Hobbies: what the person does in her/his spare time, participation in associations/groups, volunteer activities</li> </ul>
Motivations and reasons for going back in education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How the person learnt about the CPIA,</li> <li>Why the person decided to enrol</li> <li>How the courses may be useful in the work environment or at home</li> <li>Whether the course is needed to obtain residence permit</li> </ul>
Competences acquired in informal and non-formal contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What the person learnt through the experiences mentioned before</li> <li>What job position the person has</li> <li>Whether the person knows how to use a computer</li> </ul>

Source: Author's elaborations.

The template for the portfolio includes three main sections related to formal, non-formal and informal learning, as well as a section on personal interests and experiences (Table 3.10).<sup>20</sup> It allows for both multiple-choice and open questions, as well as for uploads of relevant certificates and documents. In addition, some CPIA include a section on transversal competences, which contains questions on teamwork, personal and professional objectives, ability to adapt to different situations and relationships with colleagues. To avoid the overlap of some information included in both the interview and the portfolio, some CPIA developed a common template that is filled in during the identification phase.

**Table 3.10. Common dimensions typically included in personal booklets**

Dimension	Questions/topics of interest
Personal Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Name and surname</li> <li>Age</li> <li>Nationality</li> </ul>
Formal credits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highest educational attainment: type of diploma, year of graduation, place where the institution is based</li> <li>Interrupted studies: school of origin, certificated credits</li> </ul>

<sup>20</sup> The template was prepared in the framework of the PAIDEIA plan, under the coordination of the CPIA of Bologna.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other courses provided by education and training institutions</li> <li>• Italian language certificates</li> </ul>
Non-formal credits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courses provided by institutions that are not in the education and training system</li> </ul>
Informal credits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current job</li> <li>• Previous work experiences</li> </ul>
Personal interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activities in the free time</li> <li>• Other relevant personal experience</li> </ul>

Source: Author's elaborations.

### **Assessment of competences**

After having identified the competences held by the learner at the time of enrolment in a CPIA course, the Commission – together with the adult – assesses through specific ad-hoc tests and written examinations the possession of these skills in view of the subsequent certification.

Generally, these tests can take different forms. One of the most frequently adopted assessment methodology consists in standard classroom tests. These are easier to prepare and assess for teachers, although they might be a source of stress for very-low skilled adults and students who had bad experiences with formal education systems in the past. For this reason, some CPIA introduced the use of hands-on tests, which are simulations of real-life situations where students are expected to show their competences in a particular practical context, such as the work environment, at home or in the society. While some Centres have become familiar with this type of exercises and have established their own grids to translate results into credits, others do not have the capacity or the physical space to conduct such real-life tests, even if in theory they find them more effective than classroom tests.

## **Luxembourg**

### **Context**

In Luxembourg, the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (MENJE) has the responsibility of both general and vocational adult education, while the municipalities are typically in charge of the provision of the courses. Among the variety of programmes addressed to the adult population, the learning offer targeted to low skilled adults includes:

- Basic education programmes, which focus on developing literacy in German and French, numeracy and digital skills. While this type of courses are funded by the Ministry, they are provided by the municipalities, associations or by the National Language Institute (INL).
- Second qualification pathways (*2e voie de qualification*), which include, among others, programmes to obtain a lower secondary school diploma. These courses are addressed to individuals who have not completed education but are older than the compulsory school age. This diploma provides access to both general and vocational education pathways.

### **The recognition process**

In Luxembourg, the validation of prior learning can be conducted to obtain general or vocational secondary education diplomas and certificates (i.e. the *Certificat de capacité professionnelle* – CCP, the *Diplôme d'aptitude professionnelle* – DAP, the *Diplôme de technicien* – DT and the *Diplôme de fin d'études secondaires générales*), or a Master Craftsperson certificate (*Brevet de maîtrise de l'artisanat*). Eligible

applicants need to demonstrate at least three years (or 5 000 hours) of professional or voluntary experience in a field related to the sought qualification. The process is fully conducted by the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, that has promulgated several pieces of legislation to define its implementation and the criteria for the personalisation of learning pathways.<sup>21</sup>

### **Identification and documentation of competences**

The first step of the process is a request for the eligibility check (*demande de recevabilité*) that the applicant sends directly to the Ministry. This request includes learners' documentation of the competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, and a note which explains the motivations for requiring the validation of prior learning (Table 3.11).

**Table 3.11. The template of the request for RPL eligibility check in Luxembourg**

Theme	Content
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a short text to answer the following question:</li> <li>• Explain why you decided to request the recognition of prior learning. What are your motivations?</li> </ul>
Personal information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact details</li> <li>• Labour market status</li> <li>• Job</li> <li>• Languages spoken</li> </ul>
Declaration of honour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To state that the information provided is accurate and reliable and that no additional RPL requests have been sent in the previous year.</li> </ul>
Personal experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current work experience</li> <li>• Last professional experience</li> <li>• Other previous work experiences</li> <li>• Volunteer experience</li> <li>• Other relevant experiences and activities related to the certificate, diploma or degree object of the application</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational pathway</li> <li>• Diplomas and certificates already obtained</li> </ul>
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Types of training</li> <li>• Diplomas and certificates already obtained</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from [https://men.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/professionnel/validation-acquis-experience/140114\\_dr\\_fr\\_vae.pdf](https://men.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/professionnel/validation-acquis-experience/140114_dr_fr_vae.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

