European Network of Public Employment Services

New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling

Thematic paper

Written by ÖSB Consulting
Łukasz Sienkiewicz
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New forms of skills assessment and validation

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Unit E.1 — Labour Mobility, Public Employment Services, ELA

Contact: Hilde Olsen

E-mail: EMPL-PES-SECRETARIAT@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent developments in workforce skills requirements affect Public Employment Services (PES). They need to offer new services, forms and channels of delivery, as well as provide up-to-date skills development, assessment and validation practices. The aim of the PES Network seminar 'New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling' was to support PES in further developing their support of future skills through the exchange of practices. It explored and discussed experiences in the use of new forms of: (1) skills assessment, (2) skills recognition and validation, and (3) skills-based training, including micro-credentials.

The seminar showed that skills assessment processes and procedures are generally well-established in PES in Europe. PES play an important role in providing and coordinating skills assessments in the form of tests (online and on-site), self-assessment and counsellor-supported services. Although these activities are provided in many EU PES, further efforts are being undertaken to develop and improve tools and practices in this field, particularly in the area of digital skills assessments, shifting from a qualification and occupation perspective towards skills-based profiling, comprehensive assessment of skills including job-related and 'soft' skills, and multi-level skills assessment including self-assessment (usually through online testing), counsellor support (interviewing, professional tests), practical assignments, etc.

PES are also involved in providing skills recognition and validation processes, which focus on learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, including learning through work. Most notably, PES are making – often in cooperation – increased efforts in terms of skills recognition and validation of skills of migrants and refugees.

PES are also exploring the possibilities of micro-credentials as a form of skill-based learning. Examples of well-developed practices in relation to micro-credentials are still scarce in PES, there is a growing need to include them as an important part of training offers for jobseekers.

Although some processes – particularly for skills assessment – are well-established, there are still significant challenges to be solved in order to progress and meet the demands of changing labour markets. Identified challenges include: accessibility of skills assessment procedures and recognition of skills, interest and awareness of procedures among jobseekers; availability of required resources (human resources, knowledge, validated and accurate tests, etc.); time-consuming and complicated procedures (especially for skills recognition); the need to coordinate actions of numerous bodies, stakeholders and service providers; and the challenges of working under one skills taxonomy, which offers comparability and transferability between services and institutions.

To take the PES skills-based services forward, these challenges need to be addressed by: strengthening the cooperation of stakeholders around the skills-based perspective; establishing transparent procedures for data protection and sharing personal data; increasing accessibility and availability of skills-based activities and support; developing skills-based taxonomies and services; and exploring further the potential of micro-credentials as a form of skills-based training.

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

A skilled workforce is the backbone of the European economy and is vital for sustainable growth, as well as for just and fair green and digital transitions. New skillsets for the workforce should create new and better job opportunities and full participation in society. Recent rapid and deep changes in the labour market that affect skills requirements are challenging. People need to update their skills throughout their working life. Ensuring that people have the skills required, including digital skills, poses new challenges to citizens and to public policy. This also affects PES, which need to offer new services, forms and channels of delivery, as well as provide up-to-date skills development, assessment and validation practices.

Generally, PES contribute directly to the achievement of key European employment objectives set under the European Pillar of Social Rights and the related headline target that at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030. The identification of skills shortages and the provision of information on their extent and location, as well as the matching of jobseekers' skills with employers' needs, are among the success factors. These general provisions are often not enough for the successful support of lifelong learning and skills-based labour market matching. To successfully implement skills-focused actions, a number of initiatives have recently been undertaken at the EU level, with significant contribution and involvement from PES.

With this in mind, the European Parliament, Council and Commission have agreed on 2023 as the European Year of Skills. Its key aims are to address skills shortages in the EU, promote a mindset of reskilling and upskilling, and help people to get the right skills for quality jobs. The European Year of Skills will also:

- provide new momentum to reach the EU 2030 social targets of at least 60% of adults in training every year, and at least 78% in employment;

- help achieve the 2030 Digital Compass targets of at least 80% of adults with basic digital skills and 20 million employed ICT specialists in the EU, , including gender convergence.

Article 3 (d) of the Decision of the European Parliament and Council on enhanced co-operation between Public Employment Services explains that one objective of the Decision is 'the identification of skills shortages and the provision of information on their extent and location, as well as the better matching of the skills of jobseekers with the needs of employers, including through the identification of needs for vocational training, as well as the employability of jobseekers and the prevention of unemployment, for example through career counselling and training'. Strategies and implementation differ across Europe, as do the roles and responsibilities of the PES. However, successful strategies to ensure up-to-date and relevant skills in the labour market include:

- skills assessments, including (self-)assessment procedures and tools, counselling and guidance;

- skills recognition and validation procedures;

- skills-based training, including micro-credentials.

Exchange of practices and experiences is therefore important for inspiration and further development and progress. The new Skills Agenda, launched in 2020, stated that the Commission would join forces with the European Network of Public Employment Services to develop peer learning events to spotlight skills needed on the labour market, in particular for the unemployed and workers in short-time work.

