

Challenges, actors and practices of non-formal and informal learning and its validation in Europe

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**Renaud Damesin, Jacky Fayolle, Nicolas Fleury,
Mathieu Malaquin and Nicolas Rode**

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Foreword

In 2011 the European Trade Union Confederation launched a project funded by the European Commission, DG Employment, aimed at documenting the context and key issues linked to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) outcomes in the EU, based on case studies from ten countries.

This report is the result of the very competent work of Groupe Alpha and consultingeuropa. I would like to thank Jacky Fayolle and his team from Groupe Alpha and consultingeuropa (Renaud Damesin, Nicolas Fleury, Mathieu Malaquin and Nicolas Rode), as well as Maud Stéphan from consultingeuropa and Cinzia Sechi from the ETUC staff, for their great cooperation.

The ETUC's intention in commissioning the project was to put NFIL recognition at the core of trade union strategies for education and training in Europe. We are convinced that formal education paths are not enough to tackle labour employability concerns and unemployment, or for promoting career advancement and broader personal development and satisfaction in people's daily lives.

On the one hand, there are large numbers of individuals without any concrete opportunity to participate in or gain access to formal initial education and training. These people need to see the skills they have acquired in an informal or non-formal context recognised and/or improved, enabling them to find or retain a job. On the other hand, people acquire new and additional competences while at work and from life experience. These similarly need to be validated in order for them to be transformed into useful assets.

In our trade union experience over the years we have seen that NFIL skills and competences are often poorly recognised, not only by public authorities and learning institutions, but also by employers and workers

themselves. This situation implies new tasks for trade unions, strengthening our role in supporting workers and improving their conditions at the workplace, in the labour market and in civil society.

We are committed to acting on two levels: at the institutional one, to set up (where not existing) and improve (where already existing) NFIL recognition and validation paths, in cooperation with European and national authorities; and in the labour market and at the workplace to foster employers' and workers' awareness of the need for NFIL recognition, to increase workforce employability and efficiency, as well as to tackle unemployment and support personal development.

Three tools are available to trade unions to achieve these objectives: negotiations with institutions; social dialogue and collective bargaining with employers; information and advice for workers. Using the study and the recommendations listed in the report, our aim is to strengthen our tools and our daily work in this field.

During the course of the study, the European Commission launched an important Recommendation on NFIL recognition, which was adopted by the EU Council in December 2012. This can be seen as the first result of our action.

We have to recognise that there are still huge obstacles to overcome, particularly in some countries. On top of a lack of awareness by institutions and stakeholders, the involvement of the social partners, and trade unions in particular, in NFIL validation is still too low, jeopardising the implementation of the Commission's Recommendation.

This is the reason why we at the ETUC, together with our affiliates, are strongly committed to making our role fully recognised at all levels. This report constitutes a very good basis for our action in this field.

Luca Visentini
Confederal Secretary at the ETUC
January 2014

Introduction

This book presents and updates the results of a project conducted in 2011 and 2012 by a team from *Groupe ALPHA* for the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) on the practices and issues involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL). An initial report supported the work of the conference organised by the ETUC in Lisbon on 26 and 27 June 2012. This book takes account of the debates at the conference.

A first transversal section summarises this work:

- Chapter 1 presents the objectives and the methodology used in the study, based on a survey of ten European countries. It suggests a typology of those ten countries, in the light of a criterion blending the objectives of public NFIL validation policies and social partner involvement in the design and implementation of those policies. Features unique to each country are briefly described, providing the reader with an overview of the results of the ten national surveys forming the study's original informational basis.
- Chapter 2 presents the economic and social contexts influencing NFIL practices: the state of the labour market, needs in terms of skills development and access to training, and individuals' needs to have their competences recognised.
- Chapter 3 identifies the wide range of NFIL recognition and validation frameworks and processes, as well as the common need for simplification, expressed by many players in the system, as a way of making NFIL recognition and validation a genuinely accessible right. It stresses the driving role that bold public policies can play.
- Chapter 4 emphasises the role of collective bargaining in the development of NFIL recognition and validation practices. It puts forward a number of factors influencing the impact of NFIL on the labour market, an important aspect in the current crisis situation.

The second section presents the ten national monographs compiled on the basis of surveys conducted in these countries, principally by means of interviews with social partner representatives and public institutions. These ten countries were selected with the specific intention of having a sample containing countries characterized by different degrees of development of NFIL validation practices: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom (England).

The conclusion looks first at the European prospects before going on to explore paths of practicing NFIL validation in a way better shared within Europe. It finishes by issuing a set of recommendations, which, while not claiming to be exhaustive, seek to respond to certain issues identified by the ETUC project but also by a Recommendation of the European Council in December 2012 (presented in the appendix).

The appendix also contains a list of the persons and institutions interviewed in the national surveys and a glossary.

Part I

Transversal issues

Chapter 1

Main NFIL issues and the diversity of national experiences

For over ten years, the dynamic management of people's vocational pathways and transitions has been attracting the close attention of European social and political players. In this context, non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) practices, as well as the possibility of NFIL recognition and validation, can benefit a wide range of social groups, in particular the most vulnerable, and contribute towards correcting educational inequalities. They can also have a significant impact on the whole system of access to knowledge, skills and competences within companies and on the labour market. This book presents and updates the contents of a project conducted by a team from *Groupe ALPHA* for the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) on NFIL practices and challenges in the EU, including a direct survey of ten Member States. Box 1 below presents some of the common terms used in this book: non-formal learning, informal learning, validation, etc.¹

In December 2012, the European Council adopted a recommendation on NFIL recognition and validation (Council of the European Union 2012; for the complete text, see Appendix). This is a key step of a long process. Over a number of years, a body of descriptive and normative material has been built up by Community institutions²: common principles for the identification and validation of NFIL produced by the EU Council (Council of the European Union 2004); an inventory initially drawn up by ECORYS and updated by GHK³; and the Cedefop Guidelines (see

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1. For a larger set of terms and expressions related to training and NFIL validation, please refer to the Glossary in the Appendix.
 2. We detail some of these initiatives in Chapter 2, Section 1.
 3. The ECORYS inventory, carried out in the early 2000s, is available on the ECORYS / ECOTEC site: <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>. The 2010 update is available on the Cedefop site, see: Cedefop, European Commission and GHK (2010), *2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*, <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu>.

Cedefop 2009), which are designed to identify NFIL validation practices and encourage their development. Chapter 2 and the final chapter will look closer at the European Council recommendation.

This chapter first presents the general issues involved in NFIL validation (section 1), before going on to distinguish three groups of countries in terms of the extent NFIL validation has been implemented (section 2).

Box 1 **Community definitions**

Formal learning is delivered by education/training institutions or may be acquired "on the job". It is intentional on the part of the learner and leads typically to a qualification. *Non-formal learning*, too, is intentional and is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designed as learning and tends not to lead to any qualification. *Informal learning*, which results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure, is not usually intentional (and does not lead to any qualification). The understanding and use of these distinctions vary depending on national and local contexts. Some countries refer for example simply to *recognition and validation of prior learning and experience*, irrespective of the path taken to obtain such. The glossary in the appendix presents (and comments on) a more complete set of terms and concepts currently used in the NFIL field.

Learning outcomes refers to a set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, whether formal, non-formal or informal.

Validation (or sometimes *accreditation*) of *learning outcomes* acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting is the confirmation by a competent body that these outcomes have been assessed and are compliant with requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification (award of a qualification) through a 4-step process (European Community standards): 1. Identification, 2. Documentation, 3. Assessment, 4. Certification. As most of these learning outcomes have been acquired in a non-formal or informal setting, *validation of non-formal or informal learning*, or '*validation of NFIL*' is a term commonly used for 'validation of learning outcomes'. Very often at national or regional level, not all elements of this validation chain exist. Moreover, the national terms used for describing these elements are not always directly compatible with Community terms.

Final certification is not a compulsory result of the validation process, but the prospect of such certification offers a motivation for people to initiate the process. It is regarded as desirable by a very large majority of the respondents to the European Commission's 2011 public consultation on NFIL (European Commission, 2012a).

1. Issues involved in the validation of NFIL

1.1 A broad range of social groups affected by NFIL recognition

The interest shown in the processes and outcomes of non-formal and informal learning is warranted by the large proportion of the active European population (between a quarter and a third) with low qualification levels, i.e. not beyond the first cycle of secondary education. This population includes a cross-section of vulnerable social groups: young people leaving school with no recognised diploma; migrants with qualifications not always readily transferable in the host country; women starting or restarting work after bringing up a family; low-skilled unemployed people; illiterate adults, etc. The handicaps affecting these groups may prove persistent: adults with low levels of initial formal education also very often find it harder to gain access to continuing training in the course of their working life, meaning that inequalities mount up over time⁴.

1.2 'Formalizing' NFIL to correct educational inequalities

The focus on NFIL validation draws on the emerging European trend in favour of the recognition of *learning outcomes*. This means:

- giving a more important role to “learning by doing” in the acquisition and validation of skills,
- paying greater attention to the outcomes of continuing learning (CVET) throughout the career path, rather than simply the diplomas issued after initial education, general or vocational (IVET)⁵.

4. This is confirmed by a Eurydice study (2011).

5. The terms IVET and CVET will be generally used to refer to a) initial vocational education and training, for example in the form of an apprenticeship; and b) continuing vocational education and training, in the context of which existing skills are upgraded or complemented (“up-skilling”).

In the work of expert groups⁶, this recognition of learning outcomes is regarded as highly desirable from the point of view of better managing vocational pathways and transitions, since it boosts the motivation of individuals to invest in lifelong learning. This work draws upon a number of on-going developments, in which the European social players are bringing their influence to bear. The objective of the NFIL mechanisms is to get NFIL embedded in national skills qualification systems and to encourage their convergence, via the *learning outcomes* approach.

NFIL validation seeks to link up with efforts aimed at boosting the consistency of the European labour market, on the basis of recognising workers' actual competences, possibly via their certification, and thereby facilitating their transferability. The ETUC would like the Commission to urge Member States to improve their practices for validating non-formal and informal learning where they exist, and to nurture such mechanisms where they are still in their infancy.

1.3 The potentially systemic influence of disseminating NFIL (validation) practices

The large-scale dissemination of NFIL practices is liable to have a systemic effect on the recognised role of skills in a company setting and on the labour market in general. The recognition of prior learning and experience in the sense of NFIL helps to better equip workers when it comes to their vocational transitions, with recognised skills encompassing not only those certified by diplomas during initial training before actually starting work; and employers benefit from a better overview of the skills on offer. Matching supply and demand in terms of employment will greatly benefit from this.

6. Cf. the report by the Expert Group on the *New Skills for New Jobs* Project in European Commission (2010). The Community initiative *New Skills for New Jobs* also gained critical attention in the context of the work carried out by the Centre Etudes et Prospective of the ALPHA Group for the European Trade Union Confederation (see Centre Etudes et Prospective du Groupe ALPHA, 2010).

Private enterprises, the public sector and NGOs are all NFIL stakeholders (particularly when their work is seen as ‘learning’ by workers participating in it). The social partners, whether unions or employers, have actively undertaken to promote and regulate promising initiatives. With the identification and validation of NFIL automatically involving a range of social and institutional players, it is important for their activities to be coordinated around shared principles and concrete programmes determining the role of NFIL and its validation as a legitimate component in the whole education and training system, general and vocational (VET).

Expanding the scope of this system to include NFIL in this way is liable to cause tensions and upheavals, with the bodies responsible for existing qualification standards possibly showing reluctance when faced with the validation of skills acquired by non-formal or informal methods within specific local and individual contexts. Where NFIL is perceived – rightly or wrongly – as a substitute for formal education organised along the lines of courses leading to diplomas, it can arouse mistrust among social players focusing on equal access to formal education and the quality of training courses.

NFIL responds to objectives of individual development, offering people from vulnerable social groups easier access to having their prior learning and experience recognised and/or validated. As such, it contributes to social cohesion. Looked at from an ambitious perspective, it has the systemic objective of improving the effectiveness of the education and training system in its entirety and thus contributing to making vocational pathways more secure, both within and outside enterprises. It follows that it is in the public interest for NFIL to be formalized and effectively recognised on the labour market, thereby providing people with the qualifications they need to find employment.

2. Major criteria used to distinguish between three groups of countries

In order to show the diversity of NFIL recognition practices within the EU and the arrangements for involving the social partners, ten countries were selected for a monographic survey. They were taken from each of the three groups figuring in the 2010 Cedefop and GHK

inventory and relating to the level of progress – high, medium (‘medium-high’ or ‘medium-low’) or low – made in terms of taking account of NFIL and its validation (see Table 1).

Table 1 Levels of account taken of NFIL and its validation

High	Medium-high	Medium-low	Low
Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal	Denmark, Germany, Romania, Spain, Sweden, UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland), UK (Scotland),	Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Belgium (Wallonia), Czech Republic, Estonie, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovénia	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Turkey

Source: Cedefop, European Commission and GHK (2010).

The following ten countries were chosen for the survey: Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom (England). On the basis of a preparatory analysis of the information available, the ten national surveys were conducted between November 2011 and March 2012. Interviews were conducted in each country with players from the VET and NFIL validation systems: social partners, employers and shop-floor unionists, public institutions and training centres.

In the ten countries selected, one of the objectives of the study was to analyse the involvement of the social players (with a specific focus on unions) in defining and implementing NFIL validation mechanisms, as well as the impact of that involvement. This commitment by the social players and its effectiveness determine the potentially systemic scope of those mechanisms, through their incorporation into the VET system and in the operation of the labour market.

A typology of national situations emerges from the national surveys. Without contradicting the Cedefop-GHK classification, it focuses on the *criterion of a cross between public NFIL validation policies and the mode of involvement of the social players, specifically the unions*. In doing so, it distinguishes between three groups of countries: two groups which are polar opposites and one in the middle. On the one extreme, there are countries where the existence of public NFIL recognition programmes enjoys the involvement of the social partners; while on the

other extreme there are countries where the autonomous intervention of trade union players on the VET front can be very active without (yet) being backed by a mature and stabilised institutional system for NFIL recognition; in between these two extremes, the middle group includes the countries where public initiatives are to be seen more at regional than at national level.

The three groups, differentiated by this prime criterion, are not homogeneous in other senses, and the countries grouped together may have quite different levels of development, whether in economic terms in general or with regard to the VET system. This means that the implementation of NFIL validation programmes does not obey simple socio-economic determinism, instead expressing the capacity and willingness of the social and political players to come up with such programmes and get involved in their implementation. This capacity and willingness may prevail in quite different countries, a sign favouring the implementation of common thrusts at European level.

2.1 Countries with broad public NFIL validation programmes targeting all sectors of the economy (even if there are favoured targets), and where validation is part of lifelong learning systems: Denmark, Finland, France and Portugal

Though these public programmes each have their own limits and contradictions, they have the merit of actually existing and being capable of evolution. In this respect they have the potential to serve as an interesting orientation at European level.

- **Denmark** adopted a policy in 2004 entitled *Recognition of prior learning in the education system*, further developed in legislation in 2007. NFIL is taken into account throughout the education system, though its validation gains a particular focus with regard to VET. The private sector has a long tradition of validating work experience, and the unions now support individuals in their efforts to have this acquired experience recognised. Between 2004 and 2006, some 150,000 people benefited from the NFIL validation system. The Danish Education Ministry recently launched several

initiatives designed to improve understanding of the system and increase its impact.

