

Croatian experiences with recognition of prior learning

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

Foreword

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Executive Summary

Digitalisation, globalisation, the green transition, population ageing and the pandemic have all influenced the type of jobs available and the skills required to perform them. In this context, many adults will have to make job transitions, and many will need to upskill or reskill to maintain relevant skills over their working careers. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a tool for giving adults credit for skills they have acquired non-formally and informally through work experience or other learning experiences. It consists of a process by which skills are identified, documented, assessed and validated through a formal procedure, and the output can be a full or partial formal qualification, or a labour market certificate. By giving adults credit for skills they already have, RPL can shorten the time and effort required to engage in training, and support labour market transitions.

Adults in Croatia could benefit from a system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning to reduce barriers to participation in adult learning and to achieve better labour market outcomes. This report provides an overview of existing Croatian practices related to recognition of prior learning and is based on both desk research and meetings with Croatian stakeholders.

Adult learning participation in Croatia is low. Measured over a 4-week period, only 5.1% of adults participated in adult learning in 2021 compared to 10.8% on average in the EU, and time constraints are among the major barriers to participation. By shortening the duration of training programmes, RPL has been identified as a likely way to improve adult learning participation.

There is currently no comprehensive system for recognition of prior learning in Croatia. There is a partial system for recognition of practical skills through which adults can get their practical experiences validated, but this does not apply to theoretical knowledge. The current system is based on the 2007 Act on Adult Education and the accompanying rulebook and offers limited support and guidelines about how education institutions should implement recognition of practical skills. As a result, the processes are unstandardised and adult education institutions have struggled to implement the programmes.

To address these issues, the Croatian government pledged in the 2021 Act on Adult Education to improve adult learning and implement a new system of RPL. In what has followed, a Croatian Qualification Framework has been created, mapping occupation and qualification standards and their underlying competences and learning outcomes. This framework will provide the basis for the new system of RPL. In parallel, the introduction of new systems of quality assurance in adult education, micro-credentials in training and vouchers for adult learning has created a solid foundation that can be leveraged for the new RPL system.

Executive Summary in Croatian

Digitalizacija, globalizacija, zelena tranzicija, starenje stanovništva i pandemija utjecali su na vrstu dostupnih poslova i vještine potrebne za njihovo obavljanje. U tom kontekstu, mnoge će odrasle osobe morati napraviti prijelaz na novi posao, a mnoge će morati unaprijediti postojeće ili steći nove vještine kako bi zadržale relevantne vještine tijekom svoje radne karijere. Priznavanje prethodnog učenja (RPL) je alat za davanje priznanja odraslima za vještine koje su stekli neformalno i informalno kroz radno iskustvo. Sastoji se od procesa u kojem se vještine identificiraju, dokumentiraju, ocjenjuju i potvrđuju formalnim postupkom, a rezultat može biti puna ili djelomična formalna kvalifikacija ili svjedodžba za tržišta rada. Dajući odraslima priznanje za vještine koje već posjeduju, RPL može skratiti vrijeme i trud koji su potrebni za uključivanje u obuku i podržati prijelaze na tržište rada.

Odrasli u Hrvatskoj mogli bi imati koristi od sustava priznavanja neformalnog i informalnog učenja kako bi se smanjile prepreke sudjelovanju u učenju odraslih i postigli bolje rezultate na tržištu rada. Ovo izvješće daje pregled postojećih hrvatskih iskustava s priznavanjem prethodnog učenja i temelji se na dokumentarnom istraživanju i nekoliko sastanaka s hrvatskim dioničarima.

Sudjelovanje odraslih u obrazovanju u Hrvatskoj je nisko. Mjereno u razdoblju od 4 tjedna, samo je 5,1 % odraslih sudjelovalo u učenju odraslih 2021, u usporedbi s 10,8 % u prosjeku u EU-u, a nedostatak vremena su među glavnim preprekama sudjelovanju. Skraćivanjem trajanja programa osposobljavanja, RPL je identificiran kao vjerojatan način poboljšanja sudjelovanja odraslih u učenju.

U Hrvatskoj trenutno ne postoji sveobuhvatan sustav priznavanja prethodnog učenja. Postoji djelomični sustav priznavanja praktičnih vještina kroz koji odrasli mogu potvrditi svoja praktična iskustva, ali to se ne odnosi na teoretsko znanje. Sadašnji sustav temelji se na prethodnom Zakonu o obrazovanju odraslih iz 2007 i pratećem pravilniku te nudi ograničenu podršku i smjernice o tome kako obrazovne ustanove trebaju provoditi priznavanje praktičnih vještina. Kao rezultat toga, procesi su nestandardizirani, a ustanove za obrazovanje odraslih imaju problema s provedbom programa.

