Implementing a system of Recognition of Prior Learning for technical skills

Establishing a validation system of prior non-formal and informal learning in Croatia

Foreword

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Executive Summary

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) allows adults to officially validate the knowledge and skills they have acquired in non-formal and informal settings. It has many benefits for employees and for employers. For employees, it makes visible knowledge and skills acquired informally or non-formally. This improves their employability, supporting job transitions, improving labour market outcomes, and facilitating access to education and training. For employers, it exposes information about employees' skills, allowing for a better match between jobs and skills. All adults can benefit from RPL, but it is especially useful for adults with low levels of formal education or training, those facing career transitions, and migrants and refugees trying to enter their host country's labour market.

This report provides international examples and analysis of RPL systems for professional and technical competences, based on new evidence gathered through a peer-learning workshop, a study visit, interviews with international experts throughout European Union countries and desk research. The examples and analysis should support countries looking to design their own systems of RPL.

RPL systems for professional and technical competences can be grouped in three categories depending on the level of involvement of social partners: government-led, industry-led and hybrid systems. The majority of countries included in this review fall in the government-led category (Denmark, Finland, France, Latvia, Portugal and Spain). Germany and the Netherlands have industry-led RPL systems and Wallonia (Belgium), Estonia and Sweden have hybrid RPL systems. RPL systems within each group share similarities in how they are regulated and what RPL standards and assessment methods are used.

Government-led systems usually establish and develop their RPL system through legislation or regulation, while industry-led and hybrid RPL systems are generally established through formal agreements, either between different governmental institutions, the government and social partners, or among social partners themselves. This can have an impact on the longevity of the system, as systems with a strong legal basis may better withstand changes in government priorities.

Regardless of the RPL system type, public institutions are generally involved in the governance of the system. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour (or a subordinate or linked independent agency) are usually jointly or independently responsible for the RPL system. Involvement of the Ministries of Education and Labour in the RPL system has clear advantages, as it provides official recognition to the RPL system, enables alignment with the National Qualification Framework, and leverages other relevant skills policies, such as career guidance.

A core element of an RPL system are its standards. Candidate's competences that were acquired non-formally or informally are assessed against RPL standards, which serve as a benchmark. RPL standards used for the purpose of validating candidates' competences can come from a qualification framework, from an occupational standard or from industry standards. Government-led systems tend to use the learning outcomes, tasks and activities established in the National Qualification Framework as the basis of RPL standards, while under industry-led systems the social partners generally develop RPL standards themselves. An advantage with using the National Qualification Framework is that this ensures that

standards are well-accepted and transparent. However, industry standards developed by social partners may be easier to update and keep aligned with evolving labour market needs.

Assessment methods used in RPL are different from those typical of school-based learning, which is appropriate given that RPL assesses learning acquired in informal and non-formal environments. Assessment methods such as written exams or case studies may not be appropriate for RPL. The right assessment method depends on the nature of the learning outcome, the characteristics of the candidate and the skill level of the occupation for which the candidate is taking the RPL process. In general, candidates with low levels of formal education or training or who do not feel fully comfortable with the language in which the RPL process takes place may be more likely to succeed with practical assessments, such as workplace observation or work simulation. Similarly, practical assessments may be most appropriate for occupations where low levels of formal education or training are required.

Portfolios are the most common RPL assessment method in government-led systems, while practical assessments are most common in industry-led systems. The portfolio method allows the candidate to document past work experiences and outputs as evidence that they have met the required learning outcomes. In government-led systems, portfolios are often required in addition to a second assessment method. In contrast, industry-led RPL systems tend to focus more on practical assessments. While practical assessments can be faster to carry out, and feel more natural to low-educated candidates, they can also be more expensive than portfolio assessments. Countries like Germany overcome these cost constraints by conducting practical assessments at the workplace, where equipment and materials are available.

Izvršni sažetak

Priznavanje prethodnog učenja (RPL) omogućuje odraslima da službeno potvrde znanje koje su stekli u neformalnom i informalnom okruženju. Ima brojne prednosti za zaposlenike i poslodavce. Za zaposlenike čini vidljivim znanja i vještine stečene informalno ili neformalno. To poboljšava njihovu zapošljivost, podupire prijelaz na novi posao, poboljšava rezultate na tržištu rada i olakšava pristup obrazovanju i osposobljavanju. Za poslodavce, otkriva informacije o vještinama zaposlenika, omogućujući bolju usklađenost između poslova i vještina. Sve odrasle osobe mogu imati koristi od RPL-a, ali je posebno koristan za odrasle s niskom razinom formalnog obrazovanja ili osposobljavanja, one koji se suočavaju s prijelazom u karijeri te migrante i izbjeglice koji pokušavaju ući na tržište rada u zemlji domaćinu.

Ovo izvješće pruža međunarodne primjere i analizu RPL sustava za profesionalne i tehničke kompetencije, temeljene na novim dokazima prikupljenim kroz radionicu uzajamnog učenja, studijski posjet, razgovore s međunarodnim stručnjacima diljem zemalja Europske unije i istraživanje. Primjeri i analiza trebali bi podržati zemlje koje žele dizajnirati vlastite sustave RPL-a.

RPL sustavi za profesionalne i tehničke kompetencije mogu se grupirati u tri kategorije ovisno o razini uključenosti socijalnih partnera: sustavi koje vodi vlada, koje vodi industrija i hibridni sustavi. Većina zemalja uključenih u pregled spada u kategoriju koju vode vlade (Danska, Finska, Francuska, Latvija, Portugal i Španjolska). Njemačka i Nizozemska imaju industrijske RPL sustave, a Valonija (Belgija), Estonija i Švedska imaju hibridne RPL sustave. RPL sustavi unutar svake skupine dijele sličnosti u tome kako su regulirani i koji se RPL standardi i metode procjene koriste.

Sustavi pod vodstvom vlade obično uspostavljaju i razvijaju svoj sustav RPL kroz zakonodavstvo ili propise, dok su sustavi pod vodstvom industrije i hibridni sustavi RPL općenito uspostavljeni kroz formalne sporazume, bilo između različitih vladinih institucija, vlade i socijalnih partnera ili samih socijalnih partnera, a razvija ih socijalni partneri. To može utjecati na dugovječnost sustava jer sustavi s jakom pravnom osnovom mogu bolje podnijeti promjene u državnim prioritetima.