- **Finland** has had a formalized skills-based qualification system since the mid-1990s in both the IVET and CVET fields. Recognition of acquired experience is key to this system, and the social partners and enterprises alike play a stakeholder role. Between 1997 and 2008, over 65,000 people benefited from this system, obtaining partial or full certification of their competences.
- In **France**, the main mechanism, introduced by law in 2002, is the *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE, *Validation of Prior Experience*). Extending a prior mechanism to all qualifications recognised by the State and the social partners, any citizen with at least three years of experience at work or as a volunteer has the right to have his competences validated through the VAE system. This system can be used as a tool for obtaining a full certificate or as a way of acquiring credits towards a full certificate. Over the 2002-2011 period, over 230,000 qualifications were validated and 51,700 VAE applicants were registered in 2011. The social partners play an important role in the implementation of VAE and many enterprises are facilitating staff access to the mechanism.
- In **Portugal**, a large-scale public initiative, entitled *Novas Oportunidades*, was introduced in 2006 as a way of getting as many people as possible up to a minimum qualification level, corresponding to twelve years of schooling. Based on the previous process called *Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competencias* or RVCC), this new initiative had very ambitious quantitative targets, with progress relying on the setting up of a network of 450 *Novas Oportunidades* centres, often housed in existing vocational training centres. Implementation of the initiative has benefited from good cooperation between the public institutions concerned and from the active commitment of the social players at political, institutional and operational levels. The initiative introduced a dual process for validating competences, focusing on both key educational and vocational competences. Target achievement is noticeably higher for the former, thereby limiting the initiative's impact on the labour market.

2.2 Countries where the implementation of the NFIL validation process is primarily a matter for local and regional initiatives, and targets particular sectors and/or professions: Italy, Spain

In these two countries, national-level leadership is weak in the field of NFIL. The national framework is better established in Spain, and schemes introduced by the *Autonomous Communities* abide by a clearly defined national procedure, whereas there is (as yet) no such national framework in Italy.

- In **Italy**, the development of an NFIL validation system became a priority in the mid-2000s, driven inter alia by the development of the *National Qualification Framework* based on ‘standard’ criteria. Several past or current regional initiatives participate in the NFIL validation movement. Whereas certain regions have launched genuine NFIL validation initiatives, others are still at the stage of implementing partial tools linked to validation. For example, the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*, created in 2005, is an official document recording the skills acquired during training programmes and those acquired in non-formal or informal contexts. Tested between 2006 and 2009 in thirteen Italian regions, the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino* remains more a documentation of competences than a validation. An agreement on training policies concluded in February 2010 between the Ministry of Labour, the regions and the social partners refers explicitly to validation as an important aspect to be developed. Backed by the trade unions, the necessary institutional resources exist to progress towards a more ambitious national framework. A number of recent developments favour the establishment of a national NFIL validation system: in particular, an agreement reached in April 2012 between the Italian regions and the national government and the Law of 27 June 2012 serve as basis for building a national framework for NFIL validation.
- In **Spain**, the *universally accessible NFIL accreditation* has been a component of the Spanish VET system enshrined in legislation in 2002. However, practical implementation is recent and selective: a 2009 royal decree restricts accreditation to certain levels of competences and the annual calls for examination (*convocatorias*)

apply only to certain sectors, at the initiative of the competent regional authorities in the *Autonomous Communities*. These *convocatorias*, organised at regional level under the aegis of the national rules, target specific sectors of the labour market, in line with estimated quantitative needs for qualified workers, and also with financial constraints. Some Communities, such as Galicia, are proactive, but in others, such as Aragon, the social players regard the process as too complex and bureaucratic to really motivate potentially interested workers.

2.3 Countries where more or less active trade union intervention in terms of training goes hand in hand with a sometimes incomplete institutional system for NFIL validation, whose development is not considered to be a priority: Germany, England, Romania and Poland

The reasons for this situation differ from country to country: in Germany, the highly structured VET system leaves little room for NFIL validation; in England, the *National Vocational Qualifications* (NVQ) system opens the way to modular NFIL validation, although this pathway is not (as yet) fully exploited; in Romania, the proactive trade union provision of training services cannot make up for the weaknesses of an institutional NFIL validation system still lacking in maturity and stability; in Poland, developments in NFIL validation are embryonic and revolve around local initiatives.

- In **Germany**, NFIL validation does not automatically fit into a traditionally very structured and demanding VET system, which today sees vocational training as having to be of a high standard, going up to almost university level, with NFIL merely seen as a way of filling possible gaps within that system. Employees have at their disposal an individual, formal pathway for validating their prior vocational learning and thereby providing access to subsequent training courses, the so-called *external examination* or *Externenprüfung*, which targets 30,000 people per year. This path does not however seem adequate today to respond to the needs of those who escape the virtues of the apprenticeship system (*‘das duale System’*): early school leavers, migrants, *etc.* Where there

are fault lines in the VET system allowing manpower to ‘miss out’ in a country facing population ageing, better recognition of the importance of NFIL formalization has the potential to become a welcome adjunct to the high-level VET system. The unions are well aware of this potential and open to progress in formalising NFIL.

- In **England**, NFIL validation is solidly anchored in the NVQ system and proven methods for the recognition of experience, although without being a priority today. Trade union intervention, by way of so-called *learning representatives*, helps to ensure an informal training community in the workplace and provides substantial services to workers, though without necessarily resulting in the explicit certification of competences. However, the modular, pragmatic approach of NVQs has opened the door to such certification. Methods and guidelines for NFIL validation, linked to the National Qualification Framework, exist in well-defined areas of VET. These approaches are very varied in their scope and in the number of people who benefit under them. The oldest one, the NVQ scheme introduced in the 1980s, offers individuals the possibility to get their acquired skills validated. Such certification can be issued in the workplace or in approved centres. The process can be adapted, “à la carte”, to individual needs. Similarly, the various processes for the *Accreditation of Prior Learning* (APL), *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning* (APEL), and *Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL) have been in use since the early 1990s, both for qualifying for and gaining admission to higher education.
- **Romania** has an NFIL validation system based on a series of laws and decrees adopted in the course of the 2000’s. This system makes explicit reference to the certification of competences acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. The *National Council of Adult Training* (CNFPA), which recently merged with another body into the *National Authority of Qualifications*, has authorised, and supervises, a network of validation centres playing a key role in the certification of skills. Between 2006 and 2010, CNFPA-approved centres issued almost 30,000 certificates for 150 professions. This institutional system, currently being revamped, continues to seek balance, stability and credibility. High-profile trade union initiatives, involving making certain activists into VET specialists and running vocational training centres with the backing of other business and social players, provide substantial services to workers.

But these initiatives do not always lead to state certification. Work still needs to be done to build a solid link to the institutional NFIL validation mechanisms.

- **Poland** has a tradition of a strong focus on academic education and a weak culture of lifelong learning. The formal effort of aligning the system with the European frameworks is clearly having trouble making an inroad into the established practices and policies of the social and political players. Poland does not yet have any NFIL validation system. The current legal framework takes account solely of acquiring knowledge via the formal initial education or continuing training. However, a number of schemes introduced by the Polish authorities point to a growing interest in lifelong learning-related issues and to taking account of the ‘acquis’ of NFIL. Local initiatives, at the level of administrative regions or universities, are evidence of embryonic development. Similarly, union involvement is also embryonic.

Chapter 2

NFIL issues in the context of European challenges and policies on education and training

In the field of education and training, the European Union has developed a set of mechanisms and instruments allowing students and employed workers to access mobility options which expand their personal and vocational horizons, while respecting their rights and competences. Looking specifically at vocational skills and competences, these tools are helping to gradually forge a genuine European labour market, in which comparable skills and competences are recognised, thereby becoming transferable from one country to another. In particular, the *Lisbon Strategy* proposed a framework for action in this field. Its disappointing achievements have fuelled determination to tackle the obstacles in the context of the *Europe 2020* strategy more resolutely. The European social partners have also played a very proactive role in the last decade in fostering the *acquis communautaire* on education and training themes.

The first section of this chapter looks at a number of important European initiatives and challenges regarding education and training¹. The second section presents some major challenges facing European countries with regard to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Expected impacts of NFIL validation for individual workers are looked at in the third section.

1. Note: This first section presents some of the European initiatives that may be considered as important. The overview is designed to be representative, not exhaustive.

1. European challenges and initiatives regarding education and training

1.1 General prospects to renew and develop jobs and skills

In 2008, the European Commission launched its *New Skills for New Jobs* initiative for better skills upgrading, anticipation and matching, against a background of a substantial drop in the share of blue-collar skilled jobs in 19 industrial sectors in the 2000's (see the report by Oxford Research 2010). In the 2010's, the combination of technological progress promoting high-skilled jobs and the outsourcing of low- and medium-skilled jobs is set to accelerate this trend in these sectors, with automotive, shipbuilding, computers and electro-mechanics, textiles and chemicals the sectors particularly affected. Sectors able to combine employment growth and an across-the-board rise in qualifications appear a minority, corresponding for the most part to service activities (such as healthcare services) and telecommunications. But these are not automatic trends. For the European Union as a whole, Cedefop's baseline scenario for 2020 (see Cedefop 2010) underlines the sheer magnitude of professional mobility that may occur due to the difference between low net job creation (7.2 million between 2010 and 2020) and the high number of vacancies (80.3 million). This is the consequence of the renewal of the economically active population, taking retirements into account, i.e. the "80.3 million" correspond to the sum of 7.2 million new jobs and 73.1 million positions to be replaced. This renewal notably concerns semi-skilled jobs - even if their growth is inferior to that of high-skilled jobs, semi-skilled workers are set to represent half of the European economically active population in 2020. The promotion of intermediate qualifications (combining basic operational skills with high technological knowledge) seems necessary for consolidating industrial capacity.

1.2 From Lisbon to Europe 2020

The *Lisbon Strategy* "for growth and jobs" was adopted in 2000 in the face of such upcoming challenges as globalisation, climate change and an ageing population. Its main goal was to make Europe the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. As acknowledged

by the EU, the objectives were only partly achieved. 2001 saw a further programme dedicated to education, *Education and Training 2010*, being launched. The Bologna and Copenhagen processes launched respectively in 1999 and 2002 targeted the establishment of a European Higher Education Area by 2010 and have also helped to develop teaching and vocational training systems.

In March 2010 the new *Europe 2020* strategy was launched for the 2010-2020 period. The strategy aims to get the Union out of the crisis by generating smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, with greater coordination of national and European policies. There is great willingness for the *Europe 2020* strategy to be implemented with better governance than the *Lisbon Strategy*, and the new strategy includes seven flagship initiatives (notably on skills and jobs) for achieving the targets. Five targets are set for the EU in 2020:

- Employment: 75% of the population aged 20-64 to be employed.
- Innovation: 3 % of the EU's GDP to be invested in R&D.
- Climate change and energy sustainability: greenhouse gas emissions to be 20% (or even 30%, if the conditions are right) lower than 1990; 20% of energy to come from renewables; a 20% increase in energy efficiency.
- Education: reducing the rates of early school leaving below 10%; at least 40% of 30-34 years old completing third level education.
- Fighting poverty and social exclusion: at least 20 million fewer people to be in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The *Education and Training 2010* programme was strengthened in 2009 through the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, *Education and Training 2020*. The benchmarks for 2020 are:

- at least 95% of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education to participate in early childhood education.
- the share of 15-years olds with insufficient abilities in reading, mathematics and science to be less than 15%.
- the share of early leavers from education and training to be less than 10%.

- the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment to be at least 40%.
- an average of at least 15 % of adults (age group 25-64) to participate in lifelong learning.

Frequent criticism has been expressed by commentators and stakeholders about the ability of such quantitative indicators and benchmarking to effectively summarize the content of the European objectives and their national implementation.

1.3 Skills and NFIL issues up to the 2012 European Council Recommendation

Cedefop first conducted a *European Inventory on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* in 2004, repeating it in 2005, 2008 and 2010². Presenting the diversity of experiences found in European countries regarding NFIL validation, the inventory highlights best practices across the European Union and provides certain guidelines for member countries.

A resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field was passed by the European Council in July 2006. Highlighting the relevance of NFIL in the field of youth, it ties in with a 2001 White Paper entitled *A new impetus for European youth*.

The Employment Guidelines³ issued by the European Commission and approved by the Council are all connected with the challenges of NFIL recognition. Since 2010 these Guidelines target:

- Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality.

2. The last survey available is 2010. Conducted by GHK on behalf of the European Commission and in close cooperation with Cedefop, it updates the previous survey: see <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-scope.aspx>.

3. These Guidelines have been an integral part of the *Broad Economic Policy Guidelines* since 2005.

- Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning.
- Improving the quality and performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education.
- Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty.

On 18 April 2012, the European Commission published a communication, *Towards a job-rich recovery*, aimed at promoting the topics set forth in the *Europe 2020* strategy, at a time when European countries are looking for job-generating ways of returning to growth. Focusing on social inclusion and confidence as key factors for economic recovery, the communication devotes a whole section to the need to ‘invest in skills’, stressing the tangible skills mismatches evidenced by the number of vacancies remaining unfilled on Europe’s labour markets. It seeks to reinforce the monitoring and anticipation of skill needs, specifically by setting up the *European Skills Panorama* (launched in December 2012)⁴, and designed as a step towards consolidating existing anticipation tools. It aims to provide an overview of employment prospects and skills needs in the short and medium term at European, national and sectorial levels.

At the operational level, the Commission is aware that the current role played by the European employment services portal (EURES) remains marginal. The *European multilingual taxonomy of Skills, Competencies and Occupations* (ESCO), currently under development and designed to contain several thousand descriptors, should favour the adoption, by education system players and those in the labour market alike, of a precise common operational language enabling improved job-skill matching. European employment services and employers will use ESCO to define a set of skills and competences required when describing a job. The ESCO agenda is intended to be fully open to intervention by national and European social players, with the focus not being on building a cumbersome, rigid tool, but instead on promoting a process taking account of the different national perceptions of the same jobs.

4. The European Skills Panorama has a dedicated website: <http://euskillspanorama.ec.europa.eu/>.

The Commission also plans to promote the systematic mapping of certificates issued in the various countries to the skills levels defined in the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF). It proposes that the *Europass CV*, which is already in operation, be accompanied by a *European skills passport* listing the holder's skills, irrespective of how those skills were acquired. For the most mobile workers, the Commission points to its proposed directive of December 2011, designed to introduce a *European Professional Card*.

In September 2012, the European Commission issued a *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning*. This states that all EU Member States should have an operational system for validating NFIL by 2015 – a very ambitious target. As stressed in Part 2 of this book, NFIL validation frameworks within the EU are very diverse and not always compatible. Whereas a number of countries have long-established NFIL validation frameworks, others have at most local validation experience and no national framework. The three years thus represent a very short timeframe for introducing national NFIL frameworks throughout the EU. Following this proposal, the European Council Recommendation on NFIL recognition and validation was adopted in December 2012 (Council of the European Union 2012; see the complete text in the Appendix). It defines common goals and principles and recommends Member States to implement NFIL validation arrangements “no later than 2018”. It underlines that “the validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework”. The Recommendation goes on to set forth:

- that validation arrangements for NFIL validation should include the following elements: the identification of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through NFIL, the documentation and assessment thereof, and the certification of assessment results in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate;
- principles in the arrangements for NFIL validation, and in particular their link to national qualifications frameworks and the EQF;
- the need to promote the involvement in the development and implementation of these arrangements and principles of “relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry,

- commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations”;
- finally the need to promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders.

Last but not least, in its *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* communication of November 2012, the European Commission underlines a number of major challenges needing to be overcome in improving education in Europe. Emphasis is put on the importance of the European tools (EQF, ECTS, ECVET, etc.) for supporting transparency, the recognition of qualifications and especially NFIL validation.

