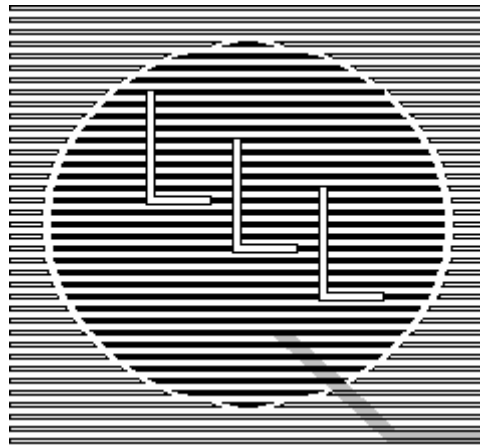


# **The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning**

An OECD activity



## **Report from Thematic Group 2:**

### **Standards and quality assurance in qualifications with special reference to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning**

*This paper is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily  
reflect the views of the OECD or the governments of its Member countries.*

## Participants in TG2

### Country delegates

BELGIUM (Flemish Community):

Ms. Patrice Schoeters, Flemish Institute for Entrepreneurship, VIZO Training and Alignment Information Centre, DIVA

Ms. Ria Van Herck, Training and Alignment Information Centre, DIVA

DENMARK:

Ms. Annelise Hauch, Ministry of Education

Ms. Vibe Aarkrog, the Danish University of Education

Mr. Steen Høyrup, the Danish University of Education

FINLAND:

Mr. Petri Haltia, University of Turku, Department of Education

Mr. Kari Nyssola, National Board of Education

FRANCE:

Mr. Michel Aribaud, Ministry of National Education

IRELAND:

Ms. Angela Lambkin, FETAC

MEXICO:

Mr. Miguel Angel Tamayo Taype, Ministry of Education

Ms. Maria Luisa de Anda y Ramos, Ministry of Education

THE NETHERLANDS:

Mr. Rigo Van Raai, Empowerment Centre EVC

Ms. Betty Feenstra, Empowerment Centre EVC

NEW ZEALAND:

Ms. Jo Doyle, New Zealand Qualifications Authority

PORTUGAL:

Ms. Candida Soares, Ministry of Labour, Department for Studies, Forecasting and Planning

SLOVENIA:

Mr. Miroljub Ignjatovic, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana

SWEDEN:

Ms. Carina Lindén, Ministry of Education and Science

UNITED KINGDOM:

Mr. John Dick, Scottish Qualifications Authority, Scotland

Mr. Sandy Rodger, Department for Education and Skills

### International organisations:

ILO:

Ms. Akiko Sakamoto, Skills Development Department

EUROPEAN COMMISSION:

Mr. Jens Bjørnåvold

OECD:

Mr. Mike Coles, Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (UK), Research consultant to the OECD

Mr. Patrick Werquin, Head of project

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## **Introduction**

This report has been prepared as part of an OECD activity exploring the relationship between national qualifications systems and the quality, quantity or distribution of lifelong learning. The report summarises the key themes raised by the participant countries. It outlines the current practices around the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the links, if any, to formal qualification systems. The report also identifies potential barriers to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and suggests actions required to break down these barriers.

At the time of production of this report a significant amount of work in relation to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning was being carried out by the European Commission. One of the streams of this work was the development of a set of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning. This report has been informed by the work of the European Commission whilst attempting to avoid duplication as much as possible.

## **Development of the report**

The work of the Thematic Group 2 took place between April 2003 and October 2004. Two meetings were held in July and November 2003 and further work was carried out through electronic exchange of information.

The drafters of this report would like to thank all the participants to the activity that provided information during the meetings and through electronic means. They were uniformly helpful in describing their efforts and in explaining practices that were unfamiliar to us, and we want to thank them for their participation. The government officials were also open about their policies, recent developments, and the problems they still seek to overcome.

# 1 Definitions

Before we embark on a discussion about the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, it is important to take a moment to clarify what it is we are talking about. A range of definitions that capture the concept of recognising learning that takes place outside of formal educational settings and is not normally recognised are in use in the countries that participated in Thematic Group Two. The following descriptions represent a significant step towards a consensus view of the countries participating in the thematic group and may help to appreciate the depth and breadth of understanding the group has of the main concepts.

## 1.1 Recognition of learning

Recognition seems to be a broad term that is often used interchangeably with the term validation (Colardyn D. & Bjørnåvold J., 2004). Both terms seem to include the recording of achievements in learning and the progress made by individuals. For some users it also includes the processes leading to the issue of a qualification. By recognising learning it is thought that it is possible to make explicit an individual's knowledge and skills so that they can use the credit gained by recognition to benefit in the labour market, in entry to formal education, financially or in terms of status or self-esteem. In some countries the term validation specifically refers to legal processes that permit to an individual to obtain a certificate (for instance a vocational diploma) linked to an individual's skills, knowledge and attitudes. In other countries validation is referred to as a means of making visible a person's skills and competencies without requiring predetermined knowledge targets to have been achieved. Recognition is also considered to be a component of the pedagogical process in adult education and an important instrument in work on recruiting and motivation for participants to study.

*Recognition of learning is the process of recording of achievements of individuals arising from any kind of learning in any environment; the process aims to make visible an individual's knowledge and skills so that they can combine and build on learning achieved and be rewarded for it.*

## 1.2 Formal learning

This kind of learning is usually associated with an institution of learning such as an educational facility or an enterprise that offers formal education and training programmes. An assessment agency may also be involved. Formal learning results from an instruction programme and is intentional from the learner's perspective.

*Formal learning can be achieved when a learner follows a programme of instruction in an educational institution or in the workplace. Formal learning is always recognised in a certificate or qualification.*

## 1.3 Non-formal learning

Like formal learning non-formal learning is achieved when an individual follows an organised programme of instruction. This could be in a range of settings such as an

educational institution, the workplace or in the home. This kind of learning is often embedded in planned activities that are often not designated as learning but which contain an important learning element. It can be structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). This kind of learning is not formally assessed. Many countries explicitly acknowledge a difference between non-formal learning and informal learning. Where this distinction is made, there is a general agreement that non-formal learning takes place in an intentional way, often in an educational or labour setting, but does not lead to formal qualifications.

***Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification***

#### **1.4 Informal learning**

Informal learning is achieved outside of organised education or training provision. It is often referred to as 'experience' or 'unintentional learning' that occurs throughout life without the learner necessarily being aware of the knowledge or skill that they have gained. This type of learning is seen as a 'side-effect' of life.

