European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Recognition and validation of foreign VET qualifications in Europe

Comparative insights for skills portability



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Cedefop's long-standing contribution

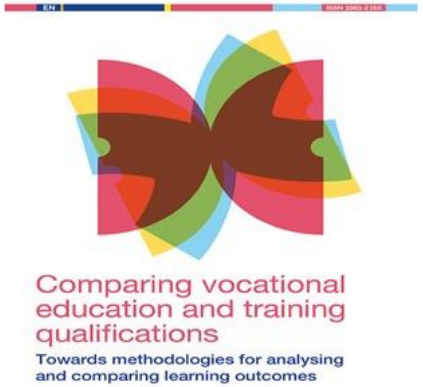
2016



2020



2022



2024



2025



2026



Why focus on VET?

- VET qualifications are central to labour shortages
- High demand but untapped talent
- Compared to higher education, VET lacks appropriate recognition frameworks
- VET's strong link to (national) labour markets increases complexity
- Serves a wide variety of functions requiring sector-specific skills
- Lack of dedicated networks

Methods and scope

Mapping

- Of national structures and legislation
- Across 30 systems
- Dataset available online

Sources

- ReferNet survey (2024)
- European inventory on validation (2023)
- Email consultations with 24 recognition bodies (2026)

Analysis

- Governance arrangements
- Recognition methodologies and outcomes
- Links to validation

Defining recognition

- *'Formal recognition of learning outcomes' means the process of **granting official status** by **a competent authority** to **acquired learning outcomes** for purposes of **further studies** or **employment**, through:*

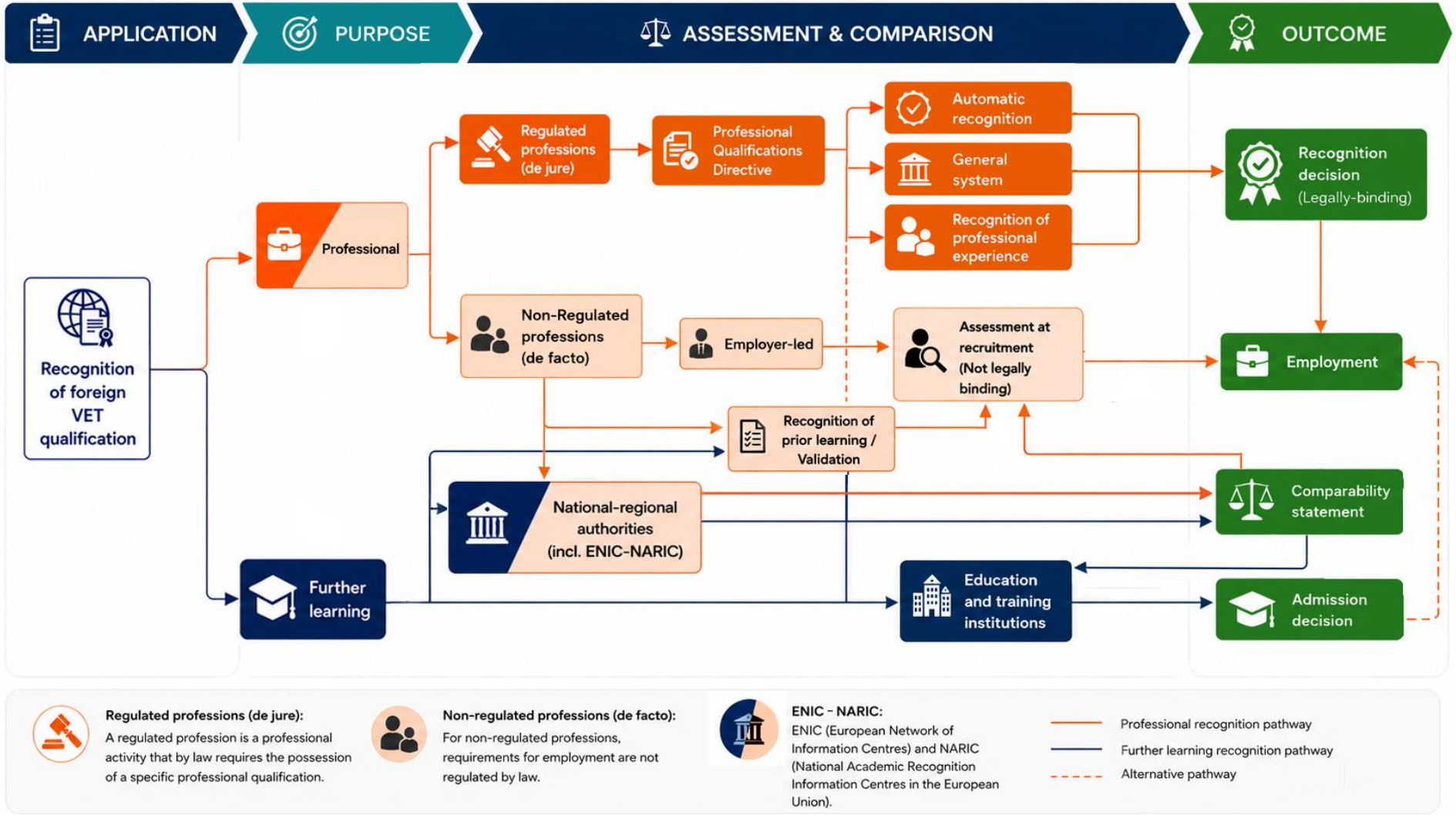
  (i) the award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles);

