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NATIONAL AGENCY FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING



# ENSURING THE QUALITY OF NON- FORMAL EDUCATION FOR ADULTS

Country report. Bulgaria

2023



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## INTRODUCTION

Education is a major factor in the transfer and establishment of new cultural and human values, in the development of human capital, in the formation of national self-awareness and self-determination, in the implementation of the aim for European integration, and plays a crucial role in creating prerequisites for sustainable human development and establishment of a knowledge-based society. The quality of education largely determines the quality of life and creates opportunities for the optimal use of the abilities of every citizen.

Non-formal and informal forms of learning are offered by various organizations - training centers, enterprises, NGOs, community centers, etc. In smaller settlements in some regions in Bulgaria, community centers are the only organizations that provide access to a library, the Internet, and other information.

The participation of the Bulgarian population in non-formal education/learning is too weak compared to the countries of the European Union. The results of the Lifelong Learning Surveys indicate that only 1.6% of the population aged 16 and over in Bulgaria participated in some form of non-formal learning in the 12 months prior to the follow-up. The same share of participation is for persons in the most active working age of 25-64 years.

The system for monitoring, evaluating and quality assurance of the results of non-formal education is not bound by legal regulations. Such a system in fact does not exist and there are no standards regarding the acquisition of competences, rather each non-formal learning provider applies some kind of quality assessment model. An important condition for quality in non-formal education of adults is the professional training and qualification of teachers, as well as measures for teachers' competences, corresponding to dynamically changing social and economic conditions.

The new economy is an economy of knowledge, of thinking, of multiple use, of recycling, of the wide use of information resources, which give the opportunity to overcome the limitation of material resources. This means that we should bend to the model of formal education, to look for opportunities to connect the various alternative ways of learning within the framework of the whole human life and within the framework of the whole society.

Above all, social life, democratic society and organization as a key structure of economic society require people who possess different competences than those of current workers in enterprises. Today, each employee in the service society, should have different social competences, should be a participant, construct their own personal and professional behavior, as well as be a creative part of a



given organization. These socio-economic demands mean several things - not teaching, but learning is increasingly becoming the essence of the system, and personal development is the natural focus of education.

## EXISTING LEGISLATION FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN NON-FORMAL ADULT EDUCATION

The Law on Vocational Education and Training is the main normative act that regulates vocational education and training and, in particular, quality assurance in the provision of VET. The Law on Vocational Education and Training (VET Act) was promulgated in the State Gazette No. 68 of July 30, 1999. In the supplementary regulations to the VET Act, definitions of non-formal education and informal learning are given, namely:

- *Non-formal education* is education that is organized by institutions outside the official vocational education and training system;
- *Informal learning* is non-institutionalized and non-systematized accumulation of knowledge, skills and competences.

According to Art. 9a, para. 1 of the VET Act, "*quality is a set of characteristics of vocational education and training that are in accordance with the expectations and needs of the individual and society*".

Unlike the non-formal adult education system, where quality assurance is not regulated, in the formal VET system, "*Centers for vocational training ensure the quality of vocational training by building an internal quality assurance system in compliance with state educational requirements for acquisition of qualification by professions and of the current legislation*". The establishment of an internal quality assurance system is mandatory for the Centers for Vocational Training.

According to the VET Act, vocational colleges and centers for vocational training develop their internal quality assurance system under conditions and procedures defined in an Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science, coordinated with the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, the Minister of Economy, the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Youth and Sports and the Minister of Agriculture. The Ordinance was promulgated and has been in force since September 2015, but was repealed in December 2016. It included texts related to self-assessment of quality in assessment areas such as: access to vocational education and training, acquisition of professional qualification and tracking the career path of persons who have acquired a professional qualification.

According to Art. 22, para. 8 of the VET Act Centers for Vocational Training are obliged to submit to the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, by January 31 of each calendar year, information on the activities performed during the previous calendar year and an annual report on self-assessment of quality through the Agency's information system. In the VET quality self-assessment report, the quality officer in the VET provider prepares an annual report, including the



following: purpose of the self-assessment; information about the external and internal environment in which the Center for Vocational Training functions during the self-assessment period; self-assessment results; comparing the evaluations according to the criteria with the previous self-evaluation period; analysis of the obtained results, achievements and good practices; assessment results in need of improvement; recommended measures and activities. In order to meet the requirements of the standards, VET providers should develop and implement an internal quality assurance system. Particularly important areas for quality improvement are: the working environment, learning outcomes, interaction with stakeholders from the local community, social partners, employer organizations and universities, as well as staff training. The Ministry of Education and Science supports and controls quality assurance in schools in the VET system (general education), and the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training – in Centers for Vocational Training (VET for adult)s. Non-formal adult learning is not covered by these quality-related texts.