***Informal learning results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It does not lead to certification.***

#### **1.5 Other terms in common usage**

In a number of countries, a range of terms are used to capture parts of the concept of recognising or validating learning that takes place outside the formal education setting and that has not, in the past, been certified. These include

##### ***Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Assessment of Prior Learning (APL)***

These terms are in common use in a number of countries such as Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. They usually refer to the assessment of any prior learning, regardless of the manner in which it has been gained and therefore can be said to encompass formal, non-formal and informal learning. The following definition demonstrates this point:

***Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) is a process, which uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate and demonstrate past learning. This learning has been acquired through study, work and other life experiences and is not recognised through formal transfer of credit mechanisms. APL allows the evaluation of past learning against established standards so that credit can be awarded and qualifications achieved.***

##### ***Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)***

This is similar to APL/RPL but specifically focuses on the assessment of experiential learning, that is learning based on experience rather than on formal instruction.

Therefore, APEL could be said to encompass non-formal and informal learning, but not formal learning.

***Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)***

This definition comes from Canada and shows some of the principles that underlie the assessment process such as reliability and validity.

***Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is an evaluation through a valid and reliable process, by qualified specialist(s), of the knowledge and skills that have been learned through non-formal education, training or experience to determine the equivalency for credit to a course.<sup>1</sup>***

***Lifelong learning***

***Learning activity that is undertaken throughout life and improves knowledge, skills and competencies within personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspectives. Thus the whole spectrum of learning, formal, non-formal and informal is included as are active citizenship, personal fulfilment, social inclusion and professional, vocational and employment related aspects.***

***Life wide learning***

Life wide learning is a term that has begun to be used to capture the idea that learning may take place in a range of contexts outside of formal education and with different aims and outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer. (1994)

## **2 Policy Opportunities and Challenges**

The recognition and certification of competencies obtained outside formal education provides numerous opportunities on a policy level. These opportunities may relate to a country's objectives in areas such as skilled employment, education, equity and immigration. The countries that participated in Thematic Group Two viewed these opportunities within the context of lifelong and life wide learning.

With every opportunity there are, of course, challenges, pitfalls or unintended consequences. These are discussed in the second section of this chapter.

### **2.1 Opportunities**

#### *Contributing to the quality, quantity and distribution of lifelong learning*

Recognition should permit existing training paths to be optimised and is likely to facilitate a more tailored approach to the development of training paths for individuals. Training paths can, subject to good screening of the individuals existing skills, be shortened or modified to the individual's requirements and therefore lead to better and more efficient training expenditure. The flow-on effects of this would be more targeted government expenditure and the creation of a platform through which the government, the learner and industry can co-operate and share resources.

Recognition makes visible the skills, knowledge and competencies of an individual. In some cases the end goal is attainment of a qualification. In other cases the aim is to examine and document an individual's existing competencies without reference to predetermined knowledge targets. By promoting the individual's self-knowledge, self esteem and self-concept, recognition may encourage adults who have not previously taken part in the formal education system to do so. It may also provide adults with the evidence required to meet any entry standards for vocational or higher level education. Recognition of existing competencies may lead to an increased willingness among employees to take part in workplace training or learning.

In addition, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is in many cases used as a mechanism for reducing the study time required in order to gain a recognised formal qualification. In these cases, the non-formal and informal learning is credited towards the qualification, thus reducing the amount of work required within the formal system in order to successfully complete the qualification. This makes the completion of a formal qualification more attainable, particularly for those who may not have engaged in the formal education system in the past, or whose family and work commitments have made participation particularly difficult. In this context, recognition should reduce the cost of formal learning to both the learner, and to the system, thus addressing one of the barriers to entry to formal learning.

Recognition procedures may motivate individuals to look upon learning not only in a lifelong sense, but also as a life wide opportunity. It may also encourage the individual to start new learning experiences.



### ***Harnessing the human resource potential of citizens: improving access to, and mobility within the labour market***

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is also regarded as an important means of enhancing individuals' employability by facilitating workers' participation in formal education and training or by enhancing appreciation of their existing skills in the workplace (ILO, 2004). Individuals who have had limited access to, or not achieved<sup>2</sup> in formal education and training or those who learned skills predominantly in the workplace are often disadvantaged in gaining access to further training opportunities, or in securing employment which adequately reflects their skills and previous experience. Workers with few, or no, formal qualifications are least likely to secure rewarding work opportunities. Helping these workers to get their competences formally recognised, gives them evidence of their personal capital, which in turn assists them in their workforce negotiations. This helps improve employment and career prospects and access to further learning opportunities.

Identifying the true competence of the individual may assist employers by giving them more information about their existing or potential staff. For enterprises, a better recognition of workers' skills is a way to overcome skills shortages and match skills demand with supply. This contributes to enterprises' investment in and planning of human resources. It may also assist in meeting industry standards or quality assurance requirements and may contribute to competitive advantage.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the workplace has been practiced at multiple levels, largely at the industrial sector level or individual enterprise level. However, it can be difficult to see the full scale of practices and impact due to the nature of data collection and recording systems. In some countries, for example Australia and New Zealand, achievement is recorded without differentiation between learning gained through formal, non-formal and informal means, making it difficult to gauge the quantum of learning gained through non-formal and informal learning.

The purpose of implementing recognition also varies. In addition to the general purpose stated above, specific case studies included in the recent ILO study show that the recognition has been carried out for improving employability of redundant workers, the unemployed and those with no official recognition for their trades; increasing the standard of practice and workforce renewal in the industry; and selecting potential managers in an enterprise (Dyson, C. and Keating, J., 2005).

### ***Overcoming social, cultural, economic inequity***

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is also an opportunity to impact on the lives of disadvantaged groups within societies. Many participant countries have influenced the recognition of non-formal and informal learning through high level strategic policies linked to equity and social inclusion. The knowledge economy, the changing nature of the workforce, the internationalisation of education and work and the need to harness the human resource potential of the nation are the basis for these policies.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of countries, including Greece, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and Portugal made reference to the particular needs of individuals who had not completed formal secondary school qualifications in their country background reports.

A focus on access and equity of the recognition procedure will improve awareness of recognition systems among the general population, and in particular for targeted groups. This includes information about how, when and why recognition assessments can be carried out.

Some countries have specific legislation or policy for target groups such as those who have not completed basic schooling to gain access to recognition systems. For example, in Mexico those who belong to the educational backlog (people 15 years of age or older who have not begun or have not finished basic education) are able to obtain certificates relating to primary, or secondary formal education. This initiative acknowledges that there are groups within society that need additional opportunities in order to realise their full human capability.

## **2.2 Policy Challenges**

Whilst recognition of non-formal and informal learning provides a number of policy opportunities linked to high-level goals such as building a country's skill base and achieving equity, with these opportunities come challenges that arise from the systems employed. We will discuss some of these challenges now.

One of the challenges to any recognition system is gaining the acceptance of the labour market. If qualifications gained partly, or fully through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning are not accepted in the labour market, the value of a recognition system to the individual, and to society is diminished. This challenge indicates the need for comprehensive awareness programmes that increase employers and the wider public's understanding of recognition systems.