In line with the objectives of the PES Decision and the European Skills Agenda, the aim of the **PES Network seminar on 'New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling'** was to support PES in further developing their support of future skills through the exchange of practices on the topics mentioned above.

In recent years, the PES Network has published surveys and organised mutual learning events on skills-based matching, addressing skill shortages, upskilling and reskilling as well as future skills, career guidance and lifelong learning.

In preparation for the seminar, a questionnaire was sent to PES in November 2022, covering: (1) description of practices of skills assessment and validation currently used in PES; (2) good practices and new developments in skills assessment, skills recognition and validation as well as micro-credentials; and (3) challenges faced by PES in relation to skills assessment and validation. By 14 December 2022, 21 PES had responded.

The PES Network seminar took place on 21 February 2023 in Brussels. It gathered representatives from 22 EU PES (BE Actiris, BE Forem, BE VDAB, CY, DE, DK, EE, EL, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IS, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI). The seminar complemented the knowledge base developed during previous PES Network events on skills-based matching, skills shortages, upskilling and reskilling as well as future skills, career guidance and lifelong learning. With three sessions focusing on the use of new forms of skills assessment, skills recognition and validation as well as experiences with the implementation of micro-credentials, the seminar made a significant PES contribution to the 2023 European Year of Skills.

2. SKILLS ASSESSMENT, VALIDATION/RECOGNITION AND MICRO-CREDENTIALS IN PES – CURRENT PRACTICES

2.1 Skills assessment

Skills assessment processes and procedures are generally well-established in PES in Europe. Over the last decade, PES have reported increased efforts in relation to development of tools and practices aimed at analysing jobseekers' skills for the purpose of skills-based job matching and counselling.

The European Commission analytical paper on *Skill-based profiling and matching in PES* (2014) notes that holistic employment support requires moving away from simply gathering information about an individual jobseeker's employment record, work experience and formal qualifications to additionally capturing and describing their full potential in terms of 'generic' and 'soft' skills. **Skills-based profiling tools** have been developed in many PES and used in the matching process, enabling employers to include more detailed information on competence requirements, including technical, generic and soft skills in their job vacancy descriptions. The **assessment or appraisal of skills** is being used to increase jobseekers' self-awareness and self-confidence and to capture the full measure of individuals' achievement and potential, and support targeted learning. Through these tools, users may update their skills, knowledge and understanding in their current occupational area; reflect on their competences to determine the type of jobs they could do immediately or in the future; identify skills that need development; bring together their achievements and learning from different fields, such as education, training, employment, home, community and leisure (learning from all these areas may contain aspects of both formal and informal learning); get a new job; undertake particular learning actions; have their skills assessed; and formulate a personal development plan (European Commission, 2014). The report on *Future skills, career guidance and lifelong learning in PES* (European Commission, 2022) also identifies a number of practices used by PES to analyse current and future skills requirements and intertwine them in services for jobseekers and employers.

CEDEFOP's Terminology of European education and training policy uses the terms **skills audit/competence profiling**. This is a 'process of analysing knowledge, skills and competences, work experience and motivations of an individual, to identify his/her training needs, define a career project or prepare a retraining/reskilling plan'. A skills audit aims to help individuals analyse their career background, assess their position in the labour

environment, define their training needs, prepare for validation of non-formal or informal learning outcomes and plan their career pathway. It is therefore important to balance the ICT-based self-assessment with face-to-face, dialogue-based approaches (CEDEFOP, 2015). The Synthesis conference paper on *Jointly addressing labour and skills shortages* (2022) notes that PES are increasingly required to collaborate with partners and adopt a personal, individualised approach to clients in counselling, initial skills profiling and skills assessment as well as coaching and guidance for jobseekers.

In December 2012, the Council of the EU adopted a Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation calls for Member States to put in place arrangements to enable individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning validated, and to be able to obtain a full qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences. The Recommendation states that 'individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment have the opportunity, in accordance with national legislation and specificities, to undergo a "skills audit" aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences within a reasonable period of time, ideally within six months of an identified need' (Council of EU, 2012, point 3c).

Skills audits can use various tools and methods but will normally require a combination of dialogue and standardised testing/assessment, as well as self-assessments (CEDEFOP, 2015). In relation to employment-led skills audits, it is crucial to ensure employers' recognition of and trust in the format in which the outcomes will be presented and the extent to which the outcomes of the audit will be accompanied by a training or development plan, as is the case in some European countries (Ibidem).

The use of online self-assessment tools is widespread in Europe (CEDEFOP, 2015). PES surveyed for the purpose of this Thematic paper also confirmed well-established practices in relation to skills assessment.

