European Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/meue20

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To cite this article: Markus Maurer & Ognen Spasovski (2023): Expanding the Validation of Prior Learning in the Context of European Integration: The Case of North Macedonia, European Education, DOI: 10.1080/10564934.2022.2158105

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2022.2158105

Published online: 11 Jan 2023.

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EUROPEAN EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2022.2158105

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Expanding the Validation of Prior Learning in the Context of European Integration: The Case of North Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the comparative literature on the growing role of "validation of prior learning," by analyzing the emergence and implementation of VPL in North Macedonia. Based on documents and qualitative interviews, the article provides an historical- institutionalist perspective on these processes. The article argues that a lack of stakeholder engagement, linked to a very low degree of institutional change in the country's skill formation system, inhibits the development and implementation of VPL.

Introduction

The validation of prior learning (VPL) has become an important element of lifelong learning policies in many parts of the world (Cedefop, 2022; UIL, 2022). Policymakers in most countries are pursuing reforms that mean individuals who have already acquired competencies in the work process do not have to "acquire" them again through training, in order to gain certain formal educational qualifications.

The literature indicates that the implementation of such reforms is often extremely challenging, hence the very slow rate of increase in the number of people achieving a qualification via validation of prior learning (see e.g., Cedefop, 2018; Cooper & Harris, 2013). Such challenges are a concern to the European Union (EU), which has been promoting the "validation of non-formal and informal learning" not only in its member states, but also among candidate countries (Council of the European Union, 2012). According to the EU's core VET agency, progress in this regard could be accelerated through more international sharing of good practices, higher budgets and better monitoring and evaluation (Cedefop, 2018, p. 45). The educational literature on validation, however, suggests that the reasons underlying its slow expansion are complex: not only are there difficulties in capturing the practical knowledge of candidates through appropriate methods (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Cooper & Harris, 2013), but there are also few incentives for education and training providers to actually engage in validation (Andersen, 2016) or potential VPL applicants simply lack the requisite competencies (Werquin, 2021). In the European context, these complex reasons have been studied primarily with regard to EU member states, or European countries that are relatively economically developed but not part of the EU (e.g., Switzerland). However, there is no academic literature on the candidate countries of the EU.

This article fills that gap, by examining the candidate country of North Macedonia, which is in Southeastern Europe and was part of Yugoslavia until 1991. The case of North Macedonia is of

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2022.2158105

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particular relevance because it has been promoting validation for almost a decade (Ministry of Education & Science, 2013b), clearly in connection with its integration into the European Union—but with very few tangible results. This paper asks why validation of prior learning did not progress as expected in North Macedonia, with the aim of contributing to the research literature on the challenges of implementing validation, as well as discussions on validation in EU-candidate countries.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

A Review of Literature

Mirroring its increasing importance in education policy, VPL has become a topic of increasing interest to academics. A substantial proportion of the literature uses the term "recognition of prior learning" (RPL). But "validation" is also increasingly widespread in the literature, due to the great importance of French scholarship using this term (see e.g., Malaquin, 2013), as well as the engagement of the EU in this field (Council of the European Union, 2012). Since the term also became established in North Macedonia, it will be used in this article.

The academic literature on validation deals with a large number of different aspects of this topic, only some of which can be addressed here.

Firstly, the literature documents a very wide range of different approaches to VPL in different parts of education systems (e.g., VET, adult education, higher education), both in terms of how competencies are recognized and in terms of the opportunities that VPL opens up (e.g., Annen, 2012; Harris, 1999). In this context, recent contributions on VPL in VET point out that some countries focus more on the achievement of formal qualifications, while others tend to focus on non-formal or partially formal qualifications. Based on case studies of Sweden and Switzerland, Maurer (2021a, in press) has established the thesis that way in which representatives of the world of work are involved in VET can have a significant influence on it; countries with collectively organized VET tend to focus more on the achievement of formal qualifications, while static VET systems focus more on the achievement of non-formal or partial qualifications.

