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**Deliverable 4.7**

**Guidelines for recognition of work-based learning and other prior learning**

**Workpackage 2** Design of innovative trainings  
**Task 4.4** Develop guidelines for work-based learning and recognition of prior learning  
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## Foreword

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## 1. Summary

Work-based learning (WBL) is an educational approach that integrates academic knowledge with practical experiences in the workplace. This provides students with the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts in a real-world setting, enhancing their skill development and competencies. Recognizing the importance of WBL is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it bridges the gap between academic knowledge and practical application, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, WBL promotes the development of essential workplace skills, such as problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, contributing to a more well-rounded and employable workforce. The recognition of WBL acknowledges its role in preparing individuals for the demands of the professional world, aligning education with industry needs. This work presents the legal framework in Europe for recognition of prior experiential learning (where WBL can be included) and provides examples and guidelines for its implementation.

## 2. Introduction

In today's employment sector, companies are increasingly seeking trained workers who are prepared for the job as the former are conscious of the financial burden that comes with inexperienced recruits plus the temporal gap between the time of employment and when the employee is fully independent and productive. Hence, it is important for vocational institutions to recognise certified learning that has been received in non-academic settings, such as short courses or in-house training, or relevant work experience that has been gained prior to the commencement of vocational education.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Europe refers to the 'process through which an individual's skills, knowledge, and competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning experiences are assessed and validated, leading to the recognition of these qualifications' (European Commission, 2016). RPL aims to ensure that learning acquired outside the formal education system is recognised and evaluated, enabling individuals to gain opportunities for further study as an entry qualification into a study programme or to gain ECTS/ECVET points for exemption from modules within a programme of study. RPL may also be used for training or work, within their own country or across Europe, based on their existing knowledge and skills. However, there may be some programmes of study for which RPL cannot be considered such as (European Commission, 2012):

1. Programmes of study that lead to regulated professional accreditation or a professional warrant.
2. Programmes that require a minimum number of hours of contact hours to deem the candidate 'fit to practice or register'.

RPL can take many forms such as (i) Recognition of Prior Certified Learning (RPCL) and (ii) Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL). RPCL is 'the process of gaining recognition of certified prior learning obtained at an accredited or recognised institution, which can lead to exemptions from parts of a study programme'. RPEL can be defined as 'the process of gaining recognition of informal and non-formal experiential learning, which may have been acquired within a work environment, a voluntary organisation, life experiences or uncertified learning contexts, which can lead to admission and exemption from parts of a study programme. The process may also take into consideration learning obtained through formal education and/or qualifications' (European Commission, 2012).

Candidates requesting RPL would be required to present evidence of prior achievements of elements, but not all parts, of a programme at a comparable or equivalent EQF level for consideration of programme admission, module/s exemption within the chosen programme of studies or any such similar purpose based on this evidence. In order to ensure the authenticity of any documents submitted by applicants, the institution carrying out the evaluation procedure reserves the right to carry out verifications with third parties.

### **3. Conceptual framework**

#### **3.1. Assessing learning pathways: recognition and validation of prior learning**

##### **3.1.1. Recognition of Prior Learning**

In order to increase transparency, comparability and transferability of qualifications between Member States, RPL in Europe is aligned with a wider European Qualifications Framework EQF, which was set up in 2008. RPL enables individuals to have their prior learning assessed and formally recognized, which can have several benefits, including enhancing employability, promoting lifelong learning, and supporting social inclusion. This approach is particularly relevant nowadays as some argue that contracting based on skills is more effective than contracting based on qualifications (Eraut, 2000).

RPL is intended to recognize and value the experience gained by individuals over a range of experiences, including work, volunteering, and self-study or community involvement. It is recognised that learning can take place in all kinds of formal education settings and individuals are able to acquire important skills and knowledge, which they do not obtain through the traditional classroom environment. Individuals will gain access to further education, training or employment based on existing skills without having to reacquaint themselves with learning they have already mastered by recognising their prior knowledge. In addition, it encourages employers to take advantage of the diverse talents and expertise of individuals who have acquired knowledge and skills through alternative pathways.

The process of recognizing prior learning typically involves several steps. Firstly, individuals interested in RPL need to gather evidence of their learning, which may include certificates, work samples, portfolios, or other documentation. This evidence is subsequently submitted to an authorized RPL provider, such as an educational institution or a professional body.

Evidence submitted by an individual shall be evaluated and assessed by the RPL provider as having relevance for learning outcomes and competencies related to a particular qualification or level within the EQF. Qualified assessors or experts in the relevant area shall frequently carry out such an assessment. In order to ensure that an individual's previous learning is validated, the RPL provider may also carry out interviews, practice demonstrations, or examinations.

Based on the assessment, the RPL provider determines the extent to which the individual's prior learning meets the requirements of the targeted qualification or level. This assessment can result in full recognition of certain learning outcomes of the programme, partial recognition, or no recognition, depending on the alignment of the candidates' prior learning and the desired qualification.

The applicant will be issued with a formal recognition statement or certificate, stating the qualifications and skills, which were recognised upon completion of the assessment. This

recognition can be in the form of credit transfer, exemptions from specific modules, or direct access to higher-level qualifications.

