

Validation of **non-formal** and **informal** learning in **higher education** in Europe

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European Education and Culture Executive Agency

Platforms, Studies and Analysis

Boulevard Simon Bolivar 34 (Unit A6)

1049 Brussels

BELGIUM

E-mail: eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu

Website: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu>

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Validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education in Europe

Eurydice report

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Codes and abbreviations

Country codes

EU	European Union				EEA and candidate countries
BE	Belgium	LV	Latvia	BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BE fr	Belgium – French Community	LT	Lithuania	CH	Switzerland
BE nl	Belgium – Flemish Community	LU	Luxembourg	IS	Iceland
BG	Bulgaria	HU	Hungary	LI	Liechtenstein
CZ	Czechia	MT	Malta	ME	Montenegro
DK	Denmark	NL	Netherlands	MK	North Macedonia
DE	Germany	AT	Austria	NO	Norway
EE	Estonia	PL	Poland	RS	Serbia
IE	Ireland	PT	Portugal	TR	Türkiye
EL	Greece	RO	Romania		
ES	Spain	SI	Slovenia		
FR	France	SK	Slovakia		
HR	Croatia	FI	Finland		
IT	Italy	SE	Sweden		
CY	Cyprus				

Other codes

:	Data not available	–	Not applicable
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Abbreviations

ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
E&T	education and training
EU	European Union
HEI	higher education institution
ICT	information and communication technologies

Introduction

People acquire knowledge and skills in various ways. One common way is to follow structured programmes in education and training institutions. Such programmes commonly lead to a certificate or qualification validating the competences acquired. However, learning can also be less structured. It can take place outside of education and training institutions, for example at workplaces or within non-professional activities of individuals.

Activities of the European Union relating to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The European Union (EU) supports actions that aim to valorise different types of learning. The idea behind this is that the validation of knowledge and skills acquired in different learning contexts can have various positive impacts on individuals. For example, it can increase people's chances on the labour market or support their aspirations for further learning.

When conceptualising the validation of different types of learning, EU steering documents refer to three main concepts – 'formal learning', 'non-formal learning' and 'informal learning' – that are defined as follows ⁽¹⁾.

Formal learning refers to learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma.

Non-formal learning means learning which takes place through planned activities where some form of learning support is present. This type of learning may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers. Moreover, common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, structured online learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources) and courses organised by civil society organisations.

Informal learning covers learning resulting from daily activities relating to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. This type of learning may be unintentional from the learner's perspective. Examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child).

The key EU policy document promoting the recognition of all types of learning is the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽²⁾. This recommendation has invited EU Member States to 'have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and

⁽¹⁾ The definitions provided are shortened versions of the definitions included in the [Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#), 2012/C 398/01.

⁽²⁾ Ibid.

informal learning' ⁽³⁾. The design of national validation arrangements has been supported by the European guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2009; 2015; 2023) and countries' advancement in this area has been mapped in successive editions of the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* ⁽⁴⁾.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education

Validation of all forms of learning has been promoted not only as a general theme, but also in relation to different sectors. For example, the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* maps the validation arrangements within three sectors, namely 'education', 'labour market' and the 'third sector' ⁽⁵⁾. The same source sub-divides the education sector into several distinct areas, including higher education. In other words, higher education appears as a rather specific and delimited area for validation policies and practice. The validation in this sector has also been emphasised and promoted within the Bologna Process, which is an intergovernmental process aiming to bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe.

The Bologna Process conceptualises validation of non-formal and informal learning by referring to the 'recognition of prior learning'. This expression appeared in the Bologna Process already in 2003, when ministers responsible for higher education underlined, within their communiqué, the necessity for taking steps 'to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the recognition of prior learning' ⁽⁶⁾. The idea was further developed in 2005, when the ministers proclaimed to 'work with higher education institutions and others to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programmes' ⁽⁷⁾. In 2009, the ministers specified that '[s]uccessful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes regardless of whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths' ⁽⁸⁾. Finally, in 2015, the ministers specified their intention 'to remove obstacles to the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of providing access to higher education programmes and facilitating the award of qualifications on the basis of prior learning' ⁽⁹⁾.

Following the above, the Bologna Process promotes the recognition (validation) of all types of learning as a means to 1) provide access to higher education (for those who do not comply with traditional access criteria) and 2) facilitate the award of a higher education qualification (for those who have acquired specific knowledge and skills outside formal higher education programmes).

⁽³⁾ Ibid., p. 3.

⁽⁴⁾ The inventory was produced in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2023 and can be consulted at: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>.

⁽⁵⁾ This applies to several editions of the inventory, in particular the most recent ones (see: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning>).

⁽⁶⁾ 'Realising the European Higher Education Area'. Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003, p. 6.

⁽⁷⁾ The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19–20 May 2005, p. 3.

⁽⁸⁾ The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the new decade Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28–29 April 2009, p. 3.

⁽⁹⁾ Yerevan Communiqué, p. 4.

About this report

This report covers 37 education systems that are part of the Eurydice Network ⁽¹⁰⁾. It examines whether and how higher education systems across Europe recognise and validate learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning. In line with the content of ministerial communiqués issued within the Bologna Process, the report approaches the validation from two angles, namely 1) access to higher education and 2) fulfilment of higher education study requirements, without excluding a potential combination of these two strands.

The analysis refers primarily to ‘validation of non-formal and informal learning’ (terminology used within the EU steering documents). When the expression ‘recognition of prior (non-formal and informal) learning’ or ‘recognition’ (terminology used within the Bologna Process) is employed, it is used interchangeably with the above terminology. Prior formal learning and its validation, which is understood here mainly as degree higher education programmes and courses ⁽¹¹⁾, is not considered in the analysis.

The text is structured in four short sections, each accompanied by an annex with country data.

The reference year of the information is the 2023/2024 academic year.

⁽¹⁰⁾ All EU Member States and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye. Two education systems that are part of the Eurydice Network and are commonly included in Eurydice reports – the German-speaking Community of Belgium and Albania – are not covered by this report. Neither are new Eurydice Network members – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – that do not yet participate in comparative reports. The report was prepared outside the official work programme of the Eurydice Network, as a network contribution to the European Year of Skills (see https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/about_en). All those who contributed to the production of the report are acknowledged at the end of the report.

⁽¹¹⁾ As shown by the EU definitions provided within this introductory section, formal learning encompasses a wider range of learning activities than degree programmes and courses. However, this report understands formal learning mainly as degree programmes and courses, to allow distinguishing such programmes/courses from other types of learning activities.

1. Validation of non-formal and informal learning as an alternative access route to higher education

The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education is an important means through which candidates who do not comply with traditional admission criteria can potentially access higher education. For this reason, the validation process is often discussed in the context of alternative (or non-traditional) access routes to higher education.

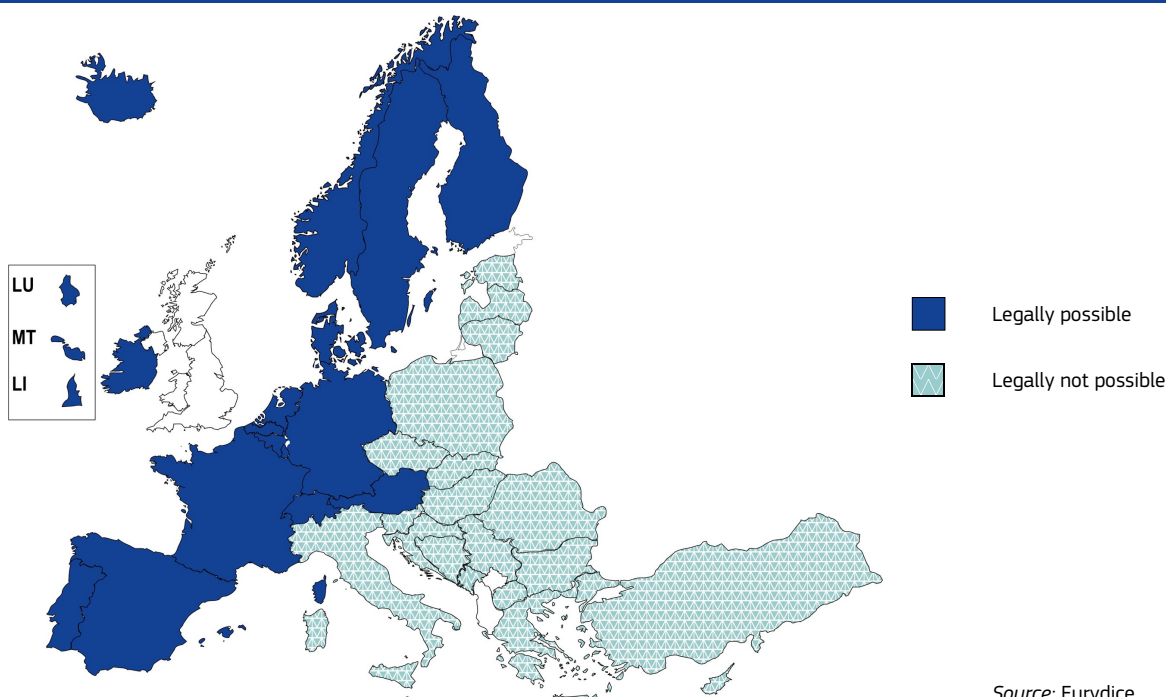
Alternative access routes to higher education are commonly understood as access routes targeting higher education candidates who do not comply with traditional entry requirements. This is either because they followed a short upper secondary vocational path (i.e. a programme which does not allow access to higher education) or because they abandoned initial education prior to the completion of the upper secondary level. In the current policy context, promoting the idea that no talent should be left behind, the theme of non-traditional pathways into higher education gains particular attention. This is all the more important since students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be over-represented in educational pathways not giving direct access to higher education (see e.g. OECD, 2021). In order to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education, the objective is to extend admissions

criteria so that all those who have a capacity to follow higher education studies would be provided with the opportunity to do so, regardless of their prior formal learning achievements.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is the most common way of broadening the admission process and widening higher education access. It involves the recognition and validation of the knowledge and skills that prospective non-traditional students acquired outside of formal learning contexts (e.g. through various non-formal learning activities, professional experience, volunteering, etc.). Through this validation process, candidates not possessing the traditional higher education entry qualifications can also gain access to higher education studies.