Secondly, the literature discusses the fact that validation in many countries develops more slowly than many policy makers would hope (see e.g., Cedefop, 2018; Cooper & Harris, 2013). Reasons given for this in the literature include the fact that political rhetoric is often not matched by commensurate political will to translate VPL policies into practice, in particular when support from actors at the policy implementation level is lacking (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Andersen, 2016; Cooper & Harris, 2013). The literature also repeatedly points out that VPL procedures are often too difficult for candidates, not least because they rely heavily on academic skills and knowledge that are hard to acquire through practical experience alone (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Cooper & Harris, 2013; Werquin, 2021). Other authors have furthermore pointed out that RPL is unlikely to establish itself if the qualifications to which it leads are not in high demand in the relevant sectors of the labor market (Maurer, 2019, 2021a; Werquin, 2013).

Thirdly, the literature discusses the promotion of validation in the context of international cooperation (Maurer, 2021b; Mikulec et al., 2022), describing its expansion as being the result of the diffusion of a global VET policy toolkit—exemplified by the establishment of qualifications frameworks (Chisholm, 2007; McGrath, 2012, p. 625). This literature shows that, whilst international organizations strongly promote validation policies, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries, they often have little effect at the implementation level, due to a lack of commitment by the key national VET actors. In Bangladesh, for example, a considerable "decoupling" between the policy reforms and their implementation has been identified (Maurer & Morshed, 2022), with reference to literature on world education culture (Nagel & Snyder, 1989; Zapp, 2019).

This discussion is clearly of great importance to researchers examining the impact of EU education policy on reforms in its member and candidate countries.

As a matter of fact, the literature just mentioned on the role of VPL in international cooperation displays important parallels to the literature dealing with the mechanisms of European integration. This suggests that reforms in different policy areas lead to a "convergence of policy rhetoric and ideas" (Vukasovic & Huisman, 2018), but that underlying regulations and social practices change only to a very limited degree. However, literature on the implementation of EU education policy in individual countries hardly deals with EU candidate countries; it is mostly about EU member states and focuses mainly on higher education (Matei et al., 2018; Vögtle, 2019), with the smaller body of literature on VET concentrating on the implementation of qualifications frameworks (see e.g., Helgøy & Homme, 2015).

A Historical-Institutionalist Approach

This article adopts a historical-institutionalist approach to answer its guiding question about the factors underlying slow validation uptake in North Macedonia. Three tenets of this approach are particularly relevant to this article (Stefes, 2019; Thelen, 2002): Firstly, that institutional evolution and social agency are mutually interdependent. Institutions set the parameters in which actors can exercise agency, and actors in turn shape the institutions in ways that reflect their interests, resources and coalitions. Secondly, the origins and evolution of institutions are defined by critical junctures, which set institutions on paths that prove "sticky," due to positive feedback from key actors as well as "institutional complementarities"—complementarities with institutions in other fields of policy. Thirdly, institutional change is possible, but usually quite gradual, and may unfold in a layered fashion, whereby new institutions are built on top of preexisting institutions that serve different purposes.

Adopting this historical-institutionalist approach, the article will focus on the development of (a) institutions that have been created over the years to establish VPL in North Macedonia, (b) the institutional context in which these institutions have been established, and (c) the actors that have influenced the development of validation regulations. In order to trace the influence of European education policy on North Macedonia, the study furthermore adopts Jakobi's (2009) approach to analyzing the impact of international organizations on national policy (which is well connected to the institutionalist perspective), examining the European influence with regard to the four dimensions suggested by this author, i.e., "standards," "funding," "technical assistance" and "monitoring."

Research Methods

Due to the focus of the article on institutions and their emergence, the analysis is based on documents, particularly those produced since 2013, because validation was officially promoted from that year onwards. These documents include legally binding regulations (e.g., laws), and less legally binding documents (e.g., strategy papers) in which the relevant actors formulate objectives and justify them or document activities. Such documents occasionally include project reports that contain information on the number of validation candidates, which is relevant because such numbers do not yet appear in any official statistics in North Macedonia. Furthermore, seven qualitative expert interviews were conducted with persons working for public authorities, international organizations and civil society organizations that have established themselves as the most relevant for the development and promotion of validation in North Macedonia. All qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2010). References to the interviews throughout the text are abbreviated, from "Int.1" to "Int. 7."

European Education and Training Policy for Candidate Countries

The development of VPL in North Macedonia would not be conceivable without the influence of the European institutions. Regulations from two EU policy areas converge, namely EU integration policy and EU education and training policy. Both areas are presented in the following section, mostly without direct reference to the context in North Macedonia.