The institutions that provide training for the acquisition of a vocational qualification and accordingly develop and implement a system for quality assurance of vocational education and training in Bulgaria are:

- vocational high schools, vocational colleges, arts schools and centers for vocational training;
- sports schools;
- religious schools - when they provide professional training in the vocational area "Religion";
- schools in prisons;
- special schools – correctional boarding and socio-educational boarding schools;
- unified schools, middle schools, profiled high schools, evening schools and special schools - for training and support of students with sensory disabilities, in separate classes.

The conditions and procedure for implementing quality management in general vocational education and training, including the areas, criteria and indicators for carrying out self-evaluation, are determined in a state educational standard specified in the Preschool and School Education Act.

The text in Art. 40. from VET Act states the essence of the validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, namely "*establishment and recognition of professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal education or informal learning, and their compliance with the state educational requirements for acquiring qualification by professions*". The state educational standards, which are part of the normative framework governing the VET system in Bulgaria, are the starting point for quality assurance both in formal education and training, and in informal training.

The Law on Preschool and School Education, published State Gazette No. 79 of October 13, 2015, in force since August 2016, regulates the quality management process, including in general VET.



Quality management is a continuous process of organizational development based on analysis, planning, execution of activities and evaluation. It takes into account the following elements:

- achievement of the goals set by VET providers, for example, integration of graduates on the labour market, satisfying the demand of the regional labour market;
- analysis of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and risks for development;
- results achieved by the trained persons;
- educational environment, including the need for specialized services.

Ordinance No. 2 of 13 November 2014 on the terms and conditions for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences, issued by the Minister of Education and Science, in force from 01.01.2015, regulates the validation of knowledge, skills and competences, acquired through non-formal education or informal learning, including procedures under:

- establishing the professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by the person;
- recognition of a degree of professional qualification or of a qualification in a part of a profession.

The Government of the Republic of Bulgaria approved the National Youth Strategy for the period 2021 - 2030, (State Gazette No. 14 of February 10, 2023). It is the main strategic document for planning and implementing the state youth policy and defines its main and specific goals and priorities for the next 10 years, as well as the measures to achieve them. The first priority is "*Promoting non-formal learning*". Part of the Strategy includes an analysis and states as a conclusion that non-formal education is still not particularly popular in Bulgaria. Low levels of self-initiative or seeking non-formal learning opportunities indicate that steps should be taken to enforce the understanding that non-formal learning provides many opportunities - for example, that it enables people to address certain health, personal, cognitive, emotional, educational or social deficits and that non-formal learning through alternative learning and training pathways increases one's own capacity to deal with real or potential social risks in life. The strategy emphasizes the need to increase young people's access to quality non-formal education by expanding the network of providers and adapting and implementing standards for the quality of non-formal education.

Measures include:

- Support for non-formal education by expanding the network of providers;
- Encouraging the participation of young people in non-formal education and informal learning;
- Adapting and promoting the implementation of quality standards;
- Creating tools for validating and recognizing skills acquired in non-formal education, informal learning and experiential learning outcomes.



The strategy envisages the development and adaptation of tools and quality standards.

### INFORMATION ON EXISTING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS IN NON-FORMAL ADULT LEARNING (ANALYSES OF EXPERIENCE OF QUALITY CRITERIA AND MONITORING OF EFFICIENCY OF PUBLIC TRAINING FUNDS)

The quality of learning outside the formal system is somewhat optional for people. The mechanism for evaluating and certifying the training results in most organizations is imperfect, and the quality assessment is expressed only by the completion of a satisfaction survey at the end of the training activities.

In non-formal education system, the culture of seeking and ensuring quality is relatively low. The lack of effective institutions and mechanisms for evaluation, monitoring and reporting, as well as insufficient competences in the field of quality management at all levels of the system, also explain the low adequacy of non-formal education. The system for the validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside the formal VET system presents tools in terms of quality assurance.

Following the approval of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, validation in VET system in the Republic of Bulgaria is regulated by Ordinance No. 2 of November 13, 2014 on the terms and conditions for validation of professional knowledge, skills, and competences (issued by the Ministry of Education and Science). The steps for conducting the validation follow the European Reference Framework for Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET).

Persons who have validated professional knowledge, skills, and competences established through informal and non-formal learning receive official documents that give them the same rights as persons who have acquired qualifications through formal education and training system. These documents - a certificate for the validation of a degree of professional qualification and a certificate for the validation of a professional qualification in a part of a profession - can be used as an official document for continuing education or starting work in EU member states. Although validation is very well regulated, it is not popular in Bulgaria and the participation rate is very low. In order to be able to organize validation, licensed centers for vocational training must have experience in training in a chosen profession. This is evidence of their capacity and expertise and it is mandated.

The validation procedure includes following logical steps:

1. Contract between the center and the applicant, that regulates the rights and obligations of the parties, the organization, physical and financial provision of the procedure.
2. Completing the data (portfolio of evidence) and attaching the necessary documents to the profile of the VET center in the information system of NAVET.