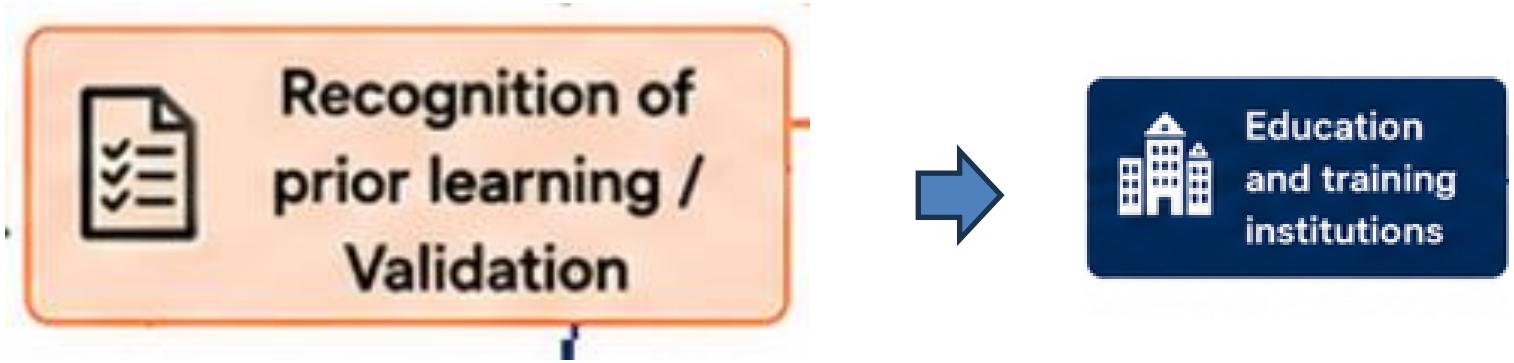
  (ii) the validation of non-formal and informal learning;

  (iii) the grant of equivalence, credit or waivers.

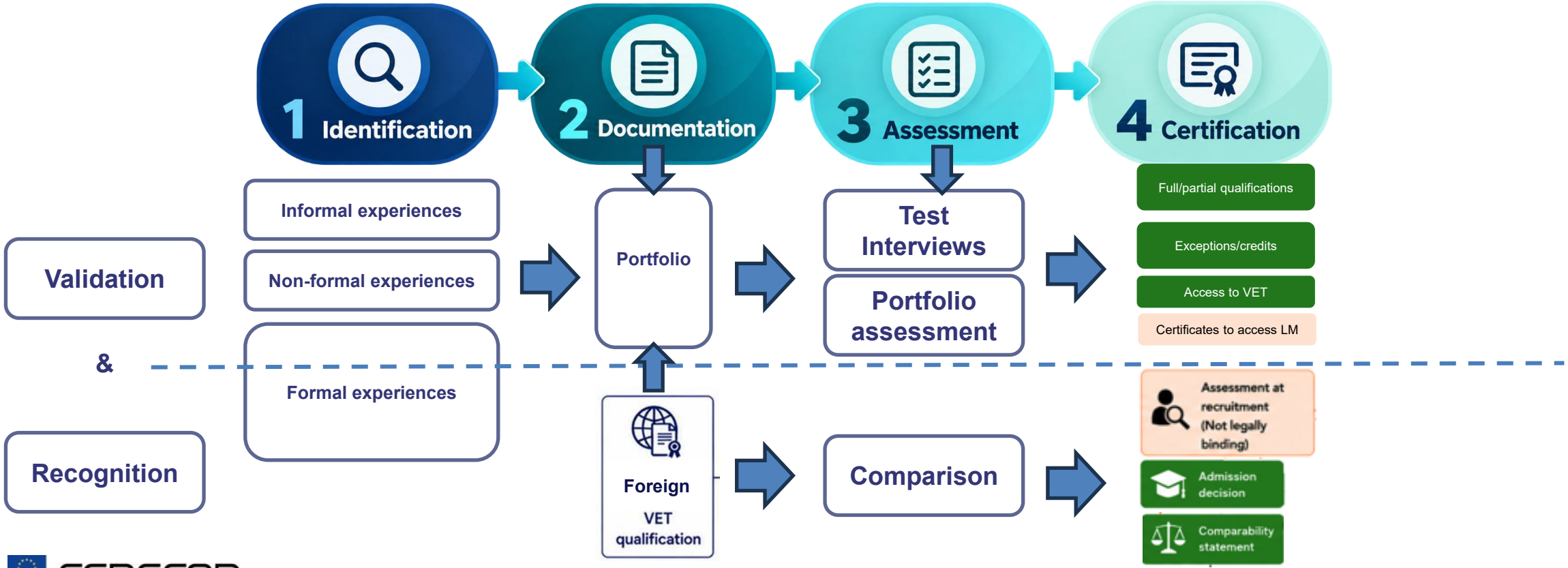
Source: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the 2008 Recommendation, OJ C 189, 15.6.2017, p. 20.