The Process of Integrating Candidate Countries

As an economic and political union, the European Union currently comprises 27 member countries. It has been undergoing a comprehensive enlargement process, particularly since the 1990s. Currently, the EU is officially negotiating with five candidate countries (namely, Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey); Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are considered potential candidates. Negotiations are conducted with each candidate country individually in order to ultimately decide to what extent the countries are able to apply EU law (acquis). For this purpose, EU law is divided into 35 chapters which are negotiated one by one (Elbasani & Šabić, 2018; Miščević & Mrak, 2017). Due to the fact that many of the current candidate countries are Balkan countries that began the accession process in the wake of the collapse of the Eastern bloc, a special admission process was defined for these countries, the so-called "Stabilisation and Association Process," which could already be completed for some countries with their admission to the EU (Čermák, 2019; Pippan, 2004). While, from the EU's point of view, the accession of new members is legitimized by the substantial political reforms they must undergo, there is a strong consensus in the literature that many such reforms are of a superficial nature (see e.g., Elbasani & Šabić, 2018).

In parallel to the political process of accession negotiations, the EU supports the candidate countries and potential candidate countries through financial and technical assistance, particularly with regard to political reforms and further development processes (e.g., in the area of infrastructure), which should bring them closer to the EU. Of particular importance are the grants of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which has two phases (2007–2013 and 2014–2020) for which 24.3 billion EUR have been budgeted so far (European Commission, 2014, 2022a). IPA's second phase, which is currently being completed, differed from the first phase in that it did not focus on accession-driven objectives in a comparatively narrow way, but rather placed "more general development and good governance objectives" at the center of its efforts (Miščević & Mrak, 2017). Against this background, reforms in the education sector were increasingly supported in IPA phase 2.

VPL in European Education and Training Policy

Education policy is not one of the central policy areas for the integration of candidate countries, because—as chapter 26 ("education and culture") of the "acquis communitaire" suggests—the member states enjoy great autonomy in the field of education and training. Despite this national autonomy, the EU pursues an overarching education policy. However, this is not based on a comprehensive legal framework (as exists, for example, for energy policy), but on the open method of coordination, i.e., through jointly agreed strategies, instruments and benchmarks, which are less binding than in other policy areas (Garben, 2012; Lancos, 2018). The candidate countries are expected to adopt the approaches used by the EU as far as possible, taking into account national characteristics, and IPA funds can also be used for this purpose.

Initially, from around the mid-1990s, the EU dealt with education policy primarily from an economic perspective, firstly by strengthening European education to contribute to economic competitiveness, and secondly by improving intra-European cooperation in education to increase

inter-state mobility on the labor market. The focus was not on a specific educational level, but on "lifelong learning" (European Commission, 2000), whereby, in the "Copenhagen Declaration," qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications and skills were elevated to core elements of European education policy (European Commission, 2002). In the end, this was based on a competence-oriented approach that had become common in Anglo-Saxon VET systems at the time, e.g., in Australia, which had introduced qualifications frameworks and RPL even before the EU (Knight, 2006).

Based on this recommendation and on even more detailed guidelines from Cedefop (the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training) (Cedefop, 2015), the EU member states and candidate countries are developing their own validation systems, a process monitored by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Advisory Group, which assists the EU Commission in its commitment to lifelong education (European Commission, 2022b; Helgøy & Homme, 2015). Candidate countries are also supported in establishing their validation systems by the European Training Foundation (ETF), whose mandate is to assist non-EU member countries, especially candidate countries and other countries in the EU's neighborhood, in improving their education and training systems (Masson, 2003; Viertel, 2010). It is also the ETF's task to document developments in the education systems of candidate countries at European level, for example in the context of country reports on validation for the attention of Cedefop, which runs an inventory on this topic (Cedefop, 2018). The ETF's involvement in candidate countries is often financed through IPA projects, which is the case for North Macedonia (ETF & Adult Education Center, 2017b).

Country Context: North Macedonia

In 1992, the Republic of Macedonia established itself as an independent state that emerged from the collapsed Yugoslavia. Due to a name dispute with Greece, which stood in the way of its integration into NATO (though integration has since taken place) and its as-yet unsuccessful admission into the EU, the state is now called North Macedonia (Koneska, 2019). The country is one of the economically poorest in Europe, and the number of Macedonians emigrating to EU countries is consequently large; expectations are high that entry into the EU would contribute to an improvement in the economic situation (World Bank, 2019).