1.4 The work of European social partners

The European social partners have backed EU developments, agreeing on a range of reference principles, in particular for ensuring that access to training helps the European labour market become more inclusive. They have at their disposal studies conducted jointly in the context of their social dialogue. In 2002, the *European Trade Union Confederation* (ETUC), *BusinessEurope* (then known as UNICE), the *European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises* (UEAPME) and the *European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest* (CEEP) adopted a *Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications*. One of the main thrusts of this framework was to stimulate positive interaction between workers, enterprises and public authorities in four priority areas: anticipating needs in terms of competences and qualifications; the recognition and validation of competences and qualifications; information, support and advice for individuals; resources to mobilize.

To put this ‘*acquis*’ of the social dialogue into practice and further develop it, the ETUC has regularly and vigorously reiterated its proposals on the role of lifelong learning. In March 2009, it adopted a *Resolution on initial and continuous vocational training for a European employment strategy*, calling for a genuine right to training, accessible to all citizens and workers.

This resolution visibly influenced the communication published by the European Commission in June 2010, '*A New Impetus for European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy*'. This communication reaffirms several objectives and principles for action proposed by the European trade unions:

- Equipping people with the right combination of skills and enabling them to update them, via initial and continuing vocational training.
- Encouraging systems favouring lifelong learning, by furnishing people with guidance services, enabling learning pathways to be customised, and ensuring the transparent recognition of prior learning in the workplace.
- Modernising vocational education and training systems by harmonising the national qualification frameworks and referencing them against the European framework with a view to encouraging permeability between vocational education and higher education and promoting positive worker mobility.

Adopted in December 2010, the new ETUC resolution *More investment in lifelong learning for quality jobs* recalls the terms of the *Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets*, concluded between the European social partners *BusinessEurope*, CEEP, ETUC and UEAPME in March 2010. These texts focus on the introduction of individual skills development programmes, defined jointly between employer and worker. The ETUC stresses the need for validating non-formal and informal learning, using credible procedures ensuring the transferability of the skills thus recognized.

2. The validation of prior learning in the face of national socio-economic issues

The main aim of this section is to illustrate the socio-economic contexts in which NFIL validation practices operate, in relation to the challenges of education and training and employment. NFIL validation practices respond to certain needs that are often stressed at EU level, but at the same time are no panacea to all the problems encountered in terms of access to training. Insofar it is important to recognise their rightful place.

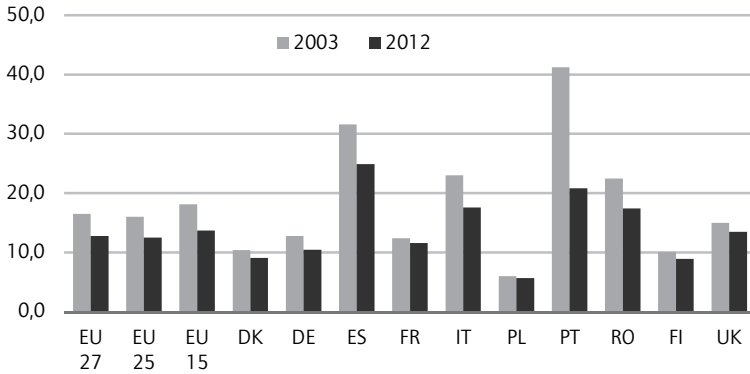
2.1 A general need for upskilling the economically active population and increasing employment

The need to upskill the active population is the most important common characteristic of all countries belonging to the survey sample (but also to the other EU Member States). Two common problems are symptomatic of these countries:

- First, the percentage of young people leaving secondary school without a qualification (cf. Figure 1) remains fairly high in the developed countries. Except for Denmark, Finland and Poland, the percentage in the sample countries is above the benchmark set in the Europe 2020 strategy (as a reminder: the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%). The overall picture does however show some improvement, with the share dropping somewhat over the last decade. Moreover, the ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET) category covering young people (16-24 year olds) has grown in most of the EU countries because of the crisis and clearly needs to be targeted by public policies (CESifo 2013).
- Second, the average level of education is quite low among older workers: “in the EU27 countries 40.4% of 55-64 year olds lack an upper secondary qualification. In 9 countries it is more than 50%. For those aged 65 and over the figure rises to 62% and in 6 countries it is more than 80%.” (European Commission 2010).

Some countries show more pronounced characteristics, with the percentage of the population without a secondary education diploma sometimes very high (for example in Portugal), or with workers facing tough conditions on the labour market, employed in low-paid jobs and/or with precarious employment contracts, as in Romania. Box 2 sums up the situation in the different countries in the eyes of the trade unions and other players encountered in the project.

Figure 1 **Early leavers from education and training**
 (% of people aged 18 to 24, 2003* and 2012)



* For United Kingdom: value from 2002

Note: *Europe 2020 and Education and Training 2020* Benchmark: the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%.

The figures refer to the percentage of the population aged 18-24 who have not completed their secondary education and are not in a later education or training situation.

Source: Eurostat, Education and Training.

Moreover, according to the *European Labor Force Survey (LFS)*, which directly questions people about their employment conditions, adult participation in lifelong learning and education activities stopped growing at the overall European level in the early 2000's, running out of steam after the initial impetus of the Lisbon Strategy.

Figure 2 illustrates these starkly contrasting trends, with participation varying greatly and at a low level in many of the countries surveyed. According to the LFS data, Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom are fortunate to be the exceptions. There has been a downward trend in lifelong learning participation since 2005 at EU level, although the last annual data available shows a slight rise at this level. It should however be stressed that while the temporal evolution for each country may be seen as 'robust', comparisons between countries should be made carefully⁵. The available

5. The comparability between countries of our sample may indeed be biased for *at least two countries*, Denmark and Finland, as the LFS data on training for these two countries are taken from administrative data (Eurostat, 2012), thereby putting a question-mark over their comparability with the other countries. We use data from this source, as, to date, we have only a limited number of years available from the other sources of data on training at European level (CVTS and AES, see below in the text).

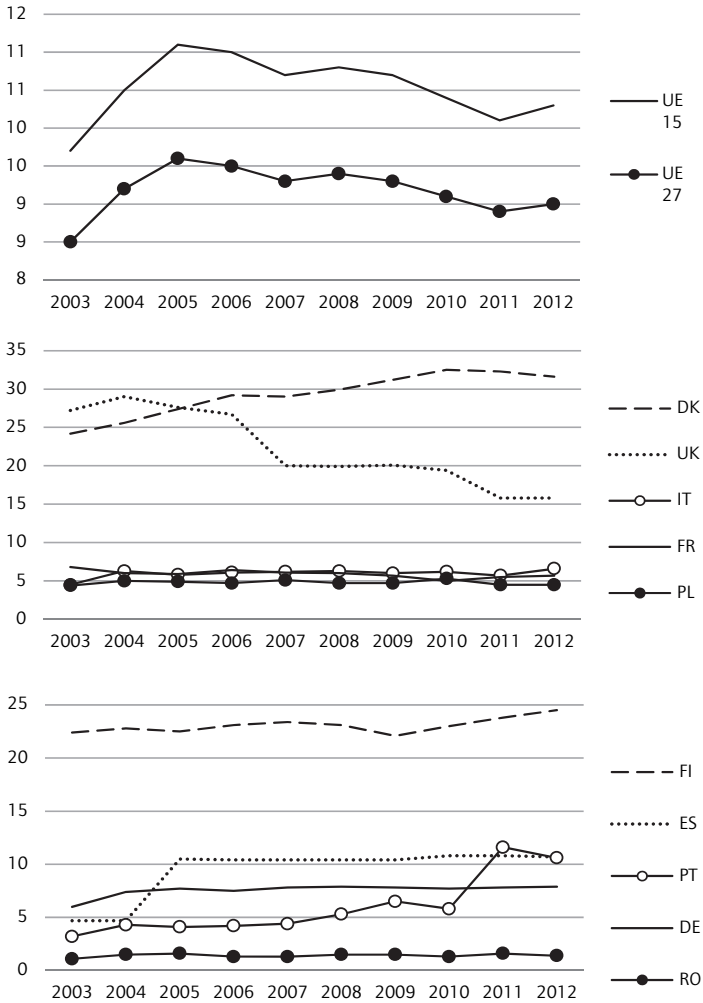
data from the LFS currently shows that participation in lifelong learning is in most cases below the benchmark set in the Education and Training 2020 strategy (as a reminder: an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning).

Box 2 **Situation and issues in the countries surveyed**

This box presents a short summary of the opinions gathered in the course of the national surveys.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Denmark | — Maintain high access to high qualifications so as to guarantee the country's development path |
| | — Take account of demographic trends and the necessary workforce renewal |
| Finland | — Raise the qualifications of the population without basic education or vocational training |
| | — Recurrent problem of young people with no diploma (estimated at the beginning of the century at almost 50,000) |
| France | — A major share of the population at work continues to have low skills |
| | — Continuing education and training does not always lead to a qualification |
| Germany | — A highly qualified industrial workforce, but growing insecurity in service jobs |
| | — Potentially 7 million fewer workers by 2030 (major demographic decline) |
| Italia | — A major share of the population has low qualification levels |
| | — The 'unification' of the Italian labour market, in terms of recognition of competences, remains to be completed |
| Poland | — Over half of the population lacks a secondary education diploma |
| | — A low-skilled labour-intensive economy |
| Portugal | — Over half of the active population has not completed secondary education |
| | — A low-skilled labour-intensive economy |
| Romania | — An urgent need to improve the position of workers in a difficult labour market |
| | — An institutional system for promoting competences in search of balance and stability |
| Spain | — Low qualification levels of a major share of the active population |
| | — A large number of workers without recognition of their vocational competences |
| United Kingdom (England) | — The focus is on the content of operational competences, more than on the level of education |
| | — A lack of funding for CVET and the recognition of competences |

Figure 2 Participation of the adult population in lifelong learning actions (% , 2003-2012)

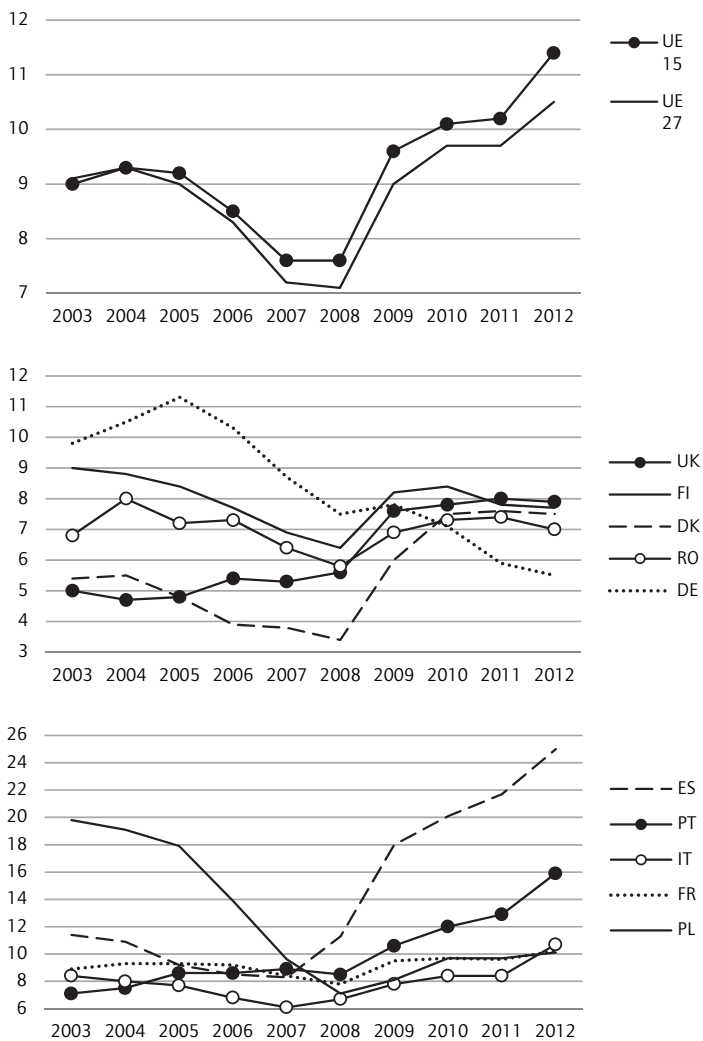


Note: Education and Training 2020 benchmark: an average of at least 15 % of adults (age group 25-64) should participate in lifelong learning.

Note by Eurostat (extract): lifelong learning actions refer to persons aged between 25 and 64 who have stated that they have received education or training in the 4 weeks preceding the survey.

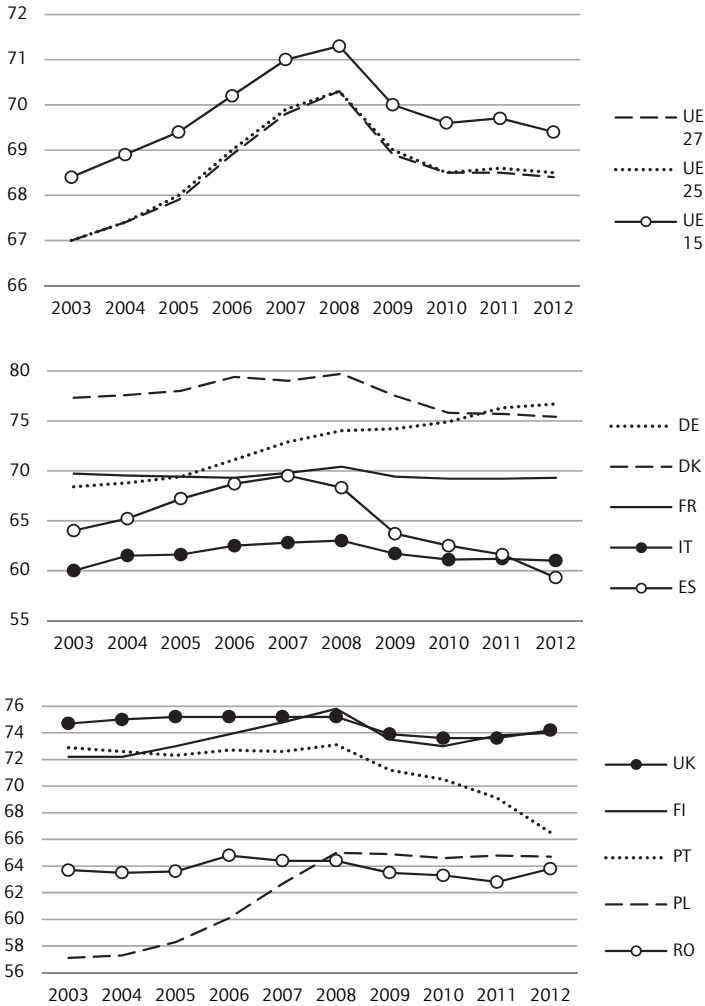
Source: Eurostat, Labor Force Survey.

Figure 3 Unemployment rates in the sample countries (% , 2003-2012)



Note: The population referred to consists of economically active 25-64 year-olds.
 Unemployment rates correspond to the number of unemployed individuals among economically active 25-64 years olds.
 Source: Eurostat.

Figure 4 Employment rates in the sample countries (% , 2003-2012)



Note: *Europe 2020* benchmark: 75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed. The population referred to consists of economically active 20-64 year-olds. Detailed data were not available for Finland and the United Kingdom. Employment rates correspond to the number of employed individuals of the '20-64 year-old' population.

Source: Eurostat.