3. A committee is appointed to assess the professional knowledge, skills and competences applied for validation.
4. A consultant is appointed to assist the person throughout the validation process and to be responsible for the preparation, completion and submission to the VET center evidences in the person's portfolio and personal dossier.
5. To confirm the professional knowledge, skills and competences acquired by the person applying for validation, the appointed committee analyzes the evidence presented by the person, performs a preliminary comparison of the professional knowledge, skills and competences claimed by the person with the learning outcomes included in the State Educational Standards to acquire a qualification in the profession (qualification profile).

The possible outcomes of the work of this committee are:

- Option 1: The commission assesses if there is lack in knowledge, skills and competences compared to those specified in the qualification profile - the applicant is advised to participate in additional training in order to complete the qualification.
- Option 2: The commission establishes full compliance with the professional competences with the qualification profile - the candidate is allowed to take exams - part of theory and part of practice for validating a degree of professional qualification or part of a profession.

The commissions for conducting the exams are determined by order of the director of the VET center. The exams are organized in accordance with the requirements of the legislation. After successfully passing the exam, the necessary document for validation of professional qualification is issued. The document must be registered in the relevant registration book and attached to the profile of the center in the information system of NAVET. All documents are checked before publication in the official register. This register is public and can be used by employers to compare information from applicants for different positions.

The statistics for the conducted validation procedures are presented in the following table:

Year	Number of institutions that have organized validation procedures	Number of persons who acquired qualifications through validation
<b>2015</b>	12	570
<b>2016</b>	13	257
<b>2017</b>	18	162
<b>2018</b>	12	117
<b>2019</b>	9	413
<b>2020</b>	8	158
<b>2021</b>	11	661

*Table 1. Statistics on the conducted validation procedures*





The preferred occupations for validation of non-formal education and informal learning in centers for vocational training are:

- In 2015: vehicle mechanic, ritual organizer, construction worker, woodworker, beautician, computer operator, cook.
- In 2016: teaching assistant, baker – party cook, beautician, economist, real estate broker, tailor.
- In 2017: hairdresser, graphic designer, assistant educator, manicurist-pedicurist, social worker, restaurant keeper.
- In 2018: construction technician, baker – pastry cook, transport vehicles worker, real estate broker, electrician.
- In the period 2019-2022, new professions are added to the validation procedures: assistant teacher, paramedic and translator from and into Bulgarian sign language.

Distribution between procedures for full and partial qualification acquired through validation is shown in the following table. It's determined lower interest through the years from adult persons to inclusion in procedures for recognition of qualification through validation.

Year	Certificates for validation of a full qualification	Certificates for validation of a part of a professional qualification in a part of a profession	Total:
<b>2015</b>	186	384	570
<b>2016</b>	105	152	257
<b>2017</b>	161	1	162
<b>2018</b>	60	57	117
<b>2019</b>	391	22	413
<b>2020</b>	141	17	158
<b>2021</b>	654	7	661
<b>Total:</b>	1698	640	2338

Table 2. Number of issued documents for validation of professional qualification

## GOOD PRACTICES

Most private companies that offer non-formal training have established their own internal quality management systems. However, there are some quality management issues, such as insufficient quality management competencies among those involved in quality assurance in terms of learning



outcomes; insufficient focus on learners; attitude toward reactivity, passive attitude and behavior instead of proactive and flexible; limited financial resources for investment in technology or quality assurance models.

Effectiveness measurement and quality improvement has been done in recent years with respect to distance forms of teaching and learning (e.g. with the so-called Massive Open Online Courses – MOOC). Ensuring the quality of learning materials/manuals, increasing access to quality learning by providing modern equipment useful for the learning process and other relevant topics should be addressed when considering a quality assurance methodology. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to define infrastructure quality standards in the non-formal education system and to update functional, sanitary and safety standards was also put on the agenda.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis is an opportunity to draw the big picture of the situation with the quality of non-formal education and to draw up a clear and effective plan of action. In addition, it allows to identify challenges and opportunities that are not considered during the routine survey of practices in this area.

Experts with experience in the education sector, in the organization and conduct of trainings outside the formal training system, in the evaluation of the quality and management of training services took part in the preparation of this analysis. The factors included in the review are related to the developments in the sector in recent years, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the requirements arising from recent national and European legislation. An assessment was made not of quality assurance in non-formal education in general, but specifically of quality in its role as a measure of the effectiveness of non-formal education services. A number of advantages of this type of learning over participation in formal training have been identified, which can be used in the context of the implementation of the EU Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials in order to stimulate lifelong learning and employability. The team focuses on the most significant strengths, threats and opportunities.

### *STRENGTHS*

#### *Positive effect of accelerated digitization*

Thanks to digitization, it is sought to achieve better control and improve the quality of the teaching-learning process, the records of the learners' achievements and the communication with the trainers in the non-formal learning system.

#### *Flexibility and workability*



Non-formal learning is available in a variety of formats and this also widens the choices available to adult learners. In the modern world, remote services accelerated and became preferred, incl. in the training services sector. Innovations in the online courses offering on a global scale have also been reflected in our country. Online courses usually end with an online exam to validate what you've learned. Involvement in non-formal education is a voluntary act, adult learners participate of their own free will and desire and because they want to satisfy some of their needs and interests. Thus, high level of engagement is achieved.