Bez obzira na vrstu RPL sustava, javne institucije su općenito uključene u upravljanje sustavom. Ministarstvo obrazovanja i Ministarstvo rada (ili podređena ili nezavisna agencija) obično su zajednički ili neovisno odgovorni za sustav PPL-a. Uključivanje ministarstava obrazovanja i rada u sustav RPL-a ima jasne prednosti, jer osigurava službeno priznavanje sustava RPL-a, omogućuje usklađivanje s nacionalnim kvalifikacijskim okvirom i potiče druge relevantne politike vještina, kao što je profesionalno usmjeravanje.

Ključni element RPL sustava su njegovi standardi. Kandidatove kompetencije koje su stečene neformalno ili informalno ocjenjuju se prema RPL standardima koji služe kao mjerilo. RPL standardi, standardi koji se koriste u svrhu vrednovanja kompetencija kandidata, mogu proizaći iz kvalifikacijskog okvira, standarda zanimanja ili industrijskih standarda. Sustavi kojima upravlja vlada imaju tendenciju da koriste ishode učenja, zadatke i aktivnosti utvrđene u Nacionalnom kvalifikacijskom okviru kao osnovu standarda RPL-a, dok u sustavima koje vodi industrija socijalni partneri općenito sami razvijaju standarde RPL-a. Prednost korištenja Nacionalnog kvalifikacijskog okvira je u tome što se time osigurava da su standardi dobro prihvaćeni i transparentni. Međutim, industrijske standarde koje su razvili socijalni partneri može biti lakše ažurirati i uskladiti s rastućim potrebama tržišta rada.

Metode ocjenjivanja koje se koriste u RPL-u razlikuju se od onih tipičnih za učenje u školi, što je prikladno s obzirom na to da se u RPL-u ocjenjuje učenje stečeno u informalnim i neformalnim okruženjima. Metode ocjenjivanja kao što su pismeni ispiti ili studije slučaja možda nisu prikladne za RPL. Pravi način ocjenjivanja ovisi o prirodi ishoda učenja, karakteristikama kandidata i razini vještina zanimanja za koje kandidat polaže RPL proces. Općenito, kandidati s niskom razinom formalnog obrazovanja ili osposobljavanja ili koji se ne osjećaju potpuno ugodno s jezikom na kojem se odvija proces RPL-a imaju veću vjerojatnost da će uspjeti s praktičnim procjenama, kao što je promatranje radnog mjesta ili simulacija rada. Slično tome, praktične ocjene mogu biti najprikladnije za kandidate iz zanimanja gdje se zahtijeva niska razina formalnog obrazovanja ili obuke.

Portfelji su najčešća metoda procjene RPL-a u sustavima koje vodi vlada, dok su praktične procjene najčešće u sustavima koje vodi industrija. Portfolio metoda omogućuje kandidatu da dokumentira prošla radna iskustva i rezultate kao dokaz da je ispunio tražene ishode učenja. U sustavima koje vodi vlada, portfelji su često potrebni uz drugu metodu procjene. Nasuprot tome, RPL sustavi vođeni industrijom više se fokusiraju na praktične procjene. Dok praktične procjene mogu biti brže za provedbu i izgledaju prirodnije nisko obrazovanim kandidatima, one također mogu biti skuplje od procjena portfelja. Zemlje poput Njemačke prevladavaju ta ograničenja troškova provođenjem praktičnih procjena na radnom mjestu, gdje su dostupni oprema i materijali.

1 The role of RPL in adult learning and the labour market

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a key instrument to improve the employability of adults. It makes visible all knowledge, including the diverse and rich learning that takes place outside of formal education (Cedefop, 2015[1]) and allows for a better match between jobs and skills (Cedefop, 2018[2]).

Additionally, RPL is an effective instrument to re-engage adults in training and education, which is crucial to better adapt to evolving skill needs and changing labour markets. The RPL process can clarify an adult's skills gaps and suggest upskilling options. By certifying skills for adults lacking formal qualifications, RPL also facilitates access to courses that have minimum entry requirements.

RPL can be beneficial for many groups of adults, and particularly for low-educated adults, those facing career transitions and migrants and refugees. Adults with low levels of formal education or training who wish to retrain or access better jobs can use RPL to demonstrate the skills they have developed through informal and non-formal learning. RPL can help adults going through career transitions by exposing skills that can be valuable across professions. RPL can also be helpful for migrants and refugees, by delivering formal credentials that are recognised in their host country labour market.

There is no single way to design an RPL system. Specific features can vary significantly depending on the goal of the system, its target group, the type of competences that it aims to validate and the country context. This report provides international examples showcasing possible ways to design and develop an RPL system for professional and technical competences. In particular, it addresses the regulation and governance of RPL systems, how RPL standards are developed, and the choice of RPL assessment methods. This report is the second in a series of reports on recognition of prior learning, with the first report covering the recognition of prior learning in adult basic education and focusing on general competences (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022[3]).

Eleven RPL systems from European Union member countries were reviewed as part of this report: Wallonia (Belgium), Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. These examples were selected on the basis that they focus on professional and technical competences, are open to all adults and aim to improve labour market outcomes. RPL systems designed with the sole purpose of facilitating access to education and training (and without a labour market objective) were excluded from the review.

The information used to produce this report was gathered through desk research, online interviews with country experts, a peer-learning workshop that took place on October 18, 2022, in Zagreb (Croatia) and a study visit that took place in Paris (France) on October 20, 2022.

What is an RPL system?

An RPL system allows adults to officially validate the knowledge they have acquired in informal settings, such as on the job, or in non-formal settings, such as in courses that are not part of the formal education curriculum. This validation can open up better job opportunities and/or grant access to formal training or

education. Typically, an RPL process includes four stages: identification, documentation, assessment and validation (Cedefop, 2015[1]).

During the identification phase, the candidate is supported by an advisor to understand if they could benefit from RPL and to identify the right RPL standards with respect to which the RPL process should be carried out. These RPL standards can come from a qualification framework, from an occupational standard or from industry standards, and can relate to the whole qualification, occupation or industry standard or to a smaller group of competences, such as a block of competences or a competence unit. The advisor usually also accompanies the candidate throughout the documentation phase, during which the candidate collects all relevant documentation and evidence to prove that they have developed a given competence. In the assessment phase, the candidate is evaluated by one or multiple assessors to determine if they have proven to have the skills and competences included in the relevant standards. Finally, if the candidate is successful, the certifying body awards the relevant certification in the certification phase.

