



The Recognition of Prior Learning in the European Union

A contribution to the Metropolis 2008 Workshop on different approaches to the integration of professionals in national labour markets

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Policy Context

This paper draws on developments at European level between 2004 and 2008 that have developed common tools to facilitate the Recognition of Prior Learning as part of a general approach to the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning. This approach is an important component of the implementation of the 2008 Recommendations on the establishment of a European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning [EQF]² in that it will increasingly use the EQF Levels and the Learning Outcomes³ that form the Level Descriptors. The European Commission, national authorities and social partners are working to implement the EQF through an EQF Advisory Group. This Group's work is complemented by the Cluster on the Recognition of Learning Outcomes, one of the eight clusters within the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, which supports the validation of non-formal and informal learning.⁴

This Cluster has produced a set of Guidelines for Member States, Social Partners and other stakeholders to apply in pursuit of the agreed objectives and benchmarks of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme.⁵ The relevant objectives are "facilitating access to education and training

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² The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm

³ "Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do after completion of learning." Cedefop (2008), The shift to learning outcomes: Conceptual, political and practical developments in Europe, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, page 15. Downloadable from <http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/upload/etvnews/news/3541-att1-1-shift-to-learning-outcomes.pdf>

⁴ Countries around Europe are increasingly emphasising the need to take account of the full range of an individual's knowledge, skills and competences – not only those acquired at schools, universities or other formal education and training institutions. Recognising all forms of learning is therefore a priority of EU action in education and training. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc52_en.htm

⁵ European strategy and co-operation in education and training: Politicians at European level have recognised that education and training are essential to the development and success of today's knowledge society and economy. The EU's strategy emphasises

systems; and opening up EU education and training systems to the wider world.” The relevant benchmark is “the average participation of working adults population in lifelong learning should rise by at least 12.5%.”

The benchmark is of special relevance in that it is assumed that valuing learning is an important means of engaging or re-engaging adults in lifelong learning.⁶

European Guidelines

Essentially the European Guidelines are seen as an evaluative tool for local, regional and national projects. The insights in the guidelines have been structured in a way that facilitates their use as a checklist of elements of validation whilst showing the interactions between these different elements. The situation across the EU is described in the European Inventory on Validation: 2007 Update. The European inventory contains a large amount of information on validation practices. Information has been structured so as to facilitate the search of information in it by its users. To this respect, information on validation practices is provided separately from information on examples of good practice, chapters have been organised by country and follow a common structure. This year, we have also included three sectoral compendia for the public, private and third sectors. These compendia discuss key trends, characteristics and methodological approaches within the three different sectors. They are intended for use by stakeholders in the field of validation (in particular practitioners), who will find the compendia have an eminently practical focus.⁷

The four fundamental principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning

1. The process of making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and experiences held by an individual should be carried out so that it remains voluntary and the results of validation remain the property of the individual.
2. Stakeholders should establish systems and approaches that include appropriate quality assurance mechanisms and provision of guidance, counselling and information about these systems.
3. The roots of trust in the process of validation depend on fairness, transparency and quality assurance and the choice of robust methodologies.
4. Credibility and legitimacy are based on participation of relevant stakeholders, avoidance of conflict of interest and clear professional standards of those carrying out the validation.⁸

These Principles are developed in ten European Principles:

1. Validation must be voluntary
2. The privacy of individuals should be respected
3. Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed
4. Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.

countries working together and learning from each other. See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc28_en.htm

⁶ “Innovative forms of assessment and recognition are a priority area for action. What needs to be done to establish working APEL-type systems in all Member States? In what ways might systematic information on their use and acceptability be developed and exchanged between countries? How can appropriate systems be developed to recognise competencies gained in non-formal and informal contexts, such as youth and community associations?” European Commission (2001), Memorandum on Lifelong Learning Section 4.1, See http://www.education.gov.mt/edu/edu_division/life_long_learning/key_message_4_sub-themes.htm

⁷ The Inventory can be downloaded from <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/2007.html>

⁸ Cedefop (2008), European Guidelines for the Validation of non formal and informal learning Page 3

5. Systems should contain mechanism for guidance and counselling of individuals
6. Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
7. The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
8. Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation.
9. The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
10. The professional competence of those who carry out assessments must be assured.⁹

This approach exemplifies the strengths and possibilities of the EU approach to mutual learning, providing a framework within which individual projects and policy developments can meet identified needs at national, regional and sector levels.