Since its independence, the country has also been marked by serious ethnic tensions, especially between the ethnic Macedonians, who constitute the majority, and the ethnic Albanians. An armed insurgency by the representatives of the latter in 2001 was ended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement, in exchange for increased rights for ethnic Albanians, but the tensions remained (Marolov, 2013).

EU Integration Process

North Macedonia has been an EU candidate country since 2005. For many years, the name dispute with Greece was the central reason for the slow progress in the accession negotiations, and since the name change, the process has been delayed further (Koneska, 2019). As a candidate country, North Macedonia is financially supported by the IPA. In the first two phases (2007–2013 and 2014–2020), more than 1.28 billion EUR were budgeted for this purpose (European Commission, 2017; Mojsovska, 2016). However, the EU's financial and technical support goes back much further: it began in the 1990s, first in the framework of humanitarian aid, and was then continued in the framework of EU development aid for countries in the Balkans (Phare and CARDS programs) (Radosavljevik-Bojceva & Temelkov, 2011). At the same time, North Macedonia is still supported directly by individual EU member states (such as Germany)

within the framework of bilateral cooperation, and of course by countries outside the EU (such as Switzerland) (Mitevski, 2016).

As part of its financial and technical assistance, the EU has supported education reforms in Macedonia since the 1990s (see e.g., Werquin, 2013). This was also done in the first phase of IPA, especially with regard to VET, although education was not part of the sectors prioritized in this phase. Education issues were then given greater weight in the second phase of IPA, albeit in conjunction with labor market and social policy objectives (Mojsovska, 2016), which gave particular legitimacy to efforts in the area of VET.

The Education and Training System in North Macedonia

The education system in North Macedonia inherited much of its structure from the system in Yugoslavia, and accordingly has many similarities with other systems in the Western Balkans. However, since Yugoslavian times, there have been major changes in the enrollment rates. In particular, a steady expansion of participation rates can be observed across all levels of education, to which both compulsory secondary education and an education policy aimed at social inclusion certainly have contributed (OECD, 2019). The increase in participation is particularly pronounced at the upper secondary level, which was attended by 82% of young adults (25–34 years) in 2019 (OECD, 2019). There has been a marked growth in higher education enrollment, a trend that was strongly corroborated by the establishment of new universities, many of which are private (OECD, 2019).

While the share of VET at upper secondary level has been shrinking in recent years, a majority of students at this level are enrolled in VET programs. Yet, whereas earlier, most VET students followed 3-year programs that mainly prepared them for labor market entry (with the option of subsequently joining higher VET courses), today, approximately 93% of them enroll in a 4-year program that leads to a state matura and provides entry to university education (State Statistical Office, 2018).

While enrollment rates have been rising, there remain considerable concerns about the quality of education, at all levels. PISA results, for instance, focusing on competence in reading, mathematics and science, were dramatically lower than the averages of not only OECD countries, but also most countries in the Balkan region, such that the OECD stated that "many young adults in North Macedonia leave education without mastering the basic competencies for life and work" (OECD, 2019). Considerable concerns also exist around upper secondary education, in particular VET, which is criticized for placing little emphasis on practical vocational competencies that are in line with labor market needs (Ministry of Education & Science, 2013a; OECD, 2019). Yet, the problem of low educational quality is particularly pervasive at the level of higher education, the rapid expansion of which was largely unaccompanied by the development of an adequate system of quality control (Stojanovski et al., 2018). In consequence, an increasing proportion of university graduates do not find their way into the labor market, exacerbating the problem of unemployment, which has become one of the most critical problems in the country (Petreski et al., 2017).

In recent years, adult education has gained more political attention (Velkovski, 2017). The focus is on improving the access of adults to formal educational qualifications (at primary as well as secondary level), and to those (often vocational) qualifications that are not part of the formal education system, but are usually intended to prepare them for a specific occupation (Adult Education Centre, 2020; Ministry of Education & Science & Adult Education Center, 2015). Adult education in North Macedonia, which has been regulated by a separate law since 2008, and has been promoted under the auspices of a designated authority, the Adult Education Center (AEC), has also benefited from external support, especially from the EU's commitment to lifelong learning in candidate countries, as well as from the growing interest in VET in other partner

countries, which hope to be able to contribute to a reduction in unemployment through short trainings for adults (see e.g., Center for Adult Education, 2016).