Kako bi riješila te probleme, hrvatska vlada se Zakonom o obrazovanju odraslih iz 2021. obvezala poboljšati učenje odraslih i implementirati novi sustav PPL-a. Nakon toga, Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja izradilo je Hrvatski kvalifikacijski okvir, mapirajući standarde zanimanja i kvalifikacija te njihove temeljne kompetencije i ishode učenja. Ovaj okvir će pružiti osnovu za novi sustav RPL-a. Paralelno, uvođenje novih sustava osiguranja kvalitete u obrazovanju odraslih, mikro vjerodajnica u obuci i vaučera za učenje odraslih stvorilo je čvrste temelje koji se mogu iskoristiti za novi sustav RPL-a.

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1 Recognition of prior learning and adult education in Croatia

Introduction

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a tool to support adults in upskilling and reskilling and gaining access to better jobs in the labour market and is crucial in the current context of rapidly changing skills needs. This chapter explores the potential role of recognition of prior learning in Croatia. It first reviews the current context of adult learning in Croatia and identifies some of the main barriers to participation in adult learning. It then provides a general overview of what is involved in a process of RPL, and makes a case that RPL can support shorter upskilling pathways and better labour market outcomes for adults

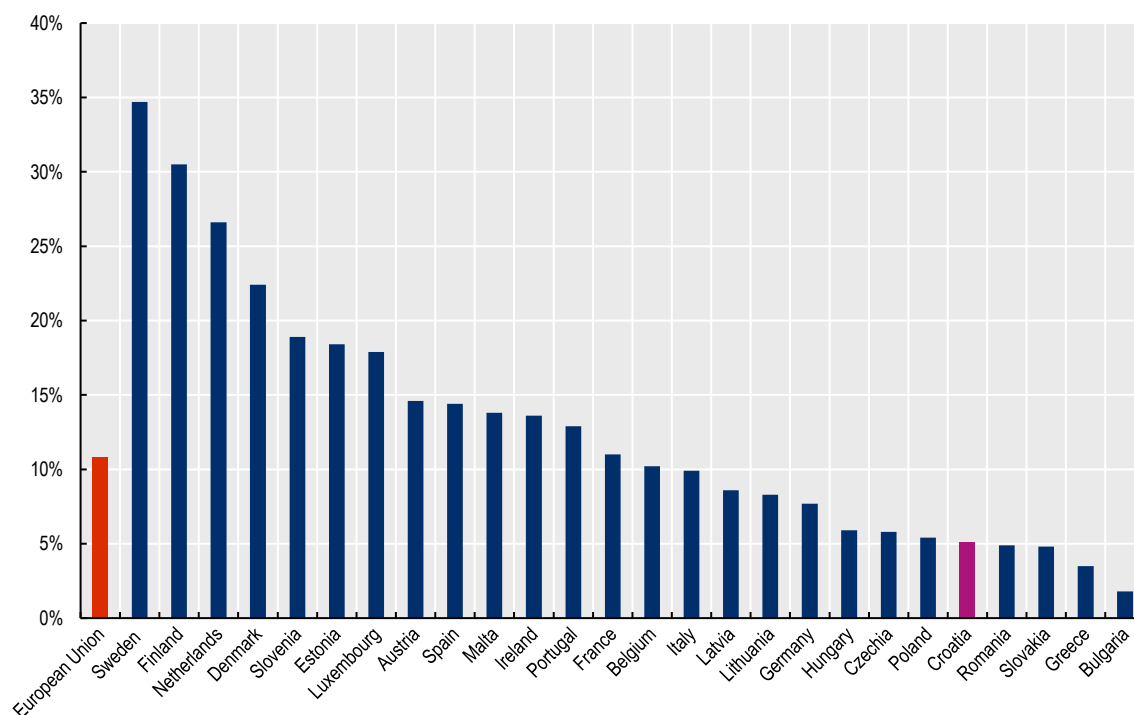
The adult education system in Croatia

Adult education in Croatia falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Science and Education, which is also responsible for primary, secondary, and tertiary education, and research institutions. The adult education system in Croatia includes primary and secondary education, but not tertiary education. Any adult learning that occurs non-formally is unregulated in Croatia, and outside of the authority of the Ministry. The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education was founded by the Ministry of Science and Education and is responsible for the planning, coordinating, implementing, and monitoring of the system of vocational education and adult education. Adult education is provided by adult education institutions, and participation in lifelong learning is promoted by the Croatian Employment Service (CES) and trade unions.

