Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in OECD countries:

A very good idea in jeopardy?

There seems to be strong agreement that a lot of learning takes place outside the formal education and training system. Less consensus exists about the extent to which this non-formal and informal learning should be recognised. Nevertheless, making non-formal and informal learning visible seems to be at the forefront of a lot of public policy in the European Union and the OECD countries. It is viewed as one of the possible options to making lifelong learning for all a reality.

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This paper aims to address some key issues at stake when dealing with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. (Technically, it is the outcomes of the learning that are assessed and that lead to some form of recognition but recognition of non-formal and informal learning will be used for short.) If the idea that individuals learn everywhere and all the time throughout their lives is not new – there is evidence since Plato and Condorcet, and throughout the twentieth century (OECD, 2007c; Werquin, 2007) – recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a field of research and a thorough policy option is quite a recent development.

There seems to be a consensus that individuals acquire skills, knowledge and competences outside the formal education and training system (formal learning). However, there is little or no consensus about the definitions of the terms, about value that should be given to this learning, about who should decide what is valued, and about the best ways to define the standards for the assessment of the outcomes of this learning.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is often considered a possible solution for promoting lifelong learning, especially for the adult population (OECD, 2007a). Together with mechanisms such as *Providing Credit Transfer* or *Establishing a Qualifications Framework* (see OECD 2007a or OECD 2007b for a full list of 20 mechanisms), recognising what people know or can do – regardless of where they have acquired these skills, knowledge and competences – is indeed likely to be a strong incentive for them to resume learning formally as they will not have to start from scratch. This also cuts the traditional costs (time, tuition fees, transportation costs, etc.) and opportunity costs (forgone earnings, etc.) of formal learning. If one would

want to be a bit provocative, it could be said that this is about the only consensus regarding the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

There seems to be room for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning beyond the lifelong learning agenda. Its current success has probably to do with the fact that it is also presented as a way of improving the efficiency of the labour market through increasing the mobility of workers; the visibility of skills, knowledge and competences; the opportunities for immigrants; etc. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is seen as having the potential to foster the knowledge economy agenda by improving the level of qualifications of individuals, making them happier and better workers, and improving their standard of living.

This paper is divided in four sections. The first one attempts to clarify the terms without really providing a definition for each of them as it is almost impossible at the international level. The second considers the main rationale and objectives for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The third lists the possible barriers and actual challenges that can prevent the recognition of non-formal and informal learning becoming a reality on a large scale. The fourth and last section considers the possible threats against recognition of non-formal and informal learning systems that are being designed or implemented throughout OECD countries. For the sake of conciseness, this paper does not describe country practice, a wealth of information on which is available at the OECD website (www.oecd.org/edu/lifelonglearning/nqs; www.oecd.org/edu/recognition).

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

For years, research has been trying to clarify the different terms in use, an endeavour that has proven quite difficult, if not impossible, at the international

level. A lot of uncertainty and disagreements remain about the meaning of non-formal and informal learning on one side and recognition on the other. There are still competing definitions for several terms and differences between them sometimes seem quite subtle; it is not worth spending time trying to reach a very unlikely consensus. (For a list and discussion of the main terms, see Werquin, 2007 or OECD, 2007c.) Definitions evolve over time and it is probably a positive feature. Therefore, referring to a publication older than a couple of years is quite a hazardous exercise (for an up-to-date glossary, see Tissot, forthcoming).

Definition of non-formal and informal learning: Is there a need for consensus?

The terms 'formal', 'non-formal' and 'informal' learning should be defined in relation to each other. Non-formal and informal learning should be defined as opposed to formal learning even if the boundaries of these terms vary across countries and over time. There have been major efforts and reforms to recognise most learning, whether formal or not, through a qualification or a recognised document (see http://www.oecd.org/edu/recognition). Three characteristics seem useful when defining the terms: whether the learning involves objectives, whether it is intentional and whether it leads to a qualification (the terms 'qualification' and 'certification' are taken as synonyms here, and they both refer to the process and the final outcome).

