

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — Recognition of skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning

(2015/C 019/16)

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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

European context

1. Although Europe has strong assets, many challenges have to be tackled in the field of education, in order to achieve the ambitious objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. Over the last few years, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning has been the subject of several comparative EU-wide analyses that have allowed a better understanding of the extent to which the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning has been implemented.

2. Since 2004, the European institutions have supported national developments in this field through various initiatives, including the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽¹⁾, the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2009) ⁽²⁾ and several editions of the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽³⁾. These efforts resulted, in December 2012, in the adoption of the Council Recommendation ⁽⁴⁾ inviting EU countries to establish the rules for validation linked to national qualifications frameworks and in accordance with the European Qualifications Framework allowing individuals to obtain full or partial qualifications on the basis of non-formal or informal learning. It is now time for LRAs to take the opportunity to express themselves on this issue.

Importance of validating skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the context of lifelong learning

— Highlighting better and more useful skills

3. Skills and competences are acquired not only through formal education but also through learning which takes place outside this formal framework. This involves the informal acquisition of a given competence during the course of an individual's life which is not linked to any formally recognised and validated qualifications. Such skills may, for example, be acquired during the course of housework, workplace-based learning, help on a farm, caring for older people, the sick, children, etc.

4. Non-formal learning on the other hand refers to situations in which an individual learns and acquires skills through various types of activity where learning takes place but without certification or accreditation of such skills. Examples of such activities include seminars, training courses which are open to all and internships, as well as, for example, amateur sport or volunteer work for local communities. Non-formally and informally acquired skills may have both technical aspects (e.g. practical experience) and social aspects (e.g. language skills).

⁽¹⁾ Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (18 May 2004) http://www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/principles/validation2004_en.pdf

⁽²⁾ http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054_en.pdf

⁽³⁾ Cedefop: European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning — Home <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory.aspx>

⁽⁴⁾ Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

5. The principle of lifelong learning currently forms the cornerstone of Europe's policy for education and employment and is therefore key to inclusion. The recognition and validation of competences and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal education is one of the key tenets of this approach, which should lead to more flexible education processes, in turn leading to greater mobility among the labour force and enhanced employability, not least of young people, the inclusion of migrants and a re-think of the idea of education (especially adult education) in general. Thanks to the validation of non-formal and informal learning, individuals will not only receive certification that they have reached a certain level in a competence acquired outside the formal education system but, in certain cases, will also achieve transition to another level of education, subject to the appropriate accreditation framework.

6. In the Bruges Communiqué of December 2010 ⁽⁵⁾, the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission declared that EU Member States should start to develop, no later than 2015, national procedures for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, supported, where appropriate, by national qualifications frameworks.

7. Meanwhile, there is still a substantial gap between these declarations and the reality on the ground. There are many significant regional and national differences in terms of the recognition and validation procedures of non-formal and informal knowledge/skills in education systems (over 100 different definitions of these processes at national and regional levels). Some EU countries and regions are lagging behind in terms of recognising non-formal and informal education and learning.

8. To this effect, the CoR urges the European to address this issue within the revision of policy priorities in the framework of the renewed Europe 2020 strategy and to deliver promptly on its commitment to create a European Area of skills and — qualifications acquired not only through formal but also non-formal learning, while ensuring permeability between different levels of education. This is a key priority for the CoR, also reflected in its proposals for the new EU legislative mandate ⁽⁶⁾, given that the mutual recognition of such qualifications facilitates, inter alia, cross-border worker mobility, boosts competitiveness and it enhances territorial and social cohesion.

9. Considering non-formal education as a means of integration into society, the CoR has on a number of occasions called for recognition and validation of the competences and qualifications acquired through non-formal education in its opinions. Over the years, non-formal learning and education have been repeatedly confirmed as key CoR priorities.

10. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that pan-European mechanisms for the recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal skills could lead to an increase in the effectiveness and value of non-formal education which takes place under programmes co-financed by the European Social Fund.