The current system of adult education is governed by the 2007 Adult Education Act, and reinforced by the 2014 Strategy of Education, Science and Technology. The 2007 Adult Education Act defines three main objectives of adult education in Croatia: to exercise the right to personality development, to train in order to increase one's employability, and to promote active citizenship. It specifies that adult education should incorporate all forms of education for adults older than 15 years, including formal, non-formal, informal, and self-directed learning. The Agency for VET and Adult Education outlines several principles to govern the Croatian adult education system: i) lifelong learning, ii) rational use of educational opportunities; iii) territorial proximity and universal access to education under equal conditions and in accordance with abilities; iv) freedom and autonomy in choosing the manner of content, form, means and methods; v) respect for diversity and inclusion; vi) professional and ethical responsibilities of andragogic workers; vii) guarantees of the quality of educational offer; and viii) respect for the personality and dignity of each participant (The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, n.d.^[1]). This mission is further supported by the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology, adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2014, which emphasises two main goals of adult education: i) the acquisition of transversal competences of the individual, and ii) the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable employability and mobility in the labour market. The 2021 Adult Education Act introduces reforms to support this mission and this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Participation of adults in lifelong learning in Croatia is among the lowest in the European Union. Only 5.1% of adults participated in adult learning in 2021, over a four-week period, compared to 10.8% on average in the EU. By comparison, the two countries with highest participation, Finland and Sweden, experience participation rates of 30.5% and 34.7% respectively (European Commission, 2022^[2]).

Figure 1.1. Adult participation in education and training (last 4 weeks), 2021



Source: Eurostat

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education, cost was the most common barrier to participation in adult learning (30% of respondents), followed by time constraints, with 26% of participants not participating due to work obligations and 22% not participating due to family obligations. Other major barriers were studies interrupted due to other priorities (28%), not having enough information about the programmes (15%) and the programme being located far away (14%) (Croatian Agency for Adult Education and VET, 2017^[3]).

Figure 1.2. Barriers to participation in formal adult education programmes, 2017



Note: Age groups 25 – 65 years.

Source: Survey on Adult Education in Croatia 2017, Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education.

The absence of validation systems for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning has been identified as one of the key factors hindering participation of adults in lifelong learning in Croatia. Setting up a system for recognition of prior learning would help to address both of the main barriers of cost and lack of time, through shorter training times and by enabling personalised learning pathways for adults.

Recognition of prior learning and its potential role in adult learning and the labour market

This section briefly describes what is involved in a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process, and how RPL can support both participation in adult learning and improved employment outcomes in Croatia.

What is RPL?

RPL commonly refers to “the process of identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes against standards used in formal education and training” (ILO, 2018^[4]) **Error! Reference source not found.** illustrates the four phases of the RPL process. In the identification phase, the candidate identifies the knowledge, skills and competences they have previously acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning. Candidates are often assisted in this stage by advisors to understand which experiences can be used in the validation process, how RPL can benefit them in their further education and employment, and what are the most appropriate reference standards (skill, qualification or occupation) for which the candidate should submit the request for validation.

In the documentation phase, the candidate documents their skills and knowledge and how they have acquired them. The documentation can include proof of formal qualifications, non-formal certificates, work

contracts, recommendations by employers or colleagues, proof of training undertaken, or a work product. As there are many ways to document skills, candidates often benefit from the guidance of an advisor.

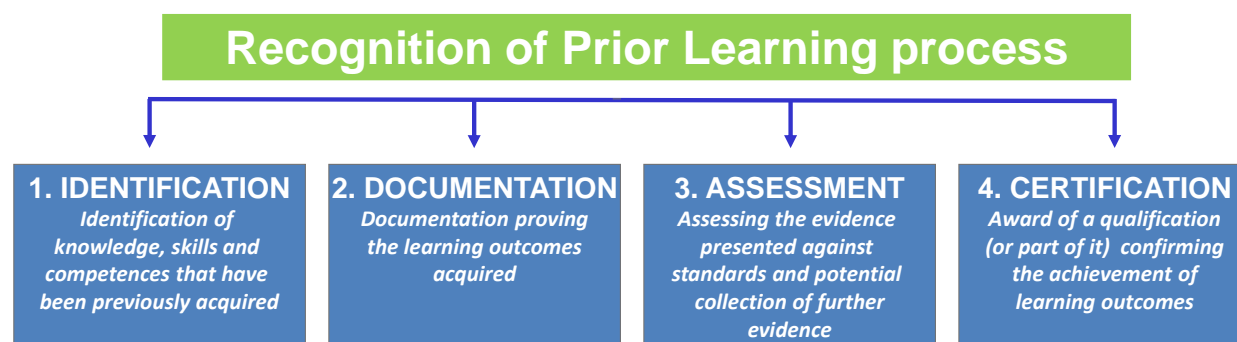
In the assessment phase, the evidence presented in the documentation phase is assessed against qualification or occupation standards. A jury evaluates if the documentation is sufficient to validate the skills and knowledge, or if further evidence is needed. Assessment methods can include standardised exams, self-assessments, interviews, practical tests, and observed behaviour (role play). Assessment methods are usually chosen depending on the qualification or occupation in question as well as the skill level and can even vary on a case-by-case basis.