It seems that recent definitions focus more on the existence of learning objectives and the intentionality of learning. Definitions based on the last characteristic ('leading to a qualification') are not very useful and should be dropped since most countries are trying to have all kinds of learning certified. Most definitions using this characteristic are old and outdated. A more inter-

esting approach could rely on the fact that formal learning is always subject to registration. To that extent it seems agreeable to call it 'formal education and/or training'. However, it seems more difficult to talk about non-formal or informal education and training. Non-formal and informal learning is a better option.

Following from this, formal learning has learning objectives and is intentional whereas informal learning results from daily life and takes place everywhere, all the time, often without people even realising it. It results from experience, does not have learning objectives and is not intentional. There seems to be a consensus regarding these two definitions. Non-formal learning is probably the least consensual term. In most countries, non-formal learning is rather organised and therefore intentional even if the activity leading to non-formal learning may not be designed or designated as learning activity as such. Non-formal learning may have learning objectives but they are very broad unlike those in formal learning where learning objectives are spelled out and where the process to reach these objectives is formalised.

Recognition: One word, several meanings

Defining the term 'recognition' is somewhat more complex because there are many meanings for this term. First of all, there is *recognition of learning* in the sense that it is acknowledged that learning has taken place. The *recognition of learning outcomes* is the result of an assessment process which can be either formative or summative. Formative assessment often takes the form of portfolio development and its result is best characterised as self-recognition even if written documents exist (such as a portfolio or a competence passport). Summative assessment engages a wide variety of assessment processes, methods and tools, such as simulation, observation, written examinations, and so on. The recognition of learning outcomes requires agreed standards and a level is usually attributed according to the level of proficiency. It is the formal

part of the process and the way to communicate to the rest of the world about the knowledge, skills and competences one has acquired. Finally, there is *social recognition* of the documents awarded during this process. It requires standards that are widely agreed throughout the society. As the value of the qualifications and/or documents lies in social recognition, it seems most satisfactory to talk of *recognition* of non-formal and informal learning as opposed to *validation* or *accreditation* which only cover the technical aspects. In addition, it leads to potential policy recommendations on how best make non-formal and informal learning visible and usable. These three definitions hold for the recognition of formal learning too.

A summary: Being pragmatic

There are no unique (internationally agreed) definitions for key terms such as 'non-formal learning', 'informal learning' or 'recognition'. All definitions have drawbacks and there is always a country to disagree with definitions that seem to satisfy most others. A common definition would need to go beyond the words and include the culture and the concepts. This is too difficult an endeavour and probably not even a useful one. A more sensible approach is to try to propose a series of guidelines and principles clarifying the potential definition of terms and leave it to countries, regions and other entities to decide what they need in the short or medium run. There is a need for working definitions and not definitions carved in stone.

All in all, what is useful for policymakers and for individuals (typically learners, workers or employers) is that a (recognition) system is created so that individuals can have what they know or can do documented in a useful and practical way, and receive social recognition. In other words, the key is to make learning visible through a quality assured assessment of skills, knowledge and/or competences. This requires a formal recognition of learning outcomes that leads to the awarding of a recognised document (certificate for ap-

plying for jobs, proof of proficiency for promotion, certification to meet salary criteria, etc.). In some countries, recognition of non-formal and informal learning may lead directly to a full qualification. In most countries, some additional top-up training is required for individuals to be awarded a full qualification. This documentation would help avoid repetition as individuals would be able to [re]use this evidence of skills, knowledge and competences in different contexts.

RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning touches on many different issues within the education and training system. It has an impact on the lifelong learning system countries or regions may want to adopt or implement because it opens up the perspective about where, when and how individuals learn; and which learning outcomes have value and need to be recognised. Deciding what has value is traditionally a source of disagreement between ministries of education and labour, or between employers and educationalists. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning involves many actors and the rationale developed in different countries systematically relies on a multi-facetted approach.