The recognition of prior learning in Europe is facilitated by various national and regional frameworks and initiatives that support the implementation of RPL practices. To ensure consistency and credibility of the certification process, these frameworks set out guidelines, standards, and quality assurance mechanisms. They also support the professional development of RPL assessors and consultants, as well as their collaboration with other interested parties such as educational institutions, employers' organisations, or social partners.

### 3.1.2. Recognition of Prior Learning

Formal, non-formal, and informal learning are three distinct categories that describe different educational settings and approaches. These categories differ in terms of structure, purpose, and recognition of experiential learning.

#### (i) Formal Learning

Formal learning 'refers to structured educational experiences provided by recognized institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. It follows a systematic curriculum, predetermined objectives, and assessment processes. Formal learning typically takes place in classrooms and is led by trained teachers or instructors. The emphasis is on achieving specific learning outcomes and obtaining formal qualifications, such as degrees, diplomas, or certifications. Examples of formal learning include attending lectures, taking exams, and earning academic credentials' (Vygotsky, 1978).

Formal education often follows linear progression and is governed by formal legislation as well as accreditation standards and is often associated with traditional educational systems. Depending on the institution and the specific programme, recognition of experiential learning in formal settings may differ. Credit or exemptions based on previous experiences may be granted by some institutions while others may require applicants to undertake further assessments or present more detailed portfolios (European Commission, 2004).

#### (i) Non-formal Learning

Non-formal learning refers to 'structured and intentional learning activities that take place outside of formal educational institutions. It is typically organized by institutions or organizations with a specific educational purpose but may not lead to formal qualifications. Non-formal learning can occur in various settings, such as community centers, workshops, vocational training programs, or online platforms' (Jarvis, 2010).

Unlike formal learning, non-formal learning has a certain flexibility in terms of curriculum and teaching methods that are not provided for by the traditional curriculum. It is open to a broad range of learners, including those who wish to upgrade their own skills and careers or acquire specific qualifications. Non-formal learning often focuses on practical skills, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities. It allows individuals to acquire knowledge and skills in a more informal and relaxed environment (Colley & Malcolm, 2003). Some non-formal learning providers may offer certifications or badges to acknowledge the skills and knowledge gained through experiential learning.

#### (i) Informal Learning

Informal learning refers to *'unintentional and spontaneous learning that occurs through daily experiences, interactions, and observations. It takes place outside of any organized or structured learning environment, such as in conversations, reading, watching videos, or engaging in hobbies. Informal learning is inherent in human life and happens naturally throughout one's lifetime'* (Eraut, 2000).

Unlike formal and non-formal learning, 'informal learning is not driven by specific learning objectives or predetermined curricula. It is often self-directed and driven by personal interests, curiosity, and real-life situations. Informal learning is highly individualized and can happen in various contexts, such as at home, in the workplace, or in social settings' (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2016).

Because of its unstructured nature, experiential learning carried out in informal settings may be difficult to recognise. However, informal learning experiences are increasingly recognised as a benefit in education discourse and efforts are being made towards the acknowledgement and integration of informal learning experiences into formal and non-formal learning contexts. Recognition mechanisms may include the development of portfolios, competency-based assessments, or recognition of prior learning (RPL) procedures.

### 3.1.3. Validation of non-formal and informal learning

The validation process involves assessing and verifying the learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning experiences. It typically includes the following steps:

1. Identification
2. Documentation
3. Assessment
4. Validation
5. Accreditation or certification

These steps will be dealt with in more detail in section 4.

Many countries and organizations have developed national qualification frameworks and validation mechanisms based on the European Qualification framework to support the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (<https://europa.eu/europass/en/europass-tools/european-qualifications-framework>). These frameworks establish criteria and procedures to assess and validate learning outcomes as well as guidelines for the individuals, assessors, and institutions involved in this process. The frameworks aim to be inclusive, flexible and transparent thus ensuring that every individual can benefit from these validation initiatives.

The following are examples of validation mechanisms in some European countries:

(i) Finland

Here, RPL is an established practice and is commonly referred to as *Tutkinnon osaaminen* or competence-based qualification. This consists of a well-developed system that is supported by national legislation, guidelines, and quality assurance mechanisms. The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) plays a central role in coordinating and providing the quality assurance of RPL processes across the country. Educational institutions, vocational schools, and universities

also have their own RPL procedures in place (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022; European Commission, 2015).

(ii) Germany

Through its "Qualifications Framework for German Higher Education" (Deutscher Qualifikationsrahmen für den Hochschulbereich, DQR), Germany has taken a comprehensive approach to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The DQR provides a framework for the comparability and recognition of qualifications in different educational sectors, including non-formal and informal learning. This provides an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate their skills and competencies acquired beyond formal education, thus establishing a basis for academic recognition.

Furthermore, a comprehensive framework covering all levels of qualifications, including vocational qualifications, has been established by the German Government under the name "Nationaler Qualifikationsrahmen" (NQR). The objective of the NQR is to increase transparency, comparability and recognition of qualifications acquired by non-formal and informal learning. It enables skills and competence to be recognised in both educational and occupational contexts.

The German Adult Education Association (DVV) has developed a validation system called "ProfilPASS" in addition to these frameworks. The latter is an instrument which supports people in identifying and documenting their skills acquired through non-formal or informal learning. It assists in the presentation of individuals' skills and qualifications to employers, training institutions and third parties, thereby facilitating their recognition.