#### *Quick feedback and analysis of collected data*

The training satisfaction survey, which until a decade ago was conducted “on paper”, now happens in digital forms and is conducted in a much shorter time. The conclusions and recommendations from the processed surveys can very quickly be taken into account by the management in regards with making decisions about changes in the curriculum, training materials, training methods.

#### *WEAKNESS*

Only large training providers with more staff and strong administrative capacity implement survey initiatives that are not formally organized, i.e. the results of the evaluation of the opinion of the trained persons are used as intended, purposefully, and improvements in the learning process occur when this evaluation is taken into account.

Smaller organizations, which also face a serious resource constraints, less often apply specific measures to estimate the quality of training. Feedback in this case relies on the initiative of the learner to express gratitude or file a complaint to express his own assessment of the resources invested in the training and the skills learned. The large number of non-formal education providers and the lack of regulation in this area inevitably lead to difficulties for citizens who are faced with the choice of which/what course to choose.

Poorly developed career/vocational guidance services limit individuals in choosing the exact course suitable for the abilities and potential of the particular candidate. The need for an information campaign on the benefits of lifelong learning, intertwined with guidance on how to make the right choice of training course, is also mentioned in a number of strategic documents as a recommendation for improvement in the sector.

#### *OPPORTUNITIES*

A well-organized system for monitoring the quality of non-formal forms of learning can be used for marketing purposes for organisations. Personal stories of satisfied, successful, fulfilled learners are a powerful marketing tool for attracting new candidates. From the learners' point of view, if there is a



system for monitoring of the quality of training services is an opportunity distinct high-quality training providers. From the state's point of view, the right professional orientation, quality courses and the realization of the trained persons are of serious interest in providing the economy with the necessary prepared human resources.

As for competition with the formal education system, regulation of quality in non-formal training organizations is a matter of comparison and sharing good practices. Non-formal training system, although unregulated, is a far more flexible and adaptable choice, it aligns faster with the trends in the business sector and very boldly introduces innovations and technologies.

The validation process enables the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of skills. This is an opportunity for people to make the acquired skills visible to others, to give them value. Validation can increase the chances of realization in the labor market and reveal new professional opportunities. The validation of skills acquired through non-formal education in Bulgaria is primarily applied in vocational training - this is the official path to document and certify acquired knowledge and skills in a profession or part of a profession and to obtain a professional qualification and specialty.

#### *THREADS*

There are number of questions and issues to discuss via dialogue between the responsible institutions:

- Responsible institution to carry out monitoring of the quality and how its results will be used to improve the training offered;
- Availability of the information on conducted monitoring (where it should be);
- Linking literacy levels with access to non-formal education;
- The applicability/recognition of the issued document after the end of non-formal learning;
- Relationship between the quality of the result of non-formal education and the socio-economic efficiency of the persons who have passed through it;
- Methodological issues regarding the specifics of adult education in the context of the ongoing technological transition;
- Popularization of the opportunities for validation of professional competences acquired informally and updating the regulations in the area;
- Clarifying the role and place of non-formal education and its inclusion in the career guidance services provided.

## SURVEY RESULTS

Within the framework of the project “Creation of self-assessment quality assurance tool in non-formal adult learning” (SelfAssessAL) a two-stage study was carried out for the needs of the target groups.

The target groups of the study are respectively:

- Providers of non-formal adult learning programs and educators;
- Policy makers and implementation responsible institutions in the field of non-formal adult learning at national level.

**The questionnaire for providers of non-formal adult learning programs (incl. trainers) was structured and distributed online. As a result, 85 responses were received.**

The results are as follows:

1. *Do you agree that information about quality assurance and assessment in non-formal adult learning is sufficient for building and implementing non-formal adult learning programs?*