If applicants receive a positive answer, they are requested to prepare a more thorough validation request (*demande de validation sur le fond*), which includes more detailed questions about their previous experiences.<sup>22</sup> For example, for each work experience learners need to indicate their role in the team, the activities they conducted, if they had a managerial role, if changes had happened and how they have reacted to them, their level of autonomy and how they behaved in unexpected situations. Then, for each of the activities performed, applicants are asked to describe them in depth, indicating how often they performed them, why they were important in the job, if they were in contact with other people within and

<sup>21</sup> The text of the laws can be found at the following links: <http://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/rgd/2010/01/11/n1/jo> and <http://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/rgd/2017/12/15/a1080/jo> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>22</sup> The template of the full validation request can be found at this link: [https://men.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/professionnel/validation-acquis-experience/140114\\_dv\\_fr\\_vae.pdf](https://men.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/professionnel/validation-acquis-experience/140114_dv_fr_vae.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

outside the organisation, if they used specific materials, objects or software to perform them, and what were the knowledge and competences required to perform them. Considering the complexity of the application form, applicants can require support in completing it if they are not able to do it themselves and if they need explanations on how to select the most relevant activities in relation to the programme they want to enter.

### ***Assessment of competences***

The dossier is then studied by a validation commission, composed of two employers, two employees representatives and two people from the field of education, that decide whether the applicant can be awarded a full or a partial qualification. If needed, the commission can invite applicants for an interview or can conduct an examination taking generally the form of a real-life situation. In case of a partial qualification, applicants have three years to take part in the training needed to validate the lacking competences.

## **Netherlands**

### ***Context***

In the Netherlands, adult education programmes are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The learning offer targeted to the adult population comprises a variety of courses, including the following:

- Basic skills training: these courses aim at improving adults' numeracy, literacy and digital skills and are provided by municipalities, which have the autonomy of deciding eligibility criteria and programmes structure.
- General secondary education (VAVO): this programme is under the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and leads to the attainment of general and vocational upper secondary qualifications for people aged 18 and above. In exceptional cases, people aged 16 or 17 who need to validate only part of the programme or are at risk of early school leaving might also be admitted.
- Vocational education: these courses cover a wide range of vocational topics (e.g. technology, healthcare, retail, tourism) and are provided by 42 regional education and training centres (ROC), 10 agricultural colleges (AOC), 11 specialised colleges, and two other institutions.

### ***The recognition process***

The Netherlands has a long-standing tradition in the recognition of prior learning, despite not having a relevant national strategy nor nation-wide guidelines on the matter. Different reforms implemented since the end of the 1990s have increasingly broadened the scope and the impact of the validation process among the adult population. In particular, a big shift occurred in 2013 with the implementation of a reform that identified two distinct purposes for the recognition of prior learning in the Netherlands: (1) the attainment of a formal qualification, and (2) the integration in the labour market.

The recognition conducted to (re-)enter the education system compares the competences that adults have acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts to those included in the national school curricula. This type of RPL, which is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, is not very widespread, especially in basic education; only some regional education and training centres (ROC) and universities conduct it in the framework of vocational programmes on an irregular basis.

On the other hand, when RPL is targeted towards entry in the labour market, competences are validated against sectoral standards or the criteria set in the national qualification system. The process is conducted by a number of institutions accredited by Dutch Knowledge Centre (EVC), which ensures the quality of the procedure. According to EVC guidelines (which are set in line with the 2012 Council Recommendation of the European Union), the recognition of prior learning should be structured in four phases: identification, documentation, assessment and certification (Figure 3.5).

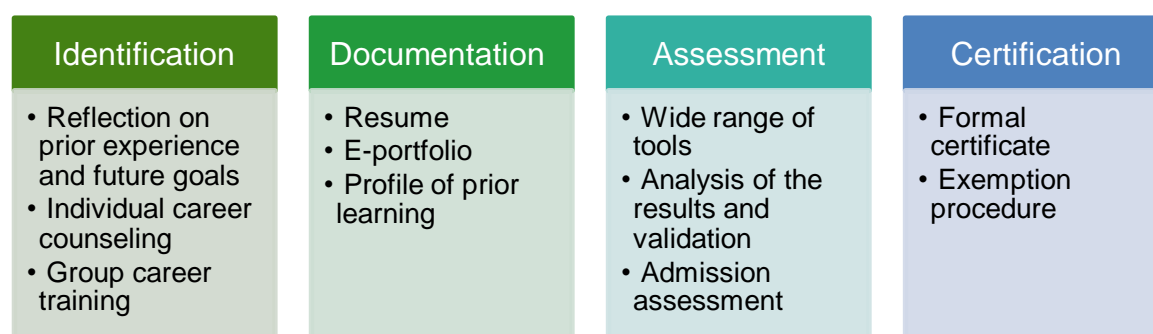
### **Identification and documentation of competences**

During the identification phase, candidates start a personal reflection on their prior experiences and, together with a career advisor, they identify their future goals. They can also benefit from further support through group career training, which promotes exchanges among peers and helps candidates become more aware of their competences. In the second phase of documentation, candidates prepare their resume and, if needed, they can receive support from a portfolio counsellor who is in charge of collecting all the relevant credentials and records and translate the different experiences into skills and competences. This documentation, which includes certificates from paid and voluntary work as well as leisure activities, diplomas, reference letters from employers, documents, videos or pictures, is then recorded in an e-portfolio through the online platform StePS (<https://www.e-portfolioforall.nl/>).