The aim of recognition is to make visible a person's knowledge and skills. However, it is possible that the documentation produced by a recognition process deals with what the person in question lacks in order to achieve a specific goal. Sensitive handling of the process of assessment and attention to the content of the certification produced may go some way to overcoming this challenge.

With many actors involved, we risk different solutions. For example in many countries the development of policy and processes occurs at different levels, both nationally and regionally. In addition, these bodies may have different aims in implementing a recognition system. Whilst this allows for flexibility and for local needs to be met by the local community, it may also cause confusion through the use of different types of process and documentation. It is therefore important that recognition systems are built on commonly agreed principles<sup>3</sup> and that measures and methods are structured, so that we achieve a process that maintains uniform standards at the national level. If this does not occur, the system may lose legitimacy. One of the ways of addressing this is to integrate the recognition system as much as possible into existing quality assurance and assessment systems.

There may also be a risk of dissatisfaction among those who have undergone longer education when work colleagues whose knowledge has been acquired in working life have the same status. It may also lead to changed pay structures and thus diminished

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<sup>3</sup> In the European Union context the approval of the 'Common Principles for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning is anticipated to take place by September 2004.

returns on education through study compared with persons who have had their non-formal and informal learning recognised. Widespread dissatisfaction could lead to people becoming more unwilling to apply financial resources to formal study and instead working and having the knowledge acquired in paid work recognised. Theoretically this could lead to a lowering of value placed on formal education and eventually, lower participation rates in formal education. This would be an un-intended negative consequence of the recognition system.

Tests and assessment influence the teaching and learning process. Perhaps another unintended consequence is that although the purpose of recognition is to give the opportunity to have informal learning validated, it could encourage institutions to develop courses that prepare the individual for this assessment of their informal learning.

Some participant countries expressed a concern that expectations of the benefits of recognition in the form of better job prospects and entry or credit towards formal education may not be able to be met. If these expectations are not met the recognition could be perceived as being a pointless exercise.

It is important for all levels of learning and all sectors of the community to be included in a recognition system. If validation is used for specific groups, such as immigrants, it may result in segregation rather than integration if immigrants are forced to use the system to have their informal knowledge confirmed. The same occurs if the instrument is classified as one only used by the less educated.

### **3 Current Practices**

In this section we will look at the extent to which countries are involved in developing recognition systems and why they are doing it. We also look at how countries are implementing recognition systems by providing examples of developments or initiatives. It is not possible to describe every kind of practice but it is hoped that the examples presented will give readers something of the 'flavour' of the activities being undertaken.<sup>4</sup> Publications that these examples are drawn from are listed in Appendix Two. The EU is in the process of developing an inventory of systems and methodologies<sup>5</sup> for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Therefore the following section provides a summary of each identified initiative rather than describing the detail of how recognition is carried out.

We present data from several countries giving examples of the numbers of people involved in informal and non-formal learning recognition systems. This, and anecdotal evidence from participating countries suggests that there is likely to be un-met demand for having learning gained outside the formal system recognised.

#### **3.1 A common interest**

Many countries in the world are investigating or developing ways to raise awareness of the fact that people learn always and everywhere and formal education is only one of the many learning pathways they may take. Whilst formal education has formed the backbone of what are becoming known as knowledge societies, the importance of harnessing the full range of available skills and knowledge is being increasingly appreciated. Evidence suggests that countries see advantages for individuals, communities, enterprises and the economy in recognising this informal and non-formal learning.

The European Commission has implemented, or is developing a number of initiatives that are related to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These include:

- Improving on a common set of principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- The EUROPASS which establishes a community framework for achieving transparency by means of a personal, coordinated portfolio of documents which citizens can use on a voluntary basis to better communicate and present their qualifications and competences throughout Europe. Europass will combine the European CV, the MobiliPass, diploma and certificate supplements and the European Language Portfolio.

#### **3.2 Different motives, different practices**

Today there is a wide range of practice in countries. Some countries have long standing, large-scale, fully institutionalised systems while others are still exploring the possibilities. The context for recognising non-formal and informal learning in different countries varies considerably. Historical, social, anthropological, cultural and economic

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<sup>4</sup> A list of possible methods for recognising prior learning is attached as Appendix Two.

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of the meeting of the commission expert group on validation of non-formal and informal learning, 28 May 2003.

factors influence the approach to recognition systems. Other important factors are the size of the country and the efficiency of internal communication.

Each country implements its practices depending on the context, the system and its own barriers. Therefore each country has its own challenges to deal with. Some countries overtly encourage or require processes for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Others have systems that allow or facilitate the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, but do not regulate it. In some cases a legislative base exists and in others change has been influenced through high level strategic policies linked to skilled employment or equity.

### **3.3 Legislation and policy**

A number of participant countries have legislative or policy changes either recently introduced or in development. Some of these do not specifically relate to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, but provide a platform on which such recognition can be facilitated. They include a focus on access, equity, validation, progression and life-long learning. As noted above, countries that consider themselves to be knowledge economies are increasingly recognising the need to promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

#### *Examples of Legislative frameworks*

A number of countries have specific statutes in law that give citizens rights to have their skills, knowledge and competencies recognised, regardless of the manner in which they have been obtained. These are largely examples of ‘top-down’ approaches where the impetus for action comes from the government, the initiative is large-scale and systematised. Examples of these are:

#### Belgium (Flemish Community)

In April 2004 the Flemish Government approved a Decree concerning formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning related to work experience. This Decree focuses on validating meaningful, profession-related competencies obtained in daily experience inside and/or outside the workplace. Individuals can step into a recognition procedure and can obtain a ‘certificate for work experience’ (‘Title for Vocational Competence’). The Decree grants formal recognition to people who can prove they have the skills and knowledge needed for a particular profession.

Following the European developments on the structure of Bachelor and Masters Degrees for Higher Education, the Flemish Government installed the Decree on Flexible Learning (April 2004). This means that Higher Education institutions can grant exemptions within certain study programme units and can even grant a degree if the outcome of assessment concludes that the competencies are indeed held by the applicant.

#### Finland

In Finland there is an Act on Vocational Adult Education (631/1998). The Act lays down the legal framework for skills tests, which are open to all adults, regardless of how (in educational institutions, at work, by self-study or by some other form of activity) they have acquired their occupational skills. By passing these tests they can achieve an officially recognised qualification.

### France

In France, there has been an interest in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning since the beginning of the 1970's. Several legal processes were adopted. For instance, in the 1980's the *bilan de compétences* (assessment of competencies) was introduced which permits a person to identify all of their competences and aptitudes without making them go through a formal validation or certification process. The *validation des acquis professionnels – VAP* (validation of on-the-job acquired skills and knowledge) was introduced in 1992. VAP made it possible to obtain a part of a vocational diploma on the basis of the acquired professional experience.