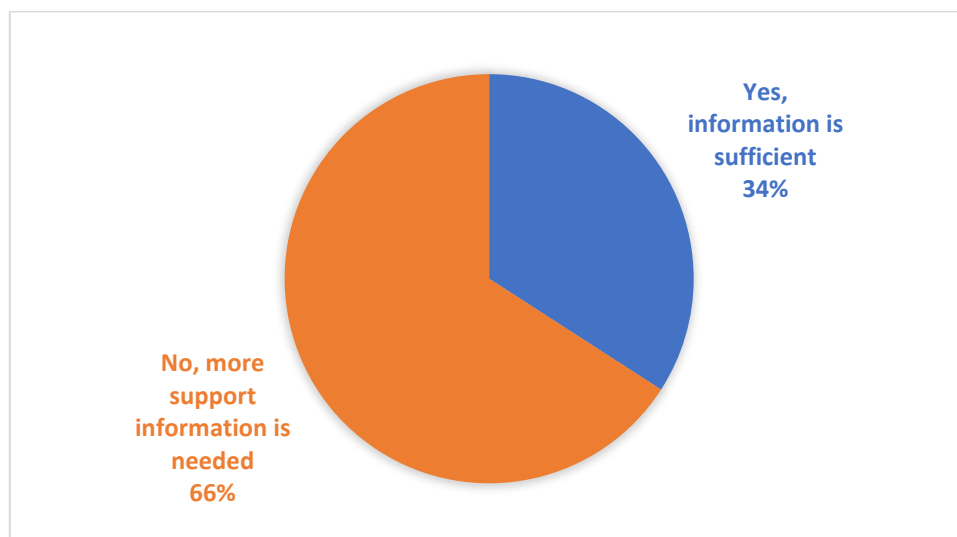


Figure 1. Relative share of responses to question #1

2. *Which are most important quality criteria for building and implementing non-formal adult learning programs?*

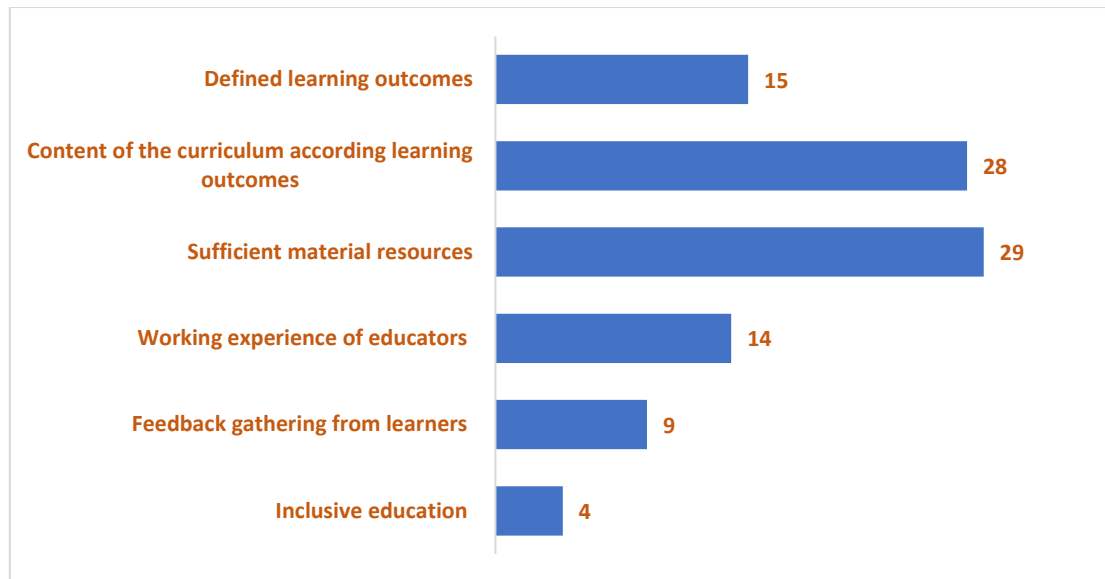


Figure 2. Distribution of answers to question #2

3. In which of the topics of quality assurance and assessment in non-formal adult learning programs are needed additional support materials most?

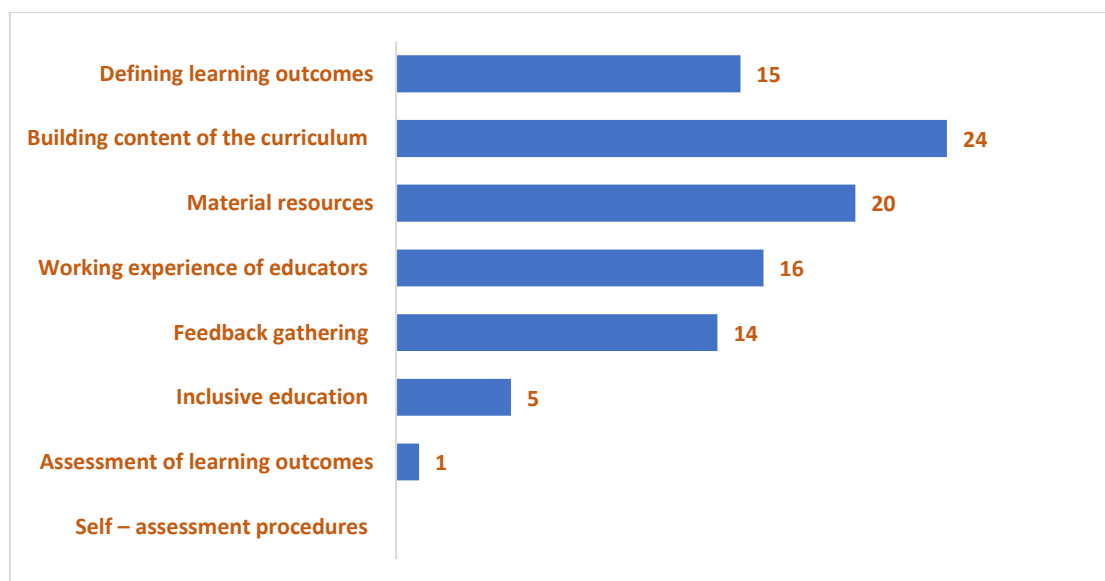


Figure 3. Distribution of answers to question #3

4. What support tools are needed for non-formal adult learning program providers and educators to improve quality of non-formal education programs?