Recognising foreign VET qualifications based on purpose



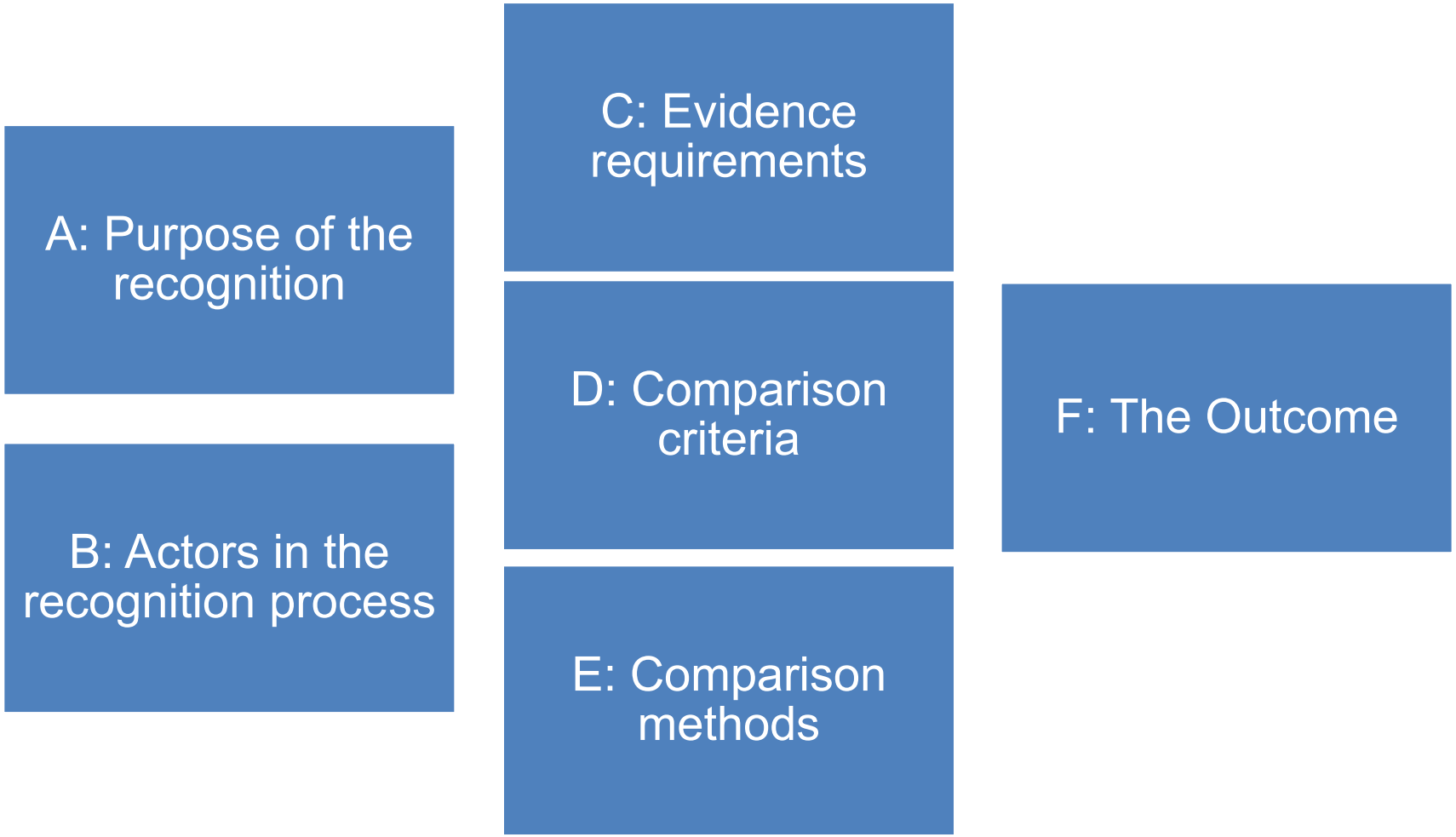


Validation *means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard*



A conceptual framework to analyse existing frameworks

Building blocks of the conceptual framework



The conceptual framework in detail (I)

1. Defining the goal and the actors (Blocks A & B)

- **Block A (Purpose):** Recognition for work, further study, or both
- **Block B (Actors):** Relevant stakeholders involved in the recognition process, e.g., institutional-led vs sector-led processes – extent of employer or social partner involvement, role of ENIC-NARICs and/or education and training providers, etc.

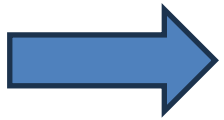
2. The recognition process: From evidence to recognition (Blocks C, D & E)

- **Block C (Evidence requirements):** These outline what the user needs to submit (i.e. evidence).
- **Block D (Comparison criteria):** These explain what the evaluators will be looking for in the evidence provided, esp. how the foreign qualifications/learning outcomes/skills compare with those of host country carrying out the recognition process
- **Block E (Comparison methods):** Comparison methods reveal how the comparison is technically performed, detailing the methods and reference points used (e.g., ESCO).

The conceptual framework in detail (II)

3. The Result: Reaching a clear recognition outcome (Block F)

- **Block F (Outcome):** This explains the possible decisions, what they mean in practice, and what the next steps are, whether that means full recognition, the need for compensatory measures, or guidance for an appeal



- This conceptual framework is designed to be **inductive and responsive to evidence**.

What authorities examine in a VET qualification