### **Assessment of competences**

Competences are then assessed by two examiners using a number of different tools including standard classroom tests, personality tests, role-play games, simulations and interviews. These tests are prepared by the accredited centres, without the involvement of EVC. Results are reviewed by an assessor who decides which competences can be validated. In case candidates want to enrol in a training programme, they might also be required to take an additional test to assess whether they have the prerequisites to enter the programme. Outcomes from the assessment are reported in the Certificate of Experience (*Ervaringscertificaat*), which can be used both in job applications and to require the exemption for modules, courses or examinations in lower secondary vocational education (MBO) or universities of applied sciences (HBO) programmes. In this case, the certificate is complemented by an exemption document issued by the training organisation which document which part of the programme has been validated.

**Figure 3.5. The recognition of prior learning for the labour market in the Netherlands**



Source: Adapted from <http://www.nationaal-kenniscentrum-etc.nl/werknemers/english> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Norway

### Context

In Norway, raising basic skills of the adult population, including legally resident migrants and detained individuals, is among the missions of Skills Norway, which is the Lifelong Learning Directorate of the Ministry of Education and Research. Two types of formal education programmes are offered: (1) primary and lower secondary education courses are managed by municipalities and aim at developing those basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills that constitute the prerequisites for an active participation in everyday school, work and community lives; (2) upper secondary level courses are managed by counties and cover both general and vocational programmes for adults.

### The recognition process

Since the late 1990s, thanks to the Competence Reform (*Kompetansereformen*) and the Education Act (*Opplæringslova*), adults aged 25 or above without compulsory education have the right to enrol in secondary education courses and request a validation of their prior learning.<sup>23</sup> This request can be made either to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration or to career guidance centres (*servicesenter*). In most cases, the identification phase is conducted directly by these centres – i.e. prospective adult students identify and document their relevant prior learning with the support of the centres' staff. By contrast, the assessment of these relevant competences against the standard learning outcomes of the national curricula is typically conducted by the schools where the adult is applying to. The recognition can aim both to shorten the duration of the training courses by validating part of them and to enhance employability.

Although career guidance centres and schools have full autonomy in the validation process, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research has developed national guidelines in order to harmonise local practices.<sup>24</sup> According to these guidelines, the recognition process should be organised in four phases:

1. Information and guidance: once adults contact a career guidance centre (or in certain cases even the exact school that interests them), they receive information on the type of courses provided and about the possibility of having their prior learning recognised;
2. Identification, documentation and skills mapping: adults gather all the documents proving their competences acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts and identify the ones that could potentially be accredited;
3. Assessment and validation: this phase varies significantly in relation to the programme chosen and the characteristics of the students, and can lead to the validation of the entirety or part of the programme;
4. Certification: students are awarded with a certificate of competences, which highlights whether they have obtained a full or partial validation (this certificate is valid throughout the country regardless of the institutions that have issued it).

<sup>23</sup> The Competence Reform can be found at this link <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-42-1997-98-/id191798/?ch=1> and the Education Act can be found at this link: <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1998-07-17-61> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>24</sup> National guidelines for primary and lower secondary, as well as upper secondary education can be found at the following links: <https://www.udir.no/eksamen-og-prover/dokumentasjon/realkompetansevurdering/nasjonale-retningslinjer-for-realkompetansevurdering-i-grunnskoleopplaringen/del-2-faser-i-en-realkompetansevurdering/#> and <https://www.udir.no/eksamen-og-prover/dokumentasjon/realkompetansevurdering/nasjonale-retningslinjer-for-realkompetansevurdering-av-voksne-i-videregaende-opplaring/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

### **Identification and documentation of competences**

The recognition of prior learning is typically conducted by professional career advisors that guide prospective learners through the different stages of the process, especially during the identification phase. The national guidelines highlight that career guidance centres can choose the right tools to identify competences of prospective learners on the basis of their profile. Portfolios are widespread, although guidelines explicitly mention that portfolios should be complemented with other tools, such as one or more interviews or practical examinations for vocational programmes.

Support to prospective learners is also provided in the preparation and update of the curriculum vitae, which represents a central element in the identification phase. An important innovation of the Norwegian experience is that the resume is generally complemented by documents prepared by previous employers, which provide a detailed description of the period of employment, the job characteristics and the tasks performed.<sup>25</sup> All this documentation is collected in the portfolio, which can also include:

- Certificates of training courses;
- Certificates or diplomas from previous formal education, even if not completed;
- Documents from employers or supervisors in volunteering activities describing the type of tasks conducted;
- Self-assessment and additional material produced by the adult, such as photographs, drawings, products, articles, crafts, etc.

Thanks to the evidence collected in the portfolio, advisors gather a first impression of the competences of the adult learners. In many cases, though, an interview is also conducted to give students the opportunity to confirm their knowledge of the different topics, explain why the documentation is relevant and help identify additional competences that might be relevant for the programme. In order to support trainers in conducting the interview, the following examples of questions are included in the guidelines:

- Questions that clarify, explain or elaborate – e.g.: What do you mean? Can you say it in a different way? Can you give an example?
- Questions that justify and expand – e.g.: Why did you choose to...? What could happen if...? Is this similar to...? In what way is...?
- Questions that make the candidate reflect – e.g.: What do you think about...? Is it always like that? What can others think about...? What is the difference between...?
- Questions that lead the candidate to draw conclusions – e.g.: Why is this important? Is this easy or difficult? What does it lead to?