Figure 4. Distribution of answers to question #4

5. Is an information campaign needed about quality, quality assessment, quality self-assessment, feedback of adult learners among non-formal adult learning program providers and educators to promote quality of programs?

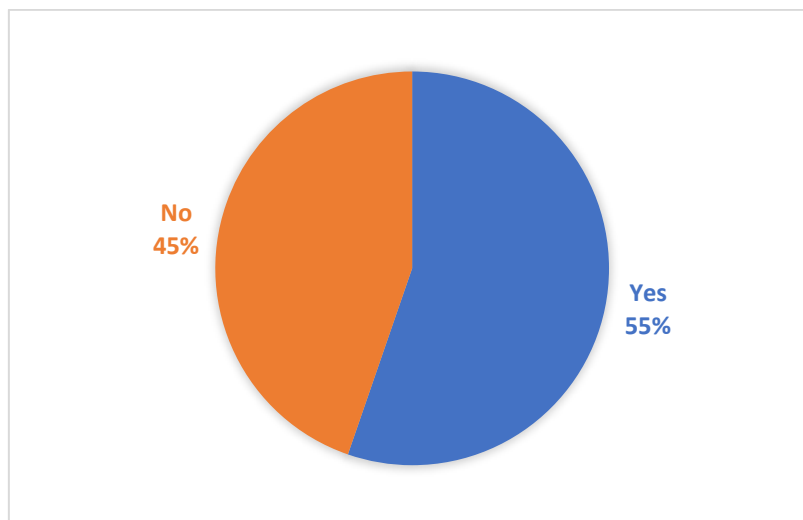


Figure 5. Relative share of responses to question #5

For 66% of respondents, information on quality assurance in non-formal adult learning is not sufficient for the development and implementation of non-formal adult learning programs. This shows the need of developing of a toolkit to support quality assurance in this area. The most important quality criteria in the development and implementation of non-formal education programs for adults are that the content of the curriculum is consistent with the learning outcomes (28 responses indicated) and material resources (29 responses). Inclusive education is not among the prioritized quality criteria.



Linking curriculum content to learning outcomes was the most frequently mentioned topic of quality assurance and evaluation in non-formal adult learning programs that needed the most additional support materials (24 responses). Material resources, the work experience of teachers and the definition of learning outcomes are frequently indicated topics with a need for additional materials. Assessment of learning outcomes and inclusive education were the least frequently answered by respondents.

The self-assessment tool was the most frequently mentioned tool to support the improvement of the quality of non-formal education programs (41 responses, almost half of all respondents). Training materials were the second most popular answer (32 respondents). Regarding the need for a quality information campaign, quality assessment, quality self-assessment, feedback to adult learners among non-formal adult learning program providers and educators, in order to promote the quality of the programs, the respondents did not indicate unequivocal answers.

Positive and negative attitudes are represented almost in half, with a slight predominance of those who indicated the answer "yes" (55% of respondents).

**The questionnaire for policy makers and implementers in the field of non-formal adult education at the national level was carried out as a semi-structured interview with representatives of the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training.**

The answers to each of the questions are summarized as follows:

- 1. Do you think adult learners are capable of objective assessment of the quality of non-formal learning programs? If yes, what could be the tools for assessment?*

Non-formal adult learning can also be subject to quality assessment, especially as it occupies an increasingly significant place, including in terms of scope, in the field of learning, in the context and of lifelong learning.

A quality assessment toolkit could include a variety of components to be considered, such as:

- Availability of certain standards for trainers, such as a certain level of qualification, professional experience, additional training, etc.
- Mechanisms to enable trainees to participate in the quality assessment process through active feedback – self-assessment forms/tests, survey templates, regular surveys of trainees' opinions and the levels of satisfaction through appropriately developed forms, etc.
- Реауестинг a feedback, as well as availability of easily manageable tools and procedures for its implementation, is essential (mandatory element) in informal training programs in order to ensure optimal flexibility and reflexivity of the training process in relation to emerging expectations and needs of the trainees.