### 3.2. Work-based learning

Work-based or experiential learning (WBL) refers to 'a form of education that integrates academic knowledge with practical work experience. It is designed to bridge the gap between theoretical learning and real-world application by providing students with opportunities to acquire hands-on skills and knowledge within a professional work environment' (OECD, 2019). It involves alternating periods of academic study and work placements, where students spend time working in a relevant industry to gain practical experience (Education and Employers, 2021).

Work-based learning encompasses different types of experiential learning, such as internships, cooperative education programs, apprenticeships and other forms of work-integrated experiential or on-the-job learning. The emphasis is on providing students with exposure to different work settings, allowing them to apply theoretical concepts to practical situations, and gaining industry-specific skills. Work-based learning frequently takes the form of cooperation among educational institutions, employers and students in order to develop a well-rounded workforce, which is equipped with both academic information and professional proficiency.

Internships are a common example of work-based learning where students work with entities related to their programme of study, applying the theory and practice gained in their educational institution to real-world tasks. This furnishes them with a deeper understanding of the theory that they have learnt and awareness of their chosen profession, allows them to develop professional connections, and helps them make informed future career choices.



For example, in the healthcare sector, work-based learning can include programs such as nursing clinical rotations, where nursing students gain hands-on experience in hospitals and healthcare facilities to develop their clinical skills and patient care abilities. This would be most effective if partnerships are established with healthcare organizations to offer preceptorship programs, allowing students to work closely with experienced nurses and gain hands-on experience in patient care. This can also be assisted by the development of state-of-the-art simulation labs where students can practice essential nursing skills on lifelike mannequins, replicating real-world scenarios they may encounter in their profession.

Similarly, boot camps and coding academies, where students learn programming languages and experience practical coding through real-world projects, can be part of work-based learning in information technology. Employers can cooperate on internship opportunities for students within engineering programmes, giving them a chance to work on actual projects under the guidance of experts.

In the area of culinary training, educational institutions may offer apprenticeship programmes in which students work alongside experienced chefs to develop their culinary skills, in partnership with renowned restaurants and hotels. The establishment of on-campus training restaurants or coffee shops where culinary arts students would have the opportunity to experience working in a true work environment while being able to offer real clients can also be part of other initiatives. Guest chefs and industry experts can also be invited to conduct workshops, demonstrations, and mentorship sessions, giving students exposure to different culinary techniques and trends.

### 3.3. RPL in WBL

RPL in work-based learning offers several benefits to individuals, educational institutions, and employers. For individuals, the RPL allows them to receive formal recognition of their expertise and knowledge, which could potentially reduce the time and costs associated with achieving a qualification. This will enable them to take advantage of their previous experience in order to obtain a higher level of employment, continuing education and the pursuit of career recognition. In addition, RPL increases individuals' confidence in their ability and motivation as a result of acknowledged and valued prior learning.

Educational institutions benefit from incorporating RPL into WBL by attracting a wide range of applicants, including those with professional experience in the sector. By recognising that learning is not confined to the classroom, RPL promotes lifelong learning and increases access to education. It also supports institutions in aligning their programmes with industry needs and standards, thereby ensuring that graduates have the necessary skills and competencies required by employers. The latter also benefit from recognising previous training because it allows them to find and use more effectively the skills and knowledge of their workforce. RPL may contribute to the professional development and upskilling of employees that consequently leads to better productivity, more satisfaction in their jobs or a greater retention rate. Recognition of prior learning by employees also makes it possible to promote a culture of continuous training and improvement in skills throughout the organisation.

To implement effective RPL processes, educational institutions, training providers and employers need to establish clear policies, guidelines, and robust assessment procedures, and

train assessors to ensure consistency and reliability. Collaboration between all parties involved is essential to validate and align the assessment outcomes with industry standards and qualifications frameworks.

The process of RPL typically involves a comprehensive assessment of an individual's prior learning against specific learning outcomes or competency standards established by educational institutions and/or industry bodies. The assessment is carried out by qualified assessors, who examine the evidence produced by the individual, e.g. in the form of reports, work samples, portfolios, references, certificates and other supporting documents. To ascertain whether a person has fulfilled the relevant criteria, the assessor compares this evidence with that of the necessary educational outcomes. For example, an individual works in an industrial chemical laboratory and would like to follow a Chemical degree programme. One of the modules, related to practical techniques, contains learning outcomes such as 'Conduct spectral and chromatographic analysis for compound identification'. If the applicant can provide certified or experiential evidence that such learning outcomes have been previously covered by, either e.g. in-house theoretical training, short courses on spectral analysis, etc. or evidence that this work formed part of the laboratory work carried out by the individual and that it was competently carried out, then exemption from the module may be considered.

To provide further evidence of an individual's ability, the assessment process can also involve interviews, live demonstrations, simulations or other forms of evaluation. This ensures that a proper assessment is carried out, in line with both educational and industrial standards. Assessment outcomes can differ, ranging from full recognition of prior learning to partial recognition leading to the award of formal qualifications, which may require additional learning or assessment to remedy any identified gaps.

## 4. EU policy on RPL

### 4.1. Developments in the context of lifelong and life-wide learning

The European Union (EU) places a strong emphasis on the recognition of prior learning as part of its lifelong learning agenda and recognizes that individuals acquire valuable learning experiences in various contexts, not just within formal education systems. Several key documents and initiatives guide the EU policy on RPL. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) gives a single reference framework for comparison and understanding of qualifications in different countries and educational systems throughout Europe. This promotes transparency and facilitates recognition of qualifications, including those acquired through RPL procedures (Cedefop).