A second interview might be required in case students are asked to collect additional documentation for their portfolio or if students need additional information on the type of coursework chosen.

### **Assessment of competences**

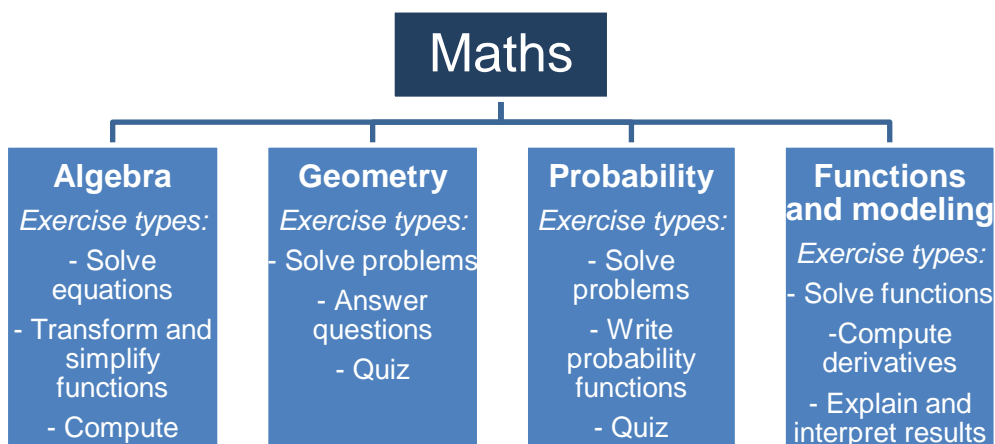
Once career guidance centres have finalised the identification of competences, the dossier of the student is then analysed by the school which evaluates the documentation collected and selects their own preferred assessment methodologies. Assessments are related to the content of the programme and are tailored to the needs and previous experience of the learners. A wide range of evaluation methods can be used, such as tests to evaluate digital skills, written assignments in Norwegian or English to assess their skills or reflect on a topic covered in the portfolio or curriculum, a home assignment followed by an interview or a practical test, which is particularly relevant for vocational courses.

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<sup>25</sup> Note that this type of employers' letters (called *Attest*) is common throughout Norway and it does not represent an additional paperwork that those who hire prospective learners need to undertake.

Often, schools encourage learners to prepare for their validation tests using an online platform called the Norwegian Digital Learning Arena (<https://ndla.no/en>). This platform was created in 2007 thanks to the collaboration of ten Norwegian counties with the objective of sharing learning resources among both teachers and students. It now covers more than 100 subjects – which are part of both vocational and general secondary education programmes – and for each of them it illustrates the content of the final examinations. As the platform also includes tutorials and solutions to past exams, it represents a valuable support also for students applying to a recognition of prior learning, who can therefore practice on this material for their validation tests. Figure 3.6 provides an example of the different exercises that are frequently included in maths tests for a general programme.

**Figure 3.6. Example of exercises included in the Norwegian Digital Learning Arena for a maths course**



Source: Adapted from <https://ndla.no/en> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Portugal

### Context

In Portugal, the responsibility of adult education is shared between the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (*Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional – ANQEP*) and the Portuguese public employment service (*Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional – IEFP*). Adult participation in lifelong learning has significantly increased in recent years, thanks to the expansion of training opportunities provided by both public and certified private training providers as well as professional training centres of the PES addressed to low skilled adults, which currently include:

- The Basic Skills programme offers courses aimed at equipping people aged 18 or over who have not attended the first cycle of education with basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills. The programme is divided in six learning units (three for literacy, two for numeracy and one for digital skills) of 50 hours each, and its overall duration can vary between 150 and 300 hours depending on the initial competences of the learners and their final objectives. The programme is also preparatory for admission into the Education and Training courses (EFA).
- Education and Training (EFA) courses are targeted to adults who have not completed basic or upper secondary education or need to improve their competences to enter or progress in the labour market. Courses range from primary to upper secondary education and often include both a theoretical and vocational component, which can lead to a dual qualification.

### ***The recognition process***

In 2016, the Portuguese government established the Qualifica programme, whose objective is also to improve the level of education of the adult population. The Qualifica network counts around 300 centres managed by both private and public institutions such as schools, employment and vocational training centres, local associations, employers federations, not-for-profit bodies and private companies. Despite not providing directly training courses, the Qualifica centres contribute to raise adults' basic skills by conducting a wide range of activities, including: i) providing personalised guidance on education and training opportunities (often through the online platform called *Passaporte Qualifica*, see Box 3.3); ii) organising outreach activities on lifelong learning; iii) promoting local partnership networks to ensure a better match between skills supply and demand; and, iv) monitoring learners that have been addressed to training by the Qualifica centres. In addition, Qualifica centres have the responsibility of the recognition of the competences acquired by adults in formal, non-formal and informal contexts.

#### **Box 3.3. The *Passaporte Qualifica* in Portugal**

The *Passaporte Qualifica* is an online platform that is used to record learners qualifications and skills in order to identify further learning pathways. Indeed, the platform capitalises on learning units already certified and credits obtained from previous training and simulates several possible pathways that can lead to new qualifications and/or professional progression. The passport can be updated and printed at any time, and can be used for both training and job applications.