- In connection with the above, an important element is the availability of procedures for regular update of the educational services provided - much more dynamically than in the field of formal education of adults.
- Availability of material and technical provision of the training process by covering some set minimum, according to the current situation in the sector.
- A set of reliable and up-to-date information materials.
- Ensured access to information resources on paper and electronic media available to trainees.
- Availability of a systematized toolkit of questionnaires, tests, tasks for self-training with the aim of both regular and final evaluation of the progress of the learners. Special emphasis on the portfolio (printed and digital) as a particularly suitable means of tracking the development of the acquired professional skills and competences of the trainees.
- The availability of a resource to implement a system for validation of previous acquired learning outcomes.
- Organisational policy of transparency and awareness for providers offering non-formal education.
- The development of a system for processing possibly received signals, complaints about the training process.
- Availability of a system for internal monitoring and evaluation of activities in the organization offering non-formal education.
- Availability of a maintained and reliable database for trained persons.
- Certification of the completed training, if possible with a description of the achieved learning results, without too much formalization of details, etc.
- A good level of administrative documentation and archive.
- A system for personal data protection for the trainees.

An essential indicator in assessing the quality of non-formal education can be monitoring the compliance of the training with the current needs of the labour market (regional, national).

2. *In what way do you think it is most possible/best way to carry out assessment by adult learners:*

- *By completing a feedback questionnaire (on paper or online)*
- *By conducting an interview*
- *Through an exam on acquired skills*
- *By other means - please specify.*



A suitable option is to complete a **feedback questionnaire** containing both closed and "open" type questions in order to obtain both easily measurable data and authentic information reflecting the diverse range of opinions on a given topic.

Another good opportunity, especially applicable in the field of informal education of adults, is the preparation and presentation of a **portfolio**, including a digital one. The portfolio is a combined tool outlining the competences acquired by individuals, fundamentally encouraging self-assessment and focusing the attention of learners on quality criteria.

*3. How adult learners' feedback can be used in improvement of non-formal adult learning programs?*

Feedback from learners is one of the main sources of information for assessing the quality of non-formal education. It can be used for a regular upgrading in the training program if there is an objective need related to the applicability of the learning results - for example, the inclusion in the training of additional topics and separate competencies that would give the trainees a competitive advantage on the labour market. It is also of significant benefit for identifying possible gaps in the training of trainers and covering them, as well as for registering the need to change/replace some already outdated teaching materials.

*4. By whom adult learners' feedback can be used?*

In general, non-governmental organizations, enterprises, companies and traditional Bulgarian cultural and educational centers offer non-formal education in Bulgaria.

The conclusions based on the received feedback can be used first of all by the team of the training organization (trainers, administration) in order to optimize the training process, and also by citizens seeking informal courses, by the institutions responsible for the development and monitoring of the educational sphere as a whole, from scientific and research organizations in analyzes and development of educational strategies.

*5. Does your country have support tools (booklets, newsletters, methodologies, guidelines) for non-formal adult learning program providers and educators? Which of them is most used/useful?*

In Bulgaria, the **validation** procedure is an alternative way to acquire a professional qualification for those who have not completed an official VET program. The validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning is an integral part of lifelong learning policy. In 2014, with amendments to the Vocational Education and Training Act validation of the results of non-formal education and informal learning was introduced. After the amendments in the law, a validation procedure was approved and has been in force since 2015, regulated by Ordinance No. 2 on the terms and conditions for validation of professional knowledge, skills and competences,



approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. VET providers organize validation procedure for qualifications - professions and specialties, included in the List of Professions for Vocational Education and Training. The units of learning based approach to developing state education standards (qualification standards) has made the validation process more transparent. Applicants provide evidence of the learning outcomes they possess with the aim of obtaining a qualification in full or part of a profession, and that allows them to access the vocational training system and the labour market. At one of the largest higher education institutions in Bulgaria - Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", there is a bachelor's program "Informal Education", which aims to prepare personnel with higher education for the needs of the intensively developing field of additional and alternative educational services for students and adults provided by specialized government, private and non-governmental organizations outside the formal education system.

Within the Master's programs at the same university, there are "Management of services and organizations for non-formal education", "Career education in institutions and networks for non-formal education", which provide a wide-ranging training in the field of theory and management of education, which they need senior managers and specialists in the intensively developing segment of non-formal education in Bulgaria, uniting organizations in the three major sectors – public, private and civil. In Bulgaria, there is a National Coordination Group for Lifelong Learning, which has initiatives and provides methodical support in the field of non-formal education, as well as a National Support Unit for the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE). On the issues related to the specifics of teaching in the field of non-formal education, there are also various scientific publications, some created within the framework of European projects. An example of such supporting literature is the Collection of Research Materials "Non-Formal Education", partially financed by the "Scientific Research" fund at the "St. Kliment Ohridski" University; "Anthology. Informal education" of University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", "Handbook for the training of trainers - use of informal learning and interactive methods in youth work", created within the framework of an "Erasmus +" project, etc.

*6. What support tools are needed for non-formal adult learning program providers and educators to improve quality of non-formal education programs?*

More open access scholarly publications to support the development of the non-formal learning sector and the skills of trainers are needed. Specialized forums for the exchange of successful practices between training organizations and teachers in the field of non-formal education could be of practical use, as well.