The Development of Validation in North Macedonia

The following section examines the development of validation in North Macedonia in four steps. First, following Jakobi's (2009) arguments (c.f., 2.1), the instruments used by the EU and its associated organizations to drive this process forward are described. Second, the evolution of institutional arrangements related to validation is presented. Third, the section discusses how validation has expanded, especially with regard to the number of VPL graduates, which, as mentioned above, has remained very low. Fourth, applying the historical-institutionalist theoretical framework, various factors underlying the low expansion of VPL in North Macedonia are explained.

Instruments of the EU to Implement Its Validation Policy

Validation has been promoted in North Macedonia in the context of the European integration process, starting from around 2012/2013. The following section now analyses the influence of European education policy on the development of validation in North Macedonia using the four dimensions proposed by Jakobi (2009).

The starting point for the design of validation in North Macedonia is undoubtedly the EU *standards* on validation, in particular the recommendations of the Council of the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2012) and the guidelines of Cedefop (2015), which are closely linked to the EU's regulations on qualifications frameworks and how these are to be related to the EQF. The central concepts and assumptions of these documents—such as the relationship between the qualifications framework and validation, the design of the validation process and possible forms of validation—are fully reflected in the Macedonian policy documents (see e.g., Ministry of Education & Science & Adult Education Center, 2016).

The accommodation of EU standards in North Macedonia is driven not least by European *funds*, which are provided to the country primarily within the framework of the IPA, and have been used repeatedly for the development of VET (Mojsovska, 2016). It is mainly with the help of IPA funds that the conceptual work in the field of validation is financed, in particular the *technical assistance* by the ETF and other expert organizations (e.g., the German DVV, which has been involved in Macedonian adult education since 1997) (Sentočnik, 2022; Werquin, 2013).

Finally, the EU is also involved in *monitoring* progress in validation. The EQF advisory group, which had to agree to the referencing of the Macedonian Qualifications Framework (MQF) to the EQF, and in this context called on the authorities to make greater progress with validation, is of central importance (Ministry of Education & Science & Adult Education Center, 2016). Less binding on North Macedonia and other EU candidate countries is the work of Cedefop, whose inventory on validation also reports on developments in North Macedonia (Spasovski, 2018).

Evolution of Country-Level Institutions to Promote Validation

Against the background of these efforts emanating from the EU, institutional arrangements were created in North Macedonia for the promotion of RPL. An important starting point was the VET strategy of 2013 (Ministry of Education & Science, 2013b), which was developed in cooperation with the ETF; it was in this document that the ministry, for the first time, underlined the importance of promoting VPL. The AEC, which is generally in charge of the development of adult education (in particular the verification of providers of adult education), was made responsible for the elaboration and implementation of the country's validation policy, in close cooperation with ETF.

The AEC subsequently became involved in the development of further strategies and legal provisions for validation. Of particular importance was the "Roadmap for implementing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning," which proposed to adopt an approach closely oriented to European standards (Ministry of Education & Science & Adult Education Center, 2016). It suggested that validation "in the short and medium term should focus on arrangements for the awarding of full or partial qualifications" (p. 35) (e.g., in VET at upper secondary level), and that in the longer term, higher education qualifications should also be considered. Aligned with these plans, the country's latest education strategy then proposed that validation should "allow for […] horizontal and vertical mobility within the education system and the labor market" (Ministry of Education & Science, 2018).

However, this claim to grant access to full or partial formal qualifications through validation could not be implemented at the level of official laws. In fact, the only law that mentions validation so far is the Law on the MQF (Republic of Macedonia, 2013), and it applies to the acquisition of vocational qualifications that would normally be issued after short training courses, not VET qualifications at upper secondary level. Two central legislative projects in which validation should have been further regulated have not been continued due to various changes of government. The last drafts contain opposing provisions, particularly with regard to validation: while the planned Law on Adult Education proposed that formal educational qualifications could be achieved by way of validation (Ministry of Education & Science, 2021a), the draft VET law did not include any such provision, only stating that regional VET centers would be entitled to conduct validation in accordance with the Law on Adult Education (Ministry of Education & Science, 2021b).