A strong rationale

The rationale for implementing a system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is systematically based on at least two main dimensions: a) promoting lifelong learning by contributing to its quality, quantity and distribution; and b) making the labour market more effective and equitable on the road toward the knowledge economy. These dimensions overlap. For individuals, qualifications or documents provided may have a double currency: in the labour market and in the lifelong learning system.

Most adult learning periods, whether formal or not, do not lead to a qualification or to the awarding of a recognised document. Not making skills, knowledge and competences visible hinders the effective use of human capi-

tal. This is especially the case when it comes to non-formal and informal learning, the volume of which creates a vast potential for routes towards qualifications.

In addition, people are usually awarded qualifications when they are young. Therefore, what individuals can display in terms of skills, knowledge and competences through their qualification(s), or any other document they may have, is blurred because these qualification(s) date back years, or even decades. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning makes skills, knowledge and competences visible. This is also viewed as potentially improving access to and mobility within the labour market. It will also help employers to better match jobs and workers and overcome skills shortages, and may indeed help to spot the gaps in the distribution of existing knowledge, skills and competences among the population, at the country, region or enterprise level. It is a powerful tool for planning training and learning activities.

As access to further learning for adults is tightly bound to initial education and training achievements, individuals with poor records from formal education generally do not make use of opportunities within the formal system of lifelong learning. Hence, many countries focus on ways of creating a second chance to obtaining qualifications. Systems for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may open doors instead of erecting barriers for those who have not achieved their full potential (OECD, 2007a). In many countries the system goes hand in hand with the expansion of adult learning as poorly qualified but skilled adults are the natural targets of such programmes.

It is often argued that recognition of non-formal and informal learning improves applicants' self-esteem as they become aware of their knowledge, skills and competences. This may increase their confidence and productivity, as well as trust of others in the family, the enterprise or the community, therefore improving their employment and career prospects and access to further learning opportunities. Individuals

would directly benefit from individualised systems of recognition as learning paths would be optimised in terms of cost and duration.

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning mechanically improves the qualification distribution of the population (and not only the young generations), with little additional burden on the formal education and training system. Enterprises are often required to employ a certain number of qualified staff (for example hospitals, enterprises trying to meet ISO requirements or wishing to bid for certain contracts, etc.). The recognition of non-formal and informal learning, by itself or together with top-up training, may be an efficient solution when the skills, knowledge and competences exist but are not yet formally recognised.

Different and complementary objectives

The main objectives pursued through the process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning vary according to the individual and country in question, from exemption of all or a part of the entry requirements for a formal learning programme, to the awarding of a full qualification. Some countries offer all possibilities whilst others focus only on part of them. The objectives are important also because each of them is relevant to different actors in the systems of lifelong learning and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. For example, exemption from entry requirements is relevant to universities in particular, while employers are mostly interested in the awarding of full qualifications (for a discussion of all these objectives in the case of France, see Charraud, 2005).

The first objective is related to meeting the entry requirements for formal learning programmes. For example, in tertiary education a qualification from upper secondary level education is required. Vocational Education and Training experience and already existing skills, knowledge or competences may often substitute a formal qualification demanded upon entry. Sometimes associated with the exemption from entry requirements, some countries offer

exemption for parts of a formal learning programme. In other words, when entering a formal learning programme, learners may be granted some credits towards the qualification(s) they are aiming for. This is often presented as one of the main breakthroughs linked to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as it implies a clear reduction in the study time required for a qualification. These exemptions are often used in the tertiary education system. This implies a double assessment process: individuals are assessed upon entry on the exemptions of requirements and/or on the number of credits granted; and they are assessed again, just like the "traditional" students, on awarding the qualification(s).