For example, in **DE**, the skills assessment process covers several activities:

- During a counselling and placement interview, skills are recorded in the placement software or clients can do so themselves via the portal (using self-assessment tools Check-U and New Plan[1]); this covers vocational skills, but also driving licences, language skills and soft skills.
- Vocational skills can be determined through a work placement (measure with an employer) or through a measure with an institution (training measure).
- A psychological assessment can be used to assess aptitude, motivation, interdisciplinary skills (e.g., performance orientation, social-communicative skills) and digital skills.

In **HU**, PES has been developing new self-assessment tools for key competencies and transversal skills. These questionnaires are online and can be used after registration as a jobseeker. Numerous competences can be measured, including social competence, reliability, self-reliance, conflict management, communication, critical competence, learning to learn, teamwork, adaptability and flexibility, customer focus, planning and organising, problem solving, decision making, time management, scheduling and coordination.

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[1] In Check-U, users' strengths, interests and characteristics are collected. It shows possible suitable apprenticeship occupations as well as fields of study with undergraduate degree programmes throughout Germany. In New Plan, psychologically based tests and self-assessment procedures can be processed, which provide information about cognitive abilities, work attitudes, social skills and motivations. The results are compiled into an individual competence profile and can be compared with the interdisciplinary requirements of various occupational goals. They can also be used to access further information on the vocational goals. Both tools can be used as a basis for a personal counselling interview or for independent vocational orientation.

In **BE Forem**, the skills assessment (screening) is based on an online assessment tool that targets unemployed people experiencing difficulties in finding a job. The tool includes:

- A test composed of multiple-choice questions (30-60 per screening) on the knowledge and cognitive skills necessary for a specific occupation. There are tests for more than 50 occupations, hosted on an online platform (DOCIMO).
- An interview with a vocational trainer or counsellor intended to analyse and discuss the answers to the questions and identify the applicant's skills that could be improved (e.g., by involvement in a vocational training programme) and/or formally recognised (e.g., by a process of validation of non-formal or informal learning).

In **RO**, the skills assessment process focuses on professional competences obtained in non-formal ways. Before the assessment process, the candidate, assisted by the professional skills evaluator, analyses their performance in relation to the content of the occupational standard/professional training standard. The evaluator explains and details, on request, the content and provisions of the standard. Depending on the result of the self-assessment, the evaluator advises the candidate to enter the assessment process for the whole standard, or for a part of it, or not to enter the process. Those declared competent following the assessment process receive a certificate of professional competences, for the units in which they were declared competent.

There are also examples of assessment focused on specific skills, most notably digital skills. In **FR**, since 2019, every jobseeker can access a free self-assessment called Pix emploi to get an idea of their digital skills level (see box below for more details). Based on the result, the counsellor may propose workshops to help the jobseeker use online Pôle emploi services or basic digital skills training leading to a certification they can add to their resume.

Box 1: France - Pôle emploi's experience with the Basic Digital Skills Assessment (Pix emploi)

Pix emploi is a short online test with 20 questions based on the **EU Digital Competence Framework** (DIGICOMP), adapted to the jobseeker and the job search context. Skills assessed include sending/receiving emails, including attachments; using a text editor, spreadsheet or search engine; browsing safely on the internet; computer file management; computer connections; using a smartphone, including installing apps.

Through this test, three levels of digital autonomy are defined: very limited – below 50%; moderate – 50-80%; autonomous – over 80%. On this basis, the objectives and support are defined for individual jobseekers. For those with very limited autonomy, the objective is to learn basic digital skills to access their rights as a citizen; for moderate autonomy, to reinforce the knowledge required to use PES digital services; for autonomous, to maximise the use of digital services and the possibilities to find a job.

Pix emploi can be used at every stage of the jobseeker's path, starting two days after registration, when every jobseeker receives an invitation to take the test. It is designed to be easily used by both jobseeker and PES counsellor. Jobseekers can take the test online or in a local agency with support from a customer service assistant. They can search for answers online and can stop the test and complete it later.

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023

At the EU level, the [Europass portal](#) provides an open access digital skills test, based on the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens, developed by the Joint Research Centre and the European Commission. It allows users to test for information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving digital skills.

In **PL**, a nationwide tool used in PES has been implemented: *Narzędzie do badania kompetencji* (NBK), an IT tool for assessing competencies. NBK enables testing of 18 competencies. For each one, a separate test has been prepared that determines:

- in which professions the possessed competences will be most useful;
- strengths and weaknesses;
- development path (what to work on and how).

In some cases, the skills assessment process is outsourced or performed with other partners. In **AT**, the competence survey is mostly passed on to commissioned counselling institutions. These institutions survey the competences of clients, which are transferred to PES counsellors via an IT interface. In **FI**, external service providers perform digital skills mapping combined with career guidance.

Examples of good or promising practices in PES are described in more detail in the PES Practices database. One of these is [Luxembourg's Digital Skills Bridge](#), which offers employers and their employees a counselling service to identify their future needs for skills and jobs and address these skills gaps via targeted training. Other examples of PES tools for assessment of digital skills include **SE**, where [digital self-assessment tools for jobseekers have been developed](#).