The final stage is certification. The outcomes of the process of RPL vary (ILO, 2018^[41]) and can lead to a full qualification; a partial qualification; credits or units towards a qualification; exemption from admission prerequisites; or a certificate of labour market competences. A jury usually decides based on the assessment if the candidate has fulfilled the requirements to obtain the desired certification, and then the certifying body awards the earned certification to the candidate. The certification can be either a certification of equivalence, or indistinguishable from a certification issued through formal education.

While these four stages are common to most RPL systems, there is considerable heterogeneity in terms of the aims of RPL systems, their outcomes, which types of skills are assessed, and which assessment methods are used. (Error! Reference source not found.) provides an overview of these different typologies.

In Croatia, the aim of the new RPL system is to provide recognition of professional competences for adults in order to support higher adult learning participation and better employment outcomes.

Figure 1.3. The four phases of recognition of prior learning



Note: Author's elaboration.

Table 1.1. Mapping RPL processes

Criteria	Typologies
Aim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social justice • Social change • Economic development
Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full qualification • Partial qualification • Credits/units towards a qualification • Exemption from admission prerequisites • Certificate of labour market competences
Type of skill assessed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General competences • Professional/technical competences
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written tests

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolios • Interviews • “Authentic” assessments
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Source: (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022^[5]).

How could RPL support adult learning participation?

RPL could support higher adult learning participation in Croatia by shortening training times and enabling personalised learning pathways. Lifelong learning is key for individuals to adapt and succeed in labour markets that are constantly changing due to technological advances, globalisation, demographic changes and sudden shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, cost and lack of time prevent many Croatian adults from investing in training and education. In the absence of validation systems, upskilling and reskilling take considerably longer because adult learners must devote time to completing lower-level learning programmes, even when they already possess some if not all of the skills required for those learning programmes.

Setting up a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning would shorten upskilling pathways in the Croatian context, reducing the time and cost needed to participate in adult learning. It would give adults formal credit (such as a partial qualification, learning credits or exemption from admission prerequisites) for skills they have acquired non-formally or informally through work experience. RPL would then allow them to enter education programmes despite perhaps not meeting the formal pre-requisites or shorten the time it takes to complete the training program by allowing adults to focus exclusively on their skills gaps.

How could RPL support improved labour market outcomes?

Some adults may wish to have their skills validated in order to attain better labour market outcomes and are not necessarily motivated to pursue further education or training. Many adults have acquired skills through work or volunteering experience, or privately at home, but struggle to secure good employment opportunities or promotions because their skills and knowledge have not been validated. Such adults could pursue RPL to obtain a certificate proving the skills they already possess, which would allow them to enter a new field of work with regulated entry-requirements, get a better position within their own field of work, or use the certificate to negotiate better contracts or promotions.

While RPL was originally conceived as a means to widen access to formal education, it has evolved to also be a means to validate acquired skills for labour market purposes (Meghnagi and Tuccio, 2022^[5]). In the 1970s, RPL was introduced as a means to increase admission of societal groups with lower labour market outcomes in higher education institutions in the United States. At the end of the 1980s, RPL programmes were extended to not only include admission to higher education, but also a validation method for the labour market, with France and Austria being the first countries to develop a recognition framework for professional competences and to introduce an RPL system connected to the labour market.

2 Existing systems of recognition of in Croatia

Introduction

The current system for recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning only covers practical skills and does not allow for recognition of theoretical knowledge. This system for recognition of practical skills does not include the tools and procedures to allow for comprehensive validation and subsequent recognition of prior learning outside of formal education. As a result, practitioners are not able to fully tailor the learning provision to the specific needs of adult learners, which in turn slows down labour market transitions and hinders the development of individualised upskilling pathways. This chapter provides an overview of the current system for the recognition of practical skills. In addition to the main system for the recognition of practical skills, there are also smaller separate recognition systems in two particular fields: crafts and languages. The Croatian Employment Service also identifies and documents skills acquired outside of formal education for jobseekers. The chapter concludes by analysing the weaknesses of the current system that should be addressed in the new system.

Recognition processes in Croatia today

The main recognition process in Croatia today is the recognition of practical skills. The basis for recognition of practical skills can be found in the 2007 Adult Education Act in Article 11, which states that “adults can prove their knowledge, skills and abilities regardless of the way they were acquired, by taking an exam.” Croatia currently has a system to validate practical skills acquired through work experience, but not theoretical knowledge acquired through work experience. Within the scope of the 2007 Law of Adult education, theoretical knowledge cannot be recognised and/or certified if it has not been attained through formal training, such as in primary, secondary or tertiary education. Formal certificates issued by adult education institutions can be recognised by other education institutions and similarly there is a process of recognising formal qualifications attained in other countries.

There exist separate processes for the recognition of prior skills in the fields of crafts and languages. These systems recognise theoretical knowledge in addition to practical skills. The system for recognition of prior learning in craft occupations is governed by the 2003 Crafts Act that opens up the possibility of recognising theoretical knowledge. For language, the process for recognition of prior learning does not differentiate between theoretical and practical knowledge.