11. Across the EU, local and regional authorities have key responsibilities for education and training policy and they play an essential role in the fields of youth and employment policies.

12. Education institutions, universities and Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers and other providers, employment agencies, NGOs and public services that operate in a given region need to be involved and coordinated — and the same is true for businesses. Therefore, the territorial dimension must be taken into account when designing and implementing arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, the Committee considers it important that education institutions and businesses be open and adapt to the new circumstances created by the recognition of non-formal and informal education, and to harnessing the new possibilities and opportunities that they provide.

⁽⁵⁾ The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf

⁽⁶⁾ COR-2014-02333-00-00-RES.

13. Moreover, local and regional authorities are a valuable source of knowledge concerning employment opportunities, available education (non-formal and informal) and the needs of their regions and cities. Consequently, involvement of the local and regional authorities is essential in order to support the development of skills that match employment requirements.

— **Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market**

14. The Committee of the Regions calls for cooperation based on partnership between government bodies at national and local level, businesses, employees and their organisations as well as civil society organisations in the realignment of resources for lifelong learning in line with the principle of validating non-formal and informal skills.

15. Stresses the importance of acquiring the widest possible cross-cutting skills, especially in the area of entrepreneurship, and the role of these skills in cooperation between formal, non-formal and informal education and the labour market.

16. Draws attention to the important role of key stakeholders operating outside the formal education system who have a vested interest in or are directly involved in recognising and validating skills acquired outside the formal system.

17. Emphasises the need to establish common quality frameworks for learners' traineeships. In this context, endorses the action of the Council of the EU which adopted a list of recommendations in this area in March 2014 ⁽⁷⁾.

Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies, and implementing the learning outcomes approach

18. Specific legal and organisational measures that draw on public funds and are adopted in order to achieve certain aims should take account of the reallocation of expenditure in a given area.

19. By putting learners at the heart of lifelong learning policies, further improvements can be achieved regarding the effective deployment of resources for the development of education and training. Recognising the importance of the learner has led to a change in the focus of funding models for education and training, thereby avoiding any unnecessary duplication in terms of the allocation of resources from the various sources in question (formal, non-formal and informal) and tailored to the different learners' individual needs. Therefore, according to the principle of lifelong learning, in this context it is the learner rather than the institution(s) or system which is both the main driving force behind and beneficiary of the available resources.

20. This approach towards validating skills acquired outside the formal education system can significantly improve responsiveness to the new needs of learners. Such needs are to a significant extent dependent on economic and social changes which, in turn, require new skills and qualifications.

21. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that the wholesale application of mechanisms for validating skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning will not require a complete overhaul of vocational education and training systems. It points out that current training systems already include validation mechanisms, even if they are somewhat dispersed, incomplete and diverse in nature.

22. It is necessary for validation prior to further studies to be carried out in a local/regional context, where support for individual study plans, educational and careers advice, student finance issues, support for combining studies at different levels of education, and dialogue with the world of work regarding the match between the supply of and demand for skills are all handled.

⁽⁷⁾ Council recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships (10 March 2014)
http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lssa/141424.pdf

Ensuring clear rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications to enable further learning; placing greater emphasis on quality

23. The Committee of the Regions stresses the need to guarantee at EU level the appropriate quality and equivalence of validation procedures in order to ensure that certificates obtained through the validation process are mutually recognisable throughout the EU; therefore, considers the exchange of best practices amongst Member States in terms of quality assessment and validation procedures of utmost importance. These procedures must also not be overly cumbersome or protracted.

24. Calls for swift and thorough implementation of the proposals outlined in the Council's recommendations, with a particular emphasis on the need to link validation arrangements to national qualifications frameworks and to the European Qualifications Framework, and to establish clear rules for ensuring the quality of such arrangements in accordance with existing provisions.