Different actors have different roles in the RPL process. Usually there is an advisor who supports the RPL candidate in selecting the right standards for the RPL process and in putting together all relevant evidence and documentation. One or multiple assessors asses the candidate documentation and/or the candidate's performance during the assessment phase. Additionally, an RPL administrator takes care of the administrative procedures linked to the RPL process and an RPL moderator can ensure the validity and fairness of the process, ensuring the quality of the overall RPL system.

Since RPL systems mostly cater to experienced workers without formal education or training, these systems must be flexible and capable of adapting to adults with different levels of skills and needs. For example, the assessment method may be chosen on a case-by-case basis or candidates may be able to select the learning outcomes that they want to assess in the RPL process from the standards. This flexibility is important particularly to ensure that the system can cater to low-skilled adults. For example, linking the RPL process to the formal education and training system and its school-based assessment methods, such as written exams, may work for some adults but could exclude from RPL adults who may benefit the most from it.

Skills assessed by RPL systems

While the majority of RPL systems focus on professional and technical competences, RPL can also be used to validate adults' general competences (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022[3]) or transversal skills.

RPL systems that validate professional and technical competences intend to support adults in entering and progressing in the labour market or to offer them access to formal or non-formal vocational education and training. Given their labour market focus, social partners are often involved in these systems, at a minimum contributing to developing the standards used to assess the candidate's competences. Many of these systems rely on documentation that indirectly demonstrates the candidate's competences through past experiences, but some of the systems also use hands-on, authentic examinations and simulations.

The recognition of general competences or transversal skills is significantly less common in OECD countries. RPL systems that validate general competences – those that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, such as numeracy or literacy – often have the purpose of enabling access to further studies. Some RPL systems recognise transversal skills – skills required of workers across a wide range of jobs and sectors, such as problem solving or communication skills. These RPL systems often have the purpose of facilitating career transitions.

In systems that validate general competences for the purpose of accessing further studies, RPL is used to gain admission to non-formal general training programmes. Some OECD countries (for example, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Norway, Slovenia and Spain) have guidelines on the validation of general competences for the purpose of accessing formal general education. In these cases, adults

going through RPL will obtain an official qualification, or part of one, at the end of their studies, requiring precise regulation to ensure a correct and consistent application of the validation process (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022[3]).

Finally, some systems validate transversal skills with the purpose of facilitating career transitions. These systems expose skills that can be valuable across professions, such as problem solving, communication, management or leadership skills. While these systems are relatively new, they can be valuable in the labour market, especially at a time of changing skills needs and labour markets. These systems can facilitate the transition of workers from industries that are going through structural change to other jobs where their transversal skills are relevant. One example of such a system is the cross-professional skills RPL initiative currently implemented in the Netherlands by the Dutch Knowledge Centre for VPL (Dutch Knowledge Centre for VPL, 2022[4]). Over 500 adults have certified their transversal skills using this RPL system since 2016.

2 Social partners' involvement in RPL systems, regulation and governance

Social partners are generally involved in the development of an RPL system, given their connection to the labour market and the relevance of RPL to meet labour market needs. However, their degree of involvement and their role differ significantly from country to country. Depending on the extent of the involvement of social partners, RPL systems share similarities in how their systems are regulated and what RPL standards and assessment methods are used.

Countries with low levels of social partner involvement tend to have fully regulated RPL systems, either as part of an independent law or embedded within the regulation of an education level for which RPL is possible or within the regulation that creates and governs the institutions in charge of providing RPL. In contrast, in countries with high levels of social partner involvement, RPL systems are generally based on collective agreements or not regulated at all. In all cases, the Ministry of Labour or Education tends to be involved in some way in governing and supervising the system.

Classification of RPL systems by the role of social partners

Since RPL for professional and technical competences is closely connected to the labour market, social partners are usually involved in the RPL system. The extent to which social partners are involved ranges from participating in the development of the National Qualification Framework to developing and implementing the RPL system. The extent of social partner involvement is correlated with different features of RPL systems, such as how RPL systems are regulated and what RPL standards and assessment methods are used. For this reason, this report classifies RPL systems depending on the involvement of social partners.

The 11 RPL systems reviewed in this report are divided into three groups depending on the involvement of social partners: government-led systems, industry-led systems, and hybrid systems. Under government-led systems, RPL is mostly or completely developed and implemented under the government's supervision. In industry-led systems, RPL is mostly or completely developed and implemented by social partners. Under hybrid systems, the government and social partners share RPL responsibilities.

Table 2.1. Classification of RPL systems by social partner involvement

Government-led	Industry-led	Hybrid
Denmark	Germany	Belgium
Finland	Netherlands	Estonia
France		Sweden
Latvia		
Portugal		
Spain		

Note: Belgium refers to the French-speaking community (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*). The RPL systems analysed for the Netherlands and Sweden are the RPL systems corresponding to the labour market route. The RPL system analysed for Germany is the *Valikom Transfer* project. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 2.1 classifies the countries in this review into each of the three groups. Most countries included in this review have a government-led system in which the government plays a major role in regulating and/or managing the RPL system. In both Germany and the Netherlands[1] RPL is developed by social partners, who also implement the systems and, in the case of the Netherlands, manage it. Belgium, Estonia and Sweden have hybrid systems, in which both, government and social partners, are highly involved in the system. In the case of Wallonia (Belgium), the RPL system falls under the responsibility of the regional government but has strong social partner involvement in all aspects of the system, from identifying the occupations for which RPL will be available to certification. In Estonia, the Ministry of Education and Research defines the objectives and benchmarks for RPL, but the system is organised and implemented by social partners. In Sweden, the system falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research, which provides guidelines on how to develop standards through the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. Social partners in each industry develop the RPL standards and certify RPL candidates.

Both government-led and industry-led systems have advantages and disadvantages. Government-led systems usually have a stronger legal basis and can be easier to develop and implement in countries where the public sector is highly involved in the provision of adult learning. Additionally, they can leverage publicly managed adult learning and support structures, such as training centres and career guidance programmes. Certification can also be easier in government-led systems, as the Ministry of Education that delivers qualifications in the formal education system is usually more involved in the RPL system. On the other hand, industry-led systems may be more responsive to changes in skill needs and these changes may be more promptly reflected in RPL standards. Furthermore, the strong involvement of employer associations in the RPL system can increase the visibility and the value of RPL among employers.

Hybrid systems potentially have the advantages of both system types: if properly designed, they can leverage the strong legal basis and alignment with adult learning programmes of government-led systems,

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[1] The Netherlands and Sweden have a dual RPL system with an education path and a labour market path. The education path has as a goal the access to education or training. Since this report focuses on systems for professional and technical competences that have as a goal entering and progressing in the labour market, only the labour market RPL systems for the Netherlands and Sweden are included in the report.

while being highly responsive to changing skill needs and increasing awareness and acceptance of RPL among employers.