The platform is structured in five steps:

1. Registration: as a first step, learners need to provide information on their qualifications (completed or in progress) within the framework of the National Qualifications Catalogue as well as other professional training registered by training bodies or employers.
2. Diagnosis: learners are required to express their motivations, expectations and interests in relation to the particular qualification they aim to obtain.
3. Possible routes: a number of possible pathways leading to the completion or attainment of the sought qualification are suggested to learners.
4. Select course: for each of the pathways that learners might take, the platform shows the units and credits already achieved and those that are needed to obtain the sought qualification.
5. Educational and training offer research: as a final step, the platform provides more detailed and practical information such as the education and training bodies where the training is provided, their location and the dates and time of the training.

Source: <https://www.passaportequalifica.gov.pt/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

The steps that Qualifica centres need to take into consideration for the recognition of prior learning are regulated by the Ordinance No. 232/2016.<sup>26</sup> The process starts with the reception of candidates and a diagnostic phase in which learners' prior competences and experiences, as well as motivations, are

<sup>26</sup> The text of the Ordinance No. 232/2016 can be found at this link: <https://data.dre.pt/application/conteudo/75216372> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

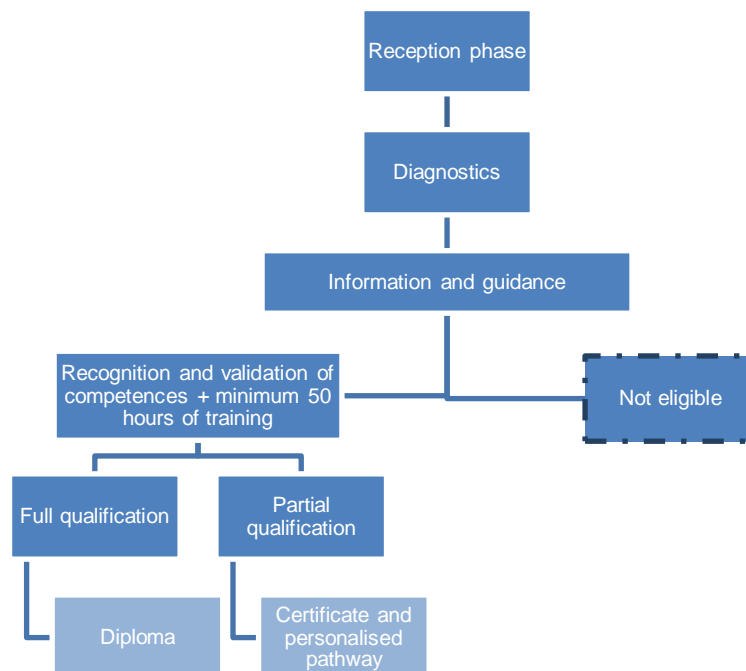
identified. This is followed by an information and guidance session in which a team of qualified counsellors judge whether learners can pursue with the documentation and evaluation phases. If considered eligible, candidates are required to prepare a portfolio, which includes evidence on formal, non-formal and informal learning acquired throughout their lives.

### **Assessment of competences**

Candidates' competences are assessed using a number of different tools, which might include written tests and oral presentations for academic pathways (i.e. primary or secondary education diploma) and workplace observation and practical examinations for professional certifications (i.e. the so-called qualification certificates). Centres retain full autonomy in the selection of the best assessment tools for their users.

A commission appointed by the centre decides whether candidates can be awarded with a full qualification or with a certificate indicating which competences have been validated and which ones are still to be assessed. On the basis of this certificate, counsellors also refer candidates to the training courses needed to obtain a full qualification – i.e. more specific and personalised pathways than the ones suggested by the *Passaporte Qualifica* platform. Figure 3.7 presents the steps involved in the recognition of prior learning process of the Portuguese Qualifica centres.

**Figure 3.7. The recognition of prior learning by the Qualifica centres in Portugal**



Source: Adapted from [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/session\\_4\\_nqf\\_portugal\\_3rd\\_acqf\\_peer\\_learning\\_webinar\\_fr\\_1.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-09/session_4_nqf_portugal_3rd_acqf_peer_learning_webinar_fr_1.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Slovenia

### Context

In Slovenia, the 1996 and 2018 Adult Education Acts and the 2007 Strategy for Lifelong Learning recognise the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport as the main responsible for adult education, although several other ministries, as well as the publicly-funded Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE), also play a key role in promoting lifelong learning and ensuring the quality of training provision.<sup>27</sup> Courses for the adult population are delivered by a plethora of providers, including public adult education centres, private and non-profit institutions, training centres within enterprises, and chambers of commerce and industry. The learning offer for low skilled adults, which has significantly improved in recent years, include among others the following programmes:

- The “Training for Success in Life” programme aims at raising the basic skills of the adult population through the following targeted initiatives:
  - “Reading and Writing Together”, which aims at raising literacy and basic skills of parents of school-age children through a 75-hour course;
  - “Bridge to Education”, which is targeted to adults having at least ten years of schooling and wanting to go back to education. The initiative offers a 100/120-hour training aimed at improving basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, communication and interpersonal skills, learning capacity and active citizenship;
  - “Challenges of Rural Life”, which is a programme focusing on literacy for adults with less than ten years of education living in rural areas and wanting to improve their economic and social conditions. Similarly to the “Bridge to Education” initiative, also this 120-hour training aims at developing basic literacy, numeracy and digital skills, communication and interpersonal skills, learning capacity and active citizenship;
  - “My Steps”, whose objective is to support learners in dealing with various everyday life situations and being more independent;
  - “Me and My Workplace”, which is targeted to employed people aged 26 and above with less than ten years of education whose skills risk to become obsolete due to technological adoption or changes in production. The programme, which includes 350 hours of training, can provide credits for courses at a higher educational levels, such as upper secondary vocational education.
- The “Basic School” programme is addressed to adults who have not successfully completed primary and lower secondary education. While its content is based on the national curriculum for the youth, training provision is more flexible and learning activities are more varied (e.g. classroom courses, autonomous learning, and course-based examination). Optional courses and personal projects are also included from the sixth year.