Position in the originating system

Qualification level

Formal status and access to further learning

Document authenticity, awarding-institution status

Content and outcomes

Curriculum, programme content and learning outcomes

Duration/credits where relevant

Occupational relevance

Correspondence with national professional requirements

Where relevant, work experience

European and national tools

In all countries, the following tools are utilised



PQD

- All countries use for regulated professions.



NQF

- Often employed for identifying the level
- Use of national NQF descriptors for comparison less common
- Increasing importance of qualification-specific LOs



EQF

- A tool to define the level of (foreign) qualification
- Referencing of the NQFs to the EQF is a requirement

EQF and NQF are the primary tools for supporting comparison (level)

Other European tools used by countries:

ESCO

- Mentioned in connection with EURES, Europass, national databases, qualification standards
- **Divided views on its potential** as a comparison tool with conditions (e.g. AI-supported matching tools) *or* too detailed and/or not fitting into national systems

Europass

- **Diploma Supplement** and **Certificate Supplement** considered useful
- Overall considered as useful digital tool for obtaining information on qualifications

Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC)

- All countries have ratified the LRC and **use it in connection with HE**
- Some countries **apply its principles to VET**

Recommendation on Automatic Recognition

- Mentioned in many responses, mostly in **connection with HE**

European Learning Model (ELM)

- Countries have only recently started mapping exercises or implementation
- Some countries report on **its potential** for comparing qualifications