Different types of RPL systems can also co-exist in the same country. This is the case in Sweden, where there are two RPL systems with different goals. There is an RPL system with an "education path," in which candidates can carry out RPL for access to education and training, to obtain exemptions to education programmes or to define individual learning pathways. There is also a second RPL system with a "labour market path," that aims to improve the employability of candidates. The education path is government-led, while the labour market path can be classified as a hybrid system.

Regulation of RPL systems

There are major differences in the way that RPL is regulated depending on the type of RPL system. In government-led systems, the RPL systems are usually defined and developed through legislation or regulation. In contrast, for industry-led or hybrid systems, RPL systems tend to be developed through agreements either between the government and social partners (the Netherlands), between different regional governments (Wallonia, Belgium), or through collective agreements (Sweden). Estonia is an exception, in which the basis of the hybrid system is defined by law, which includes a broad description of the RPL process and procedures and defines the responsibilities of the assessing bodies.

These differences in how RPL is regulated can have implications on the longevity of the system. Systems without a strong legislative basis are more vulnerable to changes in governmental priorities as they can be discontinued more easily. This is the risk, for example, of *Valikom Transfer* in Germany. *Valikom Transfer* is a country-wide labour market-oriented RPL system open to all adults that fulfil specific eligibility criteria. It is managed and implemented by 32 Chambers of Commerce and it is currently a project set to end in October 2024. Despite its success, unless the project is incorporated into German law before this, it will be discontinued.

For countries with government-led systems, the relevant laws, decrees, acts or regulations provide a comprehensive description of the system, usually covering the following aspects:

- The institutions involved in the RPL process, including the governance of the system and the institutions that provide RPL.
- The eligibility criteria for candidates to participate in RPL.
- The standards used as a reference for the RPL process.
- The actors involved in the RPL process, the requirements they must fulfil and their responsibilities. These refer to the advisor, assessor, administrator and moderator roles, as discussed in Chapter 1.
- The phases of the RPL process.
- The possible assessment methods within the RPL process.
- The output of the RPL process and how it relates to and interacts with the formal education and training system.
- The quality assurance of the RPL process and system.
- The distribution of information on RPL.

Countries can use different legal instruments to regulate RPL, with these legal instruments requiring different levels of consensus. For example, RPL is developed through Royal Decrees in Spain and by Ordinances (*Portarias*) in Portugal, which both require approval by the government. On the other hand, in France and in Finland RPL is mostly regulated by laws and acts, which require parliamentary approval.

Regulation for RPL may stand on its own or it can be embedded in other regulations. In France and Spain, there is legislation specifically dedicated to the RPL process. By contrast, Finland and Denmark have developed their RPL systems within the acts that regulate the education or training system. Similarly, in Portugal, RPL was first developed within the Ordinance that creates and regulates the Qualifica centres (Ordinance 232/2016), the centres offering RPL in Portugal. One could argue that stand-alone legislation for RPL simplifies its application and its updating. RPL systems developed simultaneously in different pieces of legislation could be more challenging to update, given that they involve several bodies of law.

Governance of RPL systems

Public institutions are involved in the governance of all RPL systems analysed in this review, including industry-led systems. Public institutions have ultimate responsibility for the RPL system and are usually in charge of overseeing and developing the system or delegating these responsibilities to other institutions. The involvement of the Ministry of Education and/or Labour in the governance of RPL systems has clear advantages. First of all, it offers an official recognition of the system, improving acceptance of the RPL system and minimising the probability that private entities may consider developing a parallel RPL system. Secondly, it allows the RPL system to leverage other policies or structures related to adult learning and skills. For example, in France, RPL candidates can use their Individual Learning Accounts (*Compte Personnel de Formation*, CPF) to cover the costs of guidance related to the RPL process. Involvement of these Ministries in the governance of the RPL system also enables alignment of the RPL system with other education and labour related policies and government strategies, such as the National Qualification Framework.

In government-led systems, responsibility usually falls to the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour or both. The Ministry of Education is ultimately responsible in Finland and Latvia and the Ministry of Labour is responsible in France. In Spain and Portugal, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour are jointly responsible for the RPL system. While it may imply higher coordination costs, this type of joint approach may be the most effective to align the RPL system to both labour market needs and the existing formal education and training system.

The ministry responsible for the RPL system may be supported by a public agency which leads the development or management of the RPL system. This is the case in Finland, Latvia and Portugal, with the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), the Latvian State Education Quality Service manages RPL, and the Portuguese National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training (ANQEP).

The Ministries of Education and/or Labour are usually involved in the governance of RPL under industry-led systems, though to a lesser extent than under government-led systems. In the Netherlands, which is the RPL system with the lowest public sector involvement, governance is shared between the government (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the National Labour Authority and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy) and the social partners. Together they are jointly responsible for maintaining and promoting a high quality RPL system, though in practise social partners manage and implement the RPL system through the Dutch Knowledge Centre for VPL (*Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC*) with no government involvement. In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) leads the development and manages the funding of *Valikom Transfer*, which is administratively managed by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) and implemented by the Chambers of Commerce.

Similarly, Ministries of Education and/or Labour are involved in the governance of RPL under hybrid systems. In Wallonia (Belgium), the system falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour of the Walloon regional government. In Estonia and Sweden, the Ministry of Education is in charge of the RPL system, but is also supported by other public entities who coordinate the system. In Estonia, the

Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*) and the Occupational Qualification Councils (OQCs) coordinate the system, and in Sweden it is the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten for Yrkeshogskolan*).

3 Developing RPL standards

The core of an RPL system are RPL standards, i.e. the benchmark against which the candidates' competences are assessed during the RPL process. RPL standards can come from a qualification framework, from an occupational standard or from industry standards, and can relate to the whole qualification, occupation or industry standard or to a smaller group of competences, such as a block of competences or a competence unit. RPL standards usually consist of a list of activities and tasks together with the related competences. The candidate first selects the RPL standard that they wish to be assessed against, often with the support of an advisor. Then, as part of the documentation and assessment phases, the candidate must prove capable of carrying out the activities and tasks included in the selected RPL standard in order to obtain the RPL certification.

The development of RPL standards

While the process of developing RPL standards varies from country to country, social partners are generally involved. As candidates complete the RPL process to improve their employability, standards must be aligned with labour market needs. For this reason, it is essential that employer and employee representatives be involved in the development of the RPL standards.