Figure 1 depicts legal frameworks for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accessing first-cycle higher education. As the figure illustrates, students without the traditional entry qualifications can access first-cycle higher education on the basis of validating their non-formal or informal learning experiences in only 18 education systems (out of 37), primarily in western and northern European countries.

Figure 1: Legal possibility of accessing first-cycle higher education through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, 2023/2024



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory notes

The figure considers only those cases where the validation of non-formal and informal learning can replace traditional higher education entry qualifications. It follows that the cases where the validation of non-formal and informal learning comes in addition to traditional higher education entry qualifications (e.g. as a competitive element) are not considered. Moreover, the figure does not consider those cases where the validation of non-formal and informal learning is legally possible only for entry to some specific programmes that commonly use talent screening, including programmes in arts, sport, etc.

For country information, see Annex 1.

Even in systems where the validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible, legal frameworks might apply regulatory limitations to this access possibility. A first type of limitation is whether all higher education institutions can provide access to non-traditional students this way. This limitation is applied in Austria, where learners can only access universities of applied sciences through the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Secondly, educational authorities might limit the categories of students who can benefit from this alternative access route. This exists for example in Spain, where only learners above the age of 40 can access higher education following a validation procedure, and in Portugal and Norway, where the minimum age is 23. Finally, the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning experience might not be enough for accessing first-cycle higher education. In Austria and Portugal, in most cases prospective students also have to pass an additional entrance examination in order to gain access to higher education studies.

Some education systems leave it largely or entirely to higher education institutions to define their validation procedures. This autonomy can even extend to the decision whether institutions offer this possibility or not (for example in Malta, the Netherlands or Switzerland). Alternatively, higher education authorities can oblige higher education institutions to put validation procedures in place, but leave it up to them to define the exact conditions (e.g. in Ireland).

Many of the education systems making it possible for non-traditional learners to access higher education through the validation of non-formal and informal learning also offer other alternative ways to do so. In order to provide a more complete picture of alternative access routes, these other alternative modes of accessing higher education are briefly examined in this section.

For entrants without formal entry qualifications, some countries offer the possibility of taking an entrance exam or admission test ⁽¹²⁾. These exams exist in the French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, Germany (for learners over the age of 25), Spain (two different options for learners above the ages of 25 and 45), the Netherlands (for learners above the age of 21), Austria, Portugal (for learners above the age of 23) and Switzerland. In 2022 and 2023, Sweden conducted a pilot project with a basic eligibility test for admission to higher education, aimed at people who were at least 24 years old. As these examples show, such admission tests are often organised for mature learners.

Some education systems organise preparatory or trial higher education programmes, or programmes leading to alternative entry qualifications. Trial or preparatory higher education programmes exist in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Malta, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Learners can obtain alternative qualifications – which are different from the standard upper secondary school leaving certificate but provide the equivalent access to higher education – by successfully completing specific dedicated programmes in Denmark (Higher Preparatory Examination), France (*Diplôme d'Accès aux Etudes Universitaires*) and Luxembourg (*Diplôme d'accès aux études supérieures*).

⁽¹²⁾ This is not to be confused with special aptitude tests offered to the most-talented people, which are most prevalent in the field of arts, sport, etc. To be considered as alternative routes, these examinations should be open to a wider group of learners (e.g. all applicants or applicants over a certain age).

2. Validation of non-formal and informal learning as a way to fulfil higher education study requirements

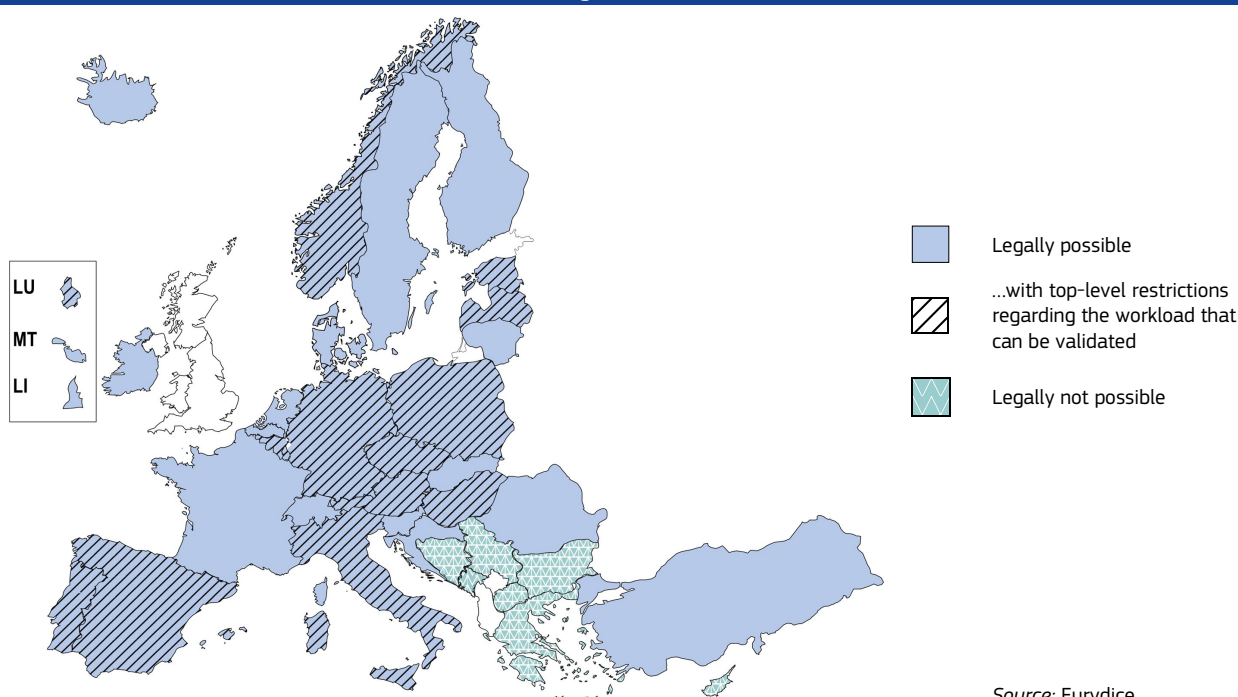
The previous section examined the validation of non-formal and informal learning as a means to access higher education study programmes (for candidates who do not comply with traditional higher education entry requirements). Another way to use the validation of non-formal and informal learning is to exempt learners from some (or potentially all) higher education study requirements if they demonstrate that they already possess the knowledge and skills relating to a specific higher education programme or qualification. This, in turn, can reduce compulsory participation in formal higher education courses and, consequently, facilitate and accelerate the fulfilment of studies.

Figure 2 displays whether it is legally possible to use the validation of non-formal and informal learning to fulfil (fully or partly) first-cycle higher education study requirements. The concept of 'legal possibility', as understood within the figure, covers different regulatory situations. First, it covers situations where top-level regulations explicitly refer to the validation of non-formal and informal learning by either explicitly requiring or explicitly allowing higher education institutions to provide validation opportunities to students. Second, it refers to situations where top-level regulations do not

explicitly mention the validation of non-formal and informal learning, but create conditions allowing higher education institutions to provide relevant procedures. For example, regulations may specify that it is up to higher education institutions to determine how programmes are conducted and/or what type of learning activities can be considered when evaluating learning outcomes. When regulations do not cover the validation of non-formal and informal learning explicitly, the country is displayed under the category 'legally possible' if there is evidence that (at least some) higher education institutions have relevant policies and procedures in place. Such evidence can include related internal regulations or guidelines published on websites of higher education institutions.

Considering the above conceptualisation, Figure 2 shows that the validation of non-formal and informal learning to fulfil first-cycle higher education study requirements is possible in 30 European education systems (out of 37 systems surveyed). It follows that the validation of non-formal and informal learning is more commonly possible for fulfilling higher education study requirements than for accessing higher education studies (compare Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 2: Legal possibility to fulfil first-cycle higher education study requirements through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, 2023/2024



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory notes

When referring to 'legal possibility to fulfil first-cycle higher education study requirements', the figure refers to two possible legal situations: 1) the possibility is explicitly stipulated in top-level (national) regulations, or 2) top-level (national) regulations do not refer to this matter, but policies and/or practice exist in higher education institutions (demonstrated, for example, by internal regulations covering this area and/or relevant information on webpages of higher education institutions).

When referring to 'top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated', the figure means restrictions established at the top level (i.e. the national or system level). Restrictions determined at other decision-making levels (e.g. regional, institutional) are not considered.

For country information, see Annex 2.

Figure 2 also demonstrates that the validation of non-formal and informal learning often comes with top-level (national) restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated. The restrictions in question are most often expressed as the proportion (percentage) of study requirements and/or the number of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. For example, in Spain, work and professional experience may be validated and converted into credits, but the validation cannot exceed 15 % of the total number of credits relating to a higher education programme. In the French Community of Belgium, in the adult higher education sector known as 'social advancement education' (*enseignement de promotion sociale*), the validation cannot exceed 120 ECTS credits in the first cycle and 60 ECTS credits in the second cycle. Czechia allows validating previously completed lifelong learning (non-degree) higher education courses, but the validation cannot exceed 60 % of the total number of credits relating to a degree programme. Hungary, in turn, specifies that at least one third of the total number of credits relating to a programme must be completed in the degree-awarding institution.

When top-level regulations do not specify any restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated, it does not necessarily mean that there are no restrictions. Indeed, the restrictions may be established at lower decision-making levels, especially by higher education institutions. For example, in Ireland, there are no nationally defined restrictions, but higher education institutions themselves address this question. One example is the National University of Ireland, which specifies in its internal guidelines⁽¹³⁾ that its constituting universities are not expected to award full degrees based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Following the above, the absence of national validation restrictions should be interpreted with caution and should not be confounded with a (widespread) possibility to achieve a higher education degree based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is even more so considering that top-level regulations with no explicit validation restrictions generally do not specify the possibility to achieve a full degree through validation arrangements. France is an exception in this regard, with top-level regulations stipulating no restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated and, at the same time, stating explicitly that the validation can either be partial, leading to the recognition of some programme elements, or full, leading to the award of a higher education degree⁽¹⁴⁾. Consolidated data published by French national authorities indicate that, in 2022, around 1 000 candidates received a first-cycle higher education degree based on a full validation⁽¹⁵⁾.