The role of learning outcomes

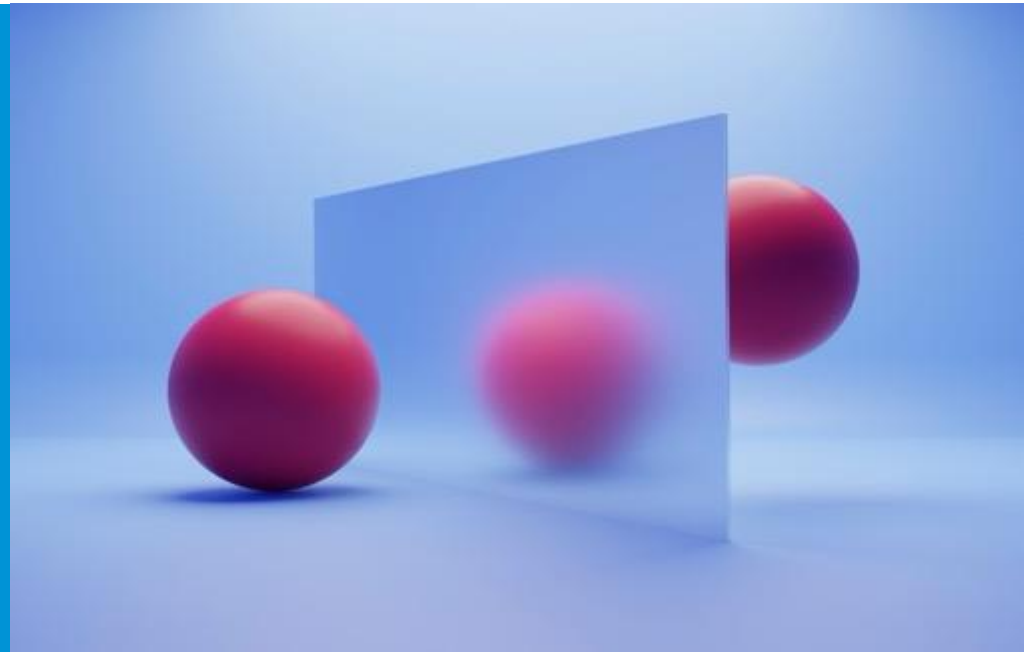
- Frequent reference to curricula, programmes and learning outcomes.
- Learning outcomes are used to define the NQF level of qualifications.
- Balance occupation-specific (professional) skills/ general subjects / and transversal skills not visible → **Most attention on occupation-specific skills**.
- Different languages between education- and employment-defined learning outcomes

PERSISTING BARRIERS

- Differences in quality and granularity of descriptors;
- Generality of learning outcomes (sometimes seen as abstract);
- Translation issues;
- Comparison of the content/learning outcomes is considered labour-intensive.

Concept of ‘substantial difference’

- Well known-concept, but little information on what it implies in practice
- Some countries use the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention definition
- “Limits” related to: content, duration, equivalency exams



Recognition practices: How do countries compare?

- **Purpose of comparison**: further study, labour market, divided into regulated and non-regulated professions
- **Case-by-case analysis**
- **Automatic recognition is rare** – mostly limited to PQD or specific agreements.
- **National qualification and/or professional standards (occupations)** used as benchmarks
- **Assessments sometimes supported by expert panels**
- **Additional requirements** may be requested



Recognition for further learning

Scope and access

- Mainly formal upper-secondary VET; credentials outside formal systems are rarely covered
- National education pathways shape eligibility; **NQF/EQF alone does not always suffice**

Responsibilities

- Recognition authorities may issue formal decisions; **education and training institutions decide admission**
- ENIC-NARICs provide information in **23 systems**, sometimes also assessing qualifications
- **10 systems** involve specialised VET or sectoral bodies

Assessment and outcomes

- Comparison of qualifications and curricula increasingly considers qualification frameworks and learning outcomes
- **At least 15 systems** apply or align with LRC principles
- Outcomes range from **legally binding equivalence decisions to advisory comparability statements**

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

¾ of systems allow VET qualifications to be acquired through validation

Validation may enable admission, credits, partial or full qualifications, supporting further progression

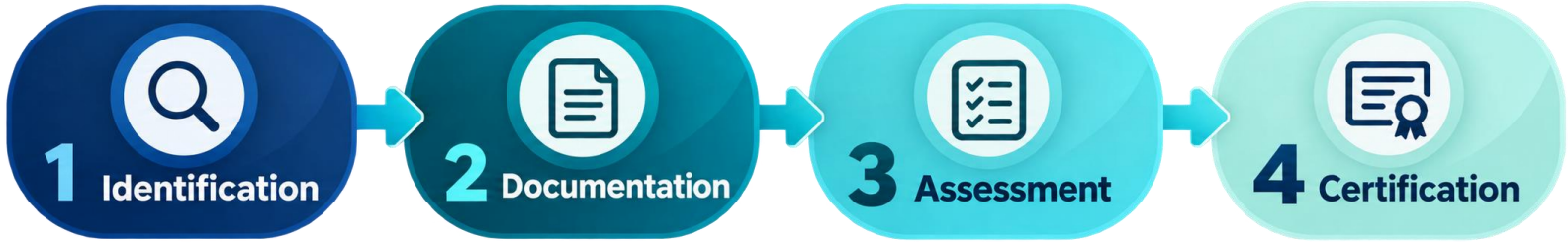
Education and training providers are also responsible for carrying out validation. Dedicated centres include those in Romania and *Qualifica Centres* in Portugal.