*7. What quality criteria/topics have to be included in self-assessment tool for non-formal adult learning programs?*



A number of indicators existing within the self-assessment system can be used when using vocational training quality indicators, such as:

- Publicity and promotion of the offered professional training;
- Access of vulnerable groups to offered professional training;
- Access of persons who left the education system (early leavers) to offered professional training;
- Provision of an accessible architectural environment;
- Availability of an adequate material and technical base;
- High level of administrative service;
- Providing an opportunity to validate professional knowledge, skills and competencies;
- A functioning internal system for ensuring the quality of the training offered, incl. internal monitoring and control mechanism;
- Measuring the achieved quality through self-assessment in the previous year;
- Updated curricula in accordance with the changes in the regulations, at the request of the training provider, etc.;
- Providing teaching staff with adequate qualifications for the purposes of training;
- Share of teachers who participated in various forms of additional training and qualification, to update and increase professional knowledge, skills and competences;
- Usage of a variety of interactive forms and methods of teaching, that are practice oriented (simulation, role-playing games, case studies, projects, debates, discussions, etc.);
- Relative share of those who left compared to those who entered at the beginning of the training;
- Relative share of conducted validation procedures of professional knowledge, skills and competences;
- Trainees' awareness of the methods, criteria and possibilities for evaluating the acquired knowledge, skills and competences;
- Usage of diverse and sufficiently flexible forms for ongoing verification of the individual characteristics of the trainees;
- Participation of training organizations in national and international programs and projects;
- Cooperation with social partners at the local and regional level;
- Relative share of employed persons on the labour market in the profession field compared to the total number of persons who have completed informal training;
- Degree of satisfaction of the graduates with the quality of the professional training (for example, through a survey of the course participants after completion of the training);



- Degree of satisfaction of the employers with the knowledge, skills and competences acquired by the persons and with their suitability for employment (established, for example, by conducting a survey of the employers).
8. *Is an information campaign needed about quality, quality self-assessment, feedback of adult learners among non-formal adult learning program providers and educators?*

Yes, such information campaigns would be useful in terms of the possible “borrowing” by non-formal learning providers of appropriate models used within the formal education system. They should be precisely focused only on those methods and elements that can find real application in the informal system, without affecting its specificity and strengths, i.e. without imposing redundant and inexpedient formalization.

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The existing internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in non-formal training are directly related to the level of trust and its perception in the society. In addition to the feedback surveys mentioned above, in some organizations the tracking of the trained persons is monitored. This is most often associated with courses that are advertised as an option for direct employment. It concerns either subsidiary companies of the training institution or partnership agreements between a training center and an employer (most often in the field of ICT and creative industry). However, this practice can hardly be classified as an element of a quality assurance system, but rather as part of the organizations' marketing policy.

The intensively developing field of additional and alternative educational services for students and adults, provided by specialized state, private and non-governmental organizations outside the official (formal) education system, is gaining an increasingly significant role in the education market. The new Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials to boost lifelong learning and employability has focused heavily on the widespread implementation of short-term courses leading to employment. That is why the question of the quality of the provided services becomes significant for a wide range of interested parties.

The various non-formal vocational training programs organized by companies, trade unions, private agencies and by formal education institutions constitute non-formal education. This is the area where there is increased cooperation between formal education institutions, trade unions and state institutions and local authorities. And these programs tend to be offered to and serve people with higher degrees from the formal education and those who are higher up in the social hierarchy. It is the activity of trade unions that can be seen as trying to reverse this trend in the name of social justice and in the name of the development of the society as a whole. Companies usually focus their



efforts on vocational training activities, but they can also be involved in activities aimed at the personal development of their employees.

Until now, civil society organizations were more involved in activities developing formal, popular education, but today they are increasingly directed towards activities affirming personal development. Private organizations and providers of educational services are active both in the field of vocational training and in the field of personal development programs, and started to participate as partners in formal education programs using public funds provided by the state or the European Union. Assessment of non-formal and informal training is a new area where objectives and responsibilities need to be clarified. This need reflects the conceptual diversity that characterizes these types of training. Assessment methods should no longer be considered in isolation from other initiatives and activities in training - the development of programs, standards, the development of mechanisms for giving credits for learning, the preparation of special training programs. In Bulgaria, the process of experimentation in this area and the state of uncertainty still prevail. Formal education and the institutions providing it, which have so dominated the field of assessment, are trying to develop more flexible systems and look for opportunities to assess alternative learning outcomes. The national development of the quality of vocational education and training in the light of the trends and guidelines of the European Union is directly or indirectly treated in various government documents - Government Program, various programs for the development of education and lifelong learning. A specified document or a specialized part of a document, independently developed, comprehensively treating the problems of the quality assurance of vocational education and training has not been developed. In this sense, there is a need for a unified conceptual basis of the quality assurance of VET - in formal and informal VET, which hinders the effective resolution of important problems of vocational education and training.

Country report is produced within Erasmus+ programme Project Erasmus+ program project "Creation of self-assessment quality assurance tool in non-formal adult learning", No. 2022-1-LT01-KA220-ADU-000085541.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.