⁽¹³⁾ [Degrees and Qualifications of the National University of Ireland: Recognition of Prior Learning](#), p. 5.

⁽¹⁴⁾ For an overview of the validation system in France and legal references, see the [ministerial webpage dedicated to the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education](#).

⁽¹⁵⁾ For 2022 national data covering higher education, see <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/la-validation-des-acquis-de-l-experience-dans-l-enseignement-superieur-public-en-2022-94023>.

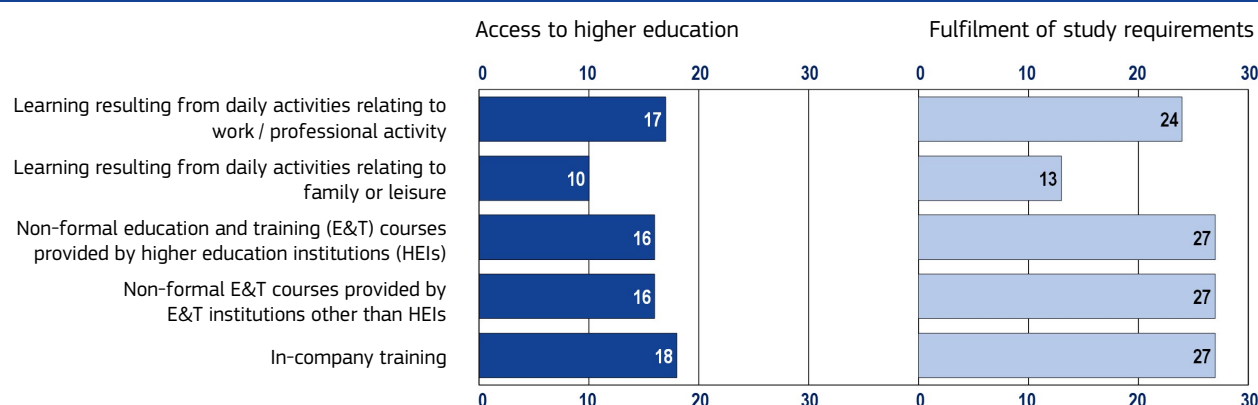
3. Learning activities that can be validated

Non-formal and informal learning are generic terms encompassing many different learning activities. When higher education systems allow learners to validate non-formal and/or informal learning, they may privilege specific learning activities.

Figure 3 refers to some typical learning activities associated with non-formal and informal learning. It starts by listing learning that can mainly be seen as 'informal', namely learning resulting from daily activities relating to work, and learning associated with family or leisure activities. The inventory continues with different types of education and training courses, including non-degree courses provided by higher education institutions, courses provided by education and training institutions other than higher education institutions, and training provided by employers.

As the figure shows, in higher education systems that allow the validation of non-formal and informal learning (for access to studies and/or the fulfilment of study requirements), learning activities that can be recognised and validated are overall quite varied. More specifically, most higher education systems allow the validation of all or almost all of the learning activities displayed in the figure. However, one type of learning is considered less often compared to others, namely learning resulting from daily activities relating to family or leisure. This applies to the validation for both accessing higher education studies and progressing in studies. In other words, higher education systems seem to be quite open to recognising work-based learning and different (non-formal) education and training courses, but less willing to acknowledge that learning taking place within family and/or during leisure time could lead to learning outcomes relevant for higher education.

Figure 3: Learning activities that can be validated within the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning in higher education, 2023/2024



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory notes

- The first part of the figure considers only those education systems where the validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible for accessing first-cycle higher education studies, that is, 18 education systems (see Figure 1). The second part of the figure considers only those systems where the validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible for progressing in first-cycle higher education studies (see Figure 2). When it comes to the second part of the figure, out of 30 higher education systems considered, data are available only for 29 systems.
- For country data feeding the figure, see Annex 3.

Behind the above general pattern, there are different national approaches to specifying what type of non-formal and informal learning can be validated. Two groups of countries emerge in this regard: 1) those that do not provide specifications regarding learning activities to consider in their top-level regulations; and 2) those where top-level regulations provide some details regarding this matter.

Finland provides an example of the first approach. In this higher education system, regulations do not specify non-formal and informal learning activities that can be recognised and validated. It is entirely up to higher education institutions to determine learning to be considered and/or accepted, which can, in principle, be any type of learning.

Czechia, the French Community of Belgium and France illustrate the approach characterised by more explicit statements in top-level regulations regarding learning activities to be considered. In Czechia, where the validation is only possible for the fulfilment of study requirements (and not for accessing higher education studies), top-level regulations envisage the validation of non-degree lifelong learning courses provided by higher education institutions. This means that if a student of a degree programme had previously completed a non-degree lifelong learning course, they can validate such a course within their degree programme. Regulations do not refer to any other learning activities that higher education institutions could/should consider. The French Community of Belgium provides a contrasting example, with regulations referring to a wider range of learning

activities, namely learning through personal and professional experience, along with previously completed study courses. France, in turn, focuses on informal learning associated with work-related activities. This is particularly prominent in the scheme ‘validation of learning from experience’ (*validation des acquis de l’expérience*), which is open to all individuals who can justify at least 1 year of professional experience relating to the content of the higher education degree they are aiming to achieve.

This analysis shows that countries allowing the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education do not necessarily envisage the validation of the same type (or spectrum) of learning activities. Some caution is therefore necessary when approaching this theme in a comparative cross-country perspective.

4. Quality assurance processes

The previous sections have shown that the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education, when legally possible, is framed quite differently across European countries. The differences lie in the degree to which this area is regulated by top-level authorities and, when it is regulated, in the extent and type of validation opportunities. Looking at validation arrangements from a system-level perspective, a question that arises is whether national higher education quality assurance agencies address the implementation of the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning in their quality assurance procedures.

Figure 4 approaches this question by looking at whether top-level (national) steering documents covering quality assurance procedures in higher education explicitly address the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning. As the figure shows, steering documents with such explicit references are in place in 19 higher education systems (out of 30 with validation arrangements for access to higher education and/or fulfilment of higher education study requirements) ⁽¹⁶⁾.

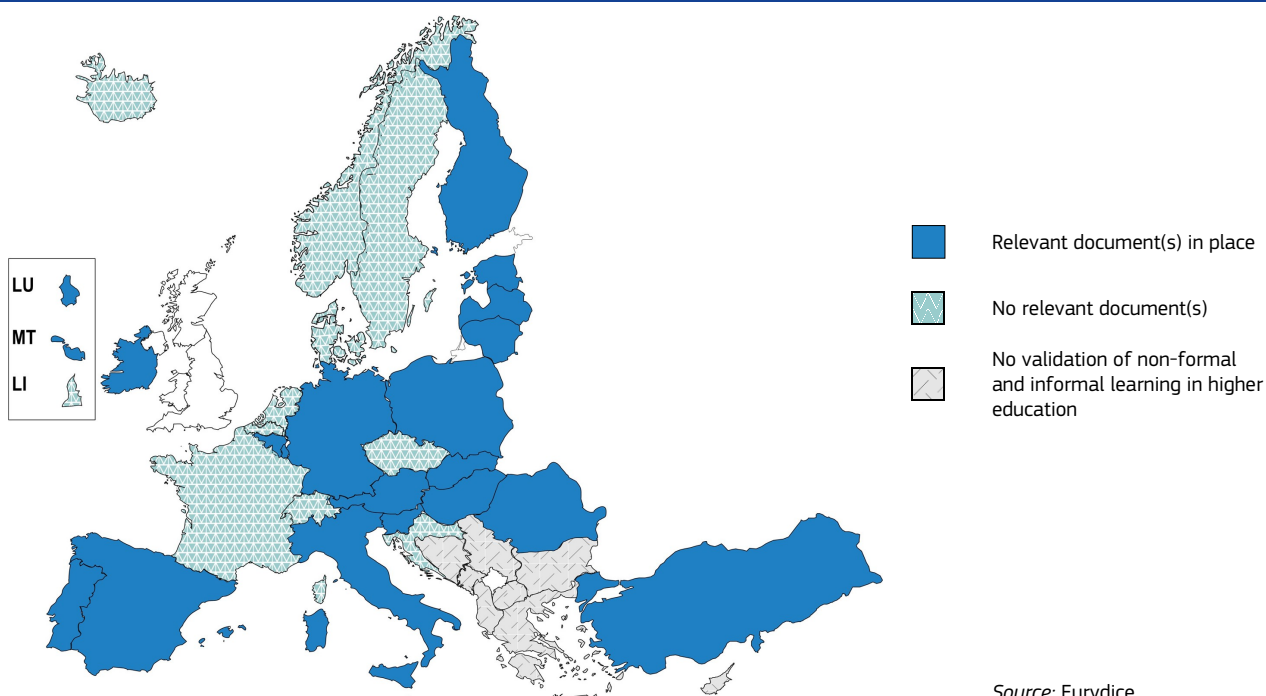
The steering documents in question mostly oblige higher education institutions to define procedures and arrangements for the recognition and validation of different types of learning, including non-formal and informal learning. This means that quality assurance agencies generally do not prescribe any specific approach, but rather concentrate on ensuring that the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is foreseen in institutional policies and regulations, and that it is underpinned by transparent and fair rules. This can be illustrated by the example of Ireland, where higher education institutions must comply with the quality assurance guidelines ⁽¹⁷⁾ issued by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the body overseeing the quality of higher education in Ireland. The guidelines specify that higher education institutions must have pre-defined and published regulations in place covering all areas relating to learner admission, progression, recognition and certification of awards ⁽¹⁸⁾. In this context, the guidelines require processes ensuring fair recognition of education and training qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning.