“A recent Scottish study found the following benefits.

A number of benefits were identified for individuals that, if promoted, could have the potential to raise demand for RPL. Benefits identified related to individuals at all levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework [SCQF] and to those who have yet to find their position on the Framework. The benefits identified included:

- **Time savings** from RPL and learners not having to undertake the same learning process as previously experienced.
- Gaining **recognition for transferable qualifications** to enable individuals to **gain other qualifications through a shorter route**
- Gaining **recognition for skills and competencies gained in the workplace or community**
- Gaining **recognition for legacy qualifications and formal but non-accredited learning undertaken**
- Ensuring individuals **build on their skills and competencies without having to repeat learning achieved**
- Enabling individuals to get **recognition of skills and competencies gained in “alternative” settings** and gain the **same qualifications as their peers**
- **Potential to assist individuals to widen their career choices** by demonstrating what skills and competencies they already have
- **Potential for individuals to review skills and competencies** on a regular basis to help them to move up and across the SCQF and remain engaged in lifelong learning
- **Potential to enable people to continually increase their skills and competences** as they develop in life, work, community contexts
- **Motivational benefits for individuals** through recognising that they may not have to start at the bottom and work their way up – it can help people to start further up the ladder than they think they are able to.

A number of potential benefits for employers were identified in the consultation process that relate to the different approaches to recruitment, retention and progression of employees and potential employees.

⁹ Op. Cit., Page 47.

Recruitment of new employees

The RPL process could enable employers during the recruitment process to identify the skills and competencies that potential employees might bring to the workplace. This could allow employers to have a better understanding of potential employees' existing skills and competences and put them in a better position to utilise/deploy such skills and competences to best effect (in the manner identified in Skills for Scotland).

In addition employers would be able to identify any gaps in the skills and competences required of the job role to be undertaken and would be able then to target training and learning appropriately for each individual recruit. This might also support a shift in mindset of some employers in encouraging them to recruit effectively from a more diverse workforce pool and, in some cases, recognising that they have a responsibility to provide appropriate learning opportunities for all recruits.

Existing employees

Where existing skills and competencies are recognised, employers would be able to target training and development activity appropriately. In addition, by knowing the full extent of existing workforce skills, employers would be in a better position to maximise effect. Where recognition was given, the cost of training could potentially be reduced, as employees would not have to go through a full programme of learning and down time could also be reduced.

The overall benefit of RPL to employers could be a reduction of time required for employee training and development activity. Such a reduction might then make more time available to be directed towards activities to support productivity. The effective utilisation and deployment of existing skills and competencies would also be likely to have an impact on productivity.

Learning Supply

As noted earlier, where individuals gain recognition for prior learning, the research suggests they are likely to be more motivated to learn particularly if they do not have to undertake a full programme of learning. If RPL was more widely available, learning providers could have an impact on the number of new learners coming into learning and an increase in enrolments could result as learners move/progress between the less formal and more formal range of learning opportunities.”¹⁰

This summary puts clearly the potential benefits of RPL, and the need to integrate this approach into the provision of VET.

A theoretical view of RPL

An analysis of the results of two Leonardo da Vinci Thematic Action Pilot Projects draws attention to the importance of Learning Cultures as a basis for understanding the potential of RPL.

“Each country has its own culture, identity, history and practices on education and training and also has its own approach and system for education and training. We describe this specific approach as the learning culture in a certain country. Since the learning cultures – and therefore, also the policy on ‘valuing learning’, which is based on this learning culture – can vary widely within Europe, the systems for ‘valuing learning’ also vary. Many countries have been involved with ‘valuing learning’ in one way or another, and it is interesting to study the various approaches in more detail. The concept and process of ‘valuing learning’ provides a perspective with which to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of each country’s systems and frameworks. This facilitates mutual knowledge exchange in which all countries can have an interest. ... ‘Valuing learning’ as a learning strategy therefore reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner takes more responsibilities for his/her own lifelong learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing ‘balance of power’ in learning processes themselves because he/she will be steering lifelong learning with his/her

¹⁰ Sutherland M and Martin S (2008), Review of the Recognition of Prior Learning Final Report, April, Inspire Scotland, Pages 10-11.

own portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he/she has achieved are documented together with the relevant evidence. These portfolios will create a new balance within learning as a process and contribute a positive change in the individual's social identity."