2.2 Skills recognition and validation

Skills recognition and validation is strongly connected to important processes of validation and recognition of learning outcomes, also covering non-formal and informal learning. As defined by CEDEFOP in the [Terminology of European education and training policy](#), **validation of learning outcomes** is a 'process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences measured against a predefined standard'. Validation consists of four phases:

- identification of the learning outcomes through dialogue with the person;
- documentation to make the person's learning outcomes visible;
- assessment of those outcomes;
- certification, which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Validation relates to various terms and acronyms, including: assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL); accreditation of prior experiential learning; assessment of prior learning (APL); recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL); recognition of prior learning (RPL); and validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL). All these terms encompass notions of similar processes to make visible and provide value to the knowledge and skills that individuals have.

The term **recognition of learning outcomes** has two dimensions:

- *Formal recognition:* the process of granting official status, by an accredited body, to knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences of an individual through award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); validation of non-formal and informal learning; grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers.
- *Social recognition:* acknowledgement of the value of knowledge, know-how, skills and competences of an individual by economic and social stakeholders.

European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) note that while validation is most commonly found within education and training, it is also carried out by several external institutions and stakeholders: labour market authorities, economic sectors, enterprises and voluntary organisations.

The Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 2012 pays particular attention to the role of guidance and counselling. It also emphasises the

importance of coordination and appropriate information on validation. The Member States are called on to 'promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas'. The Recommendation states that 'disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, are particularly likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, since validation can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market'.

With increased migration, the greatest recent challenge appears to be **validation and recognition of skills of migrants and refugees**. The report on *PES Strategies and Activities on Skill Shortages* (European Commission, 2019) notes that 'a significant challenge emerges from the fact that nine of twenty-six PES stated that they are not able to establish the qualifications and competences of jobseekers from abroad'. It is also noted that 10 out of 26 PES use their own methods to validate prior work experience and skills, while one PES uses counselling to establish the qualifications of immigrants on the register. PES should therefore aim for not only the recognition but also the validation of skills, especially for the migrant population. Not adequately reflecting and recognising skills and qualifications puts refugees at risk of being incorrectly classified as 'unskilled', which may hinder their career progression or even labour market integration (European Commission, 2017).

The European Commission (2017) paper on *Public employment services (PES) initiatives around skills, competencies and qualifications of refugees and asylum seekers* notes that to further support early identification and profiling of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, the Commission has developed a Skills Profile Toolkit for Third Country Nationals. The online tool aims to map qualifications and experiences of refugees and other third country nationals, allowing them to create profiles with personal details such as country of origin and residence status, as well as professional information like educational level and past experience.

There are examples of well-established processes of skills recognition and validation in PES. For example, in **BE VDAB**, the process starts with analysis of the skills people have attained. This requires VDAB to work with skills and competences in different phases: identifying, documenting, assessing and certification of a person's skills, in line with the Flemish labour market policy of recognition of skills. VDAB has a skills taxonomy, linked to the ROME skills standard. On an individual level, a person has several ways to identify their skills and add them to their profile on an online platform. The platform is a support tool to position oneself on the labour market, discover suitable ways to learn related to career aspirations and find vacancies and labour market information. VDAB aims to assess and validate learning outcomes in all learning trajectories. It works with a range of partners, including employers.

In **HR**, the Act on the Recognition and Assessment of Foreign Educational Qualifications (adopted in 2022) regulates the methodology and procedures for the assessment of foreign educational qualifications. However, there is no procedure yet for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. In the Croatian Employment Service, assessment of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning is based on a jobseeker's self-assessment. The Law on Adult Education (adopted in 2021) foresees the development of a validation and recognition system for prior non-formal and informal learning and prescribes a framework for its implementation.

Some PES offer validation and recognition of skills for specific groups of jobseekers. For example in **SE**, the PES programme for validation of prior learning for registered unemployed people states that validation is for those who need to have their competence and skills formally recognised. The jobseeker needs to be registered at Arbetsförmedlingen, be aged at least 25 or have a disability, or be at least 18 years old and face significant challenges in entering the labour market due to special circumstances. With the jobseeker, Arbetsförmedlingen review their experience and assess whether validation is appropriate.

The validation is then carried out by an assessor from a supplier who has a contract with the PES, chosen by the jobseeker.

Some PES do not perform recognition and validation of skills and competencies themselves but participate in a multi-stakeholder process.

In **MT**, Jobsplus administers the Trade Testing system, which evaluates the knowledge, skills and competences a person acquires through non-formal and informal learning in a specific occupation. The assessment is composed of an interview (where applicable, candidates need to present a portfolio of their work), a written assessment and a practical assessment. When a candidate passes all these components, they obtain a Certificate of Competence. Jobsplus is also involved in the validation process, which is regulated by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA). Under the validation process, Jobsplus' role is to conduct the assessment on behalf of MFHEA. The main difference between the validation process and Trade Testing is that to sit for the validation process a candidate must have at least three years' work experience and the certificate awarded after the assessment is pegged to the European/Malta Qualifications Framework. Assessments conducted under the validation process are based on the national occupational standards.