The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is another significant initiative that supports the recognition of learning outcomes in vocational education and training. It aims to enhance the mobility of learners across European countries by facilitating the transfer, recognition, and accumulation of credits for qualifications and learning outcomes. For further information, refer to the following websites:

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-cooperation/vocational-education-training/ecvet\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-cooperation/vocational-education-training/ecvet_en)

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/ecvet\\_pdf\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/ecvet_pdf_en.pdf)

Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training): ECVET User's Guide:

[https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/evet/ecvet\\_userguide.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/evet/ecvet_userguide.pdf)

European Training Foundation (ETF): ECVET Toolkit:

<https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/toolkits/ecvet-toolkit>

In addition, the European Commission has encouraged member states to develop policies and frameworks for recognition of non-formal or informal learning. This entails establishing RPL procedures and mechanisms for the assessment and validation of learning obtained in contexts other than common educational settings. In order to assess previous learning, member states have to implement a variety of approaches including portfolio assessment, interviews, examinations and workplace evaluations. [https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/national-qualifications-frameworks-nqfs-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/national-qualifications-frameworks-nqfs-europe_en) provides an overview of the national qualifications frameworks implemented by European countries, which are linked to the EQF.

The EU promotes the involvement of important stakeholders, e.g. education and training providers, employers' organisations, social partners and professional associations, with a view to ensuring the high quality and reliability of RPL processes. The involvement of such stakeholders is an important step in defining clear criteria and standards for assessing and recognising prior learning.

Over the past years, a number of developments have taken place across the EU on lifelong and life-wide learning. Lifelong learning is the process of continuously acquiring knowledge and skills over a person's life, while Life-wide learning recognises the opportunity to learn from experiences that go beyond formal education. The importance of adult education and training in supporting lifelong learning is reflected in the European Adult Education Agenda, which came into force in 2011. The Commission calls on member states to draw up strategies and initiatives for promoting access, participation and quality in adult learning. RPLs play an important role in adult education, enabling individuals to gain recognition of their prior experiences and to pursue further education or career development. (<https://basicskills.eu/projects/cooperation/implementation-of-the-european-agenda-for-adult-learning/#:~:text=The%20Council%20Resolution%20on%20a,on%20developing%20their%20basic%20skills.>)

The EU also promotes the recognition and validation of skills acquired outside formal education through the Europass framework. A standardised format for the documentation and description of qualifications, skills or competence is offered by the use of the Europass. It provides for a wide range of documentation, which enables the recognition, and transferability of knowledge and skills throughout Europe, such as CVs, language passports or certificates.

Moreover, the EU has been focusing on promoting digital skills and digital literacy as essential components of lifelong learning. The Digital Education Action Plan, which was introduced in 2018, seeks to increase citizens' digital competencies and skills as well as the identification of digital badges and certificates. The initiative recognises that technology skills in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century

workforce are increasingly important, and aims to improve people's adaptability to technological advancements.

#### 4.2. European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) play crucial roles in harmonizing and enhancing the recognition of qualifications across Europe. These frameworks facilitate the mobility and lifelong learning of EU citizens, while providing a common language and reference point to compare and understand qualifications from different countries, thus making it easier for individuals to transfer between education and training systems or to seek employment in different EU countries.

##### 4.2.1. European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The EQF is a common reference framework developed by the European Union in 2008 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>).

The primary objective is to promote the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications across European countries. The EQF consists of eight levels of learning outcomes, describing knowledge, skills and competencies that are required at each level, regardless of the type or origin of the qualification. The levels are determined according to the learning outcomes and are not related in any way to particular types of qualifications or educational systems.

The EQF levels are as follows:

- Level 1: *Basic general knowledge and skills*. At this level, individuals acquire basic knowledge and skills that are necessary for personal development, active citizenship, and further learning. It includes basic literacy, numeracy and communication skills.
- Level 2: *Basic vocational skills and knowledge or elementary skills*. This level consists of acquiring essential knowledge and skills that are needed for work or to continue learning. Basic vocational skills, as well as the ability to carry out simple tasks and activities under guidance or supervision, are included.
- Level 3: *Intermediate vocational skills and knowledge*. Individuals have attained a good grasp of the essential knowledge and skills that are required for their employment or continuing education at this level. They are able to perform routine tasks with a range of cognitive and practical skills and may work, although supervised, with some autonomy.
- Level 4: *Advanced vocational skills and knowledge*. This level indicates that individuals are equipped with a wide range of skills in cognitive and practical fields, enabling them to cope effectively in many working environments. Advanced knowledge and skills in the field of work or further education are included.
- Level 5: *Higher vocational (or specialist) skills and knowledge*. Advanced knowledge and skills that allow individuals to perform complex tasks or further training in a specialised area are reflected at this level. It involves competence, responsibility and the ability to solve complex problems.

- Level 6: *Bachelor's degree or equivalent*. At this level, individuals have advanced knowledge and skills that are based on the most advanced understanding of the field of study or practice, at the forefront of academic and professional fields.
- Level 7: *Master's degree or equivalent*. This level represents highly specialized knowledge and skills that enable individuals to develop and apply original thinking in a specific field of study or practice.
- Level 8: *Doctoral degree or equivalent*. This constitutes the highest level of EQF, which indicates the most advanced knowledge and professional experience in a given field. At this level, researchers can carry out independent research or contribute to knowledge in a significant way.

