

## **recognition of informal and non-formal learning: CYPRUS, state of the art 2008**

Policy, legislation, national qualifications framework – related to recognition of informal and non-formal learning

### **Policy objectives and legislative arrangements**

The overall responsibility for the development of education policy and implementation in Cyprus rests with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC). Cyprus adopted a Lifelong Learning Strategy in 2007, which includes all aspects of formal education and training and informal and non-formal learning activities (Korelli et al 2007). The Strategy includes stake issues regarding Adult Learning Education and extends over a period of 7 years (2007-2013) coinciding with the time span of other important national and European documents (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

Currently there are no specific procedures or guidelines for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning within the educational system. However, institutions, particularly higher education, can and do allocate credits for existing skills often gained informally or non-formally at work (DEOK 2008).

Cyprus takes a broad workforce development approach to education and training and includes legislative supports for the apprenticeship system, schooling and the Human Resource Development Law that sets the standards for vocational qualifications, guidance and cross border activities.

The Lifelong learning Strategy covers all levels and types of education and training, formal, non-formal and informal, from pre-primary education to adult and continuing education and training. The challenges addressed concern to make education and training systems accessible to all citizens, to improve the education and training systems (content and infrastructure), to increase research and development activities, and to attain efficiency in governance of lifelong learning systems. The Educational Reform, the dialogue which has been initiated in 2005 for the restructuring and the modernization of the Cyprus Education System constitutes a key vehicle of the Lifelong learning Strategy, in addressing the above challenges. The main aims of the Reform is to improve the quality of education, to modernize curricula and teaching methods, to offer equal opportunities to young people, and to contribute to overcoming the difficulties and eliminating obstacles for education of children and adults coming from diverse backgrounds and having diverse needs. (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

Cyprus has also included the EU Benchmarks in its aims for improving the quality of its education system and its Lifelong learning strategies. Some of the EU benchmarks and measures for their progress are directed towards the early school leavers, towards increasing the number of graduates of Secondary Education and those with University Degrees, towards increasing the number of teachers participating in in-service training seminars, and the participation of adults in Lifelong learning (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

The full utilisation of human resources in conditions of social cohesion and equal opportunities is a priority that has been described in the National Strategic Reference Framework for Cohesion Policy 2007-2013 (Korelli et al 2007).

## **National Qualification reference points and standards for recognition**

Cyprus is in the process of developing a National Qualifications system align aligned to the vocational qualifications system and to the European Qualifications Framework. The Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) has the legal responsibility for the promotion and gradual establishment of the Vocational Qualifications system. More specifically, the law clearly places power and authority on the HRDA to set standards of vocational qualifications for any category or categories of persons employed and to provide for the assessment and issue of the relevant certificates of vocational qualifications. (ILO 2008)

In the absence of a national framework of qualifications, Cyprus pursues Recognition and validation through aligning other formal certification with national curricula from school, vocational and further training and higher education on a case by case and institution by institution basis. However, following the deliberations for the approval of the European Qualifications Framework in the EU, a working committee has been set up to formulate the policies for its introduction, on the basis of National priorities and conditions. The discussions are at early stages and every effort has been made to involve all stakeholders and relevant certificates of the schooling system of Cyprus. The Cyprus Higher Education system was always based on the three cycle system, including short cycle programs and is fully in line with the Bologna Process and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, as agreed in Bergen.

The future development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that will incorporate the System of Vocational Qualifications is expected to contribute to the further improvement of knowledge, skills and competences through lifelong learning. The transparency of Vocational Qualifications that is an important part of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is expected to improve the vocational education and training systems. As a result, the persons involved will acquire the knowledge, skills and competences that are needed in the labour market both at National and European level (MOEC 2008).

## **Implementation of accreditation of informal and non-formal learning**

Recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning is a priority issue for the Youth Board of Cyprus, since non-formal and informal education are being implemented through most of its programmes undertaken as part of the European Commission Youth in Action programme. Recognition and visibility of the skills young people learn whilst participating the non-formal program occur through the *Youth Pass* certificate.

Cyprus undertakes a number of recognition and validation activities in the workplace context that provide interesting examples of processes used to gain recognition for certification and/or for progression in work. For example, civil servants seeking promotion within the public service sit an examination which enables them to show their level of skills and knowledge and this process is an important factor in promotional decisions. In a very different area the certification provided to Information Technology (IT) trainers by the European Computer Driving Foundation (ECDF) is assessed on the basis of an evidence record prepared by potential and existing trainers, making their skills visible and highly transferable across national boundaries (DEOK 2007). In both these examples, the focus is on assessment rather than the pathway and so informally developed skills and knowledge are effectively being validated along those formally acquired.

Other informal learning experiences are regularly accredited but are not applicable as credits for an academic notification. Various agencies in Cyprus provide non-formal education award certificates which are, frequently, accepted for the purpose of hiring or promotion. These are Adult Education Centres, State Institutes of Further Education and the Cyprus Academy of Public Administration. While these certificates are not all part of a national qualifications system, they do provide consistent standards for assessment and meaningful certification and could be used in the future for assessment of learning undertaken outside of the formal training programmes themselves.