⁽¹⁶⁾ When top-level (national) steering documents relating to quality assurance in higher education do not explicitly cover the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning, some relevant quality assurance mechanisms may still exist. For example, top-level steering documents may promote, more generally, the implementation of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG) at the national level. This can, in turn, contribute to an enhanced transparency of validation practice at the institutional level. This is because the ESG (p. 13) include explicit references to this area, by stating that higher education institutions should have in place regulations covering ‘fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning’.

⁽¹⁷⁾ [Statutory quality assurance guidelines developed by QQI for use by all providers](#).

⁽¹⁸⁾ When developing their regulations and policies, institutions can rely on the [Principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education and training](#) (2005).

Figure 4: Presence of top-level (national) steering documents explicitly addressing the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning within higher education quality assurance procedures, 2023/2024



Explanatory note

For country information, see Annex 4.

Beyond general guidelines requiring higher education institutions to have in place policies for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, quality assurance agencies sometimes specify further requirements and/or provide further guidelines. For example, in Malta, the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), the quality assurance agency for higher education, has issued a guiding document on the recognition of prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning⁽¹⁹⁾. Should a higher education institution be interested in introducing a recognition policy, it must adhere to the guidelines and obtain an approval of its intended policy from the MFHEA.

While not displayed in a dedicated figure, another important system-level feature of validation policies and measures is the (system-level) monitoring of the actual validation practice. This may enable policymakers to understand whether, to what extent and by whom validation measures are used. The present report is not able to systematically capture which European higher education systems monitor the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education⁽²⁰⁾. However, an older report covering the validation practice in Europe noted that 'data collection on different aspects of validation (participation, type of qualification or outcomes achieved, user characteristics, success rate, length of procedure, etc.) remains at a low level' (Cedefop, European Commission and ICF, 2019, p. 33).

⁽¹⁹⁾ [Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) – Definitions, Principles and Guidelines](#).

⁽²⁰⁾ As shown in Section 2 of this report, France, for instance, has in place national monitoring of the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education.

Conclusion

This short report has examined the extent to which higher education systems across Europe provide opportunities for learners to validate their knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The focus was on whether the validation of non-formal and informal learning can 1) replace traditional higher education entry qualifications and 2) contribute to the fulfilment of higher education study requirements. Within these areas, the report looked at the amount and type of learning that can be validated, and the quality assurance mechanisms underpinning validation practices.

The report shows that less than half of higher education systems in Europe (18 systems) provide opportunities for those without traditional entry qualifications to enter higher education based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Among the systems providing such opportunities, several offer additional alternative entry routes to higher education, including special entry tests or examinations, or preparatory higher education programmes. Most higher education systems providing alternative access routes to higher education, including the access through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, are situated in western and northern Europe.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education study requirements is more common than the validation for accessing higher education studies. More specifically, this type of validation is possible in all higher education systems with alternative access routes to higher education and in 12 systems requiring standard qualifications for higher education entry (30 systems in total). However, while the validation contributing to the fulfilment of studies is commonly possible, regulations often set restrictions on the amount of non-formal and informal learning that can be validated within higher education study programmes. This means that learners using validation opportunities commonly have to participate in at least some formal degree courses before achieving a higher education qualification.

Data also suggest that some learning activities might be easier to validate than others. Indeed, higher education systems seem to be more open to validating learning outcomes resulting from work-related activities and/or different education and training courses than those initiated by family or leisure activities.

Finally, the report shows that around two thirds of the systems with validation arrangements explicitly address this theme in top-level (national) steering documents relating to higher education quality assurance procedures. When the theme is addressed, the aim is generally to ensure that the validation practice taking place in higher education institutions is underpinned by clearly defined rules.

Overall, the report identifies several different approaches to the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education, ranging from no relevant policies and measures to policies and measures opening rather extensive validation opportunities. Beyond the topics examined in the report, further themes to be investigated include system-level aspects, such as national monitoring of validation practice, along with operational aspects, such as methods and approaches used to evaluate non-formal and informal learning in higher education. Moreover, it seems important to survey how a relatively new topic in EU policy discussions – the topic of micro-credentials ⁽²¹⁾ – translates into validation policies and practice across Europe.

⁽²¹⁾ For details, see <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials>.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Legal possibility of accessing first-cycle higher education through the validation of non-formal and informal learning and other alternative access routes, 2023/2024

Data in this annex feed Section 1 of this report (see Figure 1 and the related analysis). The table indicates whether it is legally possible to access first-cycle higher education through the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽²²⁾. Whenever possible, the table provides a short description of the system. In addition, the last column specifies whether there are alternative access routes to higher education (i.e. access without traditional higher education entry qualifications) other than the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

	Access through validation is legally possible	Description of the system	Other alternative access routes
BE fr	Yes	The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education (<i>valorisation des acquis de l'expérience – VAE</i>) is covered by Article 119 of the Decree 'Paysage'. This article approaches the admission and the allocation of credits in a combined perspective. The evaluation is organised by higher education institutions, which judge whether the candidate's skills and knowledge are sufficient to follow the chosen studies. Within the evaluation, it is possible to consider personal and professional experience, as well as studies. The personal or professional experience must correspond to at least 5 years. Moreover, the validation of non-formal and informal learning can also be used for entry to higher education programmes provided within the adult education sector known as 'social advancement education' (enseignement de promotion sociale). This sector covers both secondary and higher education.	Admission test organised by higher education institutions for candidates without secondary qualification. Admission tests are also possible for entry to higher education programmes provided within the adult education sector known as 'social advancement education' (enseignement de promotion sociale).
BE nl	Yes	The basic principles of the procedure for validating non-formal and informal learning in higher education are covered by the decree 'Codex Higher Education', Articles II.232 – II.240. The validation of prior non-formal and informal learning is managed by higher education institutions and by associations (official entities regulating the cooperation of a university and one or more university colleges). They should have documented validation procedures to guide staff and applicants through the different stages of the process. At the end of the procedure, applicants can receive a 'certificate of competence'.	Admission test / entrance examination for students without the necessary entry qualifications can be organised by higher education institutions. On the basis of the assessment, the institution's board can make enrolment conditional on the successful completion of a preparatory programme (Codex Higher Education, Articles II.177 (short cycle), II.179 (first cycle) and II.183 (second cycle)).
BG	No	–	–
CZ	No	–	–
DK	Yes	Applicants without an upper secondary qualification can in principle apply for short-cycle, first-cycle and second-cycle programmes. The higher education institution will assess their application on an individual basis. However, it is difficult to get accepted without any other formal qualifications, such as vocational training or single subject courses.	Alternative entry qualification: Higher Preparatory Examination (hf)

⁽²²⁾ The table does not include systematic information on study cycles other than the first cycle, as such information is outside the scope of Figure 1. However, some references to other cycles are included for some countries, depending on the availability of information. The same principle is followed in Annexes 2–4.

	Access through validation is legally possible	Description of the system	Other alternative access routes
DE	Yes	In order to have their prior learning validated (<i>Anrechnung</i>) and to gain access to higher education institutions, applicants must usually provide evidence of their qualifications, such as transcripts, certificates or work experience records. The validation process may involve an interview, a test or the submission of a portfolio of evidence.	Alternative entry qualification: <i>Begabtenprüfung</i> : for candidates over the age of 25 without the standard entry qualifications. Under specific conditions, learners can access higher education after following vocational education and training courses (<i>Hochschulzugang über berufliche Bildung</i>). In addition, several higher education institutions offer preparatory and bridging courses for learners without the standard entry qualifications.
EE	No	–	–
IE	Yes	Although higher education institutions are responsible for their admissions policies, they are nevertheless obliged to have procedures in place on access, transfer and progression. More information is available on a dedicated website .	Preparatory higher education programmes can be offered by individual higher education institutions with funding from the Higher Education Authority .
EL	No	–	–
ES	Yes	Candidates with work or professional experience who do not have any qualifying academic qualification to enter university (first cycle) and have reached 40 years of age, may access the first cycle through the validation of non-formal and informal learning procedure .	Two types of admission tests for candidates without the standard entry qualifications: Entrance exam for people above the age of 25. Entrance exam for people above the age of 45. Preparatory programmes for people above the ages of 25 and 45 who must pass a preparatory year.
FR	Yes	The validation of professional experience (<i>validation des acquis professionnels – VAP 85</i>) allows direct access to degree programmes at universities without having the required diploma, by validating professional experience (paid or unpaid), training or personal skills developed outside of any training system. For details and regulatory references, see the ministerial webpage dedicated to the validation of non-formal and informal learning .	Alternative entry qualification Diplôme d'Accès aux Etudes Universitaires (D.A.E.U.) : this diploma confers the same rights as the <i>baccalauréat</i> (standard higher education entry qualification). It allows students to pursue higher education, or to take competitive examinations requiring the <i>baccalauréat</i> diploma.
HR	No	–	–
IT	No	–	–
CY	No	–	–
LV	No	–	–
LT	No	–	–
LU	Yes	The validation of learning from experience (<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience – VAE</i>) is a system that allows access to degree courses at the University of Luxembourg based on professional and/or personal experience (see Article 33 of the Law of 27 June 2018 outlining the organisation of the University of Luxembourg). The experience on the basis of employment, self-employment or voluntary activity must correspond to at least 3 years and should be directly related to the qualification requested. The same applies to accredited study programmes offered by specialised higher education institutions and for short-cycle programmes offered by Luxembourgish secondary schools (see Articles 48 and 11 of the Law of 21 July 2023 concerning the organisation of higher education).	Alternative entry qualification Diplôme d'accès aux études supérieures (DAES) : individuals who were unable to obtain the <i>baccalauréat</i> have the chance to acquire an equivalent diploma.
HU	No	–	–