The recently introduced system of *validation des acquis de l'expérience – VAE* (Validation of skills and knowledge gained through experience) allows individuals to validate non-formal and informal learning and on-the-job acquired skills. This system is registered both in the 'education code' and in the 'labour code'. Individuals can obtain a vocational qualification, or part of an official qualification, for example a vocational national diploma or a sector's qualification related to their real experience, without taking part in a formal learning or training system. All those who have worked for at least three years in one or several positions directly related to the desired qualification, regardless of their present or previous professional status (public or private sector worker, freelance, craftsman, tradesperson, job-seeker or voluntary worker) are eligible and there is no age limit.

### Mexico

In Mexico the Standardisation and Certification Systems of Labour Competency, as part of the Project for Modernisation of Technical Education and Training, certify individual's competencies that have been acquired throughout their life, regardless of the manner and place in which they were acquired. This certification is based on the Labour Competency Technical Standards (NTCL) developed by Standardisation Committees (Lead Bodies) integrated by entrepreneurial, worker and educational or training institutions representatives. NTCLs also provide a basis for technical education modular programmes.

### Portugal

Within the framework of the European Strategy for Employment and of the National Action Plan for Employment's guidelines – Portugal has lately developed the *Sistema Nacional de Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências* (National System for Recognising, Validating and Certifying Competences non-formal and informally acquired - RVCC System) (Decree no. 1082-A/2001, of September 5<sup>th</sup>). The joint Decree (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Security and Labour) lays down the legal framework for the national system for recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning.

The RVCC System is expected to contribute effectively, in the short term, to raising the levels of academic certification and of professional qualification of the Portuguese population, as well as to improve employability and to encourage, at any time, return to education and training processes for its citizens.

### Sweden

In Sweden for decades the right to individual examination has been formally regulated in the Ordinance on municipal adult education (1992:403), Chapter 4, Sections 15 and 15a. According to the Ordinance, those wishing to obtain a grade for a specific course at compulsory and upper secondary school level are entitled to be examined without having

taken part in the course in question.

### **3.4 Linking to the formal system**

For most countries that participated in Thematic Group Two, the links between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the formal qualification systems are access, entry and credit towards the formal qualification. Some examples of the links between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and formal education systems follow:

#### France

In France, since the passing of the new law in January 2002, there is no distinction in terms of the system of validation between the non-formal and informal learning and formal education or training, insofar as same qualifications are accessible whatever the course the individual takes. National qualifications or which are delivered either after one period of education or formal training, or starting from the recognition of experience, are both recognised by the State and each one is presented within the framework of the *référentiel* (a register that describes the qualifications). These qualifications are structured in outcomes-focussed units which can be obtained successively and independently from/to each other. Also, a person can acquire a qualification while taking part in periods of formal or non-formal education or in carrying out their occupation.

All the qualifications (national qualifications, qualifications of professional branches and qualifications of private organisations) are recorded in a national register of professional qualifications, which is kept up to date by the national commission of professional certification.

#### Mexico

In Mexico there is Agreement 286, published in the Government's Official Publication on October 30th, 2000, that establishes in its third Title the guidelines that determine the general standards and criteria to which the processes will be allocated, and through which the knowledge corresponding to academic levels or grades acquired in an autodidactic manner, through labour experience or on the basis of the certification regime that refers to vocational training will be accredited, implying the acknowledgement of informal learning.

#### New Zealand

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has established a structured National Qualifications Framework based on outcomes-focussed unit standards. The NZQA has strongly encouraged the application of the principles and processes of the Recognition of Prior Learning in the implementation of its National Qualifications Framework. Facilitating the recognition of prior learning and transfer of credit between institutions was one of its objectives of the development of the National Qualifications Framework. In addition, the NZQA requires all institutions and providers accredited to offer courses and qualifications, even outside the National Qualifications Framework, to make a commitment to the implementation of the recognition of prior learning. Recognition provided can be in the form of credit towards a formal qualification or the award of a full qualification. New Zealand has, since the early 1990s, consistently promoted seamless transition between sectors and acknowledged the value of recognition of achievements of non-formal and informal learning (albeit using different

terms). This approach has been particularly important for recognising Maori (indigenous) knowledge.

### Portugal

In Portugal, the recently introduced system for the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in so far as it awards a certificate equivalent to the formal education system diploma at compulsory education level allows for access/return to the formal system.

### Sweden

In Sweden, a student who is lacking non-formal and informal learning or formal education but having relevant practical experience, can still be admitted to higher education in Sweden. This means that the higher education institutions not only have to recognise the formal learning, but also the non-formal and informal learning, if the applicant so desires.

## **3.5 'Bottom-up' or local initiatives**

### Ireland

In Ireland there have been a number of pilot experiences in the recognition of prior learning developed as a result of a demand for access/entry to education and training and for certification of skills. Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) responses have been devised to respond to the needs of industries experiencing organisational change. FAS, the training and employment authority worked with the Irish Electricity Supply Board in an accreditation programme for semi-skilled linesmen who were all experienced workers. These workers were fast-tracked through an electrical apprenticeship and were credited for prior experience as part of the process.

Failte Ireland (the tourism development authority) has APL procedures available for workers in the tourism, catering and hotel industry who have acquired experience in the workplace and who have no formal recognition. Candidates apply to Failte Ireland, are appointed a mentor and prepare a portfolio of evidence which is submitted to Failte Ireland. They are then interviewed by an APL committee and awarded a certificate if they achieve the standards. In this initiative there is no written examination.

### New Zealand

The Otago Polytechnic established the Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning (CAPL) in 2000.<sup>6</sup> There are now five CAPL centres in Polytechnics and Institutes of Technology in New Zealand, all established with the support of the Otago centre. Candidates may apply to have their prior learning, gained from formal education, life, and work experience assessed against the learning outcomes of qualifications. Using a facilitated process, CAPL candidates are given support to prepare evidence to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes for which they want recognition. A variety of assessment methods are used. Professional dialogue led by the candidate is the preferred method for higher qualifications at Otago CAPL. Other assessment forms include undertaking practical assessments, providing a portfolio of file evidence and/or an attestation by an individual or group that the candidate has demonstrated defined skills and understandings. An appropriately qualified assessor with relevant subject knowledge assesses the candidate. A team of assessors is sometimes used.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.capl.nz.ac.nz](http://www.capl.nz.ac.nz)



Employers may also access this service in order to have the skills of their employees fully recognised and to assist them in gaining industry-relevant qualifications. Candidates, or employers pay a set administration and an assessment fee (encompassing facilitation support) that is determined by the amount and nature of support and assessment required.

#### United Kingdom

An example of a 'bottom-up' initiative from the United Kingdom is delivered through local family learning centres and work placements. It is aimed at people from minority ethnic communities in areas where they are under-represented in education and training or where their unemployment rates are high. A wide range of opportunities is available and participants are encouraged to make up flexible packages to suit their needs. Options include support in basic skills or language, other formal or informal learning in a variety of skills, and the opportunity to gain qualifications.