While not a process of recognition per se, the Croatian Employment Service (CES) maps out skills acquired through work experience and matches adults with existing vacancies or training programmes but does not issue certificates or qualifications.

Recognition of practical skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning

Any practical skill that has been acquired through work experience can be validated and certified by an adult education institution, according to the process established by the 2007 Adult Education Act and the 2008 rulebook (*Pravilnik o standardima i normativima te načinu i postupku utvrđivanja ispunjenosti uvjeta u ustanovama za obrazovanja odraslih*). In general terms, the rulebook outlines the following process for recognition of practical skills within adult education institutions:

Exceptionally, without attending practical classes and exercises, the acquired knowledge and skills in practical classes and exercise may be effectively verified at the written request of the participants and with attached evidence before a three-member committee panel appointed by the professional body established by the statute of the institution, of which one is a teacher of the practical teaching and exercises. A student who has demonstrated the acquired knowledge and skills in practical teaching and exercises, in part of the programme or as a whole, may benefit from a proportionally shortened duration of education.

This article in the rulebook forms the foundation for the current system of recognition and provides a general outline of the four first phases of an RPL process: identification, documentation, assessment and certification.

Identification

In the identification phase, the rulebook stipulates that recognition of practical skills has to be initiated through a written request by the candidate themselves. The rulebook does not include any mention of advisors that should assist the candidate in identifying the skills for which they can access validation. In practice, to initiate a validation process, the adult contacts the adult education institution and submits a written request to have their practical skills recognised.

Documentation

In the documentation phase, the rulebook mentions that the candidate needs to provide evidence for their skills, though it does not specify what type of evidence is needed. Based on stakeholder consultations, the most common types of documentation that is requested are work contracts outlining the tasks and responsibilities performed by the adult, as well as written testimonies by the employer or a supervisor. Certificates of non-formal learning are generally not accepted as documentation, though this is left to the discretion of the evaluating jury.

Assessment

In the assessment phase, the rulebook states that the assessment is carried out by the three-member committee panel appointed by the adult education institution and that one member of the panel has to be a teacher of the skills or qualification up for validation. It does not give any further guidelines on the makeup of the jury, nor how they should assess the candidate. Within the existing system of recognition of practical skills, any adult education institution can choose to offer recognition and validation of practical skills, as long as they offer courses that correspond with the skills that are being validated. In practice, the education institutions have considerable discretion in the nomination of jury members and, as a result, the selection of juries is unstandardised and jury members have varying levels of expertise with the validation process.

In addition to unstandardised selection of jury members, there are also no common standards for validating learning outcomes under the current system of recognition of practical skills. Adults' skills are measured against the curriculum of the course that most closely resembles the skill for which validation is sought. There is no requirement that courses be tied to the Croatian Qualification Framework (CROFQ). Therefore, the standards against which adults are evaluated vary among educational institutions. Through stakeholder

consultations, several institutions cited lack of qualification standards and learning outcomes as barriers to establishing a process for recognition of prior learning, as it is costly and time consuming to establish qualification standards for every skill that could be validated.

Certification

For the certification phase, the rulebook establishes a process whereby the candidate can have their learning pathway shortened following the validation process. It indicates that the certificate the candidate receives at the end of the process can be used for entry into formal learning, and the certificate issued is equivalent to a certificate issued following formal education. In practice, since candidates can only access recognition of practical skills but not recognition of theoretical knowledge, they cannot obtain full recognition of any qualifications that contain theoretical knowledge.

Beyond specifying the above four phases in the RPL process, the current rulebook is notably silent about how individuals should be made aware about the existence of the RPL service, and about how RPL should be monitored or quality assured.

Awareness raising

There are no awareness or media campaigns surrounding the current system for recognition of practical skills. Adults find out about the service through the Croatian Employment Service (CES) or word of mouth. During consultations, stakeholders reported instances when employers contacted adult education institutions in search of candidates with practical skills and were referred candidates that had undergone the process of recognition of practical skills. There are organised and open communication lines between employers, employers' organisations, and adult education institutions in order to meet labour market demands, but this communication is on an ad-hoc basis and not formalised. There is no involvement of social partners in the current system of recognition of practical skills, and the system is governed centrally by the Ministry of Science and Education.

Monitoring and quality assurance

There is currently limited oversight of the implementation of recognition of practical skills. There is no centralised overview of which adult education institutions have implemented the system, nor is there a register of how many adults have completed the recognition of practical skills or their labour market outcomes upon completion.

There are very few institutions that have implemented the system for recognition of practical skills, to such an extent that it is challenging to find real-life examples of implementation. Further, there is no data collection on the programmes and participation, making it difficult to assess their impact on adult learning and labour market transitions.

Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning as it pertains to languages and crafts

There are two independent systems for recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning that operate alongside the existing system of recognition of practical skills. The recognition of prior learning for crafts is a system that is managed by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts where adults can get their practical and theoretical skills validated and obtain a formal qualification for their craft. The recognition of prior learning for language skills is a system governed by the adult education institutions for foreign languages, where institutions can evaluate adults' language skills even if they were not obtained at the education institution.

Recognition of practical skills and theoretical knowledge in crafts

The validation of knowledge, skills and competences for craft occupations include both practical skills and theoretical knowledge. Article 56 of the 2003 Crafts Act outlines that the master craftsman's examination can be undertaken by adults who do not have adequate formal education given they have relevant practical experience (Crafts Act, 2003^[6]). As such, the responsibility of ensuring validation and certification of existing skills is held by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, while craft schools are responsible for the identification and documentation stages of RPL. Adults who wish to have their skills and knowledge validated reach out to craft schools which assist the adult in the registration and documentation process. Once the educational institution approves the documentation, the adult has to undergo an examination in front of a five-member jury assembled by the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts. The jury must include master craftsmen representing crafts businesses for which the master craftsman's examination is being taken. If the adult's skills are deemed in line with the professional standards developed by the Chamber, the adult receives a certificate of completion.

Marketing of the RPL process for crafts is done in conjunction with marketing of the courses and degrees offered by the education institutions, though there are no separate media campaigns targeting adults with non-formal or informal crafts experience. Adults can also contact educational institutions directly for more information. As the final exam undertaken is the same for adults with adequate and inadequate formal training, the same crafts certificate is issued for both groups, and employers are not able to distinguish between the two groups based on certificates only. This creates a culture within the crafts field where RPL and non-formal and informal learning is accepted as a valid way of obtaining skills.

Recognition of language skills

There is a system for the recognition of languages in Croatia that is based on the 2007 Act on Adult Education, but this system is unique in that language programmes do not distinguish between practical skills and theoretical knowledge (Zakon o obrazovanju odraslih (Adult Education Act), 2007^[7]). Establishing an RPL system for languages is somewhat more straightforward, as there are internationally accepted standards for languages, and a person practicing a language does not need any form of technical equipment which may be subject to occupational standards, such as operating heavy machinery. Foreign language schools have a special examination process for adults who have acquired language skills outside of formal education. Those who wish to have their language skills certified can contact a language school to initiate the process. For the RPL process in languages, there is no requirement to show proof of skills, through a work contract or a certificate obtained through non-formal learning. Instead, the adult will self-assess which level of language skills they possess using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and inform the educational institution that they wish to undertake a validation of language skills at that level. The adult is then examined by a panel of experts at the stated language level. A language certificate is issued if they pass, and this certificate is indistinguishable from certificates obtained through formal education at the institution. The jury is comprised of language experts who have gained expertise in conducting the examinations for adults who have acquired their language skills outside formal employment.

In the systems of RPL for both crafts and language, candidates have to pass a final exam that determines if they fulfil the criteria to get their skills validated. The assessment method is the same for adults in the RPL system and students attending classes through formal education. The benefit of having the same assessment for adults accessing RPL and those in formal education is that they are evaluated against the same standards and using the same methods, ensuring that they possess the same baseline skills. However, relying only on final exams as an assessment method might exclude adults who are not comfortable taking formal exams (and may have chosen not to pursue formal education for this reason). Exam-taking is a skill that can be acquired, but it is one that adults outside the education system may be out of practice with.

Skills mapping by the Croatian Employment Service

Currently, the Croatian Employment Service (CES) does not play a role in the process of recognition of practical skills, though it does gather information about skills and experience to support job matching. Through interviews, unemployed adults share information about skills they have acquired through work experience. They are asked to provide documentation to demonstrate how they have acquired those skills, preferably through a work contract but also through employer testimonies. The CES agent compiles an extensive overview of their skills and competences and can direct the adult towards employment where those skills are needed, but where there is no requirement for formal certification of skills. The CES also maintains an open line of communication with adult education institutions and can direct the adult towards appropriate training options. In the new system of RPL, the CES could play a more active role, and possibly undertake a similar process to identify which adults could benefit from recognition of prior learning.

Analysis of the current system for recognition of practical skills

Very few adult education institutions have implemented a system for recognition of prior learning, and this can partly be explained by a lack of standardisation in the way that learning outcomes are assessed and in the selection of juries. As the Croatian Qualification Framework was only completed in 2021 (see more details below), there were no occupational standards, qualification standards or learning outcomes available when adult learning institutions were invited to establish systems for the recognition of practical skills. The adult education institutions that have implemented recognition of practical skills have measured adults against the learning outcomes of their own curriculum, rather than against common standards. Without standardisation, establishing a process to recognise practical skills at an educational institution is costly, as it requires the institution to set their own standards for skills and occupations. This leads to RPL processes of varying quality across the different educational institutions.