	Access through validation is legally possible	Description of the system	Other alternative access routes
MT	Yes	Higher education institutions are autonomous in deciding whether they accept applications based on the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. Institutions should have documented validation procedures to guide staff and applicants through the different stages of the process. These procedures should be approved by the Malta Authority for Further and Higher Education .	Some degree programmes allow access through preparatory programmes.
NL	Yes	The Higher Education and Research Act makes it possible for higher education institutions to adopt procedures and criteria for the recognition of acquired competences for those who are not enrolled.	Admission test: Colloquium Doctum: for candidates who are above the age of 21 and who do not have the required formal qualifications, it is possible to do an assessment / entry test to enrol in a higher education programme.
AT	Yes	Candidates can access first-cycle programmes at the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) based on a subject-relevant professional qualification. A subject-relevant professional qualification can be, for example, the completion of a relevant apprenticeship or a corresponding school for intermediate vocational education. In most cases, additional examinations are also required. The subject-relevant professional qualifications and additional examinations for the respective study programme are defined by the UAS.	Alternative entry qualifications: University entrance qualification examination (Studienberechtigungsprüfung): entitles the holder to be admitted to all degree programmes in the field of study for which the university entrance qualification was obtained. Vocational entrance exam (Berufsfreifeprüfung): additional entrance qualification for those who have completed initial vocational education.
PL	No	–	–
PT	Yes	The programme 'Programa Maiores de 23' set out in Decree-Law No 64/2006 (amended by Decree-Law No 113/2014 of 16 July). One of the evaluation dimensions for the access to higher education by this route destined for over-23-year-olds is the assessment of the educational and professional experience of the candidate. However, access cannot be granted without the admission test (see next column).	Admission test for people above the age of 23 (candidates must be at least 23 years old by 31 December of the year before they take the admission exam) without the traditional entry qualifications. The admission test aims to assess the knowledge and skills considered essential for entry and progression in the given course, and can be organised according to the different profiles of the candidates and the courses to which they apply.
RO	No	–	–
SI	No	–	–
SK	No	–	–
FI	Yes	According to the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act , higher education institutions can accept students to degree programmes without a certificate if the student can show they have the skills needed for the studies.	Students can be admitted based on studies completed in open university / open university of applied sciences.
SE	Yes	According to the Higher Education Ordinance , applicants without the necessary entry qualifications can show that they have the necessary competences for admission through a Swedish education or education outside of Sweden, practical experience or some other circumstance. Swedish higher education institutions have agreed to assess applicants without formal qualifications based on uniform requirements. They have developed recommendations for validating real competences for admission to higher education .	In order to create more paths to higher education, the Swedish government decided on a pilot project with a basic eligibility test for admission to higher education. It was aimed at people who were at least 24 years old and had not completed upper secondary education or the equivalent within adult education. An approved result from the test would give basic eligibility for higher education into all universities in Sweden. The test was held in 2022 and 2023. It will be evaluated during 2024, following which there will be a decision on whether this test will become permanent.
BA	No	–	–

	Access through validation is legally possible	Description of the system	Other alternative access routes
CH	Yes	Higher education institutions' autonomy. More information is available at the swissuniversities website .	The ' passerelle ' examination is an entrance exam that can be taken by candidates having only professional secondary leaving qualifications (<i>maturité professionnelle</i> or <i>maturité spécialisée</i>), which give access to universities of applied sciences, but not to all universities. Some higher education institutions also organise admission exams for candidates not complying with the regular admission criteria (see the example of ETH Zürich).
IS	Yes	According to the Higher Education Act , higher education institutions may accept students without the formal entry qualifications who possess an equivalent level of maturity and knowledge as assessed by the relevant institution.	According to the Higher Education Act , higher education institutions may offer preparatory study programmes for persons who do not meet the admission criteria.
LI	Yes	Higher education institutions are responsible for recognition decisions. If there is no standard entry qualification available, it is possible to make a 'sur dossier' application. The higher education institution in charge then decides which types of learning can be taken into account based on the application in question.	Higher education institutions have the autonomy to offer a 'preparatory semester' for learners without the standard entry qualifications.
ME	No	–	–
MK	No	–	–
NO	Yes	Candidates without the standard entry qualifications can access the university education based on the ' 23/5 rule '. Candidates must be at least 23 years old and should be able to document experience from work and/or education totalling at least 5 years. Caring for children or suffering from a long illness may also meet parts of this requirement.	
RS	No	–	–
TR	No	–	–

Annex 2: Legal possibility to fulfil first-cycle higher education study requirements through the validation of non-formal and informal learning, 2023/2024

Data in this annex feed Section 2 of this report (see Figure 2 and the related analysis). The table indicates whether it is legally possible to fulfil first-cycle higher education study requirements through the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Whenever possible, the table specifies whether there are any top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated. A short description of the system is also provided.

	Legally possible	Top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated	Description of the system and of regulatory restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated (if applicable)
BE fr	Yes	Yes	The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education (<i>valorisation des acquis de l'expérience</i> – VAE) is covered by Article 119 of the Decree 'Paysage'. This article approaches the admission and the allocation of credits in a combined perspective. The evaluation is organised by higher education institutions, which judge whether the candidate's skills and knowledge are sufficient to follow the chosen studies. Within the evaluation, it is possible to consider personal and professional experience, along with studies. The personal or professional experience must correspond to at least 5 years. Moreover, there is a separate regulation and dedicated guidelines for the education sector targeting adults known as 'social advancement education' (<i>enseignement de promotion sociale</i>). This sector covers both secondary and higher education. When it comes to higher education, the validation (<i>valorisation des acquis</i> – VA) is limited to 120 ECTS credits in the first cycle and 60 ECTS credits in the second cycle.
BE nl	Yes	No	The Codex Higher Education (Article II.241) makes it possible to use the validation of non-formal and informal learning to shorten the duration of studies (programme exemptions based on proof of competence). It is also possible to recognise/validate a full programme (Article II.245).
BG	No	–	–
CZ	Yes	Yes	The Higher Education Act, Section 60, allows recognising lifelong learning (i.e. non-degree) courses provided by higher education institutions. If graduates of lifelong learning courses become students of degree programmes, higher education institutions may recognise credits acquired in such courses for up to 60 % of the total number of credits required for the completion of studies. The recognition/validation of other types of non-formal learning is not specified in legislation, nor is the recognition/validation of informal learning.
DK	Yes	No	The validation system targets mainly short-cycle programmes and professional first-cycle programmes. Their applicants are requested to inform about previous work experience and completed higher education courses. The aim is to evaluate whether it is relevant to shorten the duration of the programme in question.
DE	Yes	Yes	There is currently no overarching legal regulation regarding credit transfer of skills and abilities acquired outside higher education. At the level of the <i>Länder</i>, the respective state higher education acts allow for credit transfer. The formulations in the Land laws are based on a series of resolutions and specifications, particularly those of the Conference of Ministers of Education (<i>Kultusministerkonferenz</i>) or the Accreditation Council. For details, see the related resolutions of the Conference of Ministers of Education from 2002 and 2008. The 2002 resolution of the Conference of Ministers of Education specifies that knowledge and skills acquired outside higher education, including through non-formal or informal learning, can account for a maximum of 50 % of the total credits of a degree.
EE	Yes	Yes	The Standard for Higher Education, paragraph 13, sets the principles for assessment and certification of prior learning and professional experience. Legislation states that the validation cannot replace the final examination and/or the thesis.
IE	Yes	No	Although higher education institutions are responsible for their admissions policies, they are nevertheless obliged to have procedures in place on access, transfer and progression. There are no top-level validation restrictions regarding the amount of learning that can be recognised/validated, but higher education institutions themselves address this question.

	Legally possible	Top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated	Description of the system and of regulatory restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated (if applicable)
IE	Yes	No	One example is the National University of Ireland, which stipulates, in its institutional guidelines (Degrees and Qualifications of The National University of Ireland: Recognition of Prior Learning , p. 5), that its constituting universities are generally not expected to offer full degrees on the basis of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. More specifically, the guidelines state that 'the circumstances in which it would be appropriate to make a full award solely on the basis of RPL [recognition of prior learning] are likely to be highly exceptional. The University does not therefore confer awards on this basis at this time. In an exceptional case, where a Recognised College proposes to make an award solely on the basis of prior learning, it should seek the views of the University at the earliest opportunity'.
EL	No	–	–
ES	Yes	Yes	In the first and second cycles, work and professional experience may be recognised in the form of credits. The number of credits that are allocated based on work or professional experience and/or non-degree higher education courses may not exceed 15 % of the total credits of a degree programme. A higher number of credits can only be allocated when non-degree courses (which a candidate has previously completed) are formally transformed into degree programmes or when there are interinstitutional agreements. The recognised credits are not related to a grading system and, therefore, are not considered when calculating overall students' academic marks. These rules are stipulated in Royal Decree 822/2021 (Articles 10.5, 10.6 and 10.7). In the short cycle, students may request the total or partial exemption of the professional module 'workplace training'. In this case, they must certify a work experience relating to their programme of at least 1 year.
FR	Yes	No	The validation of learning from experience (<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> – VAE) offers the possibility to receive exemptions from all or some study requirements relating to a qualification. The candidate must justify at least 1 year of professional experience relating to the content of the desired qualification. The professional experience does not need to be continuous, and it can take place within a job or during periods of initial or continuing training in a work environment. Moreover, there is a procedure for validating professional experience for engineers, which enables individuals to obtain the degree/title of engineer. Candidates must be at least 35 years old and have at least 5 years of professional practice in engineering positions. For details and regulatory references, see the ministerial webpage dedicated to the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
HR	Yes	No	It is legally possible for higher education institutions to implement the validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education study requirements. However, only some institutions have so far implemented relevant policies and procedures. Examples include the University of Rijeka and the Faculty of Economics of the University of Rijeka (for details on their arrangements, see: University of Rijeka; Faculty of Economics of the University of Rijeka). Moreover, specific conditions apply to students of nursing who can prove their work experience as nurses. They may be exempt from compulsory clinical practice.
IT	Yes	Yes	The principle of the recognition/validation of skills demonstrated by students is confirmed by Law no. 240/2010, article 14. Higher education institutions can recognise work experience, extracurricular internship or apprenticeship, or community service. They define how this is done in their teaching regulations. According to the above law (Article 14, paragraph 1), the validation is limited to 12 ECTS credits. It is noteworthy that in 1999, when the validation was introduced, there was no top-level restriction regarding the workload that can be validated. The restriction was then set to 60 ECTS credits in 2006, to 30 ECTS credits in 2009, and finally to 12 ECTS credits in 2010.
CY	No	–	–
LV	Yes	Yes	This area is covered by the Law on Higher Education Institutions, Article 59.3 'Recognising the Knowledge, Skills, and Competences Acquired Outside Formal Education or Obtained by Professional Experience'. This law stipulates that higher education institutions should assess the knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education, including through professional experience. They should also grant credits, if learning outcomes demonstrated correspond to those relating to different study programmes. A dedicated 2018 regulation issued in accordance with the above law states that the validation cannot replace the final examination and/or the thesis.