#### 4.2.2. National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)

National Qualifications Frameworks are 'national-level frameworks that align with the EQF and provide more detailed descriptions of qualifications within each country. Each European country, as well as some non-EU countries, has developed its own NQF to reflect its unique education and training systems, while ensuring compatibility with the EQF' ([https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/national-qualifications-frameworks-nqfs-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/national-qualifications-frameworks-nqfs-europe_en)). The relationship between the EQF and NQFs is based on a referencing process. Each country's NQF is referenced to the EQF, which means that the EQF level is mapped to the corresponding level within the national framework. In order to promote mobility and recognition of skills and qualifications, such a reference process helps ensure that the qualifications in each country are compatible and comparable with those that exist in other EU countries.

NQFs are usually composed of a series of levels that connect to the EQF levels. These frameworks define the learning outcomes, competencies and qualifications linked to each level. A broad range of qualifications, such as academic degrees, VET qualifications and certification in different sectors may be covered by the NQFs. National bodies and stakeholders, including public authorities, educational establishments, employers' organisations, trade unions as well as associations of professionals are active in the development and implementation of NQFs. In each country, the participation of those stakeholders ensures relevance, quality and recognition of qualifications.

NQFs provide several benefits, including (i) improving the transparency and understanding of competencies in a country, (ii) facilitating the recognition of qualifications across borders (iii) promoting RPL and lifelong learning (iv) aid in developing and ensuring the quality of education and training systems (v) enhance the employability and the mobility of learners and workers not only nationwide but also across member states.

#### 4.3. Micro-qualifications

Micro-qualifications (or microcredentials) for lifelong learning and employability have been promoted by the EU since 2022 (<https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials>). The recognition of prior learning (RPL) of micro-qualifications or micro-credentials refers to 'the process of assessing and acknowledging the skills, knowledge,

and competencies individuals have acquired through completing micro-qualifications or other forms of short, targeted learning programs' (OECD report). RPL provides individuals with the opportunity to have their microcredentials recognized and counted towards further education, employment, or career advancement. In addition, it enables an individual to display his or her knowledge and skills leading to increased career opportunities and professional recognition. RPL of micro-credentials can also have significant benefits in the employment context. In particular, microcredentials are increasingly used by employers to verify an individual's skills and knowledge in certain specific areas. Employers can make more informed decisions when hiring, giving promotions or for training opportunities as they have proof of an applicant's competence in a specific area.

The RPL process for microcredentials may vary according to an institution, organisation or industry. For this reason, individuals wishing to have their microcredentials recognized should consult the specific RPL policies and procedures of the competent authorities so that they can be fully informed about the requirements and processes involved.

## 5. Guidelines for RPL

The European Guidelines on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4054\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4054_en.pdf)), (<https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-05/4236072 ETF prior learning A4 K8.pdf>) and ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073_en.pdf)) provide a framework and recommendations for European countries to introduce, irrespective of where or how learning is obtained, appropriate and transparent systems in order to recognize and verify previous learning by individuals. These guidelines are designed to raise lifelong learning levels, and improve access to educational and employment opportunities across Europe in order to stimulate individuals' mobility. The guidelines were developed by the European Commission and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in collaboration with member states and stakeholders in the field of education and training. They were first published in 2009 and were revised and updated in 2015 to reflect the evolving needs and challenges in recognizing prior learning. These guidelines set out principles, procedures and practices that should be taken into account by countries when developing or improving their RPL systems. While these guidelines do not constitute legal mandates, they provide a reference and basis for countries in aligning national policies and practices with Europe's best practices.

The key principles underlying these guidelines are (i) *inclusion*: all people, regardless of their background, age and educational context, should be able to use RPL systems. They should be able to identify the learning acquired through formal, nonformal and informal means. (ii) *transparency*: clearly defined criteria and evaluation methods should be in place for the implementation of RPLs, ensuring a clear, transparent and well-documented process. (iii) *equity*: recognised standards and criteria should be used for this purpose. Equality of opportunity and the avoidance of discrimination based on factors such as gender, age or nationality should be ensured. (iv) *quality assurance*: to ensure that assessment and verification processes are of soundness and accuracy, RPL systems should comply with quality assurance principles.

Recommendation for different aspects of the RPL process, including information and advice for individuals, assessment methodologies, involvement of relevant stakeholders as well as the use of RPL results in other education, training or employment purposes is also set out in these guidelines. In addition, the guidelines stress that in order to facilitate the implementation and continuous improvement of RPL systems, it is necessary to establish national coordination mechanisms and support structures. These arrangements may include the establishment of national RPL centres, expert networks or coordination bodies that are responsible for promoting good practices, and providing training and guidance in order to facilitate exchange of experience between stakeholders.