However, recognition and validation remain weakly interconnected

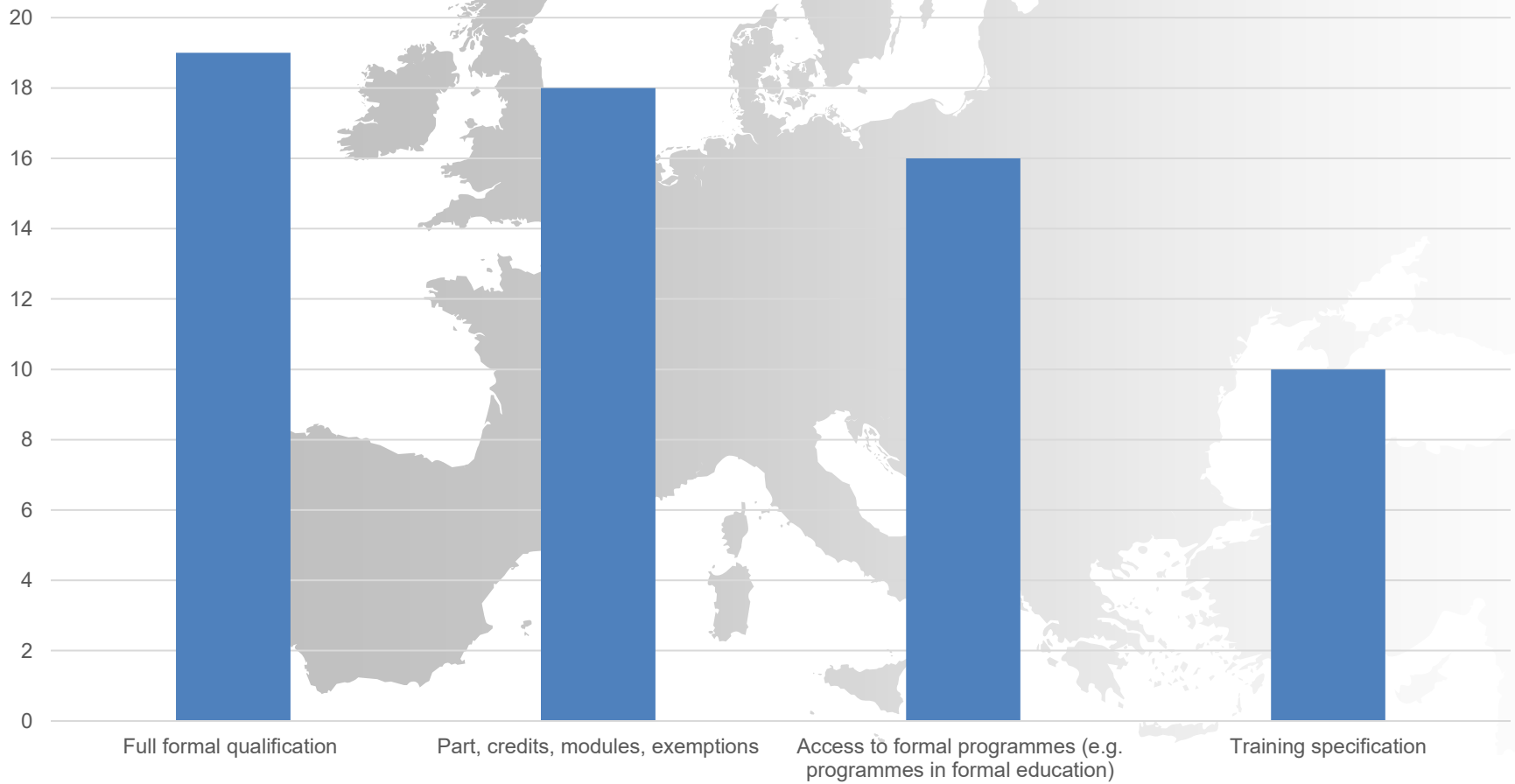
2012 Council Recommendation

Four-stage approach



What can be obtained through validation

Number of countries by what can be obtained through validation in Initial VET



Source: 2023 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning
Note: 24 countries have validation arrangements of the 32 countries under study