Comprehensive initial assessment and regular, target driven reviews guide the individual's learning experience and help maintain motivation. Retail and call-centre businesses provide the work experience and, importantly, provide a commercial atmosphere that leads to swift improvement of English and information technology and communication skills. The family learning centres offer a non-threatening entry point within the community's own cultural order, but with close links to employability. All 145 trainees who started on the programme completed it, achieving a variety of qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

### **3.6 Social partnership**

A number of participant countries have strong social partnership models that facilitate the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Some examples are:

#### Belgium (Flemish Community)

The SERV, Flanders Social and Economic Council, is the official tripartite consultation body responsible for creating professional profiles. These profiles are used as basic standards for recognition procedures which lead (directly or indirectly) to certification (Decree Title of Vocational Competence). In Flanders the government and social partners have joint responsibility for the recognition of prior learning. The Quality Assurance Framework is thus established in extensive dialogue between the formal vocational educational/training authorities and the social partners.

#### France

In France, the State is responsible for the design of the national qualifications, but the social partners are involved in all processes. For example, the vocational qualifications delivered by the ministry for national education are developed by the "advisory professional commissions" which comprise employee representatives and employers who chair them. In the same way, the panels which evaluate and validate comprise employees and employers.

#### The Netherlands

The government and social partners are responsible for the recognition of prior learning on national level ('poldermodel' or consensus-model) in the Netherlands. The social

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<sup>7</sup> UK response to the EU memorandum on Lifelong Learning, pp36, DfES, 2003.

partners are responsible for the sector level. It is a co-ordinated action involving several ministries and/or other actors.

Partners and stakeholders that are involved by implementing the policy are amongst others government, national employers organisations, trade unions, national educational associations and the national labour agency

### Portugal

The current Portuguese network of 70 RVCC (Centres for Recognising, Validating and Certifying Competences) centres is set up based on the accreditation of public and private entities strongly established in the community to which they belong. They are, among others, enterprise associations, associations for local/regional development, associations of municipalities, institutional social partners (CAP, CGTP-In, CCP) and public institutions (vocational training centres, basic and secondary schools). The national 'RVCC Centres' network is defined, designed, monitored and assessed at national level. It is implemented and self-assessed at local level.

### Sweden

In Sweden, a government authority was established in the beginning of 2004 with the main task of promoting the development of legitimacy, quality and methods for validation outside the higher education sector. Responsibility for validation will be shared between the educational system and the labour market. It is intended that implementation of validation will take place through regional cooperation between education providers, professions, industries and the social partners. The delegations' activities are expected to cost SEK 60 million over a four year period.

## **3.7 Work related learning**

### Australia

During 2003 International Labour Organisation (ILO) commissioned a report on the recognition of prior learning in the workplace. This report is yet to be published, but contains some exciting examples of workplace practice. One of these, from Australia is described below.

The Worker Assistance Program-Forestry industry project is funded by the Victorian government and supported by the Construction Forestry Mining and Engineering Union (CFMEU) and Forest and Forest Products Employment Skills Council (FAFPESC). The Victorian government's 'Our Forests, Our Future' policy statement was developed in response to community pressure to reduce the size of the native timber industry. The Worker Assistance Program, aimed to assist workers displaced from the industry, was instigated in 2002. It provides funds for relocation assistance for forestry workers, an employment incentive scheme and opportunities for re-training in addition to other benefits. One of its features is the assessment of the skills that workers have developed at the workplace, in order to provide them with a skills passbook to present to prospective employers.

Sawmill workers and associated personnel are assessed. These workers are drawn from the range of occupations, from operatives on the mill floor to those working in offices at the mill. They include a cohort of mature aged workers (over 55 years), many of whom have worked in the industry for most of their lives, as did their fathers and grandfathers. Workers are assessed against any benchmark that is relevant to their experience. Primarily, they are assessed against the competency standards in the Forestry Training

Package, but workers have been assessed against the competencies in the Business Services Training Package and against heavy machinery competency standards, amongst others. A local Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institute carries out the assessments. Qualified assessors are provided for each competency area. The advantage of using a TAFE Institute is that there is a large pool of qualified assessors to draw from.

Five hundred people have been made redundant to date. Ninety-five per cent of these people have gone through the recognition process. Of these 8 per cent have entered further training and 67 per cent have found employment. Some workers have retired (7 per cent), others are not actively seeking employment (4 per cent) and others are receiving workers' compensation due to illness or disability.

*Source:* Construction Forestry Mining and Engineering Union (2003)

There are no usable data or credible studies that estimate the impact of recognition on learners and their subsequent capacities to gain employment and continue into formal learning. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned study from Australia indicates that the outcomes for workers were generally positive. Typically they gained self esteem from the recognition and in most cases the RPL either was part of, or led, to further education and training. The support given by the industry authorities (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) has been based upon judgements that the RPL processes lead to skills upgrades and to better platforms for further skills upgrades. This together with the support of the industry organisations and unions indicate that the processes do contribute to the employability of the workers.

### **3.8 Quality assurance**

It is essential that the players in recognition systems be subject to quality assurance standards. This ensures consistency across the system and helps to maintain the legitimacy and value of the system to the individuals participating in it, and to the wider society. It also ensures that those participating in recognition systems are held to the same standards. The following example of the quality assurance surrounding a recognition system comes from Denmark:

For obtaining an individual VET training plan in Denmark competence assessment takes place in co-operation with a guidance counsellor at a vocational college or a CVT (Continuing Vocational Training) centre. These institutions have been awarded accreditation authority by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry has formulated a standard for and guidance to assessment of competences (Cort, 2002). However, at the moment the actual methods and procedures are still decided on a decentralised school level.

In Portugal, the innovative character of the National System for Recognition, Validation and Certification of Skills requires high standards of quality to ensure that the RVCC mechanism functions in a transparent and consistent manner. This, in turn, ensures the legitimacy and value of the competences recognised and validated through the certificates awarded.

To maintain these high standards of quality, the RVCC System includes a Quality Charter which establishes the values and principles that regulate the activities of each RVCC centre. It also requires network co-ordination with a view to a continual

improvement of the quality of services to be provided to the system users. Each centre develops its own Quality Declaration, stating its commitment to the quality standards of the services to be provided. This must be accessible to all stakeholders, including service users.

Each centre is also required to develop a Strategic Intervention Plan (PEI) which is reviewed each year. This plan outlines the goals for the centre and the performance indicators against which it will be assessed. RVCC centres are also subject to a system of monitoring and evaluation. The purpose of this monitoring is the continual improvement in the quality of services delivered. This system includes a self-assessment process in which the centre identifies its own strengths and weaknesses and develops an action plan to address any areas of concern and to build on its strengths. For this purpose, a “Self-assessment Guide” has been designed and is being applied by the ‘RVCC Centres’.