The validation process involves the following steps:

1. Identification of the learning outcomes obtained by individuals through non-formal and/or informal learning. To this end, a diversity of learning experiences and contexts such as work projects, community involvement, personal hobbies or online courses need to be recognised.
2. Documentation of learning experiences and evidence of their acquired knowledge and skills. This can be achieved through different means, such as portfolios, samples of work, certificates, references, testimonials and self-assessments. The results of the training and its relevance to a particular area or competence should be clearly shown in the documentation.
3. Assessment consisting of an evaluation of the submitted evidence and setting out to determine the compatibility with established standards or criteria. This can be achieved by different assessment methods, for example in the form of interviews, observations, written trials or a combination thereof. In order to ensure accurate measurement of learning outcomes, the assessment needs to be fair, reliable and valid.
4. Validation of the authenticity and quality of the learning outcomes. This entails a comparison of evaluated outcomes with recognised standards, qualifications or competence frameworks. An authorized institution, professional organisations, employers or a combination of these stakeholders may carry out validation. It aims at ensuring that the results of training comply with the requisite standards, which may be recognised and taken up by relevant parties.
5. Accreditation/certification confirms that an authorised body, such as an educational institution or a professional organisation, recognises and accepts the learning outcomes. In order to improve their employability and mobility in the labour market, certification gives individuals an official document with which they can attest that they have knowledge, skills or competencies in their area of expertise.

### 5.1. Guidelines for RPL in WBL

Contextualizing the European Guidelines on RPL ([https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4054\\_en.pdf](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4054_en.pdf)) adaption and application of these guidelines to specific national, regional, or sectoral contexts. The guidelines offer a framework for the recognition and validation of the skills, knowledge, and competencies acquired through

work-based learning. A detailed step-by-step process of how to contextualize these guidelines is the following:

1. *Understanding the context:* Knowledge of current national or regional policies, legislation and regulations related to WBL and RPL. Identification of the specific challenges, opportunities, and priorities within the given context.
2. *Analysis of the Work-Based Learning setting:* Assessment of the existing WBL programmes, systems and practices in a country or region together with the determination of the types of training that can be provided, such as apprenticeships, internships, or traineeships.
3. *Identification of stakeholders:* Identify key stakeholders, such as government bodies, training institutions, employers, industry associations, trade unions and learners representatives, which are involved in the implementation of WBL. These stakeholders should be engaged throughout the contextualization process.
4. *Alignment with National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs):* align to existing national or regional qualifications frameworks. Determine the level, learning outcomes and descriptors of the EU framework within the national framework in relation to relevant qualifications.
5. *Adaptation of Guidelines:* The EU guidelines should be reviewed and adapted to the special context of each Member State or region. In doing so take into account the language, terminology and structure commonly used in a given country or region. Take into account any requirements of law or regulation that need to be dealt with.
6. *Definition of Recognition Criteria:* Propose recognition criteria in line with the EU guidelines. The evidence required for assessing and validating prior learning acquired through work-based education should be set out in these criteria. Specification of the standards and benchmarks on which this recognition process will be measured should be outlined.
7. *Determination of assessment methods:* Identification of appropriate assessment methods to evaluate the evidence presented by applicants seeking recognition such as competency-based assessments, interviews, portfolio reviews, workplace observations, or a combination of methods. The assessment methods chosen should be valid, reliable, fair, and transparent.
8. *Establishment of support mechanisms:* In order to facilitate the assessment and validation of prior learning, provide guidance materials, resources and training programmes. In order to help with questions and concerns, it is worth considering the creation of a helpdesk or helpline.
9. *Establishment of quality assurance procedures:* This ensures consistency, fairness, and reliability of the recognition process. This includes moderation, standardization, and regular evaluation and review of the recognition practices.
10. *Implementation and Monitoring:* To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the recognition scheme, guidelines shall be implemented in cooperation with relevant stakeholders through an implementation process monitored together with feedback and necessary adaptations.
11. *Review and Update:* Regularly review and update the guidelines based on feedback, emerging trends, and changes in the WBL scenario. Best practices and developments in the field of RPL are pivotal in this regard.



## 5.2. Examples of implementation

In Croatia, the practices of RPL in WBL are primarily implemented through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF serves as a reference system for organizing and recognizing qualifications in Croatia, aligning them with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education (ASOO) website (<http://www.asoo.hr/>) provides information on the recognition and validation of prior learning in Croatia and the role of ASOO in implementing RPL practices. The National Qualifications Framework (NOQ) website (<http://www.nok.hr/>) offers comprehensive information about the Croatian National Qualifications Framework, which serves as the basis for recognizing and validating qualifications, including prior learning.

In Poland, implementation is through the National Qualifications System (Krajowy System Kwalifikacji, KSK) and National Register of Vocational Qualifications (Krajowy Rejestr Kwalifikacji, KRK). These systems provide a framework for organizing and validating qualifications in the country, aligning them with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (<https://men.gov.pl/>, <http://www.kwalifikacje.edu.pl/> and <https://www.krk.parp.gov.pl/>).

In Portugal, the practices of RPL in WBL are primarily implemented through the National Qualifications System (Sistema Nacional de Qualificações, SNQ) and the National Catalog of Qualifications (Catálogo Nacional de Qualificações, CNQ). These systems provide a framework for organizing, validating, and recognizing qualifications in the country, aligning them with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). (Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional, ANQEP) website: <https://www.angep.gov.pt/> and Sistema Nacional de Qualificações, SNQ) website: <https://www.qualifica.gov.pt/>.