Finally, it is more and more possible to be awarded a full qualification on the sole basis of the assessment of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. This is the most discussed objective since it is not necessarily socially accepted that qualifications are awarded to those who do not attend classes or are not assessed in exactly the same way as traditional students in the formal education and training system. When such mental rigidity exists, the most often adopted policy is to explicitly signal on the certificate that the qualification has been awarded on the basis of the assessment of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

It seems rather clear that, at a policy level, many countries are trying to establish links between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the formal qualifications, mainly because linking the two can cut the costs of learning and qualification processes; and to motivate individual learners who can begin learning at the level that reflects their actual skills, knowledge and competences. In linking the two systems, most countries are also looking for consistency. However, some countries have made the pragmatic policy choice to use recognition of non-formal and informal learning only when there is a need for certain qualifications in the labour market but this need is not met by the formal education and training system.

A key issue that should not be overlooked is that, whatever the objective, the key outcome of such a recognition process should be the awarding of a document that would ideally be recognised throughout the society, listing and describing the skills, knowledge and competences the applicant has demonstrated at some point in time – with limited validity if need be, in rapidly evolving fields for instance – so s/he does not have to do it again later in life if such skills, knowledge and competences are required for entering a formal learning programme or applying for a job, for example.

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the differences in contexts and practice (see OECD, forthcoming), the barriers to recognition of non-formal and informal learning seem to be the same in many countries and systems.

Stakeholders

Recognition systems bring in a range of new stakeholders who have previously been outside the formal learning system (small enterprises, specific social groups such as immigrants, low-skilled people, etc.). This is good as recognition of non-formal and informal learning requires the active commitment and engagement of a number of stakeholders – in the education sector and in the labour market. However, the stakeholders' differing views about key issues may prevent reaching a useful and operational agreement on the best ways to implement recognition systems. For instance, there are potential tensions between social partners and governments: while the former are traditionally interested in the utilisation of skills, knowledge and competences developed in working life, the interests of the latter seem to be more focused on making public educational institutions more flexible, and reducing costs.

Assessment

Another main challenge is the assessment methodology. There is suspiciousness about the quality of qualifications based on the assessment of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and a concern that their recognition might undermine the status of formal education and training and the associated qualifications. There is strong evidence that qualifications achieved through recognition of non-formal and informal learning are barely socially accepted. The problem is that, in formal education and training, both input and outcomes can be quality assured whereas in non-formal and informal learning the input process is invisible and out of control by definition; only the outcomes are visible and assessed. Therefore, there is a strong need for innovation in terms of assessment methodology. This is true for both summative and formative assessment.

Standards

Further, there is a lack of parity of esteem between the systems of recognition and the formal education and training system. Linked to the issue of assessment is the notion of standards against which the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning should be assessed. Who decides what has value remains an issue. The standards of formal education and training systems are usually defined on the basis of the standards of Ministries of Education. With a lot of the non-formal and informal learning taking place at the workplace, employers and Ministries of Labour would probably want to be involved in deciding what has value in terms of learning.

This may lead to clear inconsistencies in the development and implementation of standards in countries where, for instance, recognition is meant to bridge the gaps between qualifications needed in the labour market and those offered by the formal education and learning system. Some countries have indeed chosen to move away from an explicit lifelong learning perspective and have implemented a recognition system basically to create qualifications which the formal education and training system does not deliver to the labour market. In such cases qualifications may not have value when the holder wants to resume learning in the formal education and training system. This goes against one of the main rationales described above: the flexibility of the lifelong learning system.

Other way around, qualifications achieved fully or partly through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning will need to achieve acceptance in the labour market. Even in the formal education and training system, there is no point in delivering qualifications that will not have value in the labour market. The pragmatic solution of using recognition systems primarily to meet some need in the labour market may seem an appropriate solution for generating interest toward recognition approaches and processes.

The issue of legitimacy, whether linked to assessment, quality assurance, or ownership of the standards, needs to be addressed. Maintaining consistency across the system may be at risk, for instance in decentralised systems, when there are many local or industry-specific variations in the way learning outcomes are assessed and recognition systems implemented. In federal countries, mobility across regions or provinces is sometimes more difficult than across countries. To ensure their legitimacy, it is important that recognition systems are built on commonly agreed principles, and measures and methods are structured and integrated as much as possible into existing quality assurance and assessment systems.