Recognition for employment purposes

Regulated professions

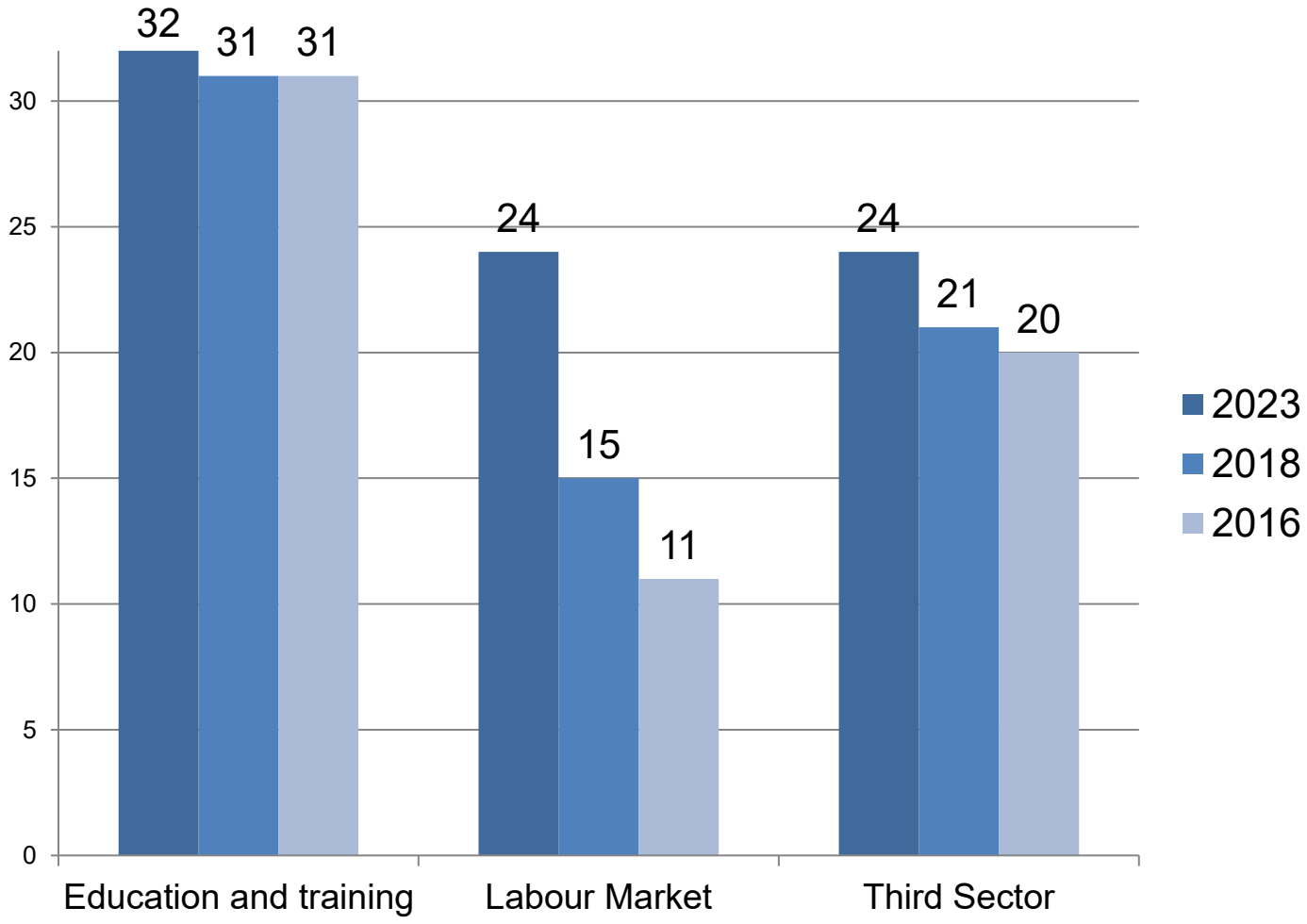
- **Countries differ** in the professions regulated and in procedural flexibility
- VET-related professions fall mostly under the **PQD general system**
- ENIC-NARICs act as assistance centres in **18 systems**
- Academic equivalence or level assessment may precede professional recognition; comparability statements do not replace legally required professional decisions
- Emerging practices **extend assessment outputs** to employment beyond the regulated profession

Non-regulated professions

- **Least formalised**, with varied services, legal frameworks and outputs
- ENIC-NARICs provide information and guidance in **21 systems**; non-binding comparability or advisory statements in **18**
- Assessments commonly **reuse further-learning criteria**, with limited adaptation to labour market needs
- Assessment may be **an administrative service** or **a statutory entitlement (10 systems)**
- Outputs are usually advisory; **employers retain recruitment discretion**