In **PL**, PES works with many actors that may officially conduct validation and certification e.g., exam bodies within the formal education system or institutions responsible for regulated professions.

In **CY**, validation of technical or other skills is done by the competent authorities: the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) and the Cyprus Productivity Centre, using Occupational Skills Assessment and Validation Centres (KEK) and a specific procedure for validation of skills in certain occupations and sectors. PES officers work with officers from the HRDA and KEK to secure reliable evaluations of the skills certificates submitted by jobseekers within the context of profiling.

Examples of established practices in other PES are described in more detail in the PES Practices database. One example is the Austrian PES [Kompetenzcheck](). The Competence Check is a tool to assess the skills, qualifications and language knowledge of refugees. It aims to recognise existing skills and qualifications and define additional qualification needs.

Another established practice can be identified in Germany. [MySkills]() is a technology-based multilingual test to assess the job-relevant skills of refugees and jobseekers without formal qualifications in order to help them find work or enter training.

2.3   Micro-credentials

According to CEDEFOP's [Terminology of European education and training policy](), **micro-credential** is a 'record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small unit of learning, and that have been assessed against a predefined standard'. Learning leading to micro-credentials is designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials can be shared and are portable, and may be standalone or combined into larger credentials.

As called for in the Council Recommendation on a [European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](), Member States are recommended to integrate micro-credentials into their employment policies and active labour market policies. The Recommendation also calls for 'supporting cooperation and exchange of best practices between PES and employers on how to use micro-credentials to support employability in the context of the PES Network'. It also invites PES and other providers to 'where relevant, ensure that information and advice on identifying and selecting micro-credentials is incorporated into lifelong learning guidance services'.

Experience among PES in use of micro-credentials is therefore a vital part of the seminar. However, examples of developed practices in relation to micro-credentials are scarce in PES. There are nevertheless some new developments in this field, which will be described in the next section of this paper.

3. NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELDS OF SKILLS ASSESSMENT, VALIDATION/RECOGNITION AND MICRO-CREDENTIALS

PES report plans for development of new skills-based approaches and procedures for both assessment and recognition/validation. Initiatives aim to build a comprehensive skills-focused system, often based on the idea of individual learning (training) accounts.

To reinforce the skills-based matching, **BE Forem** is implementing a system to analyse the extent to which a jobseeker has the skills required for a job. The diagnosis of these requested skills can be determined by elements such as certification, training, work experience or the result of an assessment tool, such as the screening available on the online assessment platform DOCIMO (see box below for more details).

Box 2: Belgium - New skills-based assessment system in Forem

A reform launched in 2022 aims to better guide jobseekers in their search for work, by a mix of in-person and digital services, immediate activation and a variety of pathways. One of the key elements of the system is the information about the individual jobseeker's skills to assess their chances of integration (by implementation of AI-based solutions) and preparation of the individual support path.

Based on this information (personal characteristics, skills, including digital) as well as skills-based testing, the jobseeker's professional profile and skills portfolio are prepared. These are used to determine the robustness of their job expectations and, based on the analysis of employment prospects, support channels and measures including training and guidance are offered. This data is available via a secured 'personal space', where jobseekers can find information and tools to support their labour market integration.

Among the tools available are online assessments for job screening (comparing the individual's skills and desired occupations), digital skills, basic skills and languages. The quality of these assessments is enhanced by building contextualised questions using media such as pictures, plans, mp3 and mp4 files. The PES considers skills assessment a key step in the process of strengthening the robustness of their clients' job prospects.

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023.

In **NL**, a new system called [CompetentNL](#) aims to create a skills standard for the Netherlands. Approximately 3 200 preferred terms are defined and described (including 40 hard skills, 60 soft skills, more than 5 000 tasks, knowledge components, working conditions and physical requirements). These are linked to the vocational educational structures. The PES uses AI techniques to validate these skills, extract synonyms for all these terms and cluster similar terms. The tasks are clustered in a hierarchy, partly using the ESCO skills hierarchy. This dataset is now partially used in online tooling for job mobility (moving from shortage occupations to occupations in demand via skills) and the ambition is that it will be used throughout all PES services. **NL** PES is working with other public parties to assess and validate CompetentNL.

Box 3: The Netherlands - Supporting skill-based transitions through CompetentNL

CompetentNL aims to serve as a common language for all labour market and education stakeholders. On the basis of analysis, a detailed and verified dataset about occupations, skills and qualifications was created, in which each occupation is defined by hard skills, soft skills (competences), knowledge components and working conditions. As each occupation is defined by comparable skills categories, it allows for comparison of the skills and qualifications required for a current job and a job for which the jobseeker or worker is planning a transition. Analysis of skills components allows for the identification of differences and missing skills, for which training or other support measures can be provided. The skills-based analysis can support effective transitions – not only job-to-job, but also occupation-to-occupation.