It seems that recognising non-formal and informal learning does not create skills, knowledge and competences. It just makes them visible. This apparent drawback is actually one of the most promising avenues as recognition processes can be designed so that they clearly and explicitly become learning processes.

Cost

The issue remains whether the benefits of recognition are great enough compared to the costs especially since the results may not have full social recognition. It is very likely that a recognition process is less costly for individual learners than a full education and training programme; but how about costs for the system? Some countries that have fees for recognition have decided that these fees should never be higher than tuition fees for the formal

education and training programme leading to an equivalent level or qualification. However, there is strong evidence that recognition of non-formal and informal learning is not cheap for the system because it requires individualised treatment. A major difference, in terms of assessment costs, is that the cost of accepting one additional student in a formal programme is not high because the procedures are already in place. In the case of recognition, assessment procedures cannot be easily standardised. Further, recognition systems require panels of assessors for each candidate whereas in the formal system there is one assessor for many students. In addition, some target groups require extra resources, for information and guidance for example. It is uniformly reported that it is also extremely difficult, and therefore time consuming and costly for the system, to have a low-skilled potential applicant to accept s/he has skills, knowledge and competences.

The cost issue is not necessarily a hindrance to implementing recognition but there is a need for clarity because all recognition systems incur infrastructure costs that are often initially subsidised by public finances. Alternatively, there are "hidden subsidies" through the sharing of facilities with local training centres, for example. These hidden subsidies should not be denied and costing exercises must be done properly. (For an attempt to formalise and model the cost of recognition versus the cost of formal education and training, see Werquin, 2007). Most countries with an apparently well-functioning recognition system report that they would not be in a position to rapidly scale up the take-up due to lack of (well trained) staff and/or facilities to organise the assessment of applicants. Costs in terms of time and money should be related to expected benefits.

Cost saving and cost sharing are obvious responses to these issues. However, cost saving arising from reducing the sensitivity of the system to the needs of individuals and other stakeholders and by limiting quality assurance procedures are likely to have a negative impact in the longer term. An-

other solution, despite above-mentioned difficulties, would be to rapidly reach a critical mass in the number of applicants so that recognition procedures become more affordable on average. Access could be limited in few domains and opened up to others as viability becomes less of an issue.

Many countries rely on expanded private capacity and increased competition in the provision of learning opportunities as a way to improve efficiency of the qualifications system and to meet the needs of users. The cost of recognition systems is inextricably linked with this expansion. During the 1990s the private share of the total financing of education increased, and there is a clear trend in favour of greater private contributions in many OECD countries. It is very likely that a market will develop. Another problem is that funding systems often do not provide incentives, particularly for educational institutions, to implement systems for recognising non-formal and informal learning since grants are much higher for traditional students than for recognition applicants.

Pure economic theory would lead to asking individuals to pay more because they benefit from the system and save a lot of money not having to pay for a formal learning programme. Nevertheless, such an approach may not be implemented in the short or medium run as recognition systems need to, above all, attract people: higher recognition fees for applicants will only be possible when recognition systems have proven more efficient than formal education and training programmes in achieving a qualification. Until then, it is likely that the promoters of recognition of non-formal and informal learning still try to convince individuals on the basis of a low cost.

Take-up

The issue of low take-up is a clear challenge for the years to come. Even in countries where the system is the most conducive to undertaking a recognition process, the numbers often remain very small. This is partly due to inadequate or badly targeted promotional activities. Also, among low-skilled people,

there is a clear fear of failure due to negative experiences with formal education. All in all, there is a low perception of the potential benefits. Ambassador programmes could help reach out and convince those who most need a (second chance) qualification.