## **Programmes at different sub-sectoral levels**

### *Secondary school*

There are two types of upper secondary school, namely the unified lyceum, providing general upper secondary education, and technical and vocational schools. The latter provides two major directions, a technical (theoretical) one, and a vocational (practical) one. Upon completion, all students receive an upper secondary school-leaving certificate, which provides access to higher education (Korelli et al 2007). About 75% of the secondary school leavers continue their studies beyond the secondary level. About 47% pursue their studies at higher educational institutions abroad, and 28% attend higher educational in Cyprus (Korelli et al 2007). The learning outcomes are constantly evaluated, as provided by the educational system, through a formative-everyday evaluation by the teacher, as well as through written exams, during and at the end of the school/academic years. These exams are the responsibility of each school. However, final national exams are carried out for some subjects for pupils attending the last year of Upper Secondary Education. The results are used for the issuance of their High School Diploma and also for the entry to the Tertiary Education institutions. Often the results of the final exams are used for the restructuring of the curricula (Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

### *Certification programmes for youth and adults to complete secondary education*

Formal education in the form of initial education and training is available through Apprenticeship System, which accepts students who leave formal education between grades 8 and 10. The programme lasts for 2 years and is a combination of general education and vocational training at school and practice training in industry. Responsibility is shared between the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Cyprus Productivity Centre (Korelli et al 2007).

The Human Resource Development Authority approves and subsidises multi-company initial training programmes organised in cooperation with training institutions, enterprise-based initial training and the practical training of students of certain specialisations in public secondary and tertiary education institutions (Korelli et al 2007).

The Apprenticeship System is a 2-year free of charge initial vocational education and training programme providing practical and theoretical training to young people who have not successfully completed their lower-secondary compulsory education and wish to be trained and employed in technical occupations. Students must be at least 14 to be accepted System and must not be over 18 at the time of graduation. Responsibility is shared between the Cyprus Productivity Centre and the Ministry of Education and Culture, while the Human Resource Development Authority compensates employers for wages paid to apprentices attending classes at technical schools. The Apprenticeship Certificate allows access to a number of regulated occupations (e.g. building contractors, electricians), given that all the other provisions of the relevant legislation are being observed. (Korelli et al 2007).

### *TVET*

The dominant actor responsible for governing Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) is the Human Resource Development Authority, HRDA, as it approves and subsidises training programmes implemented by public and private institutions and enterprises (Korelli et al 2007).

Initial Vocational Education and Training programmes begin to be provided at the upper secondary level of the education system. Upon completion of their compulsory lower-secondary education, successful gymnasium leavers are eligible to enrol either in the theoretical or in the practical direction offered by technical schools (Korelli et al 2007).

Secondary Technical and Vocational Education provides a broad range of technical/ vocational education, initial training and re-training programmes to eligible gymnasium leavers and adults. It is integrated into the national school system and maintains close links with industry and other training institutions (Korelli et al 2007).

Technical Schools offer two distinct 3-year secondary school programmes free of charge: the Theoretical Direction and the Practical Direction. The first year of studies is common for the branch in each direction and students select a specialisation offered in the branch of their choice in the second and third year of their studies. The Theoretical Direction is completely school-based and combines general education subjects with

technological and workshop subjects. The first and second year of the Practical Direction are also completely school-based and combine general education subjects with technological and workshop subjects, while the third year of studies combines a school-based environment with a real workplace as final-year students are placed in industry for one day per week, where they follow a practical training programme. The programmes provided include a variety of branches in both the Theoretical and Practical Directions (for example, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, building and civil engineering, hotel and catering, fashion design, graphic arts and interior design and other branches) (Korelli et al 2007).

Following a supervised practical training programme, final-year students of the Practical Direction are placed in approved enterprises for one day a week throughout their final year. Instructors who maintain continuous contact with the employers closely monitor their progress and performance (Korelli et al 2007).

School leaving certificates, equivalent to those of secondary general education schools, are awarded upon successful completion of either programme. Therefore, TVE school leavers are eligible for admission to universities and other tertiary education institutions in Cyprus and abroad. Qualifications provide access to regulated occupations. Each employer decides about the competence of the employees since there is not an official skill accreditation body. About 53% of the graduates of the Theoretical Direction pursue successfully studies at Institutions of Higher and Tertiary Education. The vast majority of the graduates of the Practical Direction enter the labour market and only about 15% pursue successfully studies at Institutions of Higher and Tertiary Education (Korelli et al 2007).