## 5.3. Exemptions to RPL

Exemptions to RPL may have limits, depending on the country. For example, in Malta, exemptions must not be given (i) for programmes at EQF level 3 or lower or (ii) for research and project components or (iii) in the case of the third or fourth year of studies for EQF level 6 programmes (iv) For practice-based learning, such as modules achieved through work-based learning. (v) Key skills modules can be considered for exemption only at EQF levels 4 and 5. Exemptions should only be approved for entire modules and not components of a module.

Exemptions should not exceed 30% of the ECVET/ECTS value of the entire programme of studies unless the learning outcomes are identical to those of the modules in the programme and RPL has been certified using ECVETs/ECTSs.

In the case of requests for RPCL for exemptions, these cannot be accepted if more than ten years have elapsed since the certified learning under consideration has taken place. In the event that such certification has been obtained more than 10 years before the date of the application, this may still be considered in conjunction with additional proof of further experiential learning.

Students will be expected to present a portfolio as evidence of RPEL. Since this portfolio is expected to consist of a lengthy document, the institution is to ask prospective applicants to start compilation well ahead of the deadline for submission of the application. Any evidence submitted as part of a portfolio must be directly related to the subject of the exemption being applied for. Evidence may be in the form of reference letters, authenticated reports or outputs, project work, blogs or video diaries, witness testimony, volunteering records, observation of practice or simulation, authenticated presentation, catalogues, critiques or reviews, programmes or any other form of evidence, which is considered relevant to the request for exemption.

Whenever exemptions are granted to an applicant, these should be clearly identified on the transcript and they should not be included when the overall classification of the individual's achievements within the course of studies are determined. Notification of performance issued in the case of students who prematurely terminate their programme of studies must not include reference to RPCL awarded exemptions.

In the case of a successful RPL outcome in which the applicant is granted entry to a programme of studies and/or any exemption from specific module/s for a specific intake, applicants would need to avail themselves of such entry/exemptions in that specific intake. Should an applicant fail to apply as a student in the indicated intake, s/he will be subject to an extension fee to maintain or re-activate the RPL process.

In cases of an unsuccessful RPL outcome, applicants will have the right to appeal as per the Institution's procedures.

The following are a few more examples of exemptions to RPL in different EU countries:

(i) Germany:

Germany recognizes prior learning through the process called "Anrechnung." However, there are certain exemptions to the recognition of prior learning. One example is the "German language requirement" exemption, where candidates who have completed their education in the German language may not need to provide additional evidence of their German language proficiency. Source: DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) - Recognition of Foreign Qualifications: <https://www.daad.de/en/study-and-research-in-germany/plan-your-studies/recognition/>

(ii) France:

In France, exemptions to RPL can be granted based on specific criteria. For instance, the French education system has a process called "Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience" (VAE), which allows individuals to have their professional experience recognized. However, certain fields such as medicine, pharmacy, and law have restrictions on RPL due to the specific requirements and regulations in those fields. Source: France VAE - Recognition of Prior Learning: <https://www.vae.gouv.fr/>

#### 5.4. Limits to recognition

While RPL is generally encouraged and promoted in Europe, there are certain cases where it may not be applicable or cannot be used. Examples of such cases are the following:

- (i) *Regulated professions:* RPL may not be applicable or is limited in regulated professions where specific qualifications, warrants, licenses or certifications are legally required to practice. These professions typically have strict educational and professional requirements that cannot be bypassed through RPL. Examples include medicine and other health care professions (EU Directive 2005/36/EC), law, architecture and engineering (European Training Foundation, 2022; [www.europa.eu/europass/en/recognition-skills-and-qualifications](http://www.europa.eu/europass/en/recognition-skills-and-qualifications)).
- (ii) *Non-transferrable skills:* RPL may not be applicable when the skills acquired by an individual are not directly relevant or transferable to the desired qualification. The assessment of prior learning is typically focused on determining the relevance and equivalence of the acquired knowledge and skills to the target qualification. If there is a significant mismatch, RPL may not be feasible or relevant.
- (iii) *Lack of evidence:* RPL requires individuals to provide evidence in the form of documentation, portfolios, testimonials, etc. If such evidence or documentation is lacking, the RPL process may not be possible (European Commission, 2012).

### 5.5. Examples of RPEL

France is the only known country to the authors where RPEL can be a way to obtain a diploma, thus, its example is here described. In France, recognition of prior learning ('VAE : validation des acquis de l'expérience') has been the third way to obtain a diploma in France since 2002.

#### **VAE definition:**

Anyone, regardless of age, nationality, status and level of training, who has at least one year of experience directly related to the certification in question, can apply for the VAE. This certification, which can be a diploma, a title or a certificate of professional qualification, must be registered in the National Directory of Professional Certifications (RNCP).

Whether you are an employee, job seeker, self-employed, etc., there are many financing solutions (CPF, Transition Pro, public financing, etc.).

#### **Since December 21, 2022**

A new legal basis (Law n°2022-1598 of December 21, 2022) on emergency measures relating to the functioning of the labour market with a view to full employment, changes the provisions relating to VAE along three axes:

- Simplification of the procedure relating to the VAE: facilitation of the admissibility stage, shortening of the courses and harmonisation of the funding rules, in order to strengthen the attractiveness of the VAE for candidates with the aim to reach 100,000 courses by the end of the five-year period ;
- Securing courses in order to multiply successes. The law individualizes and strengthens the support given to candidates by giving the possibility of carrying out additional training during the course and also benefiting from a longer period of absence to prepare for sessions;

- Modernization of the system: a national public service in the form of a digital platform was created. This platform concentrates information for the user and organizes the different stages of the VAE journey.