25. Equally, the Committee of the Regions considers that, while placing due emphasis on quality, validation procedures should be clear and not too complicated in order not to deter those who wish to formalise their learning outcomes from doing so and to make lifelong learning a reality. Moreover, quality assurance mechanisms throughout the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning are key to ensuring that such learning is treated at par with formal learning.

Appropriate information policy

26. In order to ensure their legitimacy, validation procedures must have strong ties with the world of work. In many cases, recognition procedures for a given area of activity should be developed by, or in close cooperation with, the sector concerned.

27. The Committee of the Regions considers that a sufficiently broad, comprehensive and comprehensible information policy, targeting the public and businesses and informing them of the opportunities for and advantages of validating skills, is of key importance to successful validation procedures; this policy should also be designed with the people to whom it is targeted in mind.

28. Proposes that information activity be carried out separately for each reference level ⁽⁸⁾ (especially for reference levels three to six) of the European Qualifications Framework.

29. Also suggests that it should be coordinated and partly co-financed via the European Social Fund and Erasmus+, under Key Action 3 (support for policy reform).

30. In formulating these policy proposals, we note that throughout the European Union local and regional levels have key responsibilities for education and training policy.

31. It is the local and regional authorities that have key responsibilities for education and training and direct knowledge of both the skills required for the labour market in their area and the training requirements of their citizens. They are therefore well placed and able to contribute to policy development and implementation in the field of education and training, including the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in full respect of the subsidiarity principle.

32. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that validation procedures for skills acquired outside the formal education system are a vital part of fundamental changes to the European model for vocational education and training. For the regions, they not only represent an important mechanism for developing a sustainable labour market but are also helping to create more flexible education systems which are more tailored to a rapidly changing world, thereby improving the interconnection between education, training and employment.

33. Considers it important to pool local and regional best practice in non-formal, informal and vocational education, to transfer knowledge and to ensure the participation of stakeholders in cooperation projects.

34. The Committee of the Regions notes that lessons may be learned from validation procedures for non-formally and informally acquired skills in cases where there is a mismatch between vocational education systems and labour market needs.

⁽⁸⁾ The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) foresees 8 levels of learning outcomes, enabling a much easier comparison between national qualifications.

35. The Committee of the Regions considers that common, pan-European frameworks should be established for systems validating non-formal and informal skills in order to ensure that they are mutually recognisable.
36. The validation of non-formal and informal skills should, in particular, encompass reference level five, as education courses for this level have practically disappeared in Central and Eastern Europe.
37. Calls for the creation of a concrete and common framework at EU level for the recognition of skills and competences acquired not only through formal but also non-formal informal learning, while ensuring permeability between different levels of education.
38. Political interest in the variety of practice-based educational processes that are subsumed under non-formal learning has increasingly been focused on quality standards, validation and strategies for recognition.
39. There is a strong need to create a pan-European strategy (in the form of guidelines and possible implementation scenarios) with a view to establishing a common framework for recognition of informal and non-formal education/learning in order to facilitate the creation of relevant national procedures.
40. It has to be clearly shown that the proposed actions cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, but in view of their scale and effects can be better achieved at EU level. The proposed actions involve trans-national aspects that cannot be properly regulated by Member States or regional and local authorities acting alone. In addition, the proposed actions should provide clear benefits compared with actions at national, regional or local levels by virtue of e.g. a global evidence-based policy analysis or a common framework to support interaction with the rest of the world in the field of education and training. Given these trans-national aspects, trans-national cooperation structures (both public and private) must also be involved in developing validation procedures.
41. At the same time, the EU should act only to the extent necessary, while the content and form of action should be suitable and appropriate to achieve the intended objective. Where it is necessary to set standards at EU level, consideration should be given to setting minimum standards leaving freedom to Member States and competent regional and local authorities to set higher standards (proportionality principle). The proposed form of action should be as simple as possible in order to achieve the intended objectives and leave as much scope for national, regional and local decisions as possible.

Brussels, 4 December 2014.

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of the Committee of the Regions*
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