The development of a Competence-Based System of Vocational Qualifications is a high priority objective, for which Cyprus has committed itself towards the European Commission. The System will be gradually established and implemented in two phases. During the 1st phase, which is implemented in the period 2006-2007, 5 Standards of Vocational Qualifications at level 2 have been developed, while access to the system is provided to employees. During the 2nd phase, which covers the period 2007 – 2013, the development of another 20 standards at various levels is envisaged and opportunities for access are expected to be provided to employees, unemployed and economically inactive persons. Furthermore, it will be examined how the System will incorporate the branches /specializations of Technical and Vocational Schools and the Apprenticeship System as well as other initial vocational training programmes. The System is expected to bridge the various qualifications acquired via formal, non-formal and informal learning and strengthen the ties between initial and continuing vocational education (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

#### *Higher education*

Due to limited places in higher education, students take part in “selection examinations” organised by the Ministry of Education and Culture, competing for public higher education institutions in Cyprus and Greece (Korelli et al 2007). Public tertiary education is provided at the University of Cyprus and at a number of institutes/ colleges which come under the jurisdiction of various ministries. Two more state universities have been established and commenced their activities. In addition, there are also private institutions. (Korelli et al 2007). In Tertiary Education, the external Quality Assurance system of Cyprus is presently implemented within the scope of the Council for Educational Evaluation and Accreditation (SEKAP), which conducts programs of the private institutions of tertiary education. SEKAP consists of seven senior academics, of international standing, from at least three different countries. Worth mentioning is the close cooperation of Cyprus with NARIC in promoting quality in Higher Education, as well as the establishment of the Cypriot team of Bologna Promoters for the implementation of Bologna Process in Cyprus. The establishment of a National Quality Assurance Body for Higher Education is currently being examined (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

## **Competency development**

Training opportunities for the unemployed and other groups vulnerable to exclusion on the labour market are somehow limited. Two schemes aiming to promote the training and employability of the unemployed and of the inactive women have been developed and were implemented over the period of October 2006-December 2007 by the Human Resource Development Authority. In addition a new scheme for the enhancement of

computer literacy of the unemployed was developed and implemented over the period November 2006-December 2007 (Korelli et al 2007).

The providers of training for the abovementioned group are found both in the public and the private sector, such as private colleges, public and private training institutions, the Upper Secondary General and Vocational Education, NGOs, The Centre for the Vocational Rehabilitation of the Disabled, the Department of Social Welfare Services with the collaboration of the Public Employment Services (Korelli et al 2007).

The promoters of the programmes for the unemployed and other groups vulnerable to exclusion in the labour market are responsible for setting the quality standards and for checking that the standards of different programmes are met (Korelli et al 2007).

#### *Competency development in the context of non-formal education programmes*

The Adult Education Centers provide non-formal continuing education, which aims at improving the quality of life of both men and women involved and offering them fulfillment, with the aim of improving their self-image and developing their communication skills, thereby contributing to their all-round development. This is achieved through a nationwide network of programs aimed at all citizens.

The three hundred Adult Education Centers in Cyprus offer programs in both urban and rural areas, usually on the premises of public schools. Most of the classes operate in the afternoon and evening, with a small number also taking place in the morning.

In an effort to offer access to free education to all citizens, the Adult Education Centers organize special classes each year which are tailored specifically to meet the needs of various disadvantaged groups, such as prisoners, senior citizens, individuals with disabilities and learning difficulties, i.e. handicapped, deaf, blind, psychologically distressed. Greek Cypriots who wish to learn Turkish, Turkish Cypriots who wish to learn Greek, children of repatriated Cypriots, Greeks of the Diaspora and foreigners, Asylum Seekers and Political Refugees may also attend free of charge courses of the Adult Education Centers.

Participation requires no formal qualifications and courses may be attended by anyone aged 15 and above. The main fields of study are literacy, ICT, health and sports education, domestic science, cultural activities, foreign affairs, handicrafts, parental education, etc. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

At present there are no procedures or national guidelines for the recognition of prior learning including non-formal and informal learning within the Educational System. Individual higher education institutions may allocate at their own discretion a number of credits for prior learning when evaluating entry or transfer requirements. A recent modification of the Law of the Cyprus Council for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications (KYSATS) allows the Council to recognize, at its discretion a number of credits based on prior learning arose in the context of the discussions about the development of a National Qualifications Framework. For example the Continuing Education Center, operating within the University of Cyprus has assigned learning outcomes and credits to the modules of some lifelong learning programs (Ministry of Education and Culture 2008).

## **Future directions**

Cyprus is committed to developing its educational sectors and to work towards a national qualifications system and framework. This work is in itself is creating important debates and resulted recently in a shift by the Higher Education qualifications body that will now recognized some prior learning and also a shift in some continuing education courses electing to use learning outcomes to better enable credit transfer to higher education courses. These shifts in thinking and practice show Cyprus is making shifts in strategic thinking and practice that will

Cyprus is watching closely the developments in the EU around consistent and or comparable approaches to the validation of informal and non-formal learning across sectors and European countries and plans to consider these developments as its own qualifications system evolves. (DEOK 2007). The ongoing implementation of the EQF and EUROPASS promoted by the EU is expected to extend the validation of informal learning activities as people seek to use their skills gain informally to increase their mobility and opportunities across the union.

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