On this limited legal basis, the AEC, with the support of the ETF, was able to issue only a few regulations on validation, restricted to non-formal adult education, such as guidance notes for the validation process and a handbook for assessors (ETF & Adult Education Center, 2017a, 2017b).

Access to Validation at the Level of Individuals

Despite these comprehensive efforts, there has been less progress in actually implementing validation in North Macedonia than many of its promoters would have hoped. In fact, to date, vocational competencies have only been validated in the framework of pilot projects funded by external donors. The most relevant example is that of "Build up Skills," a project supported by the EU through its Horizon 2020 program, which aimed at improving skills in the field of energy-efficient construction. Within the framework of this project, 967 workers from 5 different occupations obtained skills certificates stating that they were competent in the field of energy-efficient construction. Though validation played an important role in the overall design—and also in the reporting—of this project, participants in fact developed most of the necessary skills through training, rather than through a recognition of previously acquired competencies (Build up Skills, 2016a, 2016b; Spasovski, 2018). More recently, under a donor-funded initiative that piloted validation in the years 2020–2021, seven candidates received their waiter certificate, positioned at level 3 of the MQF, that would otherwise be issued after a short training program. Under the same initiative, it had been planned to validate the skills of facade workers, but due to low demand, no qualification was awarded in this occupation (Adult Education Centre, 2021).

Explaining the Slow Development of Validation

What are the reasons for the slow development of validation in North Macedonia? In the following sections, this question will be answered from a historical-institutionalist perspective, considering the development of validation as a type of institutional change that occurs as a function of social agency and institutional context.

Lack of Interest of Key Actors

Policy makers in North Macedonia have been promoting validation in the form of a top-down process because they see it as a requirement for their country's accession to the EU—not because they consider it to be a significant response to specific challenges in Macedonia's education and training system (Trimcev, 2019; Int. 2; Int. 4; Int. 7). Accordingly, there are few policymaking and implementation actors with a genuine interest in taking validation forward.

Among such potential actors are two authorities under the influence by the Ministry of Education, namely the Bureau for the Development of Education (BDE) and the VET Center, which are responsible for the preparation of new legal regulations in VET and for development work in this field. Yet, the promotion of validation was never a central concern for them: their focus is on formal VET at the upper secondary level for young people, the large majority of whom today enroll in the four-year VET program that is mainly oriented toward preparing them for higher education. These two authorities have always had two major concerns: firstly, they were of the view that the regular formal VET qualifications were too demanding to be made accessible to individuals with little formal education (Werquin, 2013, p. 27). Secondly, they felt that validation could further undermine the already low level of confidence in existing qualifications acquired through part-time VET, such as healthcare qualifications, where there are already doubts about the application of compliance standards by relevant education providers (Int. 4; Int. 6).

Virtually no interest in validation has been voiced from the side of the employers in North Macedonia, even though many among them report on their struggle to find a sufficient number of workers who are willing to work (ETF, 2020; Mojsoska-Blazevski, 2019). One of the reasons for their lack of interest is institutional arrangements in many branches of the labor market that do not require vocational qualifications from employees (e.g., in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, retail), so those who actually want to work have few incentives to undergo validation (Trimcev, 2019; Int. 5; Int. 6; Int. 7)

Institutional Focus on Non-Formal Qualifications

In this context, the country's validation policy received a clear focus on non-formal qualifications that can only be acquired outside of regular education programs, through training providers that have to be recognized by the AEC (Int. 1; Int. 3) (c.f., 5.1.2). This development took place gradually but can, in the end, be regarded as a critical juncture in the development of validation in North Macedonia. The AEC, a small authority with little influence, became responsible for validation in North Macedonia, obviously with limited leverage to promote validation, particularly in formal VET (Int.5). In fact, the possibility of extending validation to at least partially formal VET qualifications was discussed early on. However, this intention was not only undermined by the strong reservations on the part of the VET center, but also by institutional regulations in formal VET, especially its strongly theory-oriented curriculum, which complicates efforts to single out specific parts of the programs for the purpose of validation (Int. 5; Int. 7).

This institutional focus on non-formal education also reflects the fact that the promotion of validation has received key support from organizations that are involved in adult education, in particular the adult education providers and the Lifelong Learning Center, an organization that represents the interests of these providers. Clearly, their interest in validation is at least partly for commercial reasons, as validation schemes would generate new income—especially if they were to be subsidized by the state (Lifelong Learning Centre, 2018).