Other European statistical sources (the *Continuing Vocational Training Survey*, CVTS, and the *Adult Education Survey*, AES) shed additional light, confirming in particular that the intensity of training efforts within enterprises varies greatly between countries and enterprises, partly dependent on the size of the latter. This is often compounded in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where access to training is made more difficult by the fact that their workers live in countries where enterprises in general make little effort to invest in CVET. Workers in SMEs are often denied access to training, while at the same time SMEs are having great trouble attracting talent.

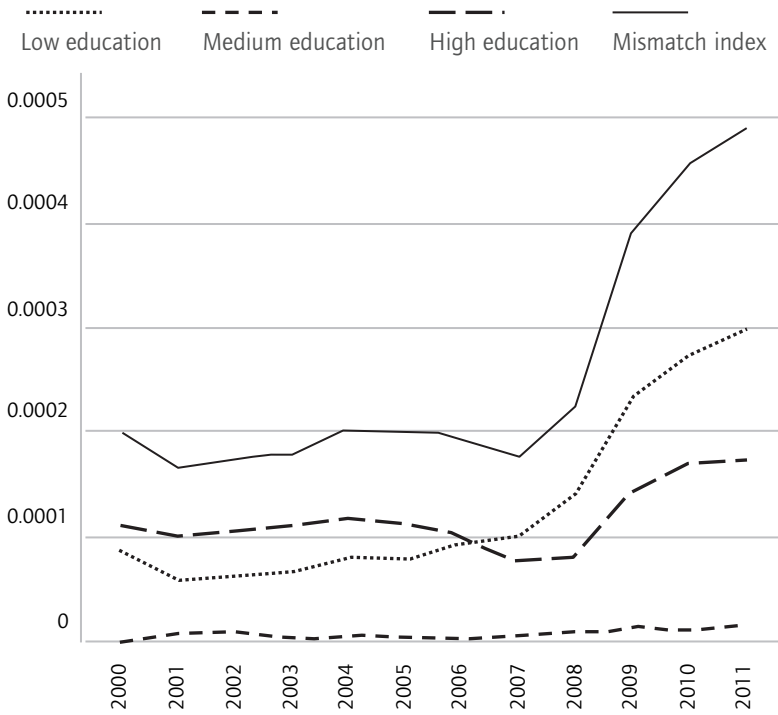
While upholding lifelong learning, the Community figures emphasize the gap between the ambitious target and the somewhat mediocre results. Compared to the resources ploughed into achieving this ambitious target, the results achieved remain too limited to meet individual and collective training needs in the European Union. Actual access to lifelong learning remains overall too low, and varies too much between countries and different sections of the population. Looking at all EU Member States, the proportion of European adults without access to CVET is considerable.

This situation is all the more problematic given that there is a common, growing need for greater security in career pathways and transitions, in a European context where many national economies have been hit by soaring unemployment rates since the start of the European economic crisis (figure 3).

While Europe 2020 does not set any benchmark for the unemployment rate, it has set a target relative to the employment rate: 75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed. Figure 4 illustrates the gap between this benchmark and current empirical evidence, with only Denmark and Germany, among the surveyed countries, currently meeting the target (for 2010-2011, all other countries are below 70%). Evidence points to a decline in employment rates in many countries over the past few years, with only Germany experiencing a rise.

Finally, the European Commission's *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2012* report (see Chapter 6 by Pouliakas, 2012) highlights the *skill mismatch* problem in Europe, a situation occurring when skills supply and demand are out of balance in an economy. The mismatch may take different forms: imbalance in terms of education levels, in terms of specific skills, at a macro or micro level, etc.

Figure 5 Skill mismatch index by level of educational attainment (EU 27)



Notes from Pouliakas (2012): The SMI has been derived following the methodology of Esteveao and Tsounta (2011) and the European Central Bank (2012). The education levels are separated in 3 levels according to the ISCED classification (low education: ISCED 0-2; Medium education: ISCED 3-4; High education: ISCED 5-6). Source: Pouliakas (2012), Cedefop calculations based on Eurostat data.

As seen in Figure 5, the empirical evidence for the European Union shows that skill mismatch, as estimated by the skill mismatch index (SMI)⁶, has been rising since 2008, at the aggregate level, for the high education levels and even for the low education level. The consequences

6. Pouliakas uses the definition of the skill mismatch index put forward by Esteveao and Tsounta (2011): The skill mismatch index measures “the distance between the relative demand and supply of a given skill j , where demand is captured by the share of employed persons with skill j in the EU economy/country/region at a given time period and supply is approximated by the share of the active workforce in possession of a given skill level (or, similarly, the stock of unemployed workers with skill level)” (Pouliakas, 2012, p. 357).

of this skill mismatch are diverse and costly, and include loss of productivity and growth, lower job satisfaction, etc. The public policies proposed by the European Commission notably include “encouraging the institution of validation and recognition systems of informal and non-formal learning” (Pouliakas, 2012, p. 386), possibly in the context of a wider development regarding education and training systems.

2.2 The definition of target populations

While difficulties associated with competitiveness contribute to the above trends in terms of (un-)employment, Eurostat data shows that women and young people are more affected by unemployment and inactivity⁷. Hence, the development of skills, in particular for these target groups, should be a priority. More generally, the situations outlined above (too many young people leaving school early, low levels of participation in lifelong learning, the need for greater security for vocational pathways, the particular problem of skill mismatch) call for the development of practices for recognising and validating non-formal and informal skills. In combination with a focus, dependent on national needs, on more specific ‘target’ groups, this development should contribute to a general upskilling of the population.

Where a national NFIL validation framework exists, target populations can be quite large or more limited, confined to precisely defined groups. In Portugal, for example, one of the major objectives of the previous validation policy was to certify 600,000 adults and enable 350,000 adults to benefit from upskilling between 2006 and 2010. The general aim was to establish secondary education (i.e. 12 years of education) as the minimum level of qualification for the Portuguese population.

Local authorities, education or training institutions, unions or employers sometimes take the initiative to validate NFIL, defining target populations in accordance with their own perceptions, areas of expertise and resources. This may particularly be the case where there is no national validation framework or where it is weak or in its infancy.

7. See for example CESifo (2013) for a European perspective on youth unemployment.

In this sense, Italy represents an interesting case. As the country does not yet have a national NFIL validation framework, target populations are completely dependent on local initiatives (regions or universities). In Germany, various organisations are concentrating their activities on specific groups such as low-skilled workers, the long-term unemployed or migrant workers. The target groups differ depending on the level at which validation is practiced (regions, sectors).

Validation results need to be interpreted in light of the socio-economic issues specific to each country, which determine the definition of any target population. For example, in Spain, despite serious general needs for higher levels of qualifications, the validation possibilities offered turn out to be quite limited in quantitative terms. Validation involves the annual selection procedure of the *convocatorias* (calls for examination) targeting specific occupations. Though Finland has made substantial progress in developing validation practices since the 1990s, around 20% of the Finnish working population still lacks a sufficiently high level of basic or vocational education, i.e. the system seems to have been of greater benefit to higher-skilled workers. According to the Finnish experts interviewed, several groups have already benefited from existing initiatives, though greater benefit from validation actions could be achieved by targeting specific sections of the population, such as migrants (representing a growing size of the active population in Finland, particularly in the construction sector), young unskilled people, and (past) workers of traditional industries now being restructured (e.g. the paper sector).

3. The importance of NFIL validation for individual workers

Above and beyond the collective needs emerging from the socio-economic context, the recognition of non-formal and informal competences, whether or not leading to a qualification, is a response to individual needs corresponding in part to such non-monetary elements as recognition, confidence, autonomy, etc. Naturally, a salary rise corresponds to a recompense considered to be 'normal' or 'expected' when talking about NFIL validation, but it is by no means 'automatic' and frequently not mentioned in collective agreements. However, for an individual, the motivation to initiate a process validating his prior experience has

advantages that are not necessarily monetary (or at least not immediately):

- *To promote his career with a view to lifelong learning, helping to make his future vocational pathway and transitions more secure, particularly in the face of intensive company restructuring measures.*
- *To recognise experience gained in the workplace, but also acquired in voluntary organisations and in the family environment. Recognition of all skills acquired is particularly important for the unemployed, helping them to find a new job.*
- *To drive his personal development and that one of his family.*

The social integration of individuals, the way they are seen by others and their self-confidence are bolstered. This is particularly the case where the validation process leads to formal recognition, with certification being experienced as an important symbolic event. Such validation can be particularly gratifying for low-skilled workers with no diploma, as we can see from the survey entitled *Attitudes towards vocational education and training* in the special September 2011 *Eurobarometer* report (see European Commission 2011): “People who see themselves as being low down on the social scale have less belief that VET can improve their job prospects than people higher up the scale. This represents a major challenge: one of the EU’s main objectives is to open up opportunities to disadvantaged groups, but these results show that these groups, which have the lowest aspirations in general, have the least faith in the ability of vocational training to change and improve their circumstances”. This makes it important to ensure that access to skill recognition tools is specifically open to less well-skilled workers.

The possible non-monetary benefits of validation for individuals are not always sufficiently taken into account. Too many workers potentially concerned do not grasp the extent of their competences acquired through non-formal or informal avenues – just having rights is not enough to assert them. The concrete dimension and the uneven awareness of the individual non-monetary benefits of NFIL validation are illustrated by the accounts of unionists from two countries:

- In *Finland*, certain testimonies report that the validation system there makes it possible not only to offer certain workers a ‘second chance’, or even ‘endless chances’, but also that it promotes ‘everyday

innovation' and 'worker-based innovation', whereby the skills most likely to be validated are those acquired in the workplace. For the individual, the Finnish validation system, the CBQ (*competence-based qualification*) system, constitutes a flexible way of acquiring and recognising competences. But the unions, as well as other stakeholders, also highlight the following negative aspect: workers often think that preparatory training is indispensable, and are uneasy at seeing the duration and content of that training being cut back when coupled with the validation of prior learning. The validation process can also prevent the worker concerned from remaining engaged within a work collective, whereby this collective dimension is important for most workers.

- Though a national validation framework does not yet exist in *Italy*, its construction has been initiated by recent agreements between regions and government. Trade unions point out however that workers do not attach sufficient importance to the recognition of their knowledge and competences, tending to think that the obligatory competences required to perform certain jobs are enough; the concept of 'validation of non-formal and informal competences' strikes them as very abstract. Sometimes they are not aware of the possibilities of validation, or do not want to benefit from them. But the Italian unions are showing great interest in NFIL and believe that promoting validation instruments is in workers' interests.

The recognition and validation of existing skills, irrespective of how they were acquired, must constitute an individual right, accessible to all workers. Such recognition, stretching to formal certification, is an advantage for the worker, as it stops him being tied to a certain company through improving his employability on the labour market.

Chapter 3

From NFIL validation frameworks and processes to concrete implementation programmes: common and specific problems

Though the previous chapter has underlined the obvious importance of NFIL recognition and validation, this does not mean that all EU Member States adopt the same path. Education and learning systems are built on specific national rules and practices, leading to different validation processes and frameworks.

The first section of this chapter shows that both national validation frameworks and the role of decentralised initiatives are currently for the most part dependent on each country's political and social institutions. The second section shows differences between those frameworks and concrete implementation programmes. Validation processes remain complex, and a strong recognition framework does not mean it is easily used. Similarly, the system can be linked up to other forms of qualification.

1. National validation frameworks and processes

For countries with an NFIL validation system (with or without a dedicated national framework), there are common phases in a validation pathway: informing potential candidates, providing guidance; recording proof of prior experience; presenting it to a panel for validation; being awarded the qualification or gaining credits for use in supplementary training.

While the basic NFIL validation process may seem fairly homogeneous from a technical perspective, the regulatory and legislative framework governing its implementation can vary widely according to the country.

- In Spain for example, the number of people able to benefit from NFIL validation is set in advance and limited to specific occupations. To have any hope of having their competences validated, people

therefore need prior experience in the vocational fields designated by the annual “*convocatorias*”.

- In other countries such as Denmark, the United Kingdom, Finland and France, validation is an individual right which can be exercised by any person so wishing, and is not automatically restricted by a quota.

Regional authorities or other institutions very often take the initiative, adopting their own arrangements for the recognition of prior learning. Local experience, substantial in the countries surveyed, may take various paths. There are two criteria helping us to distinguish experiences in different countries:

- *Is there a dedicated national framework for validating NFIL, or only local initiatives (e.g. at regional or sectoral level, or managed by universities)?* The availability of a detailed national register or catalogue of qualifications covering all occupations seems to be a *sine qua non* for clear progress in NFIL validation as such an instrument equates vocational competences acquired in different ways.
- *If a national framework does exist, how far does the involvement of the national authorities allow the effective implementation of the NFIL validation practices?* This involvement may take the form of large-scale public initiatives, as was the case in Portugal with the *Novas Oportunidades* initiative between 2006 and 2011, which rolled out nationwide the validation methods already piloted earlier.

The sample of countries surveyed offers a wide variety of experiences in NFIL validation, ranging from a national framework providing a structure to initial local initiatives.

Finland, France and Denmark, for example, are countries with clearly defined national institutional frameworks.

- In **Finland**, NFIL validation occurs mainly via the key CBQ system (*competence-based qualification*). Although in existence since 1994, this system was not enshrined in legislation until 2006. The possibility of having competences recognised, irrespective of how they were acquired, is a fundamental principle in the field of adult education, but also in higher education. The basic principle is that

an individual can demonstrate his learning outcomes in the workplace. The Finnish validation system in the field of adult education is based upon tripartite collaboration, with the social partners involved from the local level to the national level. This tripartite involvement is regarded as a very important general principle by the people encountered in the national survey. It applies at the level of the *National Board of Education*, which supervises the national validation framework, and the *Qualification Committees* responsible for defining the occupational standards, as well as at the level of the skills evaluation groups. Outside the CBQ system, validation may also take the form of universities recognising prior learning, though here there is no unified framework and the initiative depends on autonomous decisions taken by the universities.

- In **France**, practices for validating non-formal and informal competences are partially institutionalised within a legal framework. The social modernisation law of 17 January 2002 creates the right to *Validation of Prior Experience* (VAE, *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*), allowing anyone, on the basis of at least three years of paid, self-employed or volunteer activity, to acquire a full or partial qualification. This law also introduces the *National Register of Vocational Qualifications* (RNCP, *Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*) listing the vocational qualifications recognised by the State and the social partners. To be listed in this register, these qualifications must be accessible via VAE and include a validation procedure based, inter alia, on a series of modules. The national register is regulated and controlled by the *National Commission for Vocational Qualification* (CNCP, *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*), in which the trade unions and employers' organisations participate. In 2010, the register contained over 7,000 vocational qualifications mainly accessible via VAE and representing over 96% of all nationally recognised qualifications, apart from those gained in higher education. The regional level plays a key complementary role in terms of access to information, stakeholder coordination, and organising the services on offer under VAE.
- Following a consultation process, **Denmark** passed a law in the early 2000's introducing a national framework for the recognition of prior learning. In 2004, a document entitled *Recognition of prior learning* within the education system provided initial

guidelines and first incentives for the recognition of prior learning. The law dated 6 June 2007 defines the recognition of prior learning for various fields of adult education. Under it, all adults have the right to demand that a CVET institution assess their prior learning for the purpose of securing recognition of their competences. If the decision does not satisfy the applicant, he can appeal against it. To gain a better understanding of validation practices and their impact, the *National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning* (NVR) has been created.

By contrast, Italy and Germany are two countries without a national framework for validating prior learning gained in non-formal or informal ways.