	Legally possible	Top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated	Description of the system and of regulatory restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated (if applicable)
LT	Yes	No	The validation of prior informal and/or non-formal learning is managed by higher education institutions. The ministerial Order for the assessment and recognition of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning stipulates only some basic principles (e.g. it requires all higher education institutions to establish rules regarding the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning.). Detailed rules and requirements are set by higher education institutions.
LU	Yes	Yes	The validation of learning from experience (<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> – VAE) in higher education is decentralised. Each higher education institution defines, within the limits of the legal framework in force, its own administrative procedures that VAE candidates need to undergo. When it comes to validation restrictions, the legal framework – namely Article 33 of the Law of 27 June 2018 outlining the organisation of the University of Luxembourg – specifies that VAE at the University of Luxembourg can only be partial, since at least 60 ECTS credits relating to first- or second-cycle study programmes must be obtained through the completion of courses provided by the university. The same principle applies to first- and second-cycle programmes offered by accredited specialised higher education institution (as outlined in Article 48 of the Law of 21 July 2023 concerning the organisation of higher education). In the short cycle, which is provided by secondary schools, at least 30 ECTS credits must be obtained through formal courses (as indicated in Article 11 of the latter law).
HU	Yes	Yes	The 2011 Higher Education Act , paragraph 49, allows higher education institutions to recognise non-formal and informal learning. The same law/paragraph stipulates that at least one third of the total credit value relating to a programme must be completed in the degree-awarding institution.
MT	Yes	No	Higher education institutions are required to provide a standard operating procedure on the recognition/validation of prior learning. The procedure must be aligned with the guidelines issued by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) and endorsed by the same authority. For details, see the webpage of the MFHEA dedicated to this theme .
NL	Yes	No	The Higher education and Research Act makes it possible for higher education institutions to use the recognition/validation of non-formal and informal learning in their programmes. However, not all institutions use this option, as there is no actual legal obligation. A national project testing flexible higher education based on learning outcomes started in 2016. In this project, the recognition/validation of non-formal and informal learning was one of the main elements. A law on structural implementation of flexible higher education based on learning outcomes is currently at the early adoption stage (March 2024). If the law passes, all higher education institution will have to provide possibilities for the recognition/validation of non-formal and informal learning. The implementation of the law is likely to start by September 2025.
AT	Yes	Yes	All higher education institutions can recognise/validate prior learning for parts of higher education programmes (not for full programmes). When it comes to universities, the Universities Act 2002 , paragraph 78, specifies that they may recognise passed examinations and other academic achievements from higher vocational schools and academic secondary schools up to a maximum of 60 ECTS credits, and professional and non-professional qualifications up to a maximum of 60 ECTS credits (these two types of the recognition are permissible up to a maximum of 90 ECTS credits). This means that the validation of non-formal and informal learning at universities is limited to 60 ECTS credits.
PL	Yes	Yes	According to the 2018 Law on Higher Education and Science , higher education institutions may recognise learning outcomes achieved outside formal degree programmes. However, the recognition cannot exceed 50 % of ECTS credits assigned to a programme.
PT	Yes	Yes	The Decree-Law no. 74/2006 of 24 March establishes the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education. The same text specifies that the total number of credits awarded for different types of (non-formal and informal) learning cannot exceed two thirds of the total credits of the study cycle.

	Legally possible	Top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated	Description of the system and of regulatory restrictions regarding the workload that can be validated (if applicable)
RO	Yes	No	The 2023 Law on Higher Education (article 180, paragraph 7) provides basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education. The same law (article 190, paragraph 1) indicates that the validation takes place within the assessment and recognition centres established for this purpose. The process is based on a methodology developed by the National Qualifications Authority and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and approved by the minister of education (note: as of March 2024, the methodology in question has yet to be developed). It is also explicitly stated (article 190, paragraph 2) that documents (certifications) obtained after the validation process produce the same legal effects as documents obtained in the framework of formal learning.
SI	Yes	No	The Higher Education Act , article 35, states that first- and second-cycle study programmes must have defined criteria for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired before enrolling to the study programme. According to the Criteria for the accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes , Articles 53 and 54, higher education institutions should have adequate procedures and processes in place for the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning. The exact conditions and criteria are not prescribed.
SK	Yes	No	The Higher Education Act (131/2002) does not explicitly address the validation of non-formal and informal learning. It states that the way higher education programmes are created and conducted falls under the responsibility of higher education institutions (paragraph 6, c). Some higher education institutions have in place internal regulations addressing the validation of non-formal and informal learning (see, for instance, the regulations of the Matej Bel University or the University of Žilina).
FI	Yes	No	According to the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act , higher education institutions can recognise and provide credits for different types of learning, including non-formal and informal learning.
SE	Yes	No	Higher education institutions take their own decisions regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning for the allocation of credits. Many, but not all higher education institutions have developed internal policy documents on the recognition and validation of (formal, non-formal and informal) learning.
BA	No	–	–
CH	Yes	No	In the absence of a national regulation, higher education institutions take their own decisions regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Examples of institutions with validation arrangements: the University of Geneva , the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland and the universities of teachers' education of the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Although there is no national regulation limiting the extent of validation, it would be unlikely for an institution to allocate a high number of credits (e.g. 120 ECTS in the first cycle) based on non-formal or informal learning.
IS	Yes	No	This area is not regulated, but rather reflects the practice of higher education institutions.
LI	Yes	No	This area is only regulated in relation to postgraduate study programmes. Regarding undergraduate study programmes, there is no regulation or restriction (validation of non-formal and/or informal learning is, in principle, legally possible in all study programmes).
ME	No	–	–
MK	No	–	–
NO	Yes	Yes	Higher education institutions take their own decisions regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, according to the Recognition Regulation (Paragraph 3), at least 60 ECTS credits must be obtained through courses in the higher education institution awarding the degree.
RS	No	–	–
TR	Yes	No	The recognition of prior learning, including learning taking place outside formal higher education programmes, is foreseen in higher education steering documents, including the Institutional self-evaluation report writing guide issued by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council. There are no top-level restrictions regarding the workload that can be recognised/validated. Following the Higher Education Law , Article 44 (b), the senates of higher education institutions take decisions regarding these matters.

Annex 3: Non-formal and/or informal learning activities that can be validated in higher education, 2023/2024

Data in the two tables that follow feed Section 3 of this report (see Figure 3 and the related analysis). The tables indicate which non-formal and/or informal learning activities can be validated for A) accessing higher education studies (if candidates do not comply with traditional access requirements), and B) fulfilling higher education study requirements. When available, additional information is provided.

A) Non-formal and/or informal learning activities that can be validated for accessing higher education

	Learning resulting from daily activities relating to		Non-formal education and training (E&T) courses provided by		In-company training	Comments / further information (if available)
	work / professional activity	family or leisure	higher education institutions (HEIs)	E&T institutions other than HEIs		
BE fr	●	●	●	●	●	See the description provided in Annex 1.
BE nl	●	●	●	●	●	
BG	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
CZ	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
DK	●		●	●	●	
DE	●	●	●	●	●	Specific admission requirements and policies vary depending on the university and programme. Alongside the generic categories selected in the previous columns, programmes in adult education centres, further education courses, language cafes, voluntary activities and internships may be considered as beneficial for higher education studies. Moreover, some vocational schools or private companies that offer further education courses or certification programmes may have agreements with higher education institutions to recognise these qualifications as part of the admission process.
EE	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
IE	●	●	●	●	●	
EL	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
ES	●		●	●	●	For access to the first cycle, only the first category and the last category apply (following Royal Decree 412/2014 , Article 16). Specific non-formal education and training courses (the third and fourth categories) can only give access to the short cycle (following Royal Decree 659/2023 , Article 113).
FR	●		●	●	●	See the description provided in Annex 1.
HR	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
IT	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
CY	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
LV	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
LT	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.

	Learning resulting from daily activities relating to		Non-formal education and training (E&T) courses provided by		In-company training	Comments / further information (if available)
	work / professional activity	family or leisure	higher education institutions (HEIs)	E&T institutions other than HEIs		
LU	●	●	●	●	●	The selection is based on the content of legislation, namely specifications provided in Article 33 of the Law of 27 June 2018 outlining the organisation of the University of Luxembourg and Article 48 of the Law of 21 July 2023 concerning the organisation of higher education . The same selection applies to the short cycle (based on Article 11 of the latter law).
HU	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
MT	●				●	Learning and its outcomes must be attested in some manner. Typical examples of proofs include certificates confirming participation in training, a report from an internship or an apprenticeship agreement, articles or other works written by the applicant.
NL	●	●	●	●	●	There are no legal restrictions regarding the type of learning that can be recognised/validated. This is determined by higher education institutions.
AT	●				●	
PL	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
PT	●		●	●	●	
RO	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
SI	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
SK	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
FI	●	●	●	●	●	According to the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act , higher education institutions can accept candidates with no standard entry qualifications if they can demonstrate skills needed for their studies. It is up to higher education institutions to define how this option will be used. Students can also be admitted based on studies completed in open universities.
SE	●	●	●	●	●	
BA	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
CH			●	●	●	Each higher education institution can decide what type(s) of learning will be considered.
IS	●		●	●	●	
LI	●	●	●	●	●	Candidates with no standard higher education entry qualification can be admitted based on the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning (the admission procedure known as 'sur dossier'). It is up to higher education institutions to decide what type(s) of learning will be considered.
ME	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
MK	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
NO	●	●	●	●	●	
RS	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.
TR	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for access to higher education.