### The recognition process

In Slovenia, the validation of prior learning has gained importance in the last 15 years, thanks to the promulgation of several regulations acknowledging the right of the adult population to the recognition of their competences previously acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. However, full autonomy in the operationalisation of the procedures is left to the wide range of institutions (e.g. educational

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<sup>27</sup> The text of the 1996 and 2008 Acts and the 2007 Strategy for Lifelong Learning can be found at the following links: <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO449>, <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7641> and <https://www.andragosko-drustvo.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/LL-STRATEGY-IN-SLOVENIA-20071.pdf> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

institutions, regional development agencies, business associations, chambers of commerce and non-governmental organisations) that conduct the process.

### **Identification and documentation of competences**

Learners who decide to request a validation of their prior learning can benefit from the support of a counsellor to understand how the process works and how their prior experiences could be relevant for future training or labour market opportunities. After a first reception phase, learners are typically invited to an interview, whose objectives are to gather information on their previous experiences and plan future meetings and activities. Counsellors can use a template for the interview but are free to adapt it to the needs of their users. The template includes five main areas, namely background information, previous education, work experience, other experiences and personal views on education and learning (Table 3.12).

**Table 3.12. Template of the interview for the identification of competences**

Theme	Questions
Background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal details</li> <li>• Labour market status</li> <li>• Last year of education</li> </ul>
Previous education both completed and not completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Degree</li> <li>• Institution</li> <li>• Year</li> <li>• Preferred subjects</li> <li>• Potential learning difficulties</li> <li>• Informal learning</li> </ul>
Work experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation</li> <li>• Duration of the contract</li> <li>• Short description of the tasks</li> <li>• Periods of unemployment</li> <li>• Challenges in finding a job</li> </ul>
Other experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brief description</li> <li>• Period</li> <li>• Hobbies</li> </ul>
Personal views on education and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning habits</li> <li>• Learning difficulties</li> <li>• Expected barriers</li> <li>• Special needs</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from [https://arhiv.acs.si/obrazci\\_VPNZ/Uvodni\\_pogovor.pdf](https://arhiv.acs.si/obrazci_VPNZ/Uvodni_pogovor.pdf) (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Thanks to the information collected through the interview, the counsellor, together with the learner, prepares an online portfolio (through the platform <https://eportfolijo.acs.si/>) and start to identify what prior experiences can be relevant in relation to the standards set nationally for each adult learning programme. Diplomas and certificates can also be uploaded to document the already acquired competences. Once the portfolio is completed, the counsellor provides feedback on the competences that can be validated and presents the possible future learning opportunities.

In addition, the following online self-assessment questionnaires have been developed in order to support learners before and during the validation process:

1. "The Inventory of Work Values" explores the values considered important in orienting learners' career in different situations: (i) fundamental values of life (e.g. achieve goals, influence others, find a work-life balance, build trust in yourself and others); (ii) characteristics of the working environment (e.g. have flexibility in time management, feel low pressure, be based in a location easy of access); (iii) employee relations (e.g. establish competitive relationships, have good leaders, create support among colleagues); (iv) work activities (e.g. perform data and information analysis, have a job that helps other people, have different activities during the day). For each section, learners can express their opinion (i.e. very important / moderately important / not relevant) and the three most important values.<sup>28</sup>
2. "Self-Assessment on Emotional Intelligence" includes 30 statements and learners indicate the extent to which they apply to them. This tool can be especially useful when people had tensions and problems in their work or living environment that they were not able to solve or if they cannot control their emotional reactions.<sup>29</sup>
3. "Self-Assessment Learning" is intended to give a quick insight of adults approach to learning through 12 statements about learning strategies for which they need to indicate the extent to which they apply to them.<sup>30</sup>
4. "What Is My Learning Style?" is designed to discover personal learning styles, and counsellors can use answers to explain successful ways of learning according to students' recognised learning style, and encourage them to explore their learning needs.<sup>31</sup>
5. "What Learning Type Are You?" is intended to determine whether adults learn more by using visual or oral information or through practical exercises, which can be useful to understand training courses that are in line with people's learning capacity.<sup>32</sup>

### Assessment of competences

In Slovenia, the institutions responsible for the identification of prior learning are also in charge of the evaluation. The assessment of competences is generally conducted using a combination of different tools (e.g. classrooms and practical tests, observation at the workplace, simulations). While these institutions have autonomy in the process, they can use informative booklets that identify for each subject the objectives of the course, how they can be achieved and which types of exercises can be used for the assessment (Table 3.13). The booklets also include a self-assessment section that learners can use to make a pre-assessment of their knowledge of the topic.