By the same token, but on the contrary, another challenge will be to manage positive expectations. As seen above, it may well be that the society, the economy and the labour market are not yet ready for accepting qualifications fully or partly achieved through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Even successful applicants may not necessarily get immediate prospects in the job market or in formal education and training. And there will be unsuccessful applicants. The solution here will be to deliver interim recognised documents so that unsuccessful applicants have a chance later in life when they have accumulated more learning. The biggest risk is that qualifications are awarded to all applicants, which will contribute to the (wrong) image that recognition systems are unfair in comparison to formal education and training systems.

Data

Analysing these issues is a challenge because there is a limited amount of data available, whether quantitative or qualitative. This is mainly because existing systems do not require the method of learning to be recorded. It seriously slows down the access to decent evaluation and quantitative analysis. An obvious solution would be to require the learning process to be recorded in separate files, for analysis only, without anything of that sort appearing on the transcript of the qualification awarded. In addition to recording specific data for research and analysis within the system, some countries are carrying out (or planning to carry out) specific quantitative surveys. An affordable solution would be to implement specific recognition modules in well-established surveys such as labour force or adult learning surveys. The clear challenge will be to deliver longitudinal data.

Marginalisation

Finally, a challenge that may become an issue is the ghettoisation of systems of recognition. The risk here is that such systems become available only to specific groups, such as immigrants, indigenous populations or those with no formal education. This would isolate rather than integrate applicants. A possible solution is to leave open the door to formal education and training even for groups that are typically reluctant to undertake formal programmes (OECD, 2003 and 2005a). Targeting, if too systematic, may become an issue. And given the difficulties in recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes for low-skilled people, regular education and training may be a better option.

PERSPECTIVES – WHERE IS THE RISK?

Most countries have been reforming their qualifications systems of which recognition of non-formal and informal learning systems are an important component. An important goal of most reforms is to create a coherent and flexible system. Another goal is making transitions from one part of the formal education and training system to another as straightforward as possible. One of the devices for such endeavours is the system of recognition which is not only a mechanism on its own but also a catalyst for improving the effectiveness of other mechanisms (OECD, 2007a).

Therefore, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is high on many countries' agenda. These systems, despite being rather convincing in theory, seem to have trouble taking off and reaching cruising speed. On the positive side, there is room for recognition systems and there are islands of good practice. On the negative side, there is little evidence that these systems work, and they seem to be mostly based on faith.

There is evidence that only a little group of people supports recognition of non-formal and informal learning in most countries. Until there is clear evidence that recognition systems do work and are sustainable, they rely on this small group of champions that constantly report about the difficulties they encounter when trying to promote this approach to lifelong learning. There is a risk that, in trying to convince all the stakeholders and the society as a whole, these champions oversell the recognition system that, in the end, does not deliver.

Is it reasonable to claim that recognition of non-formal and informal learning is the appropriate solution for a hundred per cent of the population? Do countries really have the tools and the budget for implementing such systems? How can a fundamentally flexible system cope with the rigidity of most existing education and training systems? Even the most optimistic champions of the systems of recognition of non-formal and informal learning agree that this will require a culture shift. How much time will be necessary for such a shift to happen?

The purpose of this paper is not to demotivate the champions, visionaries, or the reader. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a very good idea. But it may well disappear if some precautions are not taken to communicate it, evaluate it and move away from deadly optimism. The purpose of this paper is to motivate all the stakeholders so that countries firmly enter an era of pragmatism. Recognition represents a clear breakthrough in the relatively rigid world of education and training, but a lot of work needs to be done. The opportunities for individuals are endless but for this to become a reality, we need to move from faith to evidence-based policy in order not to jeopardise systems of recognition of non-formal and informal learning even before they reach maturity.

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FURTHER READING ESPECIALLY ABOUT COUNTRY PRACTICES:

http://www.oecd.org/edu/lifelonglearning/nqs
http://www.oecd.org/edu/recognition

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ENDNOTES

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2 Here again, the many alternative terms in use, and their different meanings will not be presented but they mainly are validation or accreditation as in: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Validation of Prior Learning (VPL), and so on (OECD, 2007c).