B) Non-formal and/or informal learning activities that can be validated for fulfilling higher education study requirements

	Learning resulting from daily activities relating to		Non-formal education and training (E&T) courses provided by		In-company training	Comments / further information (if available)
	work / professional activity	family or leisure	higher education institutions (HEIs)	E&T institutions other than HEIs		
BE fr	●	●	●	●	●	See the description provided in Annex 2.
BE nl	●	●	●	●	●	
BG	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
CZ			●			The selection is based on the content of legislation, which is outlined in Annex 2. Higher education institutions could potentially recognise learning activities that go beyond the selected category. However, these activities are not explicitly referred to in legislation.
DK	●		●	●	●	
DE	●	●	●	●	●	In addition to the listed types of learning, higher education institutions could also consider open digital badges (i.e. verifiable digital awards issued to individuals), e-portfolios and micro-credentials.
EE	●		●	●	●	
IE	●	●	●	●	●	
EL	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
ES	●	●	●		●	The selection is based on the content of legislation, namely Royal Decree 822/2021 (Article 10).
FR	●			●	●	See the description provided in Annex 2.
HR			●	●	●	Specific conditions (not covered by the selection of categories) apply to students of nursing who can prove their work experience as nurses. They may be exempt from compulsory clinical practice.
IT	●		●	●	●	
CY	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
LV	●		●	●	●	
LT	●		●	●	●	The selection is based on the content of the Order for the assessment and recognition of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning . This regulation stipulates that higher education institutions can assesses competences acquired in a variety of ways: through work, training, participation in activities of various organisations and groups, volunteering, community service, non-formal and informal education, self-directed learning or other ways. It follows that the above regulation does not exclude learning from family or leisure activities; however, it does not explicitly refer to this type of activities, so this category is not selected.
LU	●	●	●	●	●	The selection is based on the content of legislation, namely specifications provided in Article 33 of the Law of 27 June 2018 outlining the organisation of the University of Luxembourg and Article 48 of the Law of 21 July 2023 concerning the organisation of higher education . The same selection applies to the short cycle (based on Article 11 of the latter law).
HU	●	●	●	●	●	
MT	●			●		See the information in the previous table.
NL	●	●	●	●	●	There are no legal restrictions regarding the type of learning that can be recognised/validated. This is determined by higher education institutions.
AT	●		●	●	●	
PL			●	●	●	

	Learning resulting from daily activities relating to		Non-formal education and training (E&T) courses provided by		In-company training	Comments / further information (if available)
	work / professional activity	family or leisure	higher education institutions (HEIs)	E&T institutions other than HEIs		
PT	●		●	●	●	Following the Decree-Law no. 74/2006 of 24 March , higher education institutions may credit previously completed training (in higher education or in other institutions) and professional experience, within the limits indicated in this legal framework (see also Annex 2).
RO	●	●	●	●	●	The selection is based on the content of legislation, namely specifications provided in the Law on Higher Education (article 183).
SI	●	●	●	●	●	There are no legal restrictions regarding non-formal and/or informal learning activities that can be recognised/validated for fulfilling higher education study requirements. This is determined by higher education institutions.
SK	●		●	●	●	The categories indicated are based on the analysis of internal regulations of some higher education institutions (see Annex 2 for details).
FI	●	●	●	●	●	There are no national limitations regarding the type of learning that can be recognised/validated. This is determined by higher education institutions.
SE	●	●	●	●	●	
BA	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
CH			●	●	●	Each higher education institution can decide what type(s) of learning will be considered.
IS	●		●	●	●	
LI	:	:	:	:	:	
ME	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
MK	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
NO	●	●	●	●	●	
RS	–	–	–	–	–	No validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education studies.
TR			●	●	●	

Annex 4: Presence of top-level (national) steering documents explicitly addressing the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning within higher education quality assurance procedures, 2023/2024

Data in the table below feed Section 4 of this report (see Figure 4 and the related analysis). The table considers only those education systems that allow the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning for access to higher education and/or fulfilment of study requirements (see Figures 1 and 2). It indicates whether, according to top-level (national) steering documents, quality assurance agencies explicitly address the implementation of the validation of prior non-formal and/or informal learning in their procedures. When this is the case, a short description is provided.

	Relevant document(s) in place	Description
BE fr	Yes	The Framework and accompanying guide for initial programme evaluations (Référentiel AEOES et guide d'accompagnement pour les évaluations initiales de programmes) includes a section on the validation of learning from experience and/or training (<i>Valorisation des acquis de l'expérience et/ou de la formation</i>). The section in question addresses the presence of validation arrangements, guidance related to these arrangements and the extent of their use by students.
BE nl	No	–
BG	–	–
CZ	No	–
DK	No	–
DE	Yes	The Accreditation Council (<i>Akkreditierungsrat</i>) in Germany sets the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education, and one of its requirements for external evaluation is to assess the recognition of prior learning and non-formal learning in the university's admission and degree requirements. Furthermore, the evaluation process conducted by the German accreditation agency explicitly considers the recognition of prior learning in its external evaluation process. The agency's evaluation criteria require higher education institutions to show how they recognise prior learning, both formal and non-formal/informal, and how they use this recognition to provide flexible and individualised learning pathways for students.
EE	Yes	Conformity with higher education legislation, including organisation and quality of the recognition/validation of prior non-formal and/or informal learning, is evaluated as part of accreditation of higher education institutions. For details, see the Guidelines for institutional accreditation issued by the Estonian Quality Agency for Education.
IE	Yes	Although higher education institutions are responsible for their admissions policies, they are nevertheless obliged to have procedures in place on access, transfer and progression. They are also required to comply with quality assurance guidelines issued by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (the body overseeing the quality of higher education in Ireland). Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is specifically referenced in the quality assurance guidelines, and would therefore be included in any institutional quality review process . These principles build on Section 57 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Act 2012 .
EL	–	–
ES	Yes	Following Royal Decree 822/2021 (Articles 10.2, 26.4, 26.5, Annex II, 3.2), universities must specify in the syllabus (study plan) of each degree the volume of credits that can be achieved through the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning, the conditions under which these credits can be achieved and their characteristics. For each syllabus, universities must prepare a syllabus report. These reports feed quality assurance processes conducted by quality assurance agencies.
FR	No	–
HR	No	–
IT	Yes	The National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes has produced a guide for the accreditation of university courses, which includes a section on the certification of skills (see p. 39).
CY	–	–
LV	Yes	The Quality Agency for Higher Education has issued self-evaluation guidelines for higher education institutions. In the self-evaluation report, higher education institutions should describe how they ensure the recognition of competences acquired in and outside previous education or through professional experience. The institutions are expected to have in place internal rules or procedures covering these aspects. Moreover, the same questions are covered by the external evaluation criteria of higher education institutions developed by the same agency.

	Relevant document(s) in place	Description
LT	Yes	Within external quality assurance procedures implemented by the national quality assurance agency (Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education – SKVC), attention is paid to how higher education institutions recognise foreign qualifications, periods of studies, along with non-formal and informal learning. This is considered within: • <i>ex post</i> institutional reviews (see the Methodology for Conducting Institutional Review of a Higher Education Institution, Annex 1); • <i>ex post</i> evaluation of study fields (see the Methodology of External Evaluation of Study Fields, Annex 1); and • <i>ex ante</i> evaluation of study programmes (see the Methodology for the Evaluation of New Study Programmes, Annex 1).
LU	Yes	As a component of the accreditation process, the quality assurance agency evaluates procedures for the validation of learning from experience (<i>validation des acquis de l'expérience</i> – VAE) of specialised higher education institutions and institutions offering short-cycle programmes, ensuring compliance with the current regulations. The respective evaluation criteria within the accreditation process are listed in Annexes B and D of the Higher Education Act.
HU	Yes	Within the process of institutional accreditation, higher education institutions carry out self-evaluations. According to the guidelines issued by the Hungarian Higher Education Accreditation Committee (p. 13, point 11), the self-evaluation includes reporting on whether the institution has in place procedures for the recognition of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning. If so, the institution should outline its experience in this area.
MT	Yes	The Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA), which is the quality assurance agency for higher education, has issues a guiding document on the validation/recognition of prior learning (Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – Definitions, Principles and Guidelines). Should an education institution be interested in introducing a recognition policy, it must adhere to the above guidelines and request approval from the MFHEA (prior to starting the recognition). For details on the procedure that the institutions need to follow, see a dedicated MFHEA webpage.
NL	No	–
AT	Yes	The Accreditation Decree on Universities of Applied Sciences specifies that the procedures for the recognition of formally, non-formally and informally acquired competences in terms of crediting towards examinations or parts of the degree programme must be clearly defined and transparent for all those who are involved.
PL	Yes	The criteria for programme evaluation established by the Polish Accreditation Committee specify the requirement to have in place formally adopted and published conditions for admitting candidates to studies and rules for student progression. In this context, the reference is made, among different aspects, to validation of learning outcomes obtained outside the study system. The criterion in question can be consulted in the template for programme self-assessment report (see Criterion 3, Standard 3.1 on pp. 25–26).
PT	Yes	The agency responsible for the quality of Portuguese higher education (A3ES) verifies whether higher education institutions have duly approved and publicised regulations, including those concerning the admission and progression of students and the recognition and certification of knowledge and competences, and whether they apply them consistently. The Guide for the assessment and accreditation of study cycles stipulates that the recognition of academic training and professional experience must be included in the self-assessment guide towards the external evaluation.
RO	Yes	The 2023 Law on Higher Education (article 189) specifies that the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts should be underpinned by internal quality assurance procedures. Moreover, the same law (articles 189 and 190) states that the validation should be conducted based on a methodology developed by the National Qualifications Authority and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. However, since the law is recent, the methodology in question has not yet been elaborated (nonetheless, it is foreseen in legislation).