**Table 3.13. Objectives and examples of the exercises for the evaluation of prior competences in foreign language and maths**

Objective	Explanation	Example of exercise
<b>Reading in a foreign language</b>		
Understanding simple texts	Understand short and simple text that relates to a concrete situation, even if the person does not know all the words	Read an advertisement for a show or for an apartment for rent and identify the relevant information.

<sup>28</sup> The questionnaire can be found at the following link: <https://vpnz.acs.si/vr/372/1> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>29</sup> The questionnaire can be found at the following link: <https://vpnz.acs.si/ci/687/so/1> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>30</sup> The questionnaire can be found at the following link: <https://vpnz.acs.si/ou/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>31</sup> The questionnaire can be found at the following link: <https://vpnz.acs.si/us/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>32</sup> The questionnaire can be found at the following link: <https://vpnz.acs.si/ut/> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

Read and search basic information	Understand basic instructions and knows where to find relevant information	Follow simple instructions, such as how to use of an ATM or a ticketing machine
Read aloud in a clear way	Read a simple text in an understandable way	Distinctly read to colleagues a simple instruction and check if it was well understood.
<b>Maths</b>		
Numbers and calculations	Understands the value of a number	Sort numbers by size and place a number between two numbers in a group.
	Know the parts of a whole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know that a greater number of parts of a whole reduces the size of the size of each part.</li> <li>Estimate the size of the instalment in relation to the period of interest-free credit (longer period, lower instalments).</li> </ul>
	Know and can perform basic arithmetic operations apply them to practical examples	Using data on petrol consumption per 100 kilometres, the distance between two places and the price per litre, calculate the cost of a journey to a desired destination.
	Know how to perform calculations with the support of a mobile phone, a calculator and a computer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measure the length and height of walls in a room, calculate the area of a wall and calculate how much it will cost if the painter charges €11/m<sup>2</sup>.</li> <li>Work out how much of his currency he needs for to buy some other currencies. Obtain a spreadsheet and do the conversion.</li> </ul>
	Can calculate percentages	Calculates exactly how savings would be realised if the person had bought €65 worth of goods at 40% reduction?
	Can work with decimals and compare them with natural numbers	Round the prices of items, which are usually expressed in decimal number, to the nearest integer.
Data processing	Understand rules and coordinates	Plays the naval battle game or learn the basic rules of chess and explain them to someone else.

Source: Adapted from <https://pismenost.acs.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Sporazumevanje-v-tujih-jezikih-in-jezikovne-zmoznosti-2.-izd-e-verzija.pdf> and <https://pismenost.acs.si/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/matematika.pdf> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

## Spain

### Context

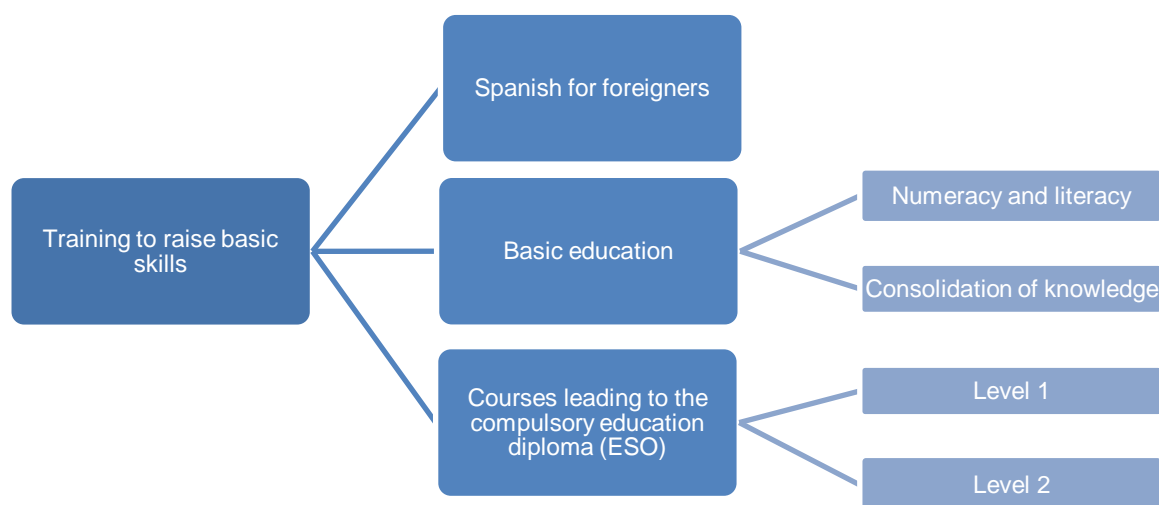
Adult education in Spain is under the responsibility of the various Regional Ministries of Education of the autonomous communities, which are in charge of the administration, development of curricula, staff management, creation of new institutes and organisation of distance learning programmes. Adult education centres (called *Centro de Educación para Adultos*, CEPA, in Spanish or *Centre de Formació d'Adults*, CFA, in Catalan) provide training courses to people aged 18 or above, including adults detained in prisons.<sup>33</sup> In particular, their training offer to raise basic skills of the adult population includes (Figure 3.8):

<sup>33</sup> Courses are exceptionally open also to people aged 16 or above who are high-level athletes or have a work contract that does not allow them to attend the regular school for youth.