Table 3.1 shows the type of RPL standards used by each of the countries included in this review. Depending on the type of RPL system, social partners are more or less involved in the development of RPL standards.

In government-led systems, the National Qualification Framework (NQF) is generally the basis for defining RPL standards. This means that no dedicated effort is needed to develop RPL standards, and the activities, tasks and learning outcomes that are outlined in the NQF are used as the RPL standards. Social partners' contribution to the development of the standards in such cases is limited to their contribution to the development of the NQF.

Spain stands out from the other government-led systems in using occupational standards rather than qualification standards as the basis for defining RPL standards. To facilitate RPL assessment against occupational standards, expert committees in Spain develop evidence guides in parallel to the occupational standards included in the National Occupational Standards (Box 3.1). These evidence guides provide practical guidance for assessors about how to assess each professional skill that is part of the qualification. Such expert committees in Spain are coordinated by a public agency and include employer and employee representatives.

Table 3.1. Classification of RPL systems by RPL standards used

Standards	Government-led	Industry-led	Hybrid
National Qualification Framework (NQF)	Denmark, France, Finland, Latvia, Portugal		Belgium, Estonia
National Occupational Standards (NOS)	Spain		
Industry standards		Netherlands, Germany (developed from the NQF)	Sweden

Note: Belgium refers to the French-speaking community (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*). The RPL systems analysed for the Netherlands and Sweden are the RPL systems corresponding to the labour market route. The RPL system analysed for Germany is the *Valikom Transfer* project.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

In industry-led systems, social partners generally develop the RPL standards, though the National Qualification Framework often serves as a basis. For example, in the Netherlands, industries can develop their own industry standards that are then approved by the Dutch Knowledge Centre for VPL. Alternatively, RPL with respect to qualifications included in the National Qualification Framework is also possible. As part of Germany's *Valikom Transfer* project, the Chambers of Commerce develop industry RPL standards using the National Qualification Framework as a basis. In developing new RPL standards, the Chambers of Commerce prioritize qualifications for which there is a large number of workers without formal qualifications.

In hybrid models, the process to develop RPL standards differs from country to country. Similarly to the Netherlands and Germany, social partners in Sweden develop industry standards on their own, and these industry standards do not require approval by any public institution. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten for Yrkeshogskolan*) provides guidelines for industry about how to develop and structure standards, but industry may or may not decide to follow these guidelines. The Agency also reviews industry RPL standards in cases where the corresponding industry decides to benchmark the industry RPL standard level of competence to the levels in the Swedish Qualification Framework. In Wallonia (Belgium), RPL standards are included in the National Qualification Framework (*Cadre Francophone des Certifications*, CFC). Each RPL provider develops RPL standards based on the evaluation profile put together by education and training provider representatives when developing the qualification. The development of the evaluation profile, and of its corresponding occupational standard and qualification is overseen by the French-speaking Professions and Qualifications Service (*Service Francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications*). In Estonia, the National Qualification Framework is also used as RPL standards. Social partner's participation in the development of the RPL standards is, again, limited to their participation in the development of the National Qualification Framework.

Box 3.1. The development of RPL standards in Spain

In Spain, RPL standards are linked to competence units defined in the National Occupational Standards, called the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications (*Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales*, CNCP). To include a new occupational standard in the Catalogue, the following steps must be followed:

1.   **Request to include a new occupational standard in the Catalogue:**

The following institutions may initiate the process of including a new occupational standard in the Catalogue: the government, the professional observatory of the technical institution in charge of qualifications (*Instituto Nacional de las Cualificaciones*, INCUAL), the government advisory institution on vocational education and training (*Consejo General de Formación Profesional*, CGFP), employers and other organisations with legitimate interest. If the institution starting the process is an employer or an organisation with legitimate interest, the pertinence of including the occupational standard in the Catalogue will be analysed by the professional observatory of INCUAL and may be discussed with other relevant entities.

2. **Assemble a working group:**

Once it is decided that an occupational standard will be included in the Catalogue, a working group is formed. Working groups include, at a minimum, sector experts, experts from the education and training sector and a methodological coordinator from INCUAL. Sector experts are selected based on technical criteria such as professional experience, technical skills and experience developing standards.

3. **Design the occupational standard:**

The sector experts from the working group identify the occupations to which the occupational standard could refer to. Then, the working group defines the competence units and the related professional outcomes, performance reference points and professional context.

After defining the competence units, the learning outcomes are developed. Learning outcomes are formulated as "is the candidate able to…?" and include evaluation criteria and context information. The learning outcomes are later used as guidance to design vocational degrees, which are included in the Spanish Qualifications Framework for Continuing Learning (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones para el Aprendizaje Permanente*, MECU). Experts in designing vocational degrees can be invited to participate in this phase.

Finally, there is an internal review to verify that the occupational standard is correctly structured, includes all relevant information and uses the same terminology as the other occupational standards included in the CNCP.

4. **External review:**

The occupational standard is then reviewed by organisations other than INCUAL. In this phase, various stakeholders can provide feedback, including the State and the Autonomous Communities Administrations, employer organisations and trade unions that are part of the CGFP, training institutions, and other organisations related to the sector of the new occupational standard.

5. **Internal approval and regulatory process:**

Once the external review is finished, the CGFP approves the occupational standard and starts the regulatory process. In this stage, there is a public consultation on the new occupational standard and other public institutions review it as well.

6. **Occupational standard approval and publication:**

Finally, the Government approves the new occupational standard by Royal Decree and it is included in the CNCP.

During step 3, in parallel to the design of the occupational standard, the working group also develops Evidence Guides for each competence unit included in the standard. These evidence guides are used

> by assessors during the RPL process. In addition to the information in the CNCP, they include details on the potential tools to use to assess each professional skill that conforms to the competence unit, as well as details on how to score the candidate on each professional skill depending on their performance in the assessment.
>
> Source: Author's elaboration based on INCUAL (2021[5]), Metodología de Elaboración del CNCP, https://incual.educacion.gob.es/metodologia-de-elaboracion1 (accessed on 04/07/2022).