	Relevant document(s) in place	Description
SI	Yes	The Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher (SQAA) is required to address the validation (recognition) of prior non-formal and/or informal learning in higher education by the Higher Education Act , article 35, which states that first- and second-cycle study programmes must have defined criteria for the recognition of knowledge and skills acquired before enrolling to the study programme. The SQAA requires that accredited higher education institutions have adequate procedures and processes in place for the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning (see the Criteria for the accreditation and external evaluation of higher education institutions and study programmes , Article 53 and 54), but does not prescribe criteria or conditions. These are defined by individual higher education institutions.
SK	Yes	The Standards for the internal quality assurance system of higher education published by the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education specify that policies of higher education institutions should ensure that the recognition of qualifications, periods of study, prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning, is transparent, consistent and reliable (Article 5, f).
FI	Yes	The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre conducts its evaluations according to an audit framework, which translates into the Audit manual for higher education institutions (2019–2024 period). Section 3.1.2 of the manual (p. 12) includes a broad formulation stating that the higher education institution 'applies the provisions and regulations concerning student admission, the recognition of prior learning, progress of studies and completion of degrees consistently and transparently'. It is also noteworthy that in order to make validation procedures and approaches more consistent across education institutions, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment have established a working group to promote and guide the creation of tools and procedures for the recognition of competences acquired in the workplace and non-formal education. Its mandate runs from July 2021 to December 2024.
SE	No	–
BA	–	–
CH	No	–
IS	No	–
LI	No	–
ME	–	–
MK	–	–
NO	No	–
RS	–	–
TR	Yes	The Institutional self-evaluation report writing guide , issued by the Turkish Higher Education Quality Council (THEQC), includes sub-criterion 'B.2.3. Student admission and the recognition and crediting of prior learning', which refers to recognising and crediting prior learning, including face-to-face, public, distance/blended education, knowledge and skills obtained through informal learning.

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EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND CULTURE EXECUTIVE AGENCY (EACEA)

Platforms, Studies and Analysis

Boulevard Simon Bolivar 34 (Unit A6)
1049 Brussels
BELGIUM
(<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu>)

Managing editor

David Crosier

Authors

Daniela Kocanova (coordination) and Anna Horváth

Graphics and layout

Patrice Brel

Cover

Publications Office of the European Union

Production coordinator

Gisèle De Lel

Contributing Eurydice National Units

AUSTRIA

Eurydice-Informationsstelle
Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und
Forschung
Abt. Bildungsstatistik und –monitoring
Minoritenplatz 5
1010 Wien
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

BELGIUM

Unité Eurydice de la Communauté française
Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles
Administration Générale de l'Enseignement
Avenue du Port, 16 – Bureau 4P03
1080 Bruxelles
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

Eurydice Vlaanderen
Departement Onderwijs en Vorming /
Afdeling Strategische Beleidsondersteuning
Hendrik Consciencegebouw 7C10
Koning Albert II-laan 15
1210 Brussel
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Ministry of Civil Affairs
Education Sector
Trg BiH 3
71000 Sarajevo
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

BULGARIA

Eurydice Unit
Human Resource Development Centre
Education Research and Planning Unit
15, Graf Ignatiev Str.
1000 Sofia
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

CROATIA

Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes
Frankopanska 26
10000 Zagreb
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

CYPRUS

Eurydice Unit
Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
Kimonos and Thoukydidou
1434 Nicosia
Contribution of the unit: Elli Hadjigeorgiou

CZECHIA

Eurydice Unit
Czech National Agency for International Education
and Research
Dům zahraniční spolupráce
Na Poříčí 1035/4
110 00 Praha 1
Contribution of the unit: Jana Halamová and
Helena Pavlíková

DENMARK

Eurydice Unit
Ministry of Higher Education and Science
Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education
Haraldsgade 53
2100 København Ø
Contribution of the unit: Ministry of Higher Education
and Science

ESTONIA

Eurydice Unit
Ministry of Education and Research
Munga 18
50088 Tartu
Contribution of the unit: Janne Pukk (expert), Inga
Kukk (coordinator)

FINLAND

Eurydice Unit
Finnish National Agency for Education
P.O. Box 380
00531 Helsinki
Contribution of the unit: Hanna Laakso

FRANCE

Eurydice Unit
Directorate of Evaluation, Forecasting and
Performance Monitoring (DEPP)
Ministries of National Education, Youth, Higher
Education and Research
61–65, rue Dutot
75732 Paris Cedex 15
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

GERMANY

Eurydice-Informationsstelle der Länder im
Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz
Taubenstraße 10
10117 Berlin
Contribution of the unit: Thomas Eckhardt

GREECE

Eurydice Unit
Directorate of European and International Affairs
General Directorate for International and European
Affairs
Hellenic Diaspora and Intercultural Affairs
Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports
37 Andrea Papandreou Str. (Office 2172)
151 80 Maroussi (Attiki)
Contribution of the unit: MoE: Alexia Karvouni,
Yannis Katsanevakis

HUNGARY

Hungarian Eurydice Unit
Educational Authority
19–21 Maros Str.
1122 Budapest
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

ICELAND

Eurydice Unit
Ministry of Education and Children
Borgartún 33
105 Reykjavík
Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

IRELAND

Eurydice Unit
 Department of Education
 International Section
 Marlborough Street
 Dublin 1
 DO1 RC96
 Contribution of the unit: Department of Education (DoE) and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

ITALY

Unità italiana di Eurydice
 Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa (INDIRE)
 Agenzia Erasmus+
 Via C. Lombroso 6/15
 50134 Firenze
 Contribution of the unit: Alessandra Mochi; expert: Paola Castellucci (Direzione Generale dell'internazionalizzazione e della comunicazione – Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca)

LATVIA

Eurydice Unit
 State Education Development Agency
 Valņu street 1 (5th floor)
 1050 Riga
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

LIECHTENSTEIN

Informationsstelle Eurydice
 Schulamt des Fürstentums Liechtenstein
 Austrasse 79
 Postfach 684
 9490 Vaduz
 Contribution of the unit: Belgin Amann

LITHUANIA

Eurydice Unit
 National Agency for Education
 K. Kalinauskas str. 7
 03107 Vilnius
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

LUXEMBOURG

Unité nationale d'Eurydice
 ANEFORE ASBL
 eduPôle Walferdange
 Bâtiment 03 – étage 01
 Route de Diekirch
 7220 Walferdange
 Contribution of the unit: Ministry of Research and Higher Education

MALTA

Eurydice National Unit
 Directorate for Research, Lifelong Learning and Employability
 Ministry for Education, Sports, Youth, Research and Innovation
 Great Siege Road
 Floriana VLT 2000
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

MONTENEGRO

Eurydice Unit
 Vaka Djurovica bb
 81000 Podgorica
 Contribution of the Unit: Ms Milica Zizic, Department for higher education, Ministry of education

NETHERLANDS

Eurydice Nederland
 Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap
 Directie Internationaal Beleid
 Rijnstraat 50
 2500 BJ Den Haag
 Contribution of the unit: Sakina Aouam and Charlotte Ruitinga

NORTH MACEDONIA

National Agency for European Educational Programmes and Mobility
 Boulevard Kuzman Josifovski Pitu, No 17
 1000 Skopje
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

NORWAY

Eurydice Unit
 Directorate for Higher Education and Skills
 Postboks 1093
 5809 Bergen
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

POLAND

Polish Eurydice Unit
 Foundation for the Development of the Education System
 Aleje Jerozolimskie 142A
 02-305 Warszawa
 Contribution of the unit: Magdalena Górowska-Fells; national expert: dr Mariusz Luterek (University of Warsaw), in consultation with Ms Renata Korzeniowska-Puculek (Ministry of Science and Higher Education)

PORTUGAL

Portuguese Eurydice Unit
 Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics
 Av. 24 de Julho, 134
 1399-054 Lisbon
 Contribution of the unit: Margarida Leandro, in collaboration with the Directorate-General for Higher Education (DGES) and the Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES)

ROMANIA

Eurydice Unit
 National Agency for Community Programmes in the
 Field of Education and Vocational Training
 Universitatea Națională de Știință și Tehnologie
 Politehnica București
 Biblioteca Centrală
 Splaiul Independenței, nr. 313
 Sector 6
 060042 București
 Contribution of the Unit: Associate lecturer Cristina
 Florina Barna, The National University of Political
 Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA);
 Professor Daniela Cristina Ghițulică, University
 Politehnica of Bucharest and Romanian Agency for
 Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS);
 Professor Nicoleta Lițoiu, University Politehnica of
 Bucharest

SERBIA

Eurydice Unit Serbia
 Foundation Tempus
 Zabljacka 12
 11000 Belgrade
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

SLOVAKIA

Eurydice Unit
 Slovak Academic Association for International
 Cooperation
 Križkova 9
 811 04 Bratislava
 Contribution of the unit: Martina Valušková and
 Juraj Schweigert

SLOVENIA

Eurydice Slovenia
 Ministry of Education
 Education Development and Quality Office
 Masarykova cesta 16
 1000 Ljubljana
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

SPAIN

Eurydice España-REDIE
 Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (INEE)
 Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y
 Deportes (MEFD)
 Paseo del Prado, 28
 28014 Madrid
 Contribution of the unit: Gerardo López Porras,
 Juan Mesonero Gómez and Jaime Vaquero
 Jiménez

SWEDEN

Eurydice Unit
 Universitets- och högskolerådet/
 The Swedish Council for Higher Education
 Box 4030
 171 04 Solna
 Contribution of the unit: joint responsibility

SWITZERLAND

Eurydice Unit
 Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of
 Education (EDK)
 Speichergasse 6
 3001 Bern
 Contribution of the unit: Aurélia Robert-Tissot (State
 Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation)
 and Antoine Maret (Swissuniversities)

TÜRKİYE

Eurydice Unit
 MEB, Strateji Geliştirme Başkanlığı (SGB)
 Eurydice Türkiye Birimi, Merkez Bina 4. Kat
 B-Blok Bakanlıklar
 06648 Ankara
 Contribution of the unit: Dilek Güleçyüz, Hatice
 Nihan Erdal (MoNE), Aydın Aslan (HEC)

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Validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education in Europe

Eurydice report

This report investigates whether higher education systems across Europe recognise and validate learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning. Specifically, the report looks at whether non-formal and informal learning can enable alternative access to higher education; the extent to which non-formal and informal learning can contribute to the fulfilment of higher education study requirements by substituting formal degree courses; the type of learning that can be validated; and the quality assurance mechanisms underpinning validation practice. The report finds that the validation of non-formal and informal learning for the fulfilment of higher education study requirements is more common than the validation for accessing higher education studies. At the same time, permissive regulations cover very diverse realities.

The report covers 37 European higher education systems (all EU Member States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye).

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