- Courses of Spanish language for foreigners at A1 and A2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages;
- Basic education courses, which are organised in two or three levels depending on each autonomous community, with the first level targeting numeracy and literacy and the other(s) focusing on consolidation of knowledge. Courses are structured in three areas (communication, maths, and sciences) and can include a foreign language. In addition to improving basic skills such as numeracy and literacy, one of the main goals of these courses is also to promote the acquisition of the key competences of lifelong learning, namely digital skills, learning to learn, social and civic skills, entrepreneurship, and cultural expressions.<sup>34</sup>
- Courses for the attainment of the compulsory school diploma (*Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*, ESO), which are based on the standard curriculum for the youth and include 34 modules of 35 hours each that are grouped in three tracks:<sup>35</sup>
  - Communication, which includes both Spanish and a foreign language;
  - Social sciences, which includes geography, history and civic education;
  - Scientific-technological, which includes maths, physics, biology, chemistry, technology and geology.

Training provision can be classroom-based, at distance or mixed, and courses typically have flexible timetables to allow the participation of people with work or family responsibilities. Moreover, flexibility is also ensured through the modularity of courses.

**Figure 3.8. Courses and diplomas offered by the Spanish adult education centres**



Note: For courses leading to the compulsory education diploma, each area (i.e. communication, social sciences and scientific-technological) is organised in two levels, split in two periods of four months each.

Source: Adapted from <https://www.comunidad.madrid/servicios/educacion/oferta-formativa-educacion-personas-adultas-cepa> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>34</sup> The law that regulates basic education can be found at this link: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2017-7983> (accessed on 06/01/2022).

<sup>35</sup> Education authorities may introduce additional modules to complete the learning offer.

### ***The recognition process***

The duration of the programmes can therefore vary significantly among students based on their needs and learning pace, as well as on their possibility to obtain a recognition of their prior experiences and hence the validation of a number of modules. In addition to the time devoted to training provision, all adult education centres need to reserve a number of hours for the guidance and tutoring of their students. This also includes time devoted to support the identification of adults' competences for the personalisation of their learning pathways. Most teachers are involved in this phase and several centres have also created a commission composed of the director of the centre and a number of teachers which supervise and validate the process.

### ***Identification and documentation of competences***

Both a portfolio and an interview are generally used to identify the competences of students, their interests and motivations, and each adult education centre can choose its own tools and practices. In some cases, however, interviews and portfolios are not considered enough to correctly understand the prior learning of the prospective students, and centres opt to rely on the written tests of the evaluation phase to ensure that the information gathered translates into real competences.

### ***Assessment of competences***

To evaluate the competences that adults have acquired in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, centres can use standard entry tests that are regularly prepared and updated by the Regional Ministries of Education of several autonomous communities. However, as centres are not obliged to adopt them, in practice teachers tend to use just parts and adapt the rest to the profile of their students. Typically, exercises included in the literacy and numeracy tests have an increasing difficulty level, as shown for example in Table 3.14 where reading a text and answering questions is repeated twice but at two different levels of complexity. Recognition of prior learning tests for the courses leading to a compulsory education diploma include a variety of exercises split in the three thematic areas and a foreign language, corresponding to the topics of the national curriculum. For communication in Spanish, exercises include both reading and comprehension, grammar and drafting. For social sciences, exercises include reading maps, organising historical facts, solving problems and answering questions on a text related to historical facts. Exercises for the scientific-technological track focus on maths, geometry and chemistry as well as on understanding technical terminology. Finally, exercises for the evaluation of a foreign language, very often English, typically involve answering questions, drafting a text and understanding the grammar basics.

After the analysis of the portfolio and the tests results, teachers provisionally assign students to a level and after a few days of observation, they can decide together with the student whether this was the right choice or they need to change group. Once the choice of the level is made, the school formalises the enrolment and delivers a recognition report which is valid for the current year and only for the centre that has carried out all the process.

**Table 3.14. Typology of exercises used in the tests for the validation of prior learning in the Spanish adult education centres**

Literacy and numeracy			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read a short text and answer questions</li> <li>• Short written essay related to the topic of the text</li> <li>• Read a long text and answer more elaborated questions</li> <li>• Simple calculations</li> </ul>			
Courses leading to the compulsory education diploma (ESO)			
Communication in Spanish	Social sciences	Scientific-technological	Communication in a foreign language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make a summary of a text</li> <li>• Answer yes/ no questions</li> <li>• Identify the synonym or opposite of a few words</li> <li>• Identify grammar categories</li> <li>• Draft a text of 100 words</li> <li>• Draft an email following specific instructions</li> <li>• Comment an image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify countries on a map</li> <li>• Identify the place where you reside in Spain</li> <li>• Organise historical facts in chronological order</li> <li>• Answer questions on government functioning</li> <li>• Solve a problem with demographic data</li> <li>• Read a text and answer questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solve calculations and explain the procedure leading to the final results</li> <li>• Simplify fractions</li> <li>• Execute some problems of geometry and chemistry</li> <li>• Calculate percentages and exponential</li> <li>• Solve first degree equations and systems of equations</li> <li>• Understand a problem and answer questions</li> <li>• Link technical terminology with images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fill in a sentence with the right word</li> <li>• Answer personal questions</li> <li>• Read a text and answer yes/ no questions</li> <li>• Write a short text to introduce yourself</li> </ul>

Note: This table presents different typologies of exercises that can be found in tests for the recognition of prior learning in Spanish adult education centres, and it does not represent a common template used in all centres.

Source: Adapted from background material provided by several Spanish stakeholders.

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