The unique features of CompetentNL are:

- CompetentNL is the foundation for a skills-oriented labour market in the Netherlands and for lifelong learning;
- CompetentNL is a validated and complete description of occupations;
- CompetentNL connects the labour market and education, and can also connect and incorporate other source parties;
- The system is free for everyone and available for unlimited use;
- Everyone can contribute to the transparent enrichment of CompetentNL;
- CompetentNL stimulates the exchange and standardisation of information between the labour market and education;
- CompetentNL connects the Netherlands even more with the EU labour market.

CompetentNL can be used as tool to understand skills-related differences of jobs and occupations, allowing for the support of skills-based transitions.

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023.

In **FR**, when a labour contract ends, the employer can indicate in the PES IT system which skills the employee has developed/used within the job, using individual accounts. These skills validated by an employer are added to the jobseeker's profile.

Integration at the level of single contract is also the focus of actions taken by **BE Actiris**. A single contract (Contrat de parcours) will gather training provided by multiple providers in one contract for the benefit of jobseekers, especially those in atypical training pathways. A certification validation framework that would allow for the coordination of responsible organisations is also being developed. Improved certifications will then be used to improve skills-based matching.

EL recently established Individual Skills Accounts (ISA), an innovative tool with a dual function: it constitutes a resume of its owner, as it contains all their certifications, and is a record of all the subsidised training activities its owner has participated in, as well as their entitlement to further training. Over the next few months, those in and out of work will be able to create a digital file including all their skills via a new Digital Portal for Skills.

Certain new developments have been noted in relation to skills recognition and validation, most notably for migrants and refugees.

For example, in **DE**, there are various possibilities. For people already living in Germany, recognition of foreign qualifications is carried out by the IQ Network within the framework of an ESF programme, and for those living abroad, it is done by the Service Centre for Professional Recognition (ZSBA). Low-skilled or unskilled people without formal vocational qualifications but with vocational experience may participate in the ValiKom project (see box below for more details).

Box 4: Germany - Skills recognition and validation within PES

In Germany, the term 'formal skills recognition' is reserved for the recognition of training and qualifications of foreigners and only relates to vocational skills. This recognition is important for jobseekers as in several professions, working in Germany is not possible without recognition of foreign formal qualifications – including those with skills shortages such as nurses, physicians and engineers.

Recognition is performed by the Service Centre for Professional Recognition (ZSBA – a part of PES) for workers living abroad, and by the IQ Network for workers living in Germany. PES counsellors provide information about services and contact details of IQ Network, as well as financial support for recognition costs (e.g., translation of foreign credentials). Jobseekers have the support of the PES during the whole recognition process, with counselling via IQ Network and recognition through other organisations.

Validation is also important for refugees or career changers. As the possibilities are limited, the Ministry for Education and Research and the Association of Chambers of Crafts and Commerce started the ValiKom project. In this pilot project, non-formally and informally acquired vocational competences for a specific occupation are assessed by a practical evaluation. Participants receive a certificate showing in which occupational fields their experience is comparable to a German vocational qualification.

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023

In **PL**, new developments, implemented in 2022 in response to the large influx of foreigners, include financing the costs of the recognition ([nostrification](#)) procedure or the procedure to confirm the completion of studies at a specific level. It is addressed to all clients in need, regardless of nationality. To facilitate and accelerate the recognition of formal qualifications, the local labour office, at the request of the jobseeker, can finance the fee for the recognition procedure or the procedure for confirming the completion of studies at a specific level, from the Labour Fund. **PL** PES is also working on new solutions such as: a tool to assess digital skills to implement *the reinforced Youth Guarantee;* better use of the *National Qualification Framework* (based on European Qualifications Framework – EQF); and supplementing traineeships (one of the most popular ALMPs in Poland), with the validation part leading to qualification.

Recognition of skills is also implemented by inclusion of training for jobseekers that are formally recognised. In **SI**, unemployed people can be directed to courses under ALMPs that lead to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). NVQ is a formally recognised work-related, competence-based qualification, which reflects the skills and knowledge needed to do a job effectively and shows that a candidate is competent in an area of work, or individual segments of work, within an area at a certain level of achievement, and as such, is part of the national qualification framework.

Developments also include new legislation and strategies. For example, in **EL**, the new National Strategy for the Upskilling of the Labour Force and Interconnection with the Labour Market (Labour Force Skills Strategy) aims to effectively match labour supply and demand, in terms of required skills. The strategy consists of mechanisms, instruments and procedures ranging from the provision of continuing vocational training to the systematic measurement and evaluation of its results, as well as its validation.

Other developments focus on the introduction of elements of a micro-credentials-based system. In light of this in **HR**, the PES launched a voucher-based adult education scheme, financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, in April 2022. Financial support via the voucher scheme is offered for programmes for the acquisition of green or digital micro-qualifications and partial qualifications (see box below for more details).