While developing RPL standards based on the National Qualification Framework or the National Occupational Standards ensures that standards are well accepted and transparent, it also has its disadvantages. One significant drawback is the lack of flexibility. Industry standards developed by social partners or industries are easy to update and, thus, are easier to align with labour market skill needs.[2] By contrast, the process of updating standards can be less frequent and agile when they are linked to the National Qualification Framework or National Occupational Standards. For example, in France, professional qualifications included in the National Directory of Vocational Qualifications (*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*, RNCP) can last up to 5 years, during which job content and requirements can change significantly.[3,4]

Additionally, National Qualification Frameworks are generally designed with the purpose of providing formal education or training and may not be appropriate RPL standards in some cases. If the goal of the RPL process is to access formal education or training, it is reasonable to expect that the candidate can demonstrate all the learning outcomes included in the RPL standard. However, if the goal is to improve labour market outcomes, a 100% correspondence between the learning outcomes in the National Qualification Framework and the candidate's RPL evidence may not be necessary, and would be difficult to achieve given that the learning process for RPL candidates is usually less structured. The RPL system assessment must take this into account and allow for some flexibility when the candidate is proving their skills, which must be reflected in the RPL standards.

Information included in RPL standards

RPL standards generally have a similar structure and include similar information. At a minimum, they identify the qualification, occupation, block of competences, or competence unit they refer to. They then describe the main activities that the person should be able to perform, which are further broken down into professional competences. These competences are often linked to related learning outcomes, as in Denmark, France, Latvia and Spain, or to tasks, as in Wallonia (Belgium), the Netherlands or Portugal. Box 3.2 provides an example of the content of RPL standards in France.

While this is the basis of the RPL standards, some countries include additional information that gives a clearer picture of the type of work that a professional with those competences does. For example, in France, Denmark and Spain, RPL standards include sectors of activity of professionals with the relevant competences, with France also including a list of potential occupations. Wallonia's (Belgium) RPL standards go one step further and provide very detailed information on the jobs of professionals with the

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[2] As an example, developing a new occupational standard included in the National Occupational Standards takes over a year, while, in Germany, developing new industry standards takes about 6 months.

[3] Article L. 6113-5 of the Labour Code of Law No. 2018-771 of 5th September 2018, accessible at: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037367660#:~:text=6%20ainsi%20r%C3%A9dig%C3%A9s%20%3A-,%C2%AB%20Art.,un%20projet%20de%20transition%20professionnelle.

[4] Unless it is renewed, after 5 years, a professional qualification becomes inactive, which means that it is removed from the NQF,

competences in the RPL standards. Information in the RPL standards includes the level of responsibility and competence of the professional and specific information on their work environment, such as if the professional works alone or in a team, the place of work, the work schedule, work-related risks, inputs and tools used by the professional, applicable regulation to the occupation and good practices.

Other information provided in RPL standards is less conventional. In Wallonia (Belgium) they include information about possible new occupations that may appear in the labour market that someone with the skills that the RPL standard refers to could work in.[5] In Estonia, information about required language skills, digital skills, personal abilities and characteristics relevant to work in the occupations linked to the RPL standard is included.

RPL standards can also include information relevant for the assessment phase. For example, RPL standards in Wallonia (Belgium) provide information on which specific tasks will be performed during the practical assessment.[6] RPL standards in France and Spain include performance criteria against which to compare the candidate's competence level.[7] RPL standards in Portugal identify the level of importance of each task within the competence unit. If the RPL candidate is not able to complete any of the essential tasks, then the candidate cannot receive the RPL certification.[8]

Finally, RPL standards sometimes include information about how to develop the learning outcomes through training. For example, RPL standards in Denmark include targeted training programmes and courses to develop competences listed in the additional competences section of the standards. In Portugal, RPL standards also link each competence unit to relevant training programmes.

> **Box 3.2. The content of RPL standards in France**
>
> RPL standards in France are compiled in the National Directory of Vocational Qualifications (*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*, RNCP). For each professional certificate, standards include information on the following fields:
>
> - Identifying information of the professional certification.
> - Level of the certification.
> - Certifying body.
> - Objectives and context of the certification.

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[5] For example, for cook, some possible new occupations included in the occupational standards are cook of bio/ecologic cuisine, vegetarian/vegan cook or home cook.

[6] As an example, some of the tasks that an RPL candidate looking to be certified in the competence unit "execute a simple menu" will need to perform are gather the relevant ingredients, pick the relevant material, prepare the ingredients, cook, prepare the relevant sauces or finish the plates. More information can be found here: https://www.validationdescompetences.be/fileadmin/user_upload/referenciels/085c438a7968ed1de0f376657cb1bda b5398afac.pdf

[7] For example, RPL standards in Spain include a scale with examples of performance at each level. Page 8 at the following link shows an example of such a scale: https://incual.educacion.gob.es/documents/20195/1873863/UC0256_1_RV+- +A_GE_Documento+publicado/f3ff0ec7-e28e-4168-95b4-fc1c39b4581f

[8] As an example, the standards for RPL for cook, including the essential competence units and each unit's level of importance, can be found in the link under RPL and professional competences of the qualification access section at the following website: https://catalogo.anqep.gov.pt/qualificacoesDetalhe/7327

Commented [MKE1]: Let's discuss: what distinguishes RPL standards from occupation standards or the NQF? Thinking about this in the context of the methodology input were preparing for Croatia and want to make sure we're consistent.

- Activities carried out by individuals who completed the certification, including the related professional and transversal competences and competence blocks.

- Assessment methods.

- Professional information for individuals who complete the certification: potential jobs, sectors of activity and relevant legislation.

- Links with other credentials.

- Legal information of the RPL standard.

Additionally, for each competence block, RPL standards include the following information:

- Professional (learning) outcomes and performance criteria.

- Work context and tools: information on the structure of a typical organisation where professionals with the certification work in, tools used and other inputs needed.

- Knowledge related to the competence.

Source: Author's elaboration based on France Compétences (2019[6]), Répertoire national des certifications professionnelles, https://www.francecompetences.fr/recherche/rncp/34095/ (accessed on 07/10/2022).

Benchmarking levels of competence in RPL against the National Qualification Framework

Once RPL standards are set, the level of competence in each individual standard[9] needs to be defined so that the performance of the candidate can be benchmarked against a reference. Systems that use the National Qualification Framework as the RPL standards are benchmarked by default against the NQF. In other words, each competence level recognised through RPL corresponds to a specific qualification level in the NQF. Levels of competence are more difficult to benchmark against qualification levels in countries that use National Occupational Standards not linked to the NQF or where social partners develop their own industry standards.

Benchmarking RPL levels of competence to the National (and European) Qualification Framework has clear advantages. It makes the level of knowledge of the candidate easier to interpret, equating it to formal qualifications and easing access to formal education and training. This is particularly relevant in countries hoping to re-engage adults into adult learning through RPL. Additionally, RPL levels further benchmarked against the European Qualification Framework can ease worker mobility within countries in the European Union, providing transparency on the level of competence.