### **Launch of the Beta version of "France VAE"**

Since December 2022, "France VAE" has become the unique space to obtain information, whilst also carrying out all the procedures. Since July 2023, more than 50 institutional players in the VAE – including the Regions, certifiers, professional branches and Pôle emploi (Public administrative institution responsible for employment in France) – have populated the platform to allow workers to have their skills recognized on nearly 200 certifications in six priority sectors: health, health and social, retail, metallurgy and sport.

This first version of the platform will be the subject of a progress report in the fall before the creation of the France VAE public service in early 2024.

### **VAE at the University**

Before the law of December 2022, persons attending University and requiring VAE benefitted from:

- support from an advisor specializing in the validation of acquired knowledge and the area of training targeted.
- expertise by a teacher-researcher specialized in the targeted training area.

The VAE process is not free, (it costs around 3000€), but may be partially covered by the State.

This VAE process at University level is possible from EQF level 5 (technician diploma) to EQF level 8 (PhD).

The work-based learning experiences such as internships, etc. are eligible for VAE.

### **Recognition process of VAE**

A portfolio of certifications, work experiences, etc. is submitted to the ministry or certifying body. Then, depending on the type of certification, the candidate is interviewed by a board of experts in the particular field in which the VAE is being requested or the portfolio is sent to them for review. In both cases, the board meets the candidate and decides whether to award total/partial validation or a refusal of validation. The entire process lasts between eight and twelve months (from the definition of the project to the validation interview).

The certification obtained by VAE has the same value as that obtained through training. Undertaking a VAE process is not just a simple formality, but it requires real involvement and motivation from the applicant to take up this challenge.

### **The different steps:**

#### 1. Reception, orientation, training:

A training advisor informs the applicant about:

- the different certification methods;
- the procedure ;
- diplomas related to the specific profession.

#### 2. Constitution of portfolio:

This portfolio should consist of:

- personal details and information;
- details and relevant certificates/documentation of prior and present training courses;
- information regarding the professional background with a detailed description of the functions and tasks performed;
- Extra-curricular activities (if they fall within the framework of the acquired experience that is to be validated).

The aim of the portfolio is to link the candidates' skills with those expected at the end of the targeted diploma. It requires reflection and analysis.

A counsellor and a teacher will assist in the compilation of this portfolio.

#### 4. Board:

A validation board reviews the portfolio and meets with the candidate. The validation board may decide:

- either to award the entire diploma;
- or a partial recognition. In this case, the board will also determine what additional subject material/experience needs to be completed to obtain the full diploma.

#### VAE to date

Between 2002 and 2012, 129,000 diplomas for professional purposes were issued by the validation of acquired experience (VAE), mainly at the higher levels. After a brief ramp-up of the system, the number of portfolios examined each year stabilized from 2006 and VAE remains an alternative route to certification.

With 700 repositories of technological and professional diplomas accessible by the validation of acquired experience offered by the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, including a quarter at higher levels, the certification offered is vast. However, the demand for VAE on a small number of specialities has increased over ten years: the 20 most targeted diplomas represent 71% of demands in 2012, against 60% in 2001.

VAE activity is mainly driven by service specialities, more particularly those in personal services (social work, hairdressing or aesthetics), which accounted for 49% of portfolios examined in 2012.

The certifications issued by the VAE are mainly higher education diplomas (42% of all in 2012). Whatever the session, the BTS remains the first diploma validated by experience: 4,000 total validations or 30% of all graduates validated.

After ten years of existence, the validation of acquired experience accounts for only 2% of the awarding of diplomas for professional purposes. Among the 30 specialities most in demand in 2012, it nevertheless represents 17.5% to 30.5% of all those admitted to the three State diplomas for educators, 9.7% of those admitted to the Early Childhood CAP and 15.9% of those admitted to the occupational safety and prevention baccalaureate.

### **Key figures**

129,000: is the number of diplomas for professional purposes issued by the VAE in ten years in France.

4 000: this is the number of total validations in BTS (higher technician diploma, EQF level 5) each year.

2%: this is the share of access by VAE to diplomas for professional purposes.

### 3. Limits to recognition: Recognition of prior learning for partial fulfilment of a study programme

The hybrid VAE is an alternative that consists in offering a VAE accompanied by additional training, which allows you to acquire the skills necessary for your professional development. At the end of the course, a neutral and sovereign jury will validate or not the diploma and therefore the increase in skills of the employee.

This hybrid VAE has several advantages:

- It generates a very strong interest in the employee for their entry into training (and therefore great attendance) because it leads to universal recognition that goes beyond the company: a diploma
- It offers a company training course that avoids a school approach of certification by examination and which is therefore not disconnected from the field.
- It has a tenfold educational effectiveness: learning in parallel with the analysis of one's past and present experience, by projecting oneself into the future.

### 4. Exemptions to RPL

(iii) France:

In France, exemptions to RPL can be granted based on specific criteria. For instance, the French education system has a process called "Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience" (VAE),

which allows individuals to have their professional experience recognized. However, certain fields such as medicine, pharmacy, and law have restrictions on RPL due to the specific requirements and regulations in those fields. Source: France VAE - Recognition of Prior Learning: <https://www.vae.gouv.fr/>

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