The goals of 'valuing learning' for the main stakeholders are as follows:

- the individual: stimulating self-investment in learning, showing learning outcomes,
- the organisation: facilitating employees' self-investment and articulation of competencies,
- the society: matching learning to needs; steering learning outcomes.

The emphasis on learning outcomes is in line with the development of common structures of education and training across Europe and is associated with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Thus valuing learning will contribute to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour. At national level, learning outcomes are a central part of the modernisation of qualification systems and frameworks in order to stimulate economic development and promote social cohesion (European Council 2006).

This activity is supported and valorised by the Leonardo Network Project "A European Observatory on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning" [OBSERVAL]. The project details are attached to this Paper.

The conditions for creating the learning society in which these benefits can come to fruition are:

- A transparent, output-oriented knowledge infrastructure;
- Creating mutual trust by focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities;
- A transparently structured education sector, that allows a flexible flow of participants from one layer of sector to another, both intra- as well as inter-sectoral;
- Universal, transparent and interchangeable procedures and reports on the competencies that have been valued;
- Close relations between educational institutions and their surroundings (enterprises, government institutions, institutions in the field of (re) integration of unemployed into the labour market);
- Creating possibilities for developing and executing individual tailor made learning paths;
- Facilities for financing flexible tailor made individual learning routes, such as an individual learning account;
- Clear communication to citizens about the technical and financial arrangements for education and 'valuing learning'.
- Development of an individual right for portfolio-assessment and career-advice."¹¹

Case Study: Leonardo Transfer of Innovation Project (2008-2010) – Piloting National and European Guidelines designed to encourage the take-up of the Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes [RPLO]

European and National Lifelong Learning Policy has emphasised the importance of the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, since Member States agreed the Common European Principles in 2004.

¹¹ Duvekot R and Konrad J (2007), Towards a transnational concept of valuing lifelong learning: some practical reflections on developing theory, Paper presented at the International Conference for Research in Lifelong Learning [CRL], University of Stirling, June 2007. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/166725.htm>

The Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes is a common issue in the national systems of the UK as well as the partner countries with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA] Accreditation of Prior Learning [APL] Guidance for the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework [QCF].¹²

“Traditionally, there has been no legal framework for recognition and validation of nonformal/informal learning within education and training in the UK due to its voluntarist approach to education and training in general. Although some administrative measures for the recognition of such learning have been introduced across the devolved administrations, they do not constitute a legal framework.”¹³

The Project will pilot these Guidelines in the VET Teacher and Trainer Sector using the Lifelong Learning UK Standards through the development of user-friendly tools, methods and support materials.

The partners in the other EU Member States will collaborate in this process, ensuring that common Standards are applied to the Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes [RPLO] in this Sector using the European Guidelines (2008) within the context of the European Qualification Framework [EQF] Decision (2007) and the developing European Credit System for VET [ECVET].

The project will improve the attractiveness and effectiveness of the VET Teachers and Trainers profession in the UK and the partner countries.

The project will demonstrate how Credit-based qualifications will make the transition from being RPLO-neutral to being RPLO-friendly, using best practice from UK and EU projects and research, including the Cedefop study on the Recognition and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning for VET Teachers and Trainers.

The outcomes in England and Wales, and across the partner countries will be:

- A validated methodology of RPLO;
- Comprehensive assessment guidance, including reference to rules of combination;
- Relevant requirements for assessment and verification;
- Demonstration of the ways in which quality assurance can ensure the reliability and validity of RPLO; new tools and methods for RPLO;
- Units of assessment, which relate to National Standards; and
- Support material for relevant professional development.

The impact of the Project will be to demonstrate the ways in which RPLO enhances the attractiveness and rigour of VET within Lifelong Learning by ensuring that vocational and professional specialists are given access to full professional status as VET Teachers and Trainers based on their existing knowledge, skills and competencies.

This will improve National policy and practice and inform the development of RPLO at European level through support for credit-based qualification frameworks across the EU and dissemination to other sectors.