- **Italy** does not yet have a national NFIL validation framework, though many regional or university-based experiments have been conducted in recent years. Furthermore, recent laws (2012) foresee the establishment of such a framework at national level. One obstacle existing up to now far has been the lack of common national-level occupational standards, even though work has been underway on the subject for a long time. Frequently cited among other obstacles are a certain lack of leadership or political will on the part of the government authorities; the number and diversity of the stakeholders involved (it is difficult to agree on common rules); the lack of funding for vocational training; and the difficulty of setting up a unified system when the regions already have their own systems and are wedded to them. This has seen certain Italian regions taking the initiative and setting up their own NFIL validation procedures. For example, Emilia-Romagna started developing its first validation tools in 2003, and the region's validation system has been in operation since 2005. Its establishment was greatly facilitated by the availability of a broad range of occupational standards. Quite flexible, the system focuses on vocational training, with the possibility of obtaining various types of qualification. The underlying philosophy is that everyone can obtain a qualification, regardless of how their skills were acquired.
- **Germany** also has no national NFIL validation framework. The government, the stakeholder institutions and the social partners are currently working on the *German Qualification Framework*, though the recognition of NFIL is not considered a priority.

However, at national level, a pilot initiative, *Development of a credit system in vocational education and training* (DECVET), has been run. This project drew on the Swiss modular qualification system. From a general point of view, the recognition of the competences of disadvantaged groups is still at an embryonic stage and involves local approaches, in the context of pilot projects run by civil society organisations

2. Beyond regulatory tools: actual practices

The validation of prior learning can involve national, regional or local initiatives. However, where there are processes and a framework providing a structure for validation at national level, the degree of implementation of the public policies and their linkage with the traditional learning or education system also need to be examined.

2.1 A system (too) complex for its users

The different phases of the validation process (informing potential candidates, providing guidance; recording proof of prior experience; presenting it to a panel for validation; being awarded the qualification or gaining credits for use in supplementary training) require dedicated resources and organisation. They attract the attention of experts, the social partners and public authorities, looking at ways of simplifying access to them and the way they function from an applicant's perspective – how can applicants be informed and given guidance more easily; how to prevent them not being plunged into difficulties when it comes to proving their vocational experience; how to provide rapid access to a panel with a good knowledge of the principles and methods of validating vocational experience; etc.

In the countries with a well-established NFIL validation system, the validation process is often formalized. But even so, in every surveyed country, whatever the regulatory or legislative contexts allowing access to NFIL validation, validation processes remain complex, and even their operation can vary within a country.

Portugal applies a tried and tested methodology standardized in the early 2000's. In the United Kingdom, methods used are far more varied. In France, practices differ depending on which ministry awards the qualification. For instance, the file to be produced to prove one's know-how is very academic-oriented when it comes to gaining a diploma from the Ministry of Education, with applicants needing to write and describe, in well-chosen and appropriate words, what they are capable of doing in the work situation. By contrast, to obtain a qualification from the Ministry of Labour, they have to demonstrate competences in a reconstructed vocational context. In Finland, even though the validation procedure is sometimes accused of being too cumbersome, it is still possible for people to validate their skills in the workplace, meaning that the procedure is more accessible to workers not wishing to return to a school context to validate their vocational experience.

In all countries, the complexity of the validation system is regularly underlined, and adjustments are being sought to simplify access to it and make it easier to navigate.

2.2 Varying degrees of implementation

While certain countries enjoy both a mature national framework and years of experience, the existence of a national framework is not necessarily synonymous with high quantitative results or genuinely effective validation practices. The national institutional framework seems to be a condition that is necessary, but not sufficient, for the implementation of the validation practices. A commitment from central government and the social partners is indispensable to the effective development of these practices.

A number of national experiments demonstrate that strong consensus on the questions of education and the validation of competences, shared by political players, educational institutions and the social partners, provides a seedbed favouring the development of validation practices – as shown by countries as different as Finland and Portugal. In contrast to this favourable factor, an environment nailed down by political priorities, cultural conditions and socio-economic situations may seriously hamper NFIL validation, even where a legal framework clearly prevails – as illustrated for example by Romania and Spain.

- In **Romania**, the national institutional framework is not yet well-established. A set of laws and decrees adopted in the early 2000's governs the evaluation of non-formal and informal competences. NFIL validation is benefiting from an expansion in the number of validation centres and improvements in evaluation procedures and methods under the aegis of the *National Council of Adult Training (CNFPA)*. A reform in 2010 merging the CNFPA and another body, now in the process of being implemented, created the *National Authority of Qualifications*. Intended to improve coherence between the national qualification framework and NFIL validation, this reform has caused controversy among the institutional players. The problem is classic and similarly found in other countries: who has overall responsibility - the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Labour? As things stand, the consequences of the reform are not very clear, and this confusion does not facilitate the participation of the social players in the validation system.
- In **Spain**, there is a clear national framework for validation, with the legal framework bolstered in recent years and the royal decree of 2009 organising the *process for the recognition, evaluation, accreditation and registration of vocational qualifications (procedimiento de reconocimiento, evaluacion, acreditacion y registro de las cualificaciones profesionales)*. However, there are major limitations curbing the development of NFIL validation practices. Though the experimental nature of the process calls for the committed involvement of the social partners, the level of support varies from region to region. Moreover, the *convocatorias (calls for examination)* currently correspond in practice to limited, selective processes not allowing a 'flexible' response to the needs of workers and employers.

There is much discussion of the principles and arrangements for the recognition and validation of NFIL in public circles, particularly between the Ministries of Education and Labour. Understandably, education ministries give priority to equal access for all citizens to good-quality initial training and education. But life does not stop when initial education ends. It is only fair to give those with limited initial education but a wealth of experience at work or in voluntary organisations fresh opportunities in the course of their active life. This is a public policy objective of key interest to the trade unions and on which they have points of view which they wish to air.

2.3 Toward complementarity in the various validation and certification pathways

The systems for validating NFIL make us look again at the status of qualifications. The latter are not always the outcome of a long training process, but can also reward the acquired and effective mastery of a specific set of skills. In many cases, these skills can be acquired quite quickly, in the framework of a specific pathway or one partially shared with traditional vocational training.

In Denmark and Finland, it is possible to obtain a vocational qualification through on-the-job experience or through a more traditional method of attending courses. The two systems are mutually compatible, allowing people to validate their experience in a step-by-step manner, gradually progressing towards a full qualification thanks to complementary training.

In France, only qualifications recognised nationally (listed in the national register of vocational qualifications) can be acquired via the *Validation of Prior Experience* scheme (VAE). In Portugal, NFIL validation is embedded in the vocational training system, whereby the *Novas Oportunidades* centres can be considered as crossing points towards lifelong learning pathways. Indeed they are often run jointly with traditional training centres, allowing for synergies and economies of scale, and also enriching teachers' work. This combination, which might at first sight seem a problem, is something that the practitioners concerned experience in a positive way.

In all cases, the linkage between traditional training and NFIL validation involves modularizing the training on offer, with the validation of prior learning supplementing the training for the purpose of obtaining a full qualification.

It should be emphasised at this juncture that while NFIL validation can replace a formal pathway for obtaining a qualification, it does not do away with the need for training. The two pathways – the formal training and qualification pathway versus NFIL validation – can be alternatives, under certain carefully defined conditions regarding the equivalence of their outcomes. They can also complement each other, dependent on applicants' pathways and their vocational experience. In this sense, we can talk about two complementary pathways giving access to skill certification.

However, for this complementarity to be effective, the training centres need to give equal consideration to both options. In France, the two ways have to be connected to each other for qualifications which can only be acquired through validated training courses, as is the case with certain diplomas in the health and social sector. But beyond this precise obligation, a number of teachers have been reticent about pledging their support for the VAE scheme, specifically with regard to university courses, for fear that the value of diplomas could be adversely affected. In Denmark, there is a different obstacle, with the remuneration received by training centres for validating NFIL lower than that earned when dispensing traditional training courses. Situations like this limit interest in promoting NFIL validation.

In most countries, work needs to be done to legitimise NFIL validation and ensure that it is respected, conditional on the quality of the procedures, as a pathway for certifying competences equivalent to more traditional, formal pathways.

Resolution of the methodological problems throughout the validation process is important for the fair treatment of people with different backgrounds. Though diplomas awarded after IVET provide only limited information about a person's actual skills, the value attached to the skills acquired on the job is dependent on their validation and certification. There must be a reliable regulatory system in place to ensure that the validation frameworks have the credibility necessary to guarantee fair treatment both for those who have gained their diplomas after long periods of study and for those wishing to gain a certificate of equivalent value, validating skills acquired over the years on the job. According to a large majority of respondents to the public consultation on NFIL (see European Commission, 2012a), this equivalence is far from being guaranteed today.

Chapter 4

From collective bargaining and tripartite dialogue on NFIL issues to the impact on the labour market

The significant place accorded to NFIL issues in collective bargaining and social dialogue between employers and employee representatives and with public authorities has major potential consequences for the impact NFIL validation can have on the way the labour market functions.

The first section of this chapter looks at the two main focuses of collective bargaining and tripartite dialogue on NFIL: upstream, the concerted definition and update of occupational standards in Sectoral Councils or Committees; and downstream, collective agreements in companies and sectors. The second section details the successive levels conceivable for assessing the practical impact of NFIL recognition and validation on the way the labour market functions, emphasising the need for an appropriate mix of state incentives and collective bargaining to direct the market towards an efficient recognition of skills, however they are acquired.

1. The embryonic relationship between NFIL and social dialogue / collective bargaining

Though still only low on the agenda, NFIL validation is not outside the scope of social dialogue / collective bargaining.

1.1 Upstream: the concerted definition of occupational standards in Sectoral Councils

The Sectoral Committees or Councils, which contribute towards the definition of occupational standards and thus have a significant influence on training and certification practices, exist in most of the surveyed countries, sometimes at regional level and now emerging at

European level. Their work provides input for the framing and updating of national directories or catalogues of occupational qualifications. However the degree to which these Councils or Committees are operational varies greatly, as does the commitment of the social players. A common union initiative to make these Councils and Committees fully proactive would be very welcome.

In the work of these Councils, reference to the competence levels defined by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF¹, cf. box 3) is not automatic. It can be more or less clear, and more or less direct, depending on the degree to which the national framework itself has been developed and its conformity with the European framework. At best, the establishment of the national framework makes it possible to describe, for each occupational standard, the learning outcomes corresponding to the knowledge, skills and competences, formulated in a way consistent with the European approach. The rigorous identification of this prior learning and the listing of the evaluation criteria mean that its validation can be authorised, as appropriate, where it is the result of non-formal and informal learning. Although not the only one, the existence of a national framework is one of the key conditions for developing NFIL validation.

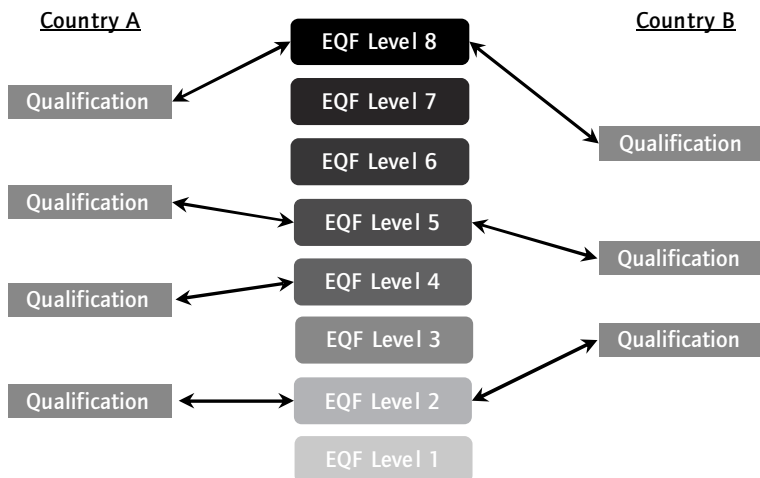
A look at the national cases surveyed confirms the diversity of experiences in Europe:

- In **Finland**, the 26 *Sectoral Committees* and 154 *qualification committees*, under the supervision of the *National Board of Education*, are important places for collective discussions and bargaining, with the social partners playing a very active role. Their presence is evidence of the recognised importance attached to their sound understanding of the skills necessary for a particular job. The Sectoral Committees are in charge of anticipating sectoral needs for skills and competences. The qualification committees define the needs associated with each qualification defined in the CBQ system and issue the qualification after the validation process. They involve a thousand experts (representatives of the employers, the employees and the training centres).

1. Consult the European Commission's website dedicated to the European Qualifications Framework: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm.

**Box 3 The European Qualifications Framework (EQF),
a translator between certified levels of qualification**
(qualification = knowledge + skills + competences)

The EQF operates as a translator. Via its eight reference levels it is supposed to transparently establish equivalency between national qualifications.



However, translation is far from automatic. The EQF links competences (in columns) to the level of mastery thereof (in rows). A given EQF level (e.g. level 5 below) is characterised by a combination of the capabilities expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. The situation gets complicated in cases where a given person may be seen as having, for example, a somewhat high level of knowledge and a somewhat low level of skills or competences.

Level 5	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 5 are	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change review and develop performance of self and others

Source: http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm.

- In **Italy**, there is not yet any shared framework of *occupational standards* at national level, even though the work underway on this subject now has the benefit of the 2012 laws targeting the setting up of a national system for validating and certifying skills. For a number of years, 28 social partner organisations (4 trade union confederations, 24 employers' organisations) have been involved in the definition of occupational standards, which should facilitate the establishment of the national competence validation framework. The work is well advanced, though no agreement has yet been reached on the definition of the occupational standards, the associated training content and the qualification of competences. Progress is slow, partly because of the divergent points of view of the ministries involved, and the lack of political leadership is keenly felt. The social partners also started work at sectoral level, but this has now been stopped for want of sufficient political involvement. The regions have also been working on validation standards since the early 2000's. The regional systems have been examined and compared with the aim of defining a minimum level of occupational standards for each region, thereby favouring the inter-regional mobility of workers.
- The **Portuguese** experience with the concerted definition of occupational standards has 16 Sectoral Councils involved, the *Conselhos Sectoriais para a Qualificação*. These collaborate with the *National Agency for Qualification (Agência Nacional para Qualificação eo Ensino Profissional, ANQEP)*, which is responsible for coordinating the national qualification system (*Sistema Nacional de Qualificações*). This system covers the *National Qualifications Framework* and the *National Qualifications Catalogue*. The Sectoral Councils allow the ANQEP to take into account the realities of the labour market, incorporating representatives from the *Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional or IEFP)*, the social partners, training centres and educational institutions. One particular issue for social partner representatives is to play an educational role vis-à-vis their members, providing them with information and advice. The ANQEP would like to make these Councils more effective in collecting information and producing forecasts. An open consultation method is used, allowing anyone to put forward proposals to create or update qualifications.

- In **Romania**, the Sectoral Committees are the focus of the tripartite dialogue on the occupational standards and allow for the social and institutional players in vocational training and qualification to meet together. These committees unite employee and employer representatives in a spirit of social dialogue on occupational standards and thus provide a basis for NFIL validation. Progress is hoped for by all involved, with a view to ensuring the full role of these committees and their active involvement in collective bargaining in enterprises and sectors.
- In **Spain**, the social partners have contributed towards constructing the *National Vocational Qualifications Catalogue (Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales, CNQP)*, via the definition of the occupational standards and each qualification. The CNQP is now complete, and contains almost 650 qualifications. However, in the view of the social partners, the actual supply of qualifications and associated training courses is too rigid and not sufficiently ‘flexible’ to respond satisfactorily to the needs of companies and individuals.