In March 2004, a survey on the impact of the validating and certifying process on the adults’ social and professional promotion has been presented by an external private consulting body. This survey combines two complementary approaches: a quantitative and a qualitative one, the latter consisting of the presentation of sixteen case studies.<sup>8</sup>

In Mexico, accreditation to ISO 9001-2000 standards is used in many parts of the education system to assure quality.

### **3.9 Target groups**

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a mechanism that enables all individuals to gain acknowledgment and visibility of all of their skills and knowledge. This allows them to build on the learning already achieved in different environments. It is important to note, however, that some target groups are particularly relevant because of their needs and interests and relative level of disadvantage in society. We have provided below some examples of how countries target specific groups in relation to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

#### *Unemployed*

Denmark has a programme specifically for assessing the working capacity of uninsured unemployed people. The target group is mainly people who are entitled to vocational rehabilitation, social pension or flexible jobs. The aim is to lay down a plan for the person’s inclusion in the labour market. The method focuses on the client’s competences and resources in relation to the labour market.

The Portuguese RVCC System is designed to formally assess and recognise knowledge, skills and competences informally acquired. Open to every citizen over eighteen, it particularly targets less schooled adults and the working population - unemployed and employed individuals alike. By formally acknowledging the competences and know-how attained in diverse contexts over one's life experience, the RVCC System aims at promoting and facilitating individual learning and training routes within a broad lifelong learning perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> The main conclusions of this survey are summarised in Appendix Three.

### 3.10 Demand for recognition systems

There is a limited amount of data on the uptake of recognition systems available from the participant countries. In some cases, such as with the New Zealand and the United Kingdom qualification frameworks, this is because the system does not require the method of learning to be recorded. The following examples however, show large numbers of individuals accessing recognition systems.

In The Netherlands the EVC monitor 2002 showed that a minimum of 6 000 people from 500 organisations took part in an EVC procedure.

In Mexico in 2002, 9585 people that obtained their bachelors certificate through recognising informal and non-formal learning, 4 868 (50,79%) were autodidacts, 2 440 (25,46%) took a non-formal preparation programme for the tests, 1 325 (13,82%) stated they acquired it through work experience, and the remaining 952 (9,93%) abstained from answering. It is worth mentioning that among those who obtained outstanding results, the smallest percentage corresponded to those who participated in a preparation programme.

France  
During the ten years of operation of the validation of the professional assets (VAP) from 1992 to 2002, 12 000 people obtained a certification by the recognition of their professional experience. The new device of VAE, introduced in 2002 has already seen nearly 15000 individuals obtain full or partial certificates. This increase is partly due to the types of certifications that can be obtained.

Portugal

*Adult participation in the process of competences recognising and validating*

Year	Nr. adults enrolled	Nr. adults actually participating in the recognition process	Nr. adults referred to short training	Nr. adults obtaining national certification
<b>2000</b> <sup>1</sup>	16	13	-	-
<b>2001</b> <sup>2</sup>	7 019	2 952	1 996	467
<b>2002</b> <sup>3</sup>	24 459	13 471	4 808	3 291
<b>2003</b> <sup>4</sup>	29 035	19 311	8 489	8 949
<b>Total</b>	60 529	35 747	15 293	12 707

<sup>1</sup> - 6 RVCC Centres operating in December  
<sup>2</sup> - 28 RVCC Centres operating  
<sup>3</sup> - 42 RVCC Centres operating  
<sup>4</sup> - 56 RVCC Centres operating

Source: PRODEP III, Ministério da Educação. 2004.

It is not possible to anticipate the future demand for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning with any accuracy. Anecdotal evidence from the countries participating in Thematic Group Two, however, indicates that more and more countries will use the qualification systems to recognise informal and non-formal learning to encourage individuals to engage in life long and life wide learning and to link informal and non-formal learning to formal learning. In the final chapter of this report we will suggest facilitators to improve systems so that countries are equipped to deal with this anticipated increase in demand for recognition systems.

## **4 Barriers To The Recognition Of Non-Formal And Informal Learning**

All participating countries were able to identify barriers to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. For some these were specific to their own education system. Given the diversity of systems involved, the commonalities among the barriers are perhaps surprising. The issues raised can be categorised according to whether they relate to the supply of learning and assessment opportunities (the system), or the demand for such opportunities (the individual). The issues relating to each of these are discussed below.

### **4.1 Individual motivation**

*Psychological* barriers may be significant. Some individuals, particularly those with low self-esteem, may not recognise the potential value of their knowledge and skills gained through non-formal and informal learning. People with low formal educational attainment may be fearful of re-entering a system, which they remember as a negative and painful experience for them. The individual may feel that the assessment exercise may reveal a lack of competencies. Fear of further failure is a powerful disincentive.

*Access* may remain a problem even for those who have decided to participate in recognition systems. Any period of apathy may disengage people from the process and attempts by such a disengaged person to once again become an active participant will not be easy. Individuals who have a poor knowledge of the systems available to support them will find it particularly difficult.

*Low perception of potential benefits* may lead individuals to question the value of the time they need to spend in recognition activities. If society, employers, and the working environment generally, are perceived to consider informal processes to be of lower status relative to formal ones, this can make it difficult for the individuals to appreciate the real value of their investment.

*Cost and time* can be issues for individuals, particularly if they need to give up work or leisure activities in order to take part in recognition processes.

### **4.2 Structures of recognition systems**

It is possible to consider the barriers that arise from the nature of recognition systems as opposed to individuals. Nevertheless the impact of such barriers always constrains the individual eventually so to some extent, this is an artificial separation. With this in mind, we now consider specific structural problems that have the potential to create problems for individuals.

*Inconsistency* in the development of standards against which individuals are assessed, how they are used across assessment centres or educational institutions and how they are communicated to the user (transparency) may undermine the confidence in the system. Poor quality training of assessors and inadequate support and guidance systems around them can compound this problem.

*Cost* can exceed the minimum required for achieving fitness for purpose of the

assessment processes. For example, the range of assessment may be excessive. Clearly, systems need to be efficient in terms of use of time and money. Too much bureaucracy increases cost, extends the time required and confuses the individual.

*Access* is restricted when insufficient attention is paid to promotional activities and regulation does not encourage institutions to recognise non-formal and informal learning. Systems may be insensitive to specialised needs, especially the recognition needs of people with learning achieved in other countries.

*Complexity* can be a consequence of growth in demand. Failure to adjust the infrastructure to cope with the increased demand may lead to inefficient administration.