¹² For the context of this Innovation, see Guidance and Support Materials for the Qualification and Curriculum Framework (Version 3) at http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_19657.aspx

¹³ European Inventory on Validation UK Report 2007 page 24. Downloadable from <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/chapters/2007/uk.pdf>

Aims and Objectives of the Project:

1. Develop an effective, efficient and quality assured methodology that implements the QCA and other national guidelines on RPLO for VET Teachers and Trainers that will make the QCF and other EQF/ECVET compatible qualification frameworks individual-friendly using the same standards of validity and reliability as in formal qualifications.
2. Identify, justify and specify tools and methods that will implement this methodology covering the use of the Europass CV, Europass Mobility and Language Passport; paper and electronic portfolios; guidance for assessor and internal and external verifiers (including those from different national systems and sectors); information packs for individuals, voluntary organisations and community groups, trades unions and employers.
3. Prepare, validate and accredit with the QCF appropriate Units of learning and assessment for RPL professionals at EQF Levels 4 and 5 incorporated in the Rules of Combination for the Standards; support partner countries in incorporating these approaches into their National Qualification Framework.
4. Carry out a pilot implementation at EQF Level 4 and 5 of a credit-based approach to RPLO for VET Teachers and Trainers in the partner countries aimed at VET Teachers and Trainers and other professionals with RPL related roles and responsibilities.
5. Evaluate the process of developing the methodology, the resulting tools and methods and the extent to which these were fit for purpose, and the provision for the RPLO proposed for RPL professionals.
6. Carry out formative dissemination and preparation for exploitation at national and European levels using the Cedefop Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning and TNet Virtual Communities.
7. Disseminate the final results and products within the UK, the partner countries and, through the Leonardo da Vinci European Observatory Network [OBSERVAL], in all eligible countries.

Target Groups and anticipated impact

The target groups are National regulators of the VET curriculum, Sector curriculum authorities, employers of VET teachers and trainers and trade unions; qualification awarding bodies; providers of work based learning; individual VET teachers and trainers and employment based training advisors.

Anticipated impact will be improvement of national guidelines to meet the needs of the QCF and other EQF/ECVET compatible qualification frameworks; use of RPL-friendly procedures by training institutions and employers; a significant increase in the take-up of RPL by VET teachers and trainers who lack recognised certification; use of learning portfolios by VET teachers and trainers as part of their continuing professional development; greater use by VET providers of the Europass tools with their learners; take up of the developed methodology by other sectors and in other Member States as part of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme.

Patterns of Migration from other EU Member States to the UK

Local Economic Impact of Migration

A recent study¹⁴ has identified that in the short-term employers benefit from the availability of migrants, especially where they are willing to take employment that existing workers are unwilling to undertake. The study identifies a significant possibility that cheap, capable migrant may contribute to a long-term low-skills equilibrium.¹⁵

Historically, the non-British born population has been concentrated in such urban clusters outside London as Slough (24.0%), Leicester (23.0%), Luton (19.6%), Oxford (19.3%) with the bulk of the

¹⁴ Nathan M (2008), *Your Place or Mine: The local economics of migration*, Institute for Public Policy Research, September. Available from <http://www.ippr.org.uk/members/download.asp?f=%2Fecomm%2Ffiles%2Fyour%5Fplace%5For%5Fmine%2Epdf>

¹⁵ Nathan M (2008), *Op. Cit.*, Page 7.

immigrants coming from South Asia, Greece and Turkey.¹⁶ More recently, there is little evidence of similar concentrations. The data suggests that patterns of local demand for labour, especially the availability of entry-level employment, the presence of exiting migrant communities and the presence of employment agencies. In 2007 the Worker Registration Scheme data suggests that there were 508,000 Poles (66% of the total), 78,830 Slovaks (about 10% of the total) and 73,315 Lithuanians (about 10% of the total). Significant clusters were present in the City of London (305 per 1,000 total population), Boston Lincolnshire (90 per 1,000 total population), Westminster (55 per 1,000 total population), Northampton (47 per 1,000 total population), South Holland Lincolnshire (42 per 1,000 total population), Peterborough (41 per 1,000 total population), and Fenland (35 per 1,000 total population).¹⁷

In this context, the study provides little evidence of the potential impact of active labour market policies in raising the level of knowledge, skills and competencies through programmes designed to support employers such as Train to Gain.