1.2 Downstream: the role of collective agreements in companies and sectors

Upstream, social dialogue can lay down conditions favourable to the development of NFIL validation practices; downstream, collective bargaining plays a concrete role in organising training and validation processes in sectors and enterprises. Within the latter, the identification of competences acquired in a non-formal or informal manner can be of value to employers. Identifying and mobilizing hidden skills can be a profitable low-cost investment for an employer, with a view to boosting productivity. At the same time, employers are often reluctant to explicitly validate these competences, for fear of wage claims or losing workers to competitors: what is non-formal or informal should stay non-formal or informal! Collective bargaining is necessary here to resolve this contradiction, making employers responsible for NFIL validation, and thus incorporating NFIL validation into career pathways offering better employment security, both within and outside an employee’s current company.

Box 4 The European Metalworkers' Federation's (EMF) approach to NFIL validation

The EMF's approach to NFIL

The EMF insists on certain common principles:

- in a 'learning' working environment, people must be able to validate their competences;
- a distinction must be made between recognition and validation: validating means fully or partially certifying a competence acquired through experience.
- validation of prior learning contributes towards the acquisition of a certain number of credits, to be supplemented, if necessary, by training.

But outside of any formal validation, recognition of NFIL can be implemented via human resource management practices: competence-based job profiles; evaluation interviews making it possible to identify the vocational skills and competences acquired and those still to be developed in order to change jobs; access to internal training courses to make up for initial training shortfalls.

Anticipating demand for competences is crucial, all the more so when there is a risk of skilled labour shortages. The EMF believes that staff management practices favourable to the recognition of NFIL should be encouraged within the framework of collective bargaining. In reality, the dialogue between employers and unions on the subjects of recognising competences, access to training and 'learning' enterprises seems to be easier at European level, being less dominated by the specific features of national systems, especially when it comes to validation in the strict sense.

An issue for negotiation in multinationals?

The EMF is committed to European-level negotiations within multinationals, and has set up negotiating groups made up of representatives from enterprises. One example of an agreement on anticipating change and on vocational development is to be found at Thalès. Allowing employees to develop their skills and encouraging them to gain higher qualifications are priority concerns when, as in Germany, enterprises are faced with demographic transition, the proper management of which will determine the mastery of new technologies.

In large companies, validation of prior learning is one of the tools available in this respect, but 'it doesn't just spring to mind spontaneously'. In the automotive sector, skill development relies heavily on on-the-job training practices. Though the sector pays its workers relatively well, demands in terms of levels of training and qualifications are limited. The EMF is calling for the explicit recognition of experience acquired on-the-job.

Source: Interview with an EMF official.

However, as seen from the experience of the countries surveyed, empirical evidence as yet only provides few examples of such collective agreements. In most countries, the link between NFIL validation practices and collective bargaining remains tenuous, for several reasons: training is generally viewed as being outside the scope of decentralized collective bargaining and its priorities, and the question of competences acquired in non-formal or informal ways has only marginal status.

At the European level, the ideas and experience of the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), an ETUC member, are interesting². The EMF believes that validating prior learning is an important contributory element in debates on employability and its tools. However, while the Federation has tried to tackle and make concrete progress on the subject, the diversity of national situations represents a major obstacle to common implementation at European level, with the issue of certification not being accorded the same importance or viewed from the same perspective by unionists at national level. Box 4 shows the EMF's approach.

2. The impact of NFIL validation on the labour market

NFIL validation has a welcome net impact on the personal and family development of those individuals benefiting from it (see also Part 1, chapter 2, section 3), particularly when associated with a complementary or subsequent training course. Such impacts can have economic consequences in the short and long term:

- More autonomous, more dynamic and more self-confident workers.
- More inter-generational progress, thanks to improved educational transmission within the family.

However, full realisation of these favourable effects, especially in the improved matching of supply and demand in terms of jobs, depends on the commitment of companies to NFIL validation and on making them responsible for recognising their workers' skills. From this point of

2. In 2012, after our survey, the EMF merged with other industry federations to become *industryAll*.

view, the current situation in most countries surveyed is unsatisfactory, and significant progress needs to be made. One symptom of this situation is the low level of responses from the private sector to the public consultation on NFIL held by the European Commission in 2011:

- Large enterprises frequently develop their own internal practices for recognising and developing competences, albeit without always deeming it necessary to validate them, as this provides workers with qualifications exploitable on the labour market outside the enterprise. Fearful of a brain drain, companies are often reluctant to take this last step.
- The commitment of small and micro enterprises to validation remains difficult for a series of reasons: practical, organisational and financial constraints; a lack of awareness of competence-related issues among managers; a lack of proximity between such small enterprises and the institutional mechanisms. This difficulty is striking in those countries where the economic and social importance of very small enterprises is great, as in Portugal and Poland, but also in countries with a highly effective training system, as in Denmark.

These factors help explain why NFIL acquisition and validation practices seem a barely visible ‘underground’ component of the education and training system, a point which limits the potentially systemic impact of disseminating these practices. This problem is well documented by CEDEFOP, and trade union intervention can be considered as a way of revealing and formalizing these ‘underground’ practices³ (cf. Box 5).

3. This is the opportunity to clarify a point possibly causing linguistic confusion: NFIL acquisition and validation practices generally occur within enterprises or institutions fully integrated, in legal terms, into a country’s socio-economic fabric, and as such have no compulsory link to the so-called ‘informal’ economy (‘unofficial’ work, underground or clandestine activities, etc.). Naturally, workers within the informal or underground economy gain skills which also deserve to be recognised: the recognition of skills and the ‘formalization’ of underground activities should therefore go hand in hand.

Box 5 Extract from *Learning while working, Success stories on workplace learning in Europe* (CEDEFOP 2011)

"It is difficult in quantitative surveys to capture non-formal and informal learning in enterprises, which is often not viewed as training and therefore difficult to monitor in terms of hours and participants. Mentoring and tutoring by more experienced colleagues is a good example, since it tends not to be considered by companies as a training activity; skilled workers who mentor other colleagues and are in charge of the induction of new recruits may not even consider themselves as trainers" (p.32).

"In some countries a new role is developing for trade union activists who provide front line guidance in working hours and negotiate with employers to open access to workplace learning opportunities. In Austria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK, trade union representatives are acting as 'learning ambassadors', encouraging employees to take on learning and fill their skill gaps, and advising companies on their training needs" (p.59).

2.1 The impact on the labour market: complementary levels

Three complementary levels can be envisaged to take account of the impact of NFIL practices and the recognition of NFIL on the labour market. The reality may, of course, be more complex than this logical succession.

Level 1: Services provided by the trade unions

The aim of these services is to improve the balance of power in favour of workers on the labour market. Trade union intervention, in the hands of delegated activists or learning ambassadors, strives to equip workers for vocational mobility, within and outside their current company, by helping to improve the capabilities that they can effectively mobilise. This is a practice with established roots in some of the countries surveyed, such as England, and that is emerging in others, such as Romania. In these countries, the unions train and encourage certain members to become activists specialised in VET questions and providing information and guidance for workers. In England, these activists contribute towards a genuine informal training community in the workplace. The services rendered to workers by these activists can be substantial, without necessarily leading to any explicit validation of the skills in the form of

official certification, although the modular, pragmatic approach of the NVQs does open the way for such certification. And employers benefit from this trade union commitment, without an overt commitment on their part... Romania demonstrates a certain duality between this voluntary trade union intervention and the institutional system for validating NFIL: whereas the trade unions are developing a range of training services for workers in cooperation with non-governmental organisations and business stakeholders, the latter – on the basis of the network of validation centres – is still looking for balance, stability and complete credibility.

Level 2: Specific and/or regulated segments of the labour market

Shortages of skilled labour affect specific occupations, corresponding to specific labour market segments, in both industry and services. Acknowledgment of this imbalance is a strong incentive to develop the validation of experience acquired in these occupations, thereby revealing the actual competences available. An additional incentive comes from state regulations stipulating compulsory qualifications for people wishing to work in certain occupations. This applies to a wide range of occupations, for example in the (health-) care and banking sectors. The common feature is often the ability to deal with the risks normally associated with performing certain types of work. These incentives, coming from the market and the public authorities, are leading unions and employer organisations to become involved in organising schemes for validating NFIL, the operational responsibility for which lies mainly with public or accredited institutions.

In Spain, the annual calls for examination (*convocatorias*), organised at regional level under the aegis of a uniform national framework, target very specific segments of the labour market, in accordance with the estimated demand for skilled workers, regulatory obligations and also financial constraints. In a region such as Galicia, the focus of the *convocatorias* was originally on the care sector, but has now been extended to industrial jobs (metalworking, textiles) and those in the tertiary sector (tourism) typical of the region's economic structure, a process gradually impacting the entire regional labour market.

Level 3: Affirmation of a general framework for NFIL recognition and validation, helping to better secure vocational pathways

The third, and most ambitious, level involves the implementation of a framework organising NFIL validation and its link to CVET across a

wide set of occupations and competences. The majority of respondents to the European Commission's public consultation on NFIL believe that, while such frameworks exist at a national, regional or sectoral level, they lack the coherence needed to allow them to respond fully to needs. Achieving such a framework implies meeting certain conditions:

- Social partner agreement on the fundamental objectives of such a general framework is obviously a precondition. To be effective, this framework needs to enjoy strong support from the social partners and their commitment in the institutions responsible for its implementation, perhaps even including their involvement in managing the training and validation processes. In Finland, the country which, of the ten surveyed, may be considered to be the one best integrating NFIL validation mechanisms into the VET system, social partner commitment is effective in both the institutions responsible for these mechanisms and in the practical programmes for validating competences. This shared commitment reflects consensus on the objectives and the methods.
- An effective network of training and validation centres, specialised by occupation or sector and well-rooted at national level, is necessary for successfully implementing state NFIL validation programmes on a large scale. One relevant indicator of the effectiveness of such programmes is the extent to which women are covered, as is very much the case in Finland and Portugal where they are fully covered. However, access to these programmes often remains very patchy, with access often easier for already qualified workers, especially where the process is voluntary on the part of the applicants. The social partners can be involved more or less directly in running (some of) these centres. Where this is the case (in Finland, Portugal, Romania, etc.), they acquire experience and the legitimacy allowing them to influence the overall strategies of the training and validation centres.

A general framework of this nature facilitates the transferability of the competences validated between enterprises and sectors, as well as highlighting the positive character of workers' mobility. Providing a more integrated approach to their individual pathways, the personal return for

workers in terms of skills, irrespective of how they were acquired, is reflected in their improved employability, enhancing their career and salary prospects⁴. This is a pathway towards achieving the slogan *Make Skills Work, Make Skills Pay*, with a systemic impact on the way the labour market functions. In France and Portugal, public programmes (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* or VAE in France, *Novas Oportunidades* in Portugal) are evidence of such an ambition, though their current limitations prevent such ambition being fully achieved:

- Little focus on vocational competences in Portugal: in the words of the social partners, the *Novas Oportunidades* initiative is a success in terms of recognising basic educational competences, but less so when it comes to vocational competences.
- Limited uptake of VAE in France (compared to the initial target): VAE is an individual right which it is not always easy for the people concerned to exercise. Partially explained by excessive 'red tape', there is in addition not always consensus on the qualifications to be validated. In many cases, employers tend to favour *Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle* (CQP) whose validity is restricted to the branch or sector and which do not correspond to a specific training level. By contrast, the unions prefer qualifications corresponding to a level validated at national level and which facilitate mobility, whatever sector the people belong to.

2.2 Combining state incentives and social dialogue / collective bargaining to steer the market

Building an operational system for validating NFIL, via these successive stages, is a question not just of institutional engineering, but also of a firm commitment by the social partners to the practical existence of such a system. In this sense, as we have seen, social dialogue and collective bargaining between employers and unions plays a major role:

4. The individual and collective returns on lifelong learning refer to the potential gains resulting from it for individuals and society respectively. A better understanding of these returns, in the form of corresponding studies, is desirable. Where these returns are high, the private and public funding being ploughed into lifelong learning can be seen as a socially profitable investment. A recent study conducted in Finland shows that such returns are significant (Laukkanen, 2010).

upstream, the Sectoral Committees or Councils help to define the occupational standards, with significant consequences for training and qualification practices, while downstream, in sectors and enterprises, the negotiation of collective agreements is designed to integrate NFIL validation, with the aim of making vocational careers more secure, within and outside enterprises. Realism forces us to acknowledge that social dialogue and collective bargaining today still fall short of this aim, particularly at a European or multinational level. Though large multinationals often have highly-developed internal practices to detect and promote competences and talents, this might be the prerogative of their human resources departments and not an issue for the bargaining table.

Where state incentives and social dialogue converge, we find the best breeding ground for boosting NFIL validation and including it in the concept of lifelong learning. Yet it is no bed of roses, as seen by the example of the French banking sector: to be fully effective, clear-cut state incentives combined with good sectoral agreements are needed for active collective bargaining within enterprises (cf. Box 6 below). Obviously, the context specific to certain companies can create the right conditions for productive initiatives, as seen in such French enterprises as *Club Méditerranée* and *Orange*, where the employer and the unions have agreed to develop a collective VAE process. In the case of *Orange*, one objective is to recognise the long experience built up over the years by the company's 'trouble-shooters', the so-called '*lignards*', at the core of the company's telecommunications operations. In the case of *Club Méditerranée*, the aim is to allow better external recognition of experience acquired by employees⁵.

But such good practices are by no means commonplace. Protocols in agreements between proactive enterprises and establishments providing VET and validation services are one way of reconciling a company's own interests and compliance with statutory criteria and standards aimed at ensuring the transferability of the competences recognised.

5. See also the detailed experience of VAE in *Club Méditerranée* in the 'France' national chapter.

Box 6 Collective bargaining and the validation of prior learning from experience (VAE): the case of the French banking sector

Interaction between collective bargaining and the validation of prior learning (VAE, Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience) in the French banking sector has been promoted by two recent developments:

- The strengthening of external incentives: the obligation, in force since 2010 and monitored by the *Financial Markets Authority (Autorité des Marchés Financiers, AMF)*, for compulsory occupational qualifications for professionals in financial investment services who are in contact with the public. The conditions and rules governing the way in which these qualifications are obtained are defined precisely in instructions issued by the AMF (see <http://www.amf-france.org>). The *Fédération Bancaire Française (FBF)* and the *Observatoire des métiers de la banque (OMB)* are very active on these subjects, implementing the AMF's requests. The FBF publishes a *Guide des métiers bancaires* (Guide to banking occupations) defining the qualification requirements for each occupation, listing for each one the tasks involved, the working environment and the required profile¹.
- The strengthening of endogenous training efforts: in June 2011, the *Association Française des Banques*² (AFB) and all unions representing the banking sector (CFDT, CFTC, CGT, CGT-FO, SNB/CFE-CGC) signed an agreement modifying the agreement of July 2005 on lifelong training in the banking sector. This new agreement, underlining the sector's major investment in CVET (approximately 4% of total wages), targets younger staff (under 26) and older staff (over 45), and particularly those less well qualified. The agreement outlines a broad range of training and qualification pathways, specifying accredited training and validation service providers. It thus explicitly opens the way for individual and collective VAE within the banks. At the same time, a joint body, OPCABAIA, has been created by agreement between the social partners, responsible for managing VET funding for the banks, (health) insurance companies, general insurance agencies and assistance societies.