In countries that do not use the National Qualification Framework as their RPL standards, benchmarking of RPL levels against qualification levels can add legitimacy and value to the RPL process. In Sweden, RPL standards are developed by industries and do not go through a quality assurance process. In this context, some Swedish industries have used benchmarking to the Swedish Qualification Framework to build upskilling pathways for RPL candidates.

In spite of all the advantages, an important drawback of benchmarking RPL levels to the National Qualification Framework is that doing so may underestimate the skills and knowledge of experienced workers. National Qualification Framework levels are designed for people who complete a formal degree. Thus, levels of competence are not fully comparable to experienced workers' competences, who may have

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[9] Individual standards can refer to the whole qualification from an NQF, occupation or industry standard or to a smaller group of competences, such as a block of competences or a competence unit.

additionally developed other job-related skills. For example, a recent graduate of a VET degree may receive a qualification at level 4 of the European Qualifications Framework, which may be the same level as the RPL certificate obtained by a professional with 10 years of experience, even if the experienced professional has more occupation-specific knowledge or managerial skills than the recent graduate. Thus, linking RPL levels to the levels of the National (or European) Qualifications Framework may not prove easy or fully comparable. It is for that reason that countries such as the Netherlands only benchmark the industry RPL standards developed by the social partners when it is requested by the entity developing the industry standards.

4 RPL assessment methods

The goal of the RPL assessment is for candidates to prove that they have achieved the learning outcomes and are capable of carrying out the tasks and activities included in the RPL standard. Given the differences in how knowledge is acquired in formal education versus in informal settings, assessment methods that are typical to formal education or training, such as written exams or case studies, may not be the most appropriate for RPL. Additionally, different assessment methods may be used as part of the same RPL assessment. This chapter provides an overview of RPL assessment methods in the countries reviewed and discusses how assessment methods are selected, and whether there is any flexibility based on the candidate's profile and the type of learning outcome.

Assessment methods

RPL assessment methods can be divided in two groups: verification-type assessments, and portfolio-type assessments. Verification-type assessments directly evaluate the learning outcomes, while portfolio-type assessment are more indirect in that they require the candidate to demonstrate their skills and competences by documenting their past experiences and outputs.

Some examples of verification type assessments are the following:

- **Work simulation** or **practical tests**: The candidate undertakes a task related to the RPL standards. Depending on the nature of the task, it can involve a practical test, such as cooking, preparing a balance sheet or building something, or a role-play activity in which, for example, the candidate must liaise with a client or teach something to a new colleague.
- **Workplace observation**: The candidate, if employed, is observed at their workplace while they carry out their usual tasks.
- **Written or oral examinations** or **interviews**: These assessment methods intend to directly assess the knowledge of the candidate by asking specific questions on the knowledge required in the RPL standard.
- **Case studies**: The candidate actively demonstrates their skills and knowledge by solving a case study related to the relevant RPL standard.

Portfolio-type assessments include the following methods:

- **Portfolio**: The candidate, usually with the support and guidance of a methodological advisor, prepares a reflective portfolio describing their relevant work experiences for the RPL process together with some activities undertaken, the outcomes of these activities and some examples of their work. Self-assessments of competences can also be part of a portfolio assessment.
- **Work samples**: The candidate presents evidence of past work through, for example, photos or videos or submitting relevant documents such as, for example, invoices or restaurant menus prepared by them.
- **References and feedback from employers, peers or subordinates**: Some RPL systems also rely on external references and assessments of the candidate provided by their current or past employer/s, colleagues and/or subordinates.

Selecting an assessment method

Selecting the right assessment method depends on several factors, such as the nature of the learning outcome, the characteristics of the candidate and the skill level of the occupation or qualification for which the candidate is undertaking the RPL process.

Different assessment methods will be more appropriate depending on whether the learning outcome falls under the cognitive domain, the psychomotor domain or the affective domain (ILO, 2022[7]):

- Learning outcomes that belong to the **cognitive** domain, such as knowledge, critical thinking or comprehension, can be tested using written or oral methods such as exams, reports, interviews or presentations.
- Learning outcomes that belong to the **psychomotor** domain involve testing practical skills, such as the ability to manipulate a given tool or instrument. These can be tested through workplace observation, workplace simulation, work samples (through, for example, videos or photos) that are part of a portfolio, case studies or references, for example.
- Finally, learning outcomes related to the **affective** domain, such as growth in attitudes or emotions, can be tested through workplace observation, references or self-reports, which may be part of a portfolio.

Assessment methods and the RPL process in general should also adapt to the characteristics of the candidate. For example, candidates who recently migrated to the country where they are taking the RPL process but are still learning the language could be assessed using practical assessments rather than written or oral assessments. Similarly, candidates with low levels of education and/or training may be more likely to succeed if practical assessments or oral assessments are used, since they may lack the specific vocabulary or literacy skills to succeed in written assessments.

Some RPL systems make adjustments to prevent such barriers from affecting the outcome of the RPL process. For example, in France, where the core of the RPL assessment is a written portfolio, candidates with limited writing abilities are given the opportunity to use digital dictation programmes to support them in writing their portfolio. Candidates in France also have access to advisors who can support them in identifying the relevant information to include in their portfolio. In Portugal, candidates must participate in a minimum of 50 hours of training to support their RPL process. Some of this training could provide candidates without formal training or education with the basic theoretical knowledge required to successfully demonstrate their skills and knowledge in the RPL process.

Finally, depending on the skill level of the occupation that the RPL standards refer to, different assessment methods may be more relevant. In general, the lower the level of formal education or training required to work in a given occupation, the more likely the RPL assessment is based on practical evaluations.

The use of different assessment methods

Most of the countries reviewed for this report use at least two assessment methods to asses candidates. Generally, the first method is already determined by the RPL standards, the RPL regulations or the RPL providers, while, in most cases, there is more flexibility in the choice of the second assessment method.

Applying the same assessment method for all candidates being assessed for a given RPL standard or even for all RPL standards makes quality assurance easier, since it standardises the RPL process. On the other hand, it may also impose barriers on candidates who do not feel as comfortable with a given assessment method, such as low-educated candidates being wary of written examinations. When countries impose a common assessment method on all candidates, they generally try to remediate these potential barriers by providing publicly subsidised guidance and support to the candidate.