Perhaps paradoxically, the *formal education system* can be a barrier to further development of more diverse recognition systems. This happens in two ways. Firstly, learning achieved within the formal education system is generally held in higher esteem than learning gained outside the system. This perception, often stated in terms of lowering of standards, prevents institutions appreciating the equal value of learning achieved and recognised in different ways. Secondly, institutions may also resist if the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is perceived as threatening their control of the awarding of qualifications. This has implications for institutions which use the formal system. The challenge for these institutions is to adapt to greater use of non-formal and informal recognition practice without perceiving it as a threat to the long-standing practices of the formal education system.

*Funding and incentives* in educational institutions are often decided on the basis of enrolments rather than on credits or qualifications gained. Consequently, in institutions awarding credit on the basis of non-formal and informal learning, there is a reduction of funding. This will often lead to institutions actively discouraging, or not promoting, assessment opportunities. Additionally, institutions may have limits on the amount of credit that can be given on the basis of prior learning, this precludes the awarding of full qualifications.



## **5 Looking to the future: facilitators for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning**

### **5.1 Principles for recognition systems**

A number of suggestions can be made about improvements to policy, or practice that go some way to breaking down the barriers discussed in Chapter Three. Before we discuss these, however, it is useful to consider some general principles of recognition of non-formal and informal learning:

- Recognition systems are a mechanism for individuals to have all of their skills, knowledge and competencies identified and valued (some countries express this as a ‘right’ of the individual)
- Participation in recognition systems must be voluntary
- Recognition systems must be flexible enough to meet the needs of diverse individuals and contexts
- Standards and procedures must be transparent, reliable, objective, relevant and impartial
- High quality guidance and counselling should be part of the system
- The system should ensure equity of access to recognition procedures
- Parity of esteem with the formal system is desirable
- Mechanisms to enhance awareness and access should be part of the system
- Recognition systems should be part of a holistic approach to lifelong learning and therefore be linked to other services such as career guidance.
- Mechanisms for measuring the effectiveness of the system in reaching its stated objectives should be included in the design.

### **5.2 Addressing individual barriers**

#### *Reducing the impact of psychological barriers*

Placing the individual at the centre of recognition systems from policy development through to implementation and evaluation is essential to the success of such systems. In order to increase the individual’s awareness, access and value of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, establishing an environment in which the adult is valued as someone with potential instead of someone who is lacking knowledge is the first step. In the Netherlands, this is very appropriately characterised as “The glass is half full” approach.

Assessment procedures must be flexible enough to include guidance that is sensitive to the individual’s needs. Assessment should also be seen as part of the individual’s development plan that has as its starting point the individual’s points of interest and personal goals. Care should be taken to ensure that all parties understand where ownership of the results of assessment of non-formal and informal learning lies and how those results may be used.

Countries could also explore new, non-traditional ways of assessment in order to motivate the adult to take part in assessments for prior learning; e.g. in Denmark adults will be assessed through solving problems in a real labour context. The use of peer assessment, self assessment and the development of portfolios are other examples of new approaches to assessment.

### *Improving access*

Promoting recognition systems so that there is an improved awareness among the general population, and in particular for targeted groups is another important step. This includes information about why, how and when recognition assessments can be carried out. Any cost of participation to the individual in terms of money and/or time should be balanced with the potential benefit of participation. This links to the next point, for only if the individual perceives of the activity as being of value, will they be prepared to invest in it.

### *Increasing the perception of the potential benefits of the system*

In order to view recognition as something of value, the individual must first have awareness of the fact that knowledge and skills can be developed everywhere and at anytime, and that sometimes they may not be aware of the skills they have amassed during their lifetime. The individual must then be able to identify the benefits of having these skills and knowledge recognised, e.g. for entry into education and training or improved job prospects. For countries this means that priority must be given to promoting an understanding of life-long and life-wide learning and how the harnessing of this learning can contribute to education and employment outcomes.

Promoting the value of having non-formal and informal learning recognised will only be successful if access to assessments, whether through formal tests and examinations, or other means is improved. This has implications for the infrastructure of the education and training system. Decisions would need to be made about the appropriate people or organisations to carry out recognition assessment and the related funding structures.

## **5.3 Addressing Barriers in the System**

### *Maintaining consistency across the system*

Any system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning should have national standards for assessment and systems to ensure that these are implemented consistently. The national standards should be flexible for implementing them in various ways.

### *Parity of Esteem*

Creating links between informal and non-formal learning and the formal qualification system can serve to break down some of the perceptions of non-formal and informal learning as 'second class'. In countries where there are well-established and independent systems for recognition of informal and non-formal learning, the parity of esteem can result from this independence. Countries need to explore different ways of creating this parity of esteem within the context of their own education systems.

Looking for different ways of recognising adult knowledge and skills is one way of doing this. Although certificates or accreditation similar to those used in academic settings can address this barrier, other alternative methods for recording achievement can be developed. The demonstration and assessment of skills and knowledge can be arranged at one's working place or by using a portfolio rather than more formal certification. The institutions should also be encouraged to be flexible with delivery of programmes, responding to people's specific needs and crediting experience as appropriate.

### *Minimising costs*

Minimising the barriers of cost and time for the learner is essential to the success of recognition systems. An example of this in practice is in Portugal where there is a law stating that adults have a free access to having prior learning assessed.

### *Financial incentives for providers or assessment agencies*

Removing any financial disincentive that exists in the system is also important. Ideally, providers or assessment agencies need to be funded for the delivery of recognition services and support mechanisms. This would both subsidise the costs to learners and provide an incentive to institutions.

### *Quality assurance and monitoring*

Those involved in carrying out assessments of non-formal and informal learning for the purposes of recognition must be provided with on-going training and development to ensure that assessment is carried out professionally and standards are implemented consistently. As this report shows, there are examples of good practice in relation to quality assurance. These focus on consistency, transparency and continual improvement of services.

As with any policy or practice, monitoring and evaluation are an important part of the implementation cycle. The nature of the system and the range of actors in it will determine at what point in the system information is collected and whether it is national or local. At a minimum however, there should be some consistency in the type of information collected to allow analysis of the impact of recognition systems and meaningful comparison between them. It is desirable for this information to include the extent of credit granted as a result of recognition of prior non-formal or informal learning and credit transfer as opposed to credit granted as a result of formal assessment as part of a course. In some countries it will be possible to demonstrate trends of access and successful recognition related to specific target groups of learners, or specific industries. This in turn, will allow for a fuller discussion on the contribution that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning can make to the harnessing of the true skills of a country's people.

## **6 Conclusion**

The countries taking part in the development of this thematic report are all at different stages in the development of systems for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Some have long-standing institutionalised mechanisms where others more recently identified recognition systems as an important mechanism for developing human potential and are still exploring the possibilities.

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning can contribute towards the achievement of high-level goals of employment, skill enhancement, equity, social inclusion and active citizenship. This report has summarised a range of practices of recognition of non-formal and informal learning and identified some of the barriers to participation from the perspective of both demand (the individual) and supply (the system).