However, these initiatives have no direct or automatic impact on practices within banks, being dependent on the conclusion and implementation in each bank of what are called *Accords de Gestion Prévisionnelle de l'Emploi et des Compétences (Forward Planning Agreements on Employment and Competences)*, which a 2005 law made it compulsory to negotiate every three years for all enterprises with more than 300 employees. According to the banks, these agreements can be more or less demanding. In the case of 'good practices' (not all!), these agreements contain strong commitments towards achieving training and qualification targets,

with a number of banks aiming to systematically promote the upskilling of their employees on the basis of VAE, in line with the rules defined by the AMF. This coherence between state incentives, collective bargaining at industry level and enterprise agreements seems to offer some promise in terms of stimulating NFIL validation in a vocational field, though it is a narrow path and one which assumes favourable political and social conditions.

1. See the sites of the FBF (www.fbf.fr) and the OMB (www.observatoire-metiers-banque.fr).
2. The employers' organisation has two facets: while the FBF is responsible for VET missions, the AFB deals with tasks involving employer representation in the field of collective bargaining. The OMB, created on the basis of the Law of 4 May 2004 on vocational training and social dialogue, was set up by the Agreement on Lifelong Training in the Banking Sector, signed on 8 July 2005. A steering committee, with the participation of the employers and the unions, defines the way the OMB operates.

In Portugal, such protocols are common between enterprises and certain *Novas Oportunidades* centres belonging to VET centres and enjoy a good reputation among enterprises. In Spain, a number of pilot schemes have been set up by enterprises, involving their workers in a process of recognising prior experience and providing complementary training, in the context of agreements reached with the Ministry of Education. In Denmark, certain sectors such as transport are taking the initiative in recognising NFIL, though other occupations (employees in the healthcare sector, electricians, etc.) are more reluctant, intent on protecting traditional access routes.

Identifying, documenting and validating competences helps to increase what we might call the depth of the labour market: the actual supply of competences by workers becomes more transparent because of it. Demand for training and upskilling by the unemployed, young people facing difficulties in finding a job, etc. also develops. When applying for a new job, a worker, whether employed or unemployed, can list his complete skills portfolio according to standards clearly recognised in an extended market, the boundaries of which go beyond geographical considerations limiting conceivable mobility⁶. 'Flexicurity' is rebalanced

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6. The National Reform Program communicated by the Romanian government to the European Commission in April 2011, for example, clearly expresses this aim: "The portfolio will include all diplomas, certificates and other documents obtained following the assessment of skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning

towards security, a not unimportant aspect of the support provided by the unions for NFIL validation mechanisms in the country which gave the world the concept of flexicurity, Denmark. The availability of such information is also an advantage for employers, as it has the potential to greatly improve skill matching. The secure external transferability of recognised or certified skills facilitates mobility.

The present trend towards labour market deregulation is a potential threat to this progress, 'deskilling' people and jobs so as to pay them less. This will be the case if qualifications, whatever their origin, are recognised less by collective agreements and if the role of the occupational categories is weakened in such agreements. In such a deregulatory approach, there is a danger of the national and European tools, such as the qualification frameworks and catalogues, being equated with 'rigidity'. This danger needs to be highlighted, especially as European policy seeks to promote mobility on the basis of certified vocational skills and competences. The paradox is that excessive labour market deregulation might have the opposite effect. As one Portuguese unionist put it, this is clearly 'a very controversial moment'. Raising people's skills levels is one way out of the crisis, and it starts with recognising their actual competences. Yet blind competitive and fiscal constraints are threatening this thrust.

This comment refers not only to those countries where labour market reforms are currently underway, reflecting pressure generated by the crisis and its political handling, but also to countries whose economic and social situation is more stable. Germany and Denmark operate highly efficient VET systems, actively supported by employers and unions, and anchored in enterprises' HR management, but moderately open to NFIL validation practices. Though recognition of formal qualifications is clearly guaranteed for the workers well integrated into competitive enterprises, there is a risk of a growing dualism, with those individuals who, for various reasons, escape the formal qualification routes, possibly ending up swelling the ranks of a peripheral economy

frameworks. Out of this individual educational portfolio one should be able to extract the following data: student educational pathway, his/her inclinations and skills and particular performances" (*National Reform Program (2011-2013)*, Government of Romania, Bucharest, April 2011, pp. 109-110).

of precarious low-paid jobs which do little to mobilise their competences and offer no prospects of upskilling. In these countries, too, upgrading the status of NFIL validation will contribute towards economic and social cohesion, more inclusive of those workforce elements (early school-leavers, migrants, etc.) whose contribution to labour supply assumes major importance in a context of demographic ageing. This is also something making itself felt in Finland, a country where NFIL validation is well integrated into the VET system.

Some possible enhancements likely to improve matching on the labour market seem to be common to all countries, despite their differences:

- More systematic global and local anticipation of skills needed, thereby clarifying priorities. At the moment, the effort invested in anticipation remains fuzzy and incomplete.
- Training and qualification services focusing more directly on specific company needs, whatever the size of the company.
- Even better, more personalised guidance for individuals before they enter the validation and training process, with similarly robust and personalised follow-up after having completed the process.

Part II

National realities and perspectives

Chapter 1

Denmark

Introduction

Denmark is a small country having to come to grips with the effects of globalization. During the 1990's and 2000's and in line with a longstanding tradition of multipartite social dialogue, the State and the social partners introduced "flexicurity" in an effort to trigger growth. This concept enables a company to make flexible use of its workforce, while, in cases of redundancy, workers are provided with high (secure) unemployment benefits until they find a new job.

Flexicurity is not the only reason for Danish labour market success. To maintain and develop the country's economic performance, Denmark has also comprehensive system for upskilling workers and maintaining high qualification levels. Both the State and companies, supported by trade unions, invest in human capital. Public spending on education and initial vocational training is one of the highest in the European Union (8.72 % of GNP in 2005), higher than the EU average (5.4%)¹.

Taking into account this commitment to education and training, one of Denmark's priorities since 2004 has been to develop the recognition of prior learning.

1. The need for a high level of qualifications and the adult training system

The high level of qualifications characterising the Danish workforce is partly due to the lifelong learning system but also to a well-established IVET system. At the end of the 2000's, some 80 per cent of a youth

1. Eurostat (2012), http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Educational_expenditure_statistics

cohort complete a recognised vocational qualification, compared to 60 per cent in the early 1980s (Eurotrainer 2008). Moreover, in 2012 less than 10% of the population aged 18-24 had not completed secondary education and were not in further education or training (Eurostat 2012).

Denmark has been operating a “dual learning system” since 2001, with a distinction made between further education for adults – adult education and CVET– and ordinary education. Adult education and CVET enable people to gain diplomas ranging from preparatory adult education (FUV) to a master degree:

- Preparatory adult education (FVU)
- General adult education (AVU)
- Higher preparatory exams (HF)
- Adult vocational training (AMU) (since 1997)
- Basic adult education (GVU) (since 2001)
- Vocational education and training (VET) programmes (since 2003)
- Short-cycle higher education programmes (VVU)
- Master’s programmes

This part of the dual learning system emphasizes awarding adults certificates for competences and continuing lifelong education. With its focus on identifying individual skills, the system was built and developed to facilitate access to training for low-skilled and unskilled workers, and to raise the overall level of qualifications.

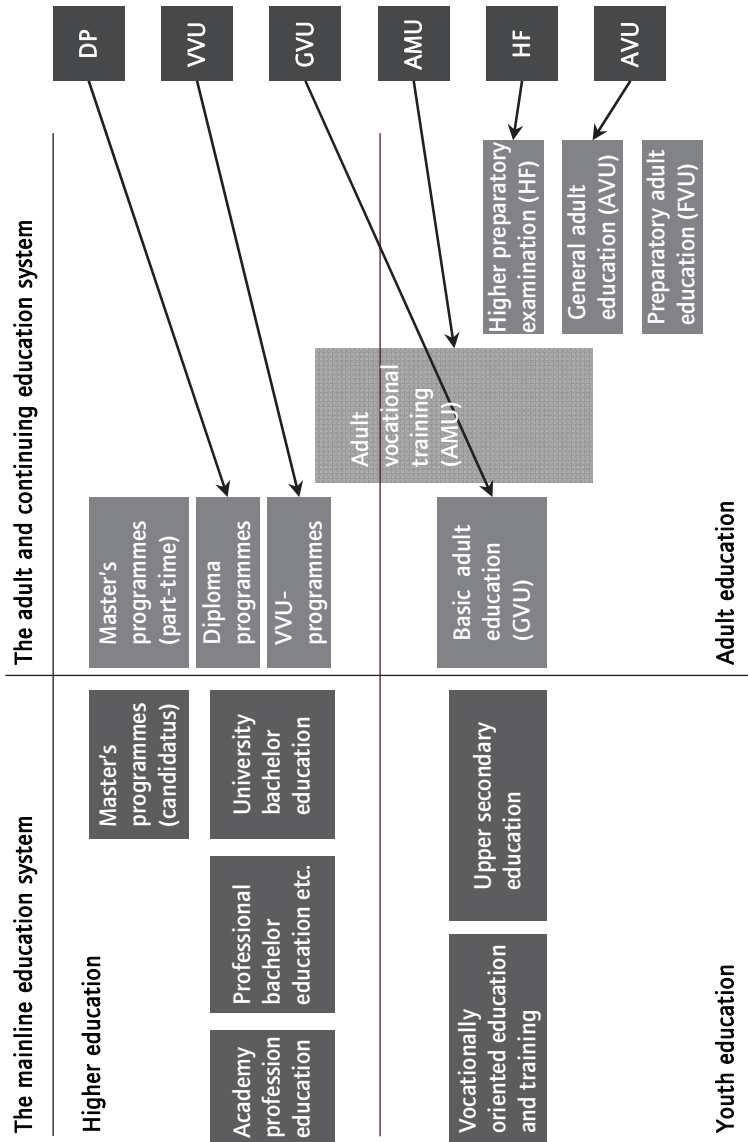
As we will see, this architecture also facilitates the recognition of prior learning.

2. The place of the NFIL recognition and validation framework and associated process in upskilling

2.1 Establishment of the NFIL validation system

During the 2000’s, Denmark upgraded the status of prior learning. This was not the result of a collective agreement between the social partners, but instead triggered by a new law adopted after a consultation process initiated at the beginning of the decade.

Figure 6 Main educational fields identified for NFIL validation
(Act No. 556 of 6 June 2007)



Source: Buhl and Andreasen (2010).

A 2004 policy paper entitled “Recognition of prior learning within the education system” constituted the first step along the path to recognising prior learning. This was followed by Act No. 556 of 6 June 2007 defining the validation of prior learning for the following six educational fields: Since 2007, every adult has the right to ask an educational institution belonging to the “adult and CVET system” to assess his prior learning with a view to having his competences recognised. Should the institution’s assessment decision not satisfy the candidate, he can appeal against it (to the *Qualifications Board*).

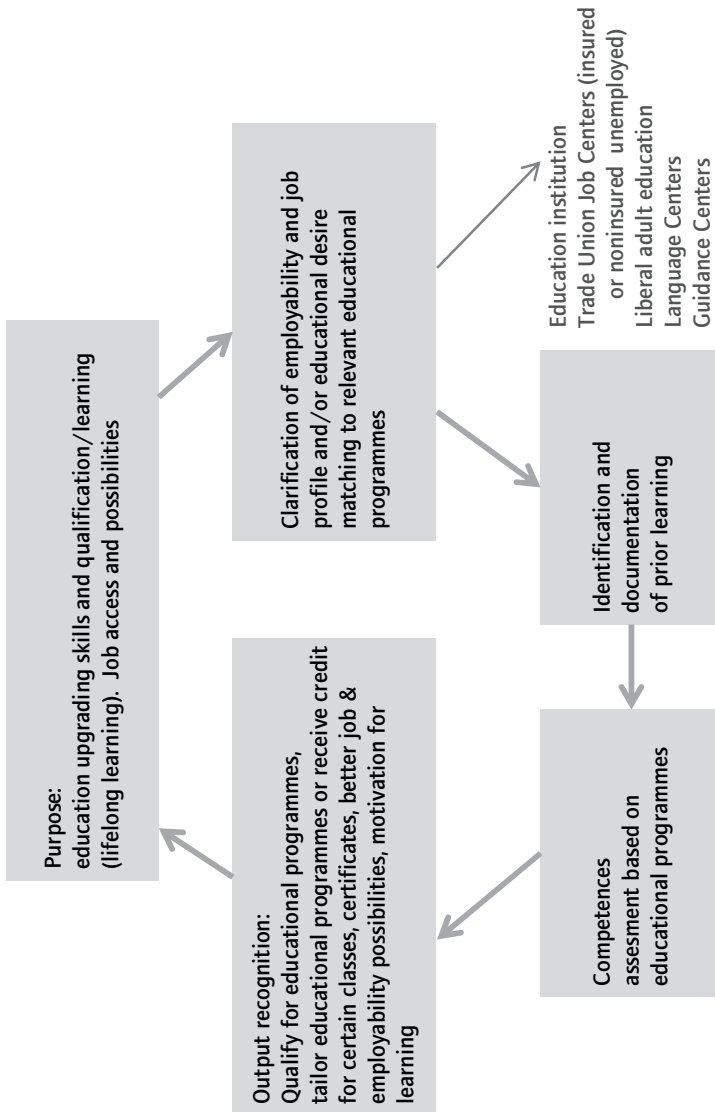
To gain a better understanding of the practices in use and their impact, the *National Knowledge Centre for the Validation of Prior Learning* (NVR) has been created.

2.2 Partnership with the social partners to promote uptake of the No. 556 Act

In June 2007, the Ministry of Education signed a partnership agreement with the *Danish Trade Union Confederation* (LO), the *Confederation of Danish Professionals* (FTF), the *Federation of Danish Employers* (DA) and the *Danish Association of Managers and Executives* to promote the recognition of prior learning and the use of adult and CVET programmes. Statements from the signatory parties are positive (Danish Ministry of Education, Department of Adult VET and the Office of Lifelong Learning, Undervisningsministeriet 2012):

- From the DA point of view: “This partnership agreement allows us to be part of setting the agenda when it comes to finding solutions for people who normally aren’t motivated to enrol in continuing education. Prior learning assessments will help profile individuals’ qualifications and make them more attractive to employers” (Henrik Bach Mortensen, director)
- From the LO point of view: “The benefit of recognising people’s prior learning is that you don’t need to start from scratch when you want to begin an education. You get credit for the things you can do. People’s experiences will now be officially recognised, and I feel that will help motivate more people to go back to school.” (Ejner Holst, Confederation Secretary)

Figure 7 The process for recognition of prior learning in an educational perspective and a Danish context



Source: Danish Ministry of Education, Department of Adult VET and Office of Lifelong Learning (Undervisningsministeriet 2012).

In spring 2008, the Ministry of Education together with the social partners created a prior learning information and networking campaign, targeting union members and employers.

This period saw emphasis being put on online publicity (access to information, tools, etc.) with a view to encouraging people to have their prior learning recognised. This was backed up by a TV campaign broadcast on Danish National TV, conferences, seminars and meetings.

The social partners, intent on giving the Danish workforce access to learning and upskilling, were also involved in this publicity campaign.

2.3 The process for recognising prior learning

The process for recognising prior learning is a “classical” process, starting with gaining experience and ending with competence assessment, and including such steps as guidance and specific processes aimed at identifying prior learning.

The above diagram compiled by the Ministry of Education clearly shows that the expected outcomes of recognition go further than just certification, including for example better job and employability prospects and enhanced motivation to continue learning.

3. Social partners and the training system: a focus on the transport sector

This chapter illustrates the specific architecture of one part of the adult and CVET system: the sectoral level, where the social partners are directly involved within bipartite boards in monitoring non-formal learning and prior learning recognition practices.