In the different countries reviewed, assessments methods are decided by different actors. In some countries (Finland, Latvia, Portugal and Spain) the assessment methods are stated in the RPL regulations. In other countries, (Wallonia, Belgium; France and Sweden), they are embedded in the RPL standards, and can therefore vary by qualification/occupation. In Denmark and Estonia, the RPL provider decides on the assessment method to use. Similarly, in Germany and the Netherlands, the assessment method is decided on a case-by-case basis by the assessor/s after discussing with the RPL candidate. In Spain and Portugal, while the initial assessment method is prescribed in RPL regulation, the assessor or RPL provider can decide on the second assessment method on a case-by-case basis, if a second assessment is deemed necessary.

The most common RPL assessment method across the sample of countries analysed for this report is the portfolio method, which is used in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France and Spain. Countries with a government-led RPL system usually rely on the portfolio assessment method, which is often complemented by a second assessment method. As described above, through the portfolio method the candidate provides evidence that they have achieved the learning outcomes of the RPL standards by documenting past work experiences and outputs. This portfolio can include a CV of the candidate, information and evidence of prior education, formal and non-formal training, and of work and volunteer experiences. The portfolio may also include a self-analysis of the candidates' learning experiences. Box 4.1 provides as an example a description of the portfolio content in France.

Box 4.1. The contents of the RPL portfolio in France

In France, as part of the VAE process (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*), the RPL candidate documents their learning experiences in two phases.

The first phase is the identification phase, called *recevabilité*. In this phase, the candidate completes the CERFA form. This is a declarative phase in which the candidate lists and provides evidence of all their experiences related to the RPL standards. It includes the identification of the relevant RPL standards, candidate information and information and evidence on all relevant education, training, work and volunteering experiences, with their corresponding activities related to the RPL standard selected.

In the second phase, once the candidate has been deemed eligible to carry out the RPL process for the given RPL standard, the candidate completes the VAE request form, which involves building a portfolio. The portfolio is developed under the (optional but recommended) guidance of a methodological advisor. This phase is a demonstrative phase, in which the candidate must demonstrate through the portfolio that they have the competences included in the relevant RPL standard.

This portfolio can be a relatively long document that includes a description of:

- The candidate's professional trajectory,
- The firm for which they work for, including the organizational chart,
- The candidate's job post, its relevance within the activity of the firm and how this job relates to other positions in the firm.

The portfolio then focuses on a 3 or 4 activities undertaken by the candidate. These activities are chosen by the candidate and for each of them the candidate describes:

- who they work with and for,
- what their role in the activity is,
- how they develop the different activities,
- why they do each task within the activity and
- what the outcome of the activity is.

> The description of these activities can include examples taken from the candidates' career.
>
> Source: Author's elaboration based on the presentations of Norbert Jaouen, Agnes Quenedey and Christine Moisan's presentations during the study visit for the DG Reform project 22HR16 on 20 October 2022 in Paris, France.

Countries that use a portfolio often pair it with another assessment method. In France, for example, after submitting their portfolio, candidates have an interview with the evaluation jury in which they are asked about specific components of their portfolio. The goal of the portfolio and of the interview is to verify that the candidate can explain the reason why they did something in a particular way, proving that they have the underlying theoretical knowledge and can carry out the assessed activities and tasks independently. In Estonia, assessors usually rely on the portfolio and an interview as well, with other assessment methods being used for more practical occupations.

Some countries (Denmark, Finland and Spain) request an additional assessment if the evidence in the portfolio is deemed insufficient. These additional assessments could include an interview, competence exams, professional simulations or workplace observations. In the case of Spain, for example, the Evidence Guide used for the RPL process suggests possible assessment methods based on the nature of the learning outcomes. For example, for a cooking-related competence unit, possible assessment methods include workplace observation, professional simulation or an interview. The assessment method is decided based on the options included in the Evidence Guide, taking into account the evidence already presented in the portfolio, the level of the competence unit and the characteristics of the candidate.

Despite the widespread use of the portfolio for the RPL assessment, this assessment method has its advantages and disadvantages. In France, the writing of the portfolio is understood to imply a deep reflection on the learning outcomes acquired. French RPL counsellors report that this often leads to an improvement in the candidate's professional self-esteem and a better understanding of their value in the labour market. It implies, additionally, leaving a track of written evidence of the RPL assessment, easing quality assurance and standardisation of the RPL process. However, the writing of a portfolio can seem a daunting task for candidates who are not confident in their writing skills, even when they have the support of an advisor. Additionally, depending on the depth of the portfolio, its writing can be quite time-consuming, with the whole RPL process taking, for example, between 6 and 12 months in France, compared to about 3 months in Germany or the Netherlands, where a portfolio is not used.

Practical tests or work simulations are another common assessment method. As indicated above, practical tests can feel more natural to low-educated candidates, potentially increasing their participation in RPL and their success in the RPL process. Practical tests, however, can be expensive, given that they may require specific machinery or tools as well as other costly inputs. In Germany, to minimize these costs, candidates take the practical test at their workplace whenever possible.

While allowing for more flexibility in the choice of assessment methods, countries with an industry-led system (Germany and the Netherlands) tend to focus more on practical tests. This could be related to social partners putting more emphasis on practical assessments because they feel they reflect the relevant competences better than other assessment methods and/or because they have more access to the tools and instruments needed to carry out practical assessments.

Portugal, Sweden and Wallonia (Belgium) also typically use practical tests. In the case of Portugal the assessment method consists of a practical demonstration of the candidate's competences in front of the Evaluation Panel. In Sweden and Wallonia (Belgium), the assessment method is prescribed in the RPL standards. In Sweden, the assessment phase typically includes a digital written test and a professional simulation, while in Wallonia (Belgium), the assessment usually includes a professional simulation.

Countries using a practical test also generally use two different assessment methods during the RPL assessment phase. This is the case in Germany and the Netherlands, where the assessment methods are chosen on a case-by-case basis, allowing for more flexibility, and can include work samples, professional

simulations, workplace observations, interviews, case studies, presentations or references, despite the push towards practical tests. Similarly, in Sweden, two assessment methods are used, generally a digital written test and a professional simulation. In Portugal, if needed, the RPL provider can also select a second assessment method on top of the practical test.

Latvia is one country that assesses an RPL candidate's competences through the same qualification examination as VET degree students, including with a theoretical and practical assessment. While this increases the comparability of RPL candidates with VET degree graduates, it can also imply significant barriers to RPL candidates, especially for those without formal qualifications who may not be comfortable sitting formal examinations.

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