Irrelevance of Non-Formal Qualifications in the Labor Market

The pilot schemes to validate competencies (cf. 5.3) have generated little demand primarily because the non-formal qualifications made accessible by these initiatives have hardly any added

value in the Macedonian labor market. Access to the jobs for which these qualifications are designed is basically possible even without such qualifications—and in those parts of the labor market that could be attractive for the target groups (e.g., better-paid jobs in the services sector in the urban areas of the country), formal qualifications at upper secondary or higher education level are required (Int. 5; Int. 7). From a historical-institutionalist perspective, one could speak of a lack of complementarities between institutions of education and institutions of the labor market.

Insufficient Leverage of the EU

While the EU welcomes progress in aligning education and training in candidate countries with EU lifelong learning policies, such alignment is not a critical requirement for accession—unlike fundamental reforms related to, for instance, the general rule of law. As a result, the organizations representing the EU have no leverage to enforce the enactment of EU education policies. The authorities in North Macedonia (not only in the field of education) are well aware of this—and it is also for this reason that pressure is not being exercised on the educational authorities to more strongly promote validation at the level of implementation.

Conclusions

Applying a historical-institutionalist framework, this case study of North Macedonia contributes to the comparative literature theorizing on why, in many contexts, the implementation of VPL schemes is slow, despite the fact that political expectations for it are high. In North Macedonia, this disjuncture is particularly evident: for some years now, the government's strategy papers have underlined the importance of VPL, clearly in the context of the European integration process and with the EU promoting VPL through various means (e.g., funding, technical assistance) which have been described in line with Jakobi's (2009) work on the influence of the EU on national-level education policies. However, the political declarations of intent have not been followed by the enactment of legal provisions that would help to achieve these educational policy goals, and the number of individuals achieving qualifications through VPL thus remains small.

As in other countries discussed in the VPL literature, the lack of institutional change in North Macedonia can largely be explained by a lack of substantive political will. Yet, while research on other countries has often pointed to a lack of political will to address challenges in the process of implementing legal regulations, the disjuncture in North Macedonia is of a different nature (see also Maurer, in press): because none of the key actors have been interested in VPL—and this includes the authorities in charge of formal VET as well as employers—institutional change has been very limited. Access to formal VET qualifications, or parts of them, could not be established—even though European experts had particularly called for the latter. To this day, the few legal regulations pertaining to VPL are restricted to non-formal VET qualifications, which enjoy little acceptance in society and the labor market. In consequence, the social demand to participate in the few pilot VPL schemes carried out so far was low.

The low interest of key stakeholders is linked to institutional conditions in the country's skill formation system. Firstly, as in other countries with mainly statist, school-based skill formation (e.g., Sweden) (Maurer, 2021a), formal, upper-secondary VET in North Macedonia is characterized by high academic requirements, undermining attempts to make them accessible to those with comparatively little formal education. Secondly, despite the high academic requirements, formal VET degrees are not well established in the labor market, so that partial qualifications would add little value—a challenge that North Macedonia shares with countries particularly in the global South (Maurer & Morshed, 2022). In the end, the only domestic actors that have been continuously pressing for validation have been providers of adult education, who have obvious

commercial motives but little political leverage. In this context, no positive feedback mechanisms can be established that would support the implementation of VPL. Nevertheless, the governments of the last few years have allowed the competent authorities to continue the discussions with the European partners and to continue the development process—in an effort to signal to the EU representatives their willingness to reform—resulting in an increasing decoupling of policy discourse from actual institutional change.

Thus, our case study also contributes, similar to for instance Jakobi's (2009) work, to research on the implementation of European education policy. It suggests that European education policy, especially in candidate countries, often leads to convergence in the field of education policy objectives at the national level, but very little change at the level of concrete regulations and practices in the education system—a thesis that has already been put forward with regard to other policy areas (see e.g., Vukasovic & Huisman, 2018). In conclusion, education and training policies should be tailored to the specific institutional conditions pertaining in each country, even in the context of EU integration.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to Maurice Hutton for help with copyediting, and to the anonymous reviewers of earlier drafts of this article for their insightful comments, which helped in refining the argument.

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