3.1 Context: the need for qualifications within this sector

The last decade has shown that the Danish transport sector needs more skilled workers to compete and survive internationally. With workers in

this sector unwilling to go back to school for years, employers and unions have agreed to set up a training system offering both apprenticeship opportunities (for young workers) and specific labour market programmes and vocational training for workers. With regard to the latter, one focus is the prior learning recognition system.

3.2 The National Transport Training Board: structure and role

The National Transport Training Board (TUR) is a non-profit organisation owned by the social partners and with the mission of proving VET.

For each area of competences, the TUR defines a VET programme which the Danish Labour Minister has to approve. The VET programmes and courses are given by public and private schools and are financed by the State, with the VET centres obliged to follow the curriculum set down by the TUR.

TUR operates 2 different programmes:

- The AMU training programme (labour market training for adults) contains more than 200 training courses ranging in duration from 1 day to 10 weeks and attended by more than 70,000 people a year.
- The VET programme (vocational training, in-company training and school-based training) which produces skilled workers with a journeyman qualification.

Within these two different programmes, the TUR monitors training centre offerings: do trainers meet up to certain quality standards? Is cooperation between the training centre and the board good? Are there facilities offered to the workers? Is there sufficient geographic proximity between the training centre and workers?

3.3 Recognition of prior learning: implementation

Twelve years ago, the transport sector was one of the first sectors to implement recognition of prior learning. In theory, there are a large number of people within this sector for whom this way of achieving skilled driver status could be of interest.

Called the “Credit Road”, the VET programme for core workers, with its mix of validation and training, has produced some 1000 skilled transport workers since 2001.

Workers have to be at least 25 years old (on average they are 42 years old) and to have been employed at least 4 years in the transport sector. The Credit Road is based on the recognition of actual competences, whether acquired at school, at work or under other circumstances.

Each worker goes through the following procedure:

- He starts by going to the training centre and asking for an individual assessment of his formal and informal skills. Groups of 3 - 5 workers are put together during the procedure.
- Trainers then introduce the group to the system. The TUR points out that people are often afraid to take part, as in the past they didn't like school and assessments. One of the roles of the trainers is thus to boost their confidence.
- The worker is interviewed and tested with regard to each element of his work in line with the credits associated with the certificate. In doing so, he goes over different topics with different trainers: basic competences, technical skills, etc. Though without any formal certification, many workers know how to perform complex tasks: driving in a foreign country, dealing with road legislation, dealing with firms, securing the trucks, etc...
- During the interviews, trainers may find themselves having to explain to the worker that on the one hand his competences seem ok, but that practical tests will be needed to demonstrate these. As part of this assessment, the worker may also have to take computer-based tests to answer certain questions

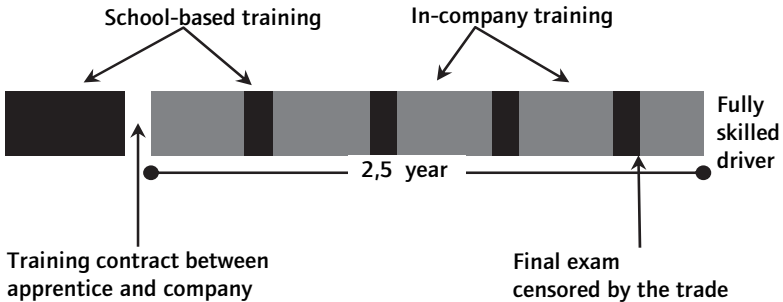
The duration of this initial step is 2 or 3 days.

After the evaluation, the candidate takes a training course lasting for 4 - 12 weeks spread out over one year (compared to a full 3-year apprenticeship programme for new entrants). The validation procedure is completed when the candidate passes a final exam - as illustrated in figure 8.

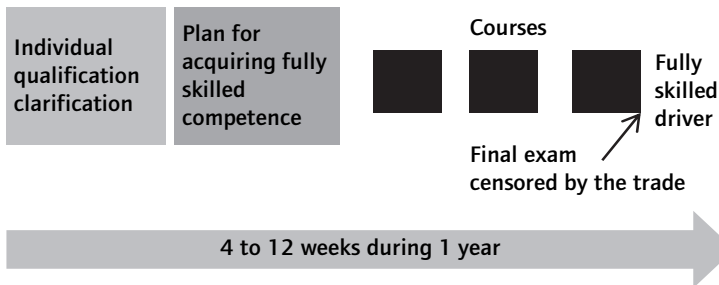
Figure 8 The prior learning recognition process in Denmark

Apprenticeship program:

Training of young professional drivers between 17.5 and 25 years



The "credit road" system
making experienced drivers fully skilled



Source: TUR (Danish national transport training board), The credit road, Copenhagen 2012.

The training is paid for by the State, though the compensation received by the training centre is not attractive. However, training centres do acknowledge that people having gone through this recognition procedure often come back for further courses, thus paving the way for lifelong learning.

Though certification does have an impact on wages, it is not much (a skilled driver earns 1 euro more per hour), meaning that workers often put pressure on the training centre to complete certification quickly.

From the TUR point of view, this tool is an important way of retaining workers within the transport sector, allowing people who do not want to go back to school for a long period to be recognised as fully skilled drivers. It also makes the sector more attractive for people coming from other sectors. The employers are also generally satisfied with this system, though do not want to generalize the impact (taking into account the wage impact).

4. Limits and difficulties of the current system of recognising prior learning

The social partners have been involved in the recognition of prior learning right from the outset, supporting the assessment of skills campaign in the early 2000's. But this involvement is not across-the-board, being dependent on the sector and the type of skills concerned. Electricians and the healthcare sector for example prefer to maintain traditional ways of gaining diplomas. One way used to develop and promote RPL involved the use of education ambassadors, initially introduced by the former Women Workers' Union (KAD) and later adopted by the Danish Commercial and Clerical Employees Union (HK). But this practice is still limited and very much underdeveloped within small and medium-size enterprises.

Good practices of inter-institution collaboration were identified by the Danish Evaluation Institute (The Danish Evaluation Institute, 2010; evaluating Act No. 556). Such collaboration provides a good opportunity to discuss which tools are relevant, ensuring a degree of alignment in the tools institutions use in assessing prior learning. Collaboration can thus potentially enhance confidence in and the legitimacy of assessing prior learning. According to the focus group interviewed with regard to evaluation, collaboration and knowledge-sharing with other institutions on the assessment of prior learning are particularly widespread within diploma programmes, where providers come together several times a year in a networking group.

However, there is a lack of information on the recognition of prior learning: “Not all institutions have a documented system to ensure the quality of prior learning assessments. The percentage of institutions with a documented system fluctuates from 43% within VVU and 48% within AMU to 61% within GUV, 69% within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC and 89% within diploma programmes – i.e. there are a number of institutional differences in how widely a quality assurance system for prior learning assessment is used, with a diploma programme standing out compared to other education areas”.

From the point of view of educational institutions, the lack of progress in the recognition of prior learning can be explained by “internal barriers”: it is difficult to plan possible individualised follow-on courses, and it is difficult to explain to applicants what prior learning actually is, and how it can be documented and assessed (the Danish Evaluation Institute 2010, pp.216-218).

This is why 3-year national initiatives were launched by the Ministry of Education in early 2012. These involve:

- *Local information campaigns and activities*, focusing on RPL as a way to increase job access and employability. Local information campaigns will try to reach such target groups as older people, women, low-skilled workers, etc. Best practice feedback will be used to support the idea that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is possible and useful. Links between credits and RPL will be clarified when not understood, and schools will be made aware of RPL.
- *Initiatives within adult VET (AMU)*. To enhance the commitment of training centres, recognition of prior learning will become one of the terms of their performance contracts.
- *Initiatives within general adult education (AVU) / higher preparatory exams (HF)*. A handbook of prior learning will be compiled, the use of which will be compulsory for staff.
- *Initiatives within higher education programmes and at diploma level*. The Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education will begin a dialogue with school associations and the Danish Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning on ways of improving RPL for high-level diplomas

Conclusion:

recognition of prior learning and the evolution of the Danish "model" (elements of assessment and perspectives for the future development of the national NFIL framework)

Since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis, the Danish flexicurity model has found itself faced with substantial problems. The increase in unemployment makes it difficult to maintain long and secure individual employment. Governments and employers would seem to be looking for more flexibility and less security for workers. In line with this statement, Danish analysts (see Andersen *et al.* 2011) emphasise another feature specific to Denmark: the investment in upskilling and generally raising the level of qualifications. They suggest further developing the Danish flexicurity model (the *golden triangle*²) to include lifelong learning, thereby boosting qualification levels and mobility. In this new form of flexicurity - called *mobication* (*mobility and education*), emphasis is put on the lifelong learning system, with people receiving more CVET and upskilling before becoming unemployed, thereby facilitating the transition for one job to another.

From our point of view, recognition of prior learning may be a good way to enhance such "*mobication*", as having certified experience taking non-formal and informal skills and competences into account increases the employability of workers and facilitates their mobility on the labour market.

2. The Danish *golden triangle* corresponds to: a high level of (job) mobility, a secure income and active labour market policies (including lifelong learning).

Chapter 2

Finland

Introduction

Finland has always attached great importance to education and training, and has a long tradition of validating non-formal and non-formal learning. The concepts of consensus, social dialogue and education play a very important role in Finnish society. In practice, tripartite cooperation in training and training assessment has existed since the 1960's. Perhaps today more than ever, education and training are considered very important because of the necessity for Finland, a small country in terms of inhabitant, to remain competitive in a globalized economy.

NFIL validation in Finland mainly occurs within the context of a specific integrated system of training and validation, the *Competence-Based Qualification (CBQ)* system. But other validation initiatives are also to be found outside this specific framework, for instance, at certain Universities of Applied Sciences (*Polytechnics*) which have undertaken their own validation initiatives. Whatever the process used for NFIL validation, the major principle of 'recognition of prior learning' is at the core of the system. At the time of writing this chapter (September 2013), there is no national qualifications framework (NQF) in Finland, though a *National Framework for Qualifications and Other Learning*, an NQF based on the 8-level European Qualification Framework¹, is

1. In this framework, "the qualifications, syllabi and other extensive competence entities of the Finnish national education system are classified into eight levels on the basis of the requirements." (source: http://www.oph.fi/mobility/qualifications_frameworks). It is proposed that statutory regulations on the level descriptors and the positioning of qualifications, syllabi and extensive competence entities on the basis of required learning outcomes be enacted at a later date by a Government Decree. The framework facilitates overall scrutiny of the Finnish education and qualifications system and other learning. "It describes the learning outcomes of qualifications, syllabi and other extensive competence entities as knowledge, skills and competences, and defines their interrelations. The competence-based description of qualifications is designed to support lifelong learning,

expected to enter into force in 2013. A legislative proposal on this NQF was submitted by the government to the Parliament on 3 May 2012, though to date it has not been transposed into legislation.

This chapter presents in a first section the Finnish system of NFIL validation and training. A second section looks at trade union involvement in the system. In a third section, two examples of promoting NFIL validation practiced by one of the Finnish trade unions are presented. Finally, the impacts of the NFIL validation system and its possible further development are looked into in a fourth section.

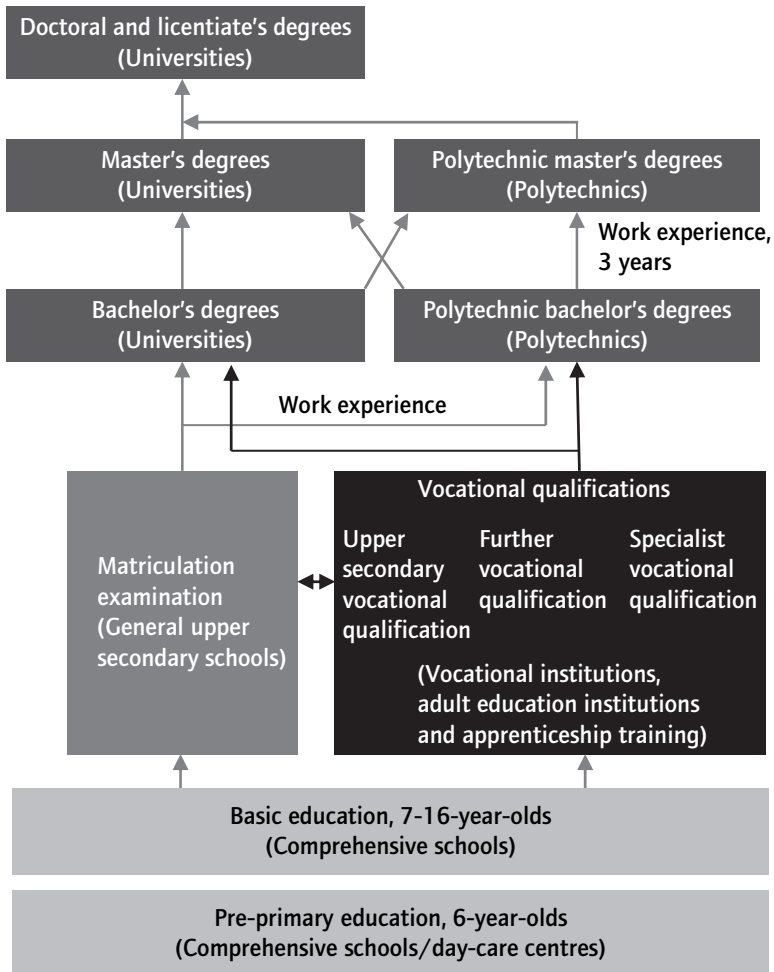
1. The CBQ system and its central role in validation and training

The *Competence-Based Qualification (CBQ)* system allows every adult to have his *prior learning* validated through demonstrating his skills *at the workplace*. The system has existed in its current form since 1994, even though only recently codified for the ‘vocational basic’ level in a law enacted in 2006. The possibility of having an individual’s competences recognised wherever they have been acquired (recognition of prior learning) is a ‘core principle’ of the CBQ system (i.e. in the field of adult education), but also in the field of higher (university) education.

The main principle behind the system involves an individual demonstrating his own acquired skills at the workplace. A mandatory module of a given qualification within the CBQ system is subject to a ‘competence test’ conducted inside a training centre, though the tests for each of the other modules are normally held inside a company. The Finnish validation system is characterised by its flexibility, with individual modules (parts of a qualification) able to be acquired separately. Once all modules are completed, the individual receives his qualification. It is theoretically possible to go directly to the exam, though in most cases individuals first take preparatory training.

improve employment prospects, increase mobility, and bridge the gap between education and the world of work.” (source: http://www.oph.fi/mobility/qualifications_frameworks).

Figure 9 The Finnish education system



The Finnish education system comprises pre-primary education, basic education, general upper secondary education and vocational education and training, as well as higher education provided by polytechnics and universities. Adult education and training is available at all levels, with the exception of pre-primary education. Students' eligibility to move from one level of education to the next is guaranteed by legislation.

Source: official document of the Finnish National Board of Education, Helsinki 2013.

The certificate obtained constitutes recognition of an individual's validated learning and may correspond to part of or the whole qualification. There are different levels of qualifications: upper secondary vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications.

Figure 9 presents Finland's general system of education and the place of vocational training in it. Within companies, Finnish workers are classified according to a 6-category (lower to higher levels) reference table, with salaries dependent on that level. It can therefore be beneficial for a worker to have a diploma as it allows him to move up the table, insofar as the sectoral collective agreements foresee such.

In addition to the CBQ system, NFIL validation in Finland may also take the form of recognition of prior learning in the field of higher education, i.e. at university. There is no unified framework in this field, and validation is dependent on the autonomous decisions of the universities.

2. Institutional architecture for NFIL validation and training, involvement