Box 5: Croatia – The voucher-based adult education scheme supporting green and digital transition

The HR PES voucher system for training prepares jobseekers to adapt to labour market changes related to the green and digital transitions. Training financed by the voucher system needs to lead to the acquisition of green and digital skills and be provided in accordance with the Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF). CROQF regulates the system of qualifications through standards based on learning outcomes and according to the needs of the labour market, individuals and society. A catalogue of skills[2] lists green and digital skills that are part of occupational standards in the CROQF register. Currently, the catalogue includes 1 904 digital and 666 green skills, covering 110 educational institutions and 67 programmes (591 programmes in total).

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023

The **PT** PES (IEFP) has developed a programme of short-term certified vocational training in several professional activities (modular vocational training of high flexibility).

In **SE**, under the [Kompetenspasset](#) project, Arbetsförmedlingen is working with micro-credentials from an explorative perspective with the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education and Rise Research Institutes of Sweden (see box below for more details).

Box 6: Sweden - Piloting micro-credentials through the Competence Passport

The Swedish PES sees micro-credentials as a tool for meeting labour market challenges and a call for education and training systems to become more flexible. To better understand the potential and added value of micro-credentials and their limits, in September 2019, the PES started an explorative project that will run until December 2023. The project includes a skills passport and work on integrating micro-credentials in the national qualifications framework (NQF) and the education system. The project encompasses five pilot projects in four sectors and courses provided by the PES.

Kompetenspasset aims to enable people who have earned micro-credentials to store them in a system of their choice and to share the credential with other parties, in their own country and beyond. It pays special attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, as well as informal learning.

Source: own development on the basis of *Network seminar on New forms of skills assessment and validation – impact on PES services and counselling* - Summary Report, European Commission, 2023.

4. CHALLENGES OF SKILLS ASSESSMENT AND VALIDATION/RECOGNITION IN PES

PES report significant developments in the area of skills assessment and validation/recognition, out of which some good practices emerge. However, although some processes, notably for skills assessment, are well-established, there are still significant challenges to be solved in order to progress and meet the demands of the changing labour markets. One of the aims of the PES Network seminar on 'New forms of skills assessment and validation' was – in addition to sharing good practices – to discuss how to overcome these challenges.

4.1 Coordination of skills assessment and recognition

Skills assessments are in principle carried out by PES, but they often require input from education or other institutions or to be outsourced to providers. As pointed out by some

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[2] Catalogue of skills is based on the CROQF but consists of only digital and green skills, which are primarily the focus of RRF. CROQF is much wider and can be accessed [here](#).

PES, more advanced tools for skills assessment are often outsourced or available through external private providers. This creates relative inaccessibility. For example, as noted by **FI**, free governmental digital tools are not yet sufficient and many high-quality services and tools are bought from the private market for PES clients. For this reason, some PES struggle with integrating skills assessment into the internal system, as comprehensive practices in this field are outsourced. They therefore need to be re-entered into the internal system using an IT interface. This is usually not the case with simple, occupational-based analyses, as these are integrated and performed internally. In **FR**, as citizens have access to skills passports on their Individual Learning Accounts, the integration of data on skills in different individual profiles provided in different IT systems is highly challenging.

It has also been noted that there may be challenges related to connection, transferability and validation using different skills taxonomies. In PES practice, due to historically well-established occupational taxonomies, the main focus is often on occupational qualifications and skills. In many countries, skills assessments are performed by selecting competences assigned to a given occupation. Moving from an occupation-based approach towards a skills-based approach is highly challenging. For example, in **HU**, this change agenda has several implications at various levels of PES, from top management to the local offices. This is not only the problem of PES but also employers, which are used to a job-based or occupational perspective and 'look for a certain ISCO code' or 'flood the PES local offices with an unstructured list of competencies'. As a result, often very few, if any, soft skills are included in skills-based matching. This information is often gathered by counsellors and stored in the database for individual jobseekers but treated 'additionally' and not considered vital for the skills and job matching procedures.

4.2 Accessibility of skills assessment

The PES surveyed pointed to a number of challenges related to skills assessment and recognition, mostly related to **accessibility** of skills assessment procedures.

In relation to **accessibility of skills assessment**, it has been noted that development of psychometric tools for assessing occupational skills is complicated and resource-demanding. Sometimes these services (for skills assessment and recognition/validation), especially if not provided online, are not equally available in all regions. For example, in **FI**, outside of the system (JobMarket Finland), high-quality services in skills mapping are targeted to some groups of jobseekers or some geographical areas. While many jobseekers would benefit from career guidance, there are not enough resources to offer guidance to everyone. This is often exacerbated by the limited focus on skills assessment at policy level.

Discussions during the seminar underlined the need for further efforts to apply skills assessment and increase its availability. It was also noted that jobseekers should be encouraged to take part in skills tests and skills-based training. Their interest in such activities is limited, especially in times of high labour demand.