Validation in the labour market

Number of countries that report having validation arrangement in place by year



Source: European inventory, 2016, 2018, 2023
Note: 32 countries under study

Growing provision

2/3 of systems report validation, RPL or skills assessment arrangements

Complementary role

Employers may use it to qualify workers with professional experience, lacking host-country qualifications

Diverse governance

VET providers, accredited centres, chambers and employment services

Limited integration

ENIC-NARICs rarely participate directly, although comparability statements may support documentation stage

Information and support: entry points by purpose

Purpose	Information and support	Decision or assessment
Further learning	ENIC-NARIC centres and national VET services, where available	Education and training institutions for admission
Employment in regulated professions	National assistance centres under the PQD	Designated competent authority for the profession
Employment in non-regulated professions	ENIC-NARIC centres or specialised national assessment services	Assessment services provide comparability assessments; employers decide recruitment
Validation of non-formal and informal learning	Designated validation providers and centres	Authorised bodies assess and certify learning

More coherent and accessible recognition arrangements

1

Clearer pathways and outcomes

Clarify responsibilities, procedures and the legal value and possible uses of recognition outputs

2

Stronger cooperation

Build on ENIC-NARIC expertise through closer links with VET authorities, professional bodies, labour market actors and validation providers

3

User-oriented methodologies

Develop shared assessment criteria and guidance that accommodate different learning and employment purposes

4

Broader qualification information

Combine NQF/EQF positioning with learning outcomes, qualification content, progression possibilities and labour market relevance



Stronger connections for skills portability

1

Connect recognition and validation

Support the combined use of formal qualifications and competences acquired through work experience and non-formal or informal learning

2

Improve visibility beyond formal systems

Strengthen connections between occupational certificates, relevant standards and qualification frameworks

3

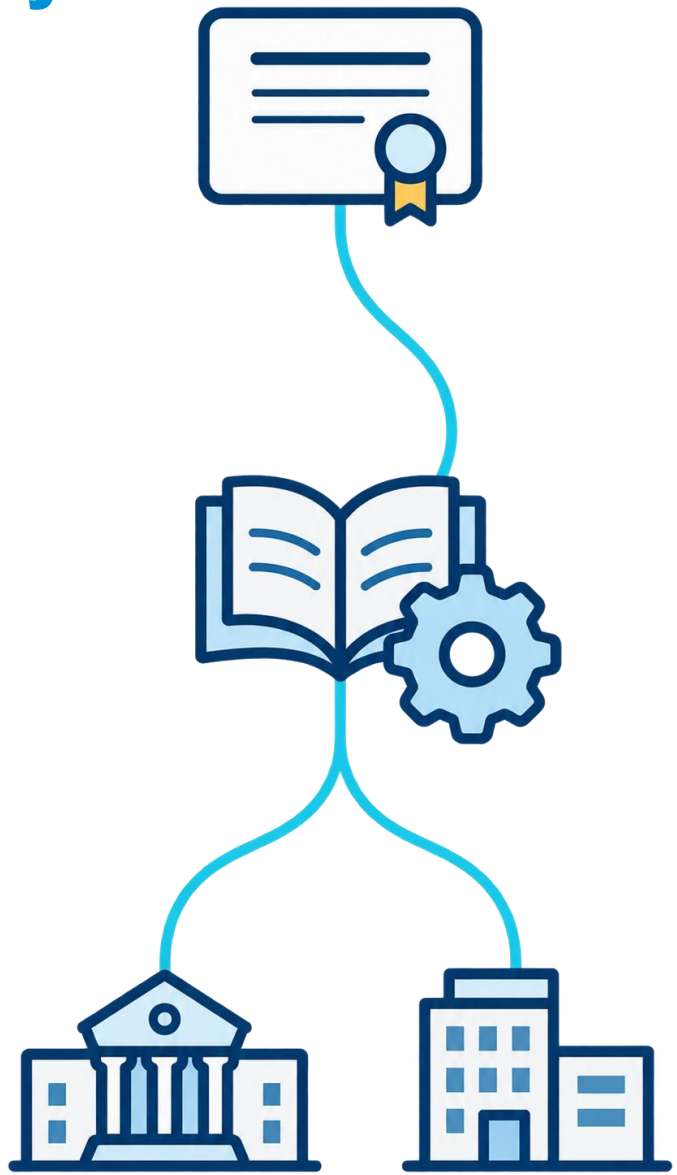
Support portability across contexts

Promote common terminology, learning-outcomes descriptions and templates, supported by digital credentials

4

Enable flexible transitions

Develop approaches that support diverse career pathways and movement between further learning and employment



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