The report has also attempted to suggest elements that might make up an effective system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The extent to which individual countries can adopt these suggestions will depend on that country's historical, cultural and economic context and the specific challenges that it faces. The issues that countries seeking to establish or enhance systems for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may need to consider are outlined in the following recommendations section.

## **7 Recommendations**

Through sharing information about the practices of recognition of non-formal and informal learning the participants in this thematic group have identified some common themes and issues that a country wishing to establish or enhance systems for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may need to consider.

Therefore it is recommended that whilst developing or reviewing such systems, countries give consideration to the following factors:

### **Purpose of the system**

It is important that the purposes of a system are clearly identified. It is difficult to design a system if the desired end result is unknown.

### **Context**

The educational, political and social context in which the system will operate must be considered. This context may affect what is possible and will dictate the areas that resources must be directed to. For this reason, this report does not suggest one model. Each country must develop its own model, perhaps learning from the practice of other countries and considering the benefits and constraints of their own context.

### **Establishing national standards**

In implementing a recognition system, countries often face the dilemma of balancing the need for consistency with the desire of local communities to develop their own solutions. The development of national goals, principles and standards within which local communities and/or individual providers of recognition services are able to operate may assist in addressing this issue.

### **Assuring quality**

It is essential that quality assurance is built into any system for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This can be achieved in many ways, including the setting of national standards and guidelines, self assessment by providers of recognition services and monitoring for consistency and transparency. The goals of quality assurance may vary from maintaining a minimum benchmark to the promotion of continual improvement.

### **Targeting user groups**

Countries need to consider carefully the issue of targeting services to certain disadvantaged groups. Whilst this can be the most effective use of resources, it runs the risk of encouraging people to view the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as only relevant for disadvantaged groups. This, in turn, can lead to the devaluing of non-formal and informal learning.

### **Enhancing awareness and access**

Recognition systems will only be successful if individuals are aware of them, consider them to be of value and are able to access them without unnecessary restriction. This means that consideration needs to be given to appropriate mechanisms for raising awareness of recognition systems and their potential value to individuals and to society. Consideration also needs to be given to the minimisation of barriers to participation such as cost and time.

**Removing disincentives in the system**

An examination of current systems to identify disincentives that may exist is recommended. Funding systems for formal education are often the site of such disincentives, particularly where funding is based on the number of enrolments rather than the credits or qualifications gained. This can mean that there is little incentive for formal education institutions to recognise non-formal and informal learning.

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**Possible methods for recognising prior learning**

- Interview to establish personal ideas and priorities.
- Interview to recognise and assess prior work experience and formal learning which is relevant to the present situation.
- Development of a Portfolio that includes the candidate's CV, qualifications, attendance certificates, work or product samples, references etc.
- Tests, written or oral.
- Practical exercises.
- Observations of the candidate solving concrete tasks, typically authentic tasks (see chapter 4), daily tasks, simulated tasks, e.g. in peak load situations.
- Evaluation: self evaluation, evaluation by the management, peer evaluation.



## Summary of the main conclusions of the Survey on the impact of the recognising and validating process in Portugal <sup>9</sup>

*The main effect of a RVCC process seems, typically, to come down to some highly subjective personal dimensions.* Indeed, a significant number of the people surveyed as part of this research project said that the RVCC process made “a very important contribution” to aspects like their own self-knowledge, self-esteem or self-improvement. The reconstruction or even definition of their personal plans, especially their professional plans, was also an effect frequently observed.

As shown by the results obtained from econometric estimation of an unemployment duration model, *when the RVCC process contributes intensely to these subjective dimensions, the likelihood of an unemployed person finding work increases significantly* (from a statistical point of view).

In particular, *more than a third of the people who were unemployed when they began their RVCC process and who were awarded certification up to December 2002 are currently working.* At the same time, the unemployment rate, which was close to 17% at the beginning of the process, is now just 13% for the people certified up to the date.

It is important to note that this beneficial effect of the RVCC process in terms of occupational insertion of the unemployed seems to be *more effective in women*, who, as we know, suffer more from the unemployment phenomenon than men.

It is equally important to note that these results refer to an *unfavourable period (2000-2003) in the labour market in Portugal*, characterised by a rise in unemployment, which confirms the relevance of the RVCC system as a rather active employment policy.

Regarding the question of the *influence of having a certificate on the transition from unemployment to employment*, the results are somewhat limited. Nevertheless they suggest a lower tendency towards this transition in the case of the unemployed who were awarded a Basic 2 level Certificate (corresponding to 6th grade), in comparison to those who were awarded a certificate equivalent to the 9th grade.

In addition to increasing the likelihood of unemployed people finding work, the RVCC process seems to *bring the unemployed and the non-active workers closer to the labour market*, thus increasing that which is normally called *labour force attachment* in the literature. On the other hand, the individuals who remained unemployed after certification were more motivated towards finding work and began to look for it more frequently.

The beneficial effects of the RVCC process also extend to the employed, who represent the majority of those who entered the system (79%). Indeed, the results of the survey on certified adults showed that *it is essentially in the lower pay scales (less than €350 a month) that there were salary increases among employees after certification.* The RVCC

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<sup>9</sup> CIDEAC – Interdisciplinary Centre for Economic Studies (March 2004). O Impacto do Reconhecimento e Certificação de Competências adquiridas ao Longo da Vida. Direcção-Geral de Formação Vocacional. Lisboa.

system therefore promotes Rawlsian improvements in social well-being, in that it is essentially the poorest whose financial situation is improved.

The effects of certification also seem to extend to the employment contract. In particular, about *15% of employees with a term contract at time of registration were “permanent employees” six months after certification.*

At the same time, *the academic certification of competences also seems to contribute to the creation of expectations in terms of career progression.* Indeed, about one fifth of the employees who initially had no progression prospects had changed their opinion six months after certification.

In terms of further studies, about 13% of the people who answered the questionnaire *continued their studies returning to the regular education system.* Most of them were women (who also predominate among the respondents) and young people (particularly aged 25 to 34, but also under 25) who had formerly attended the 3rd cycle of basic education (7th to 9th grades), and employees in a more favourable occupational situation than the average sample of respondents.

In any case, more than *two thirds (65%) of the respondents were thinking of studying further.* This result is even more expressive if we note that *only 10% said that they had registered with the RVCC process in order to further their studies.* In other words, the *RVCC process motivates people to pursue formal education,* encouraging those who did not plan to further their studies to do so, or at least to consider “going back to school” as a possibility in terms of their personal plans.

In spite of some operational problems that the RVCC system has had to overcome along its short period of existence, it is felt that, owing to the demand it has experienced, the situation in the country and, especially, the effects observed (as described above), this is an initiative that is not only innovative but also important, with its own place in education, employment and social insertion policies, in Portugal.