Further, requirements for the three-person jury are not stringent enough. Though the implementation guidelines put forward by the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education outlines the process of establishing a jury, there is nothing to prevent selecting people who have a conflict of interest, nor is there any oversight mechanism to ensure that the assessments and decisions made by the jury are evidence-based and fair. A common concern brought up in stakeholder consultations was a lack of standardisation, quality assurance and transparency when it comes to determining who appoints the jury and the composition of the jury.

The methods for assessing whether learning outcomes have been achieved are very basic under the current system which relies heavily on work contracts as the main proof of acquired skills. This effectively excludes adults who have acquired skills outside of formal employment. The use of certificates or other proof of non-formal or informal learning is not widely accepted, which presents a barrier for adults who have completed non-formal training. The current system does not use other assessment methods that could capture evidence of the candidate's skills, such as observed behaviour through role-play, practical assessments, portfolios of work, interviews or self-assessments. Limiting assessment methods to only work contracts or formal certificates hinders the assessor in getting the full picture of the candidate's skills, as certain skills may not have been a part of their job description or may have been gained outside employment. It is also harder to gauge the candidate's skill level, as employers may not be able to identify their employee's skill level.

Croatia's current system of recognition of practical skills is more geared towards enrolling adults in formal education than it is towards improving their labour market outcomes. While increasing the participation in lifelong learning is important to building a flexible and resilient labour market, RPL is equally important for those adults who do not have the need or opportunity to attend formal education but want to improve their labour market outcomes. Ideally, adults should be able to obtain certificates which attest to their skills in

order to improve their labour market outcomes, such as securing a new and better job or negotiating a promotion or salary increase. Given the current focus on RPL to facilitate enrolment in formal education, stakeholders observed that it is mostly younger adults who participate in RPL in Croatia today. Younger adults are in general more flexible and motivated to pursue recognition of skills and further training, as they have more years left in the labour market to benefit from upskilling, and they are more flexible in term of their time as they do not have as many financial or family obligations. This is also evident in the participation rates of young adults in Croatia, of which 11.7% of adults aged 25-34 participated in training in 2021 compared to 4.4% of those aged 35-44 (European Commission, 2022^[2]). The current system for recognition of practical skills does not target older adults nor does it provide any specialised incentives for them.

Similarly, the current system for recognition of practical skills does not feature a career guidance component. In other countries, guidance plays an important role in the recognition of prior learning process, both during the initial and final phases. In the initial phase, guidance counsellors can support adults in understanding the various phases of the recognition process, and in helping them to identify which skills they could have validated. Career guidance can also help adults navigate their options once they have completed the recognition process, by providing advice on further education to complete or complement obtained qualifications, or about how to leverage their newly obtained qualification in the labour market. In France, for instance, candidates receive significant support from the VAE advisor, who spends many hours with the candidate mapping their experience, skills and knowledge, and helps them put together an extensive portfolio of skills and experiences.

Trust in institutions and governance is another issue strongly affecting the current use of the system for the recognition of practical skills, and will be a challenge in establishing the new system for RPL in Croatia. Trust in the national government stands at 15% of citizens in Croatia and is the lowest in the EU (European Commission, 2021^[7]). During stakeholder consultations, the issue of trust was raised at several points. Employers and employer groups have limited trust in education institutions about how they are currently carrying out recognition of practical skills. As a result, employers have limited trust that an adult actually possesses the skills for which they have attained validation. Some of these concerns are currently being addressed through the new rulebook on quality assurance (see chapter 3). The new RPL system will have to be of high quality and rigour, establishing clear quality standards and responsibilities.

3 The new Act on Adult Education and progress in the field

Introduction

The new 2021 Act on Adult Education sets the framework for a new system of RPL. The deadline for implementing the corresponding rulebook for RPL is June 2023, eighteen months after the Act is implemented. The Act also establishes the foundation for several other related systems: the Croatian Qualification Framework (CROQF), quality assurance in adult education and in the recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials and training vouchers for continuing education (Zakon o obrazovanju odraslih (Adult Education Act), 2021^[9]). The Ministry of Science and Education is in the process of implementing these reforms, some of which have been completed (Croatian Qualification Framework, micro-credentials and vouchers) while others will be implemented starting summer 2023 (recognition of prior learning and the system for quality assurance). This chapter gives an overview of these programmes and how they can relate to the new system of recognition of prior learning.

2021 Act on Adult Education, RPL, and the Croatian Qualification Framework

The revised 2021 Croatian Act on Adult Education provides a legal basis for the implementation of a new RPL system for non-formal and informal learning, for learning outcomes equivalent to education levels ranging from elementary education up to upper secondary education (levels 1 – 5 of the CROQF). The Act further states that:

Evaluation programmes shall allow for the validation of prior learning with the relevant standard of the set of learning outcomes in the Croatian Qualifications Framework. In accordance with the provision of the law governing the Croatian Qualifications Framework, applicants may prove the set of learning outcomes they have previously acquired in a non-formal or informal manner, according to an approved evaluation programme.