¹⁶ Nathan M (2008), *Op. Cit.*, Page 13. (using 2001 Census data)

¹⁷ Nathan M (2008), *Op. Cit.*, Page 14.



Observatory on Validation

An extended view on validation of non formal and informal learning with:

- ↳ data on regulations, standards and references, methods and tools, results and statistics in a common format
- ↳ Reviews of national debates and discussions, articulations with European initiatives (NQF-EQF, learning outcomes, adult education plan,...)
- ↳ A set of interesting practices through case studies
- ↳ Annotated bibliography and literature review (researches, surveys, reports,...)

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- European Civil Society Platform for Lifelong Learning – EUCIS, Belgium
- NAVREME knowledge development KEG, Austria



European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN)

EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY OF NON-FORMAL & INFORMAL ACTIVITIES

Leonardo da Vinci Networks
LLP 2007 133980-LLP-1-2007-1-BE-
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Observal project will provide an analysis of the information on validation of non formal and informal learning available in a country:

- ↳ presented in a common format and based on a quality process
- ↳ allowing comparability
- ↳ different categories of information (interactive and dynamic approach)
- ↳ with a guarantee that the information is accurate and regularly updated

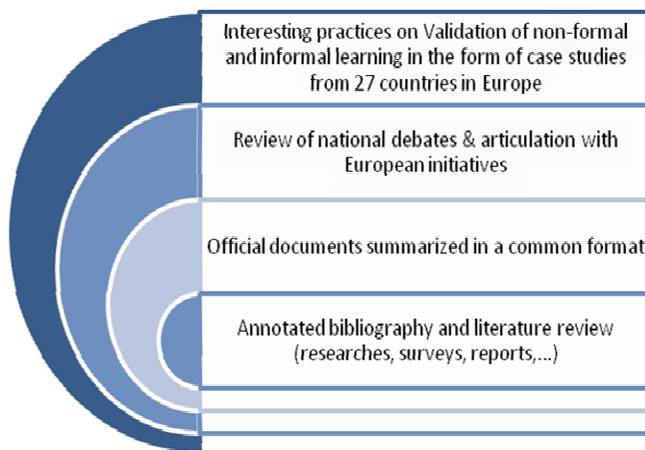


An Observatory

The Observal project has a « **benchlearning approach** » which implies:

- ↪ Collecting material (benchmark)
- ↪ Analysing material
- ↪ Debating the results

to provide an extensive and critical view on situations and practices of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The observatory will contain:



Observal has a balanced approach between a European dimension and the national or sectoral dimension, in order to reflect diversity. The objective is comparability without trying to identify similarity

- ↪ Provide a global resource for actors in charge of validation, for policy makers, for social partners and stakeholders,...
- ↪ Contribute to a common understanding of validation
- ↪ Work on a common language and a common definition of concepts
- ↪ Identify common issues, problems, obstacles



The challenge

Most Member States have developed policies or regulations designed to encourage the practice of recognition of non formal and informal learning but there is still sparse provision. In recent years, a number of studies have identified, compared and classified initiatives (Bjornavold 2000, Bjornavold and Collardyn 2004, Duvekot, Schuur and Paulusse 2005), "European Inventory" (ECOTEC 2004/2005),.

The objective of the project is to complete this first set of documentation by:

- ↪ Creating a permanent European Observatory on validation of non formal and informal learning based on a European network of national experts
- ↪ Collecting and analyzing existing data and presenting them in a common format that will allow both comparison and articulation of practices developed in different contexts or sectors, and their evaluation using criteria defined on the basis of the "common principles".
- ↪ Identifying regulations, organisation, pilot projects and experiments, standards and reference frameworks, tools and methods, purposes and approaches in the workplace, results registered (access, credits, exemptions, award of qualifications etc.) and statistics available for the development of practice
- ↪ Reviewing national debates or discussions between the most influent actors on validation issues.

- ↪ Situating the debates in a learning culture and in a European policy context especially the EQF.
- ↪ Reviewing research on the policy and practice of validation and create an annual annotated bibliography and literature review.
- ↪ Promoting an annual European validation prize.

Timeframe & Events

Observal is a 3-year project starting in November 2007

A European Validation prize will be organised at the end of 2008.



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