A strong digital divide is visible in some countries and regions, which also limits their accessibility. The lack of or low level of digital skills lead to limited interest in digital services, including online skills assessments.

Convincing people that skills assessment and related learning are needed or useful can be challenging. It is therefore crucial to familiarise jobseekers with the concept of skills/competences, and to train counsellors to incorporate this into employment counselling and guidance. This lack of trust is often related to transparency regarding the skills system that people can use to identify and describe their skills. Clients do not always provide accurate data, which complicates the specialist's work. It has also been noted that for certain occupations, particularly those related to lower skill levels, assessment arrangements need to be made to cater for people who lack literacy skills.

4.3 Challenges related to skills recognition procedures

Skills recognition procedures – even when well-developed – are often complicated and time-consuming, and often differ regionally. Design and implementation of national skills assessment and validation methodology require participation of numerous bodies, stakeholders and actors, which need to cooperate closely to successfully undertake such a significant and sophisticated project. Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders also means the need to incorporate extensive inputs from different parties and perspectives.

Many PES noted that recognition and validation of skills is not the responsibility of Public Employment Services in their countries. This responsibility is often vested in ministries or governmental bodies responsible for education. PES therefore don't play a leading role in the system and often have limited influence as regards the procedures and their use by clients. For example, in **DE**, the validation of vocational skills for unskilled workers or those who want to change their careers is managed by different chambers. PES can only advise customers on the services offered by the chambers for validation but cannot oblige jobseekers to participate in it. A need to coordinate better with skills assessment teams in other public bodies arises.

PES also note the problem of recognition of skills and qualifications of migrant jobseekers, as their diplomas are often not recognised in a host country (e.g., **BE Actiris, NO**). Skills assessments upon arrival of refugees are not necessarily of high enough quality for job brokering. In **NO**, PES has experienced that this may need to be done a second time during the 'introductory programme for refugees', when they are prepared for the labour market, which should not be necessary. This is time-consuming for both the individual and the PES. Employees of PES are signalling that they have difficulty gaining sufficient information about existing validation schemes to effectively help their foreign clients.

In addition, challenges linked to recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning have been noted by PES.

There are also challenges related to **micro-credentials**. For example, in **FR**, all certifications are provided in 'skills blocks', but it is challenging to adjust all jobseekers' training to the skills blocks they actually need.

As micro-credentials are rather new in many countries, their practical arrangement is often challenging.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges identified are by no mean insurmountable. However, they need increased efforts by PES, to build comprehensive and effective skills-based services. It is recommended that PES:

- **Strengthen the skills-centred cooperation of stakeholders.** Skills-based services (including skills assessment, validation and recognition, and skills-based training) require participation of numerous bodies, stakeholders and actors, who should cooperate closely. In particular, cooperation regarding the validation and recognition of skills between PES and the education sector, including training and validation providers, is crucial for the effectiveness of skills-related activities. PES should play an active (possibly coordinating) role to stimulate skills validation among multiple actors involved in this process.
- **Support green and digital transitions through skills development.** Skills assessment and recognition procedures should lead to the development of accessible reskilling and upskilling pathways towards the twin transition, with the aim of securing future employment for interested individuals. PES should continue to play an active role in supporting just transitions, greening of European economies and the development of much-needed digital skills.

- **Ensure establishment of transparent procedures for data protection and sharing of personal data.** Personal data on skills is sensitive; as a rule, access to them is provided to the individual and PES staff. However, it needs to be shared in a safe and trustworthy way among all relevant stakeholders, especially PES and education and training bodies, potential employers or institutions involved in the recognition and validation of skills. As such, procedures for data protection and sharing are the backbone of the skills-based support system.

- **Increase accessibility and availability of skills-based activities and support.** Notably, although some elements of skills-based processes (e.g., skills assessment) are well-established in PES, more efforts need to be made to increase accessibility for interested individuals. This requires not only streamlining the skills-based perspective into PES services (which often means changing from an occupational to a skills perspective), but also dissemination actions among potential users. As jobseekers and employment counsellors can be hesitant to use a skills-based approach, there is a need to build trust and knowledge of these processes.

- **Develop skills-based taxonomies and services.** An important challenge for skills assessment, validation and recognition stems from the inadequate development of a relevant taxonomy that is skills-based rather than occupational. Common language – especially in terms of skills taxonomy – is crucial to the skills-related processes of matching and other PES services. The transition from an occupation-based to a skills-based approach also requires initiatives to change the existing PES culture and ensure and support the application by PES staff.

- **Explore further the potential of micro-credentials as a form of skills-based training.** Micro-credentials are a relatively new tool for most PES, but they show significant potential as a form of training intervention. In order to function effectively, they need to be embedded in other elements of the skills-focused system, including skills-based matching and profiling in PES, as well as qualification systems like National Qualification Frameworks. As micro-credentials are only starting to gain recognition among stakeholders, awareness raising should be an important activity of PES and other actors.

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