In practice, the 2021 Act ties the new RPL system to the newly implemented CROQF. The CROQF outlines learning outcomes for each qualification standard and competences for each occupation standard. The CROQF provides a clear description of each qualification standard up to vocational secondary level, including the qualification value in terms of educational credits (HROO, ECVET or ECTS points) and its level within the CROQF.

The development of the CROQF is governed by the National Council for Development of Human Potential, located within the Ministry of Science and Education. The Council monitors the implementation of the CROQF in the educational system and provides advice on how to better connect the educational offers to

labour market needs. The Council also oversees the work of the Sectoral Councils, which are key industry bodies selected to participate in the process of implementing and validating the CROQF. Members of the Sectoral Councils have received instructions and training on the preparation and evaluation of occupational standards and qualification standards, in order to support the process of mapping occupations to qualifications and learning outcomes.

The CROQF online register was published in 2017 and is a virtual database for registration and integration of occupational standards with the qualification standards through units of competences and units of learning outcomes. The online register is divided into three sub-registers: the register of units of learning outcomes, the register of occupational standards, and the register of qualification standards. As of October 2022, the register contains 381 occupational standards and 109 qualification standards. Qualification and occupational standards have been linked, with one qualification standard often corresponding to several occupational standards. The qualification standards will provide the framework for the RPL methodology and evaluation standards in the new RPL system.

Recent related reforms in adult education in Croatia

There have been several reforms in adult education in Croatia since the implementation of the 2021 Act, and some of these reforms can be integrated as part of the new system of RPL. The Ministry of Science and Education recently introduced a framework for quality assurance in adult education institutions and a system of micro-credentials in adult education. The CES has also introduced training vouchers for adults that can be integrated with the new RPL system.

Framework for quality assurance

The 2021 Act on Adult Education prescribed a quality assurance framework for adult education in general, including for the new RPL system. Adult Education institutions that offer RPL must ensure that their RPL programmes comply with the appropriate qualification standard or set of learning outcomes outlined in the CROQF Register. This introduces much-needed standardisation of evaluation criteria for RPL.

As a means of quality assurance, the Act specifies a number of restrictions about which institutions can provide RPL and under which circumstances. According to the Act, an institution can implement RPL if it offers the corresponding education programme. For the adult education institution to qualify for offering RPL, its corresponding education programme curriculum must include all sets of learning outcomes that it wants to evaluate. Further, the education institution must have carried out the educational programme (and the required set of learning outcomes as described by the CROQF) over at least two academic cycles before it can implement RPL for those learning outcomes. This ensures that the education institution has sufficient experience teaching and evaluating the learning standards through formal education before it can evaluate the learning standards obtained through non-formal and informal learning. Additionally, the adult learning institution that wants to implement RPL must obtain an approval from the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education stating that the learning institution is of very high or high level of quality.

The framework for quality assurance in RPL described above is detailed in the 2021 Act on Adult Education, but has not yet been implemented.

Micro-credentials and training vouchers

As of April 2022, Croatia has implemented a system for micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are the outcome of modular learning, which breaks courses up into self-contained modules, where each module has its own distinct learning outcomes. Micro-credentials can be standalone partial credits for each module or stacked to obtain a full qualification. In this way, they offer a more flexible approach to certifying adult

learning that allows adults to fit learning into their busy work and family lives. In the Council Recommendation adopted in June 2022, micro-credentials are considered important in supporting inclusion and accessibility to education and training for a wider range of learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Council of the European Union, 2022^[8]).

Through the new “*Methodology for the development of adult education programmes for the acquisition of micro-credentials, partial qualifications and complete qualifications financed through vouchers and other sources of funding,*” the concepts of micro-credentials and partial qualifications are introduced in adult education in Croatia for the first time. The same methodology document introduces the new system of training vouchers. The CES is responsible for the new training vouchers, which offer subsidised training for both employed and unemployed workers. Voucher-funded learning is currently available exclusively for formal training programmes that require regular attendance at adult education institutions.

The programmes for micro-credentials and training vouchers are still in the early phase and there is limited data and evaluation of their use. However, the structure of the training voucher programme allows for tracking of participation in adult learning and labour market outcomes which should produce the data required to evaluate these programmes.

Micro-credentials and training vouchers can be integrated into the new system of RPL. With the new system of micro-credentials, adults can receive partial qualifications as an output of RPL. Following the RPL process, advisors can also create learning plans for adults that include micro-credentials to assist them in obtaining full qualifications or build on existing qualifications validated through RPL. Training vouchers could be extended to RPL services or career guidance services as part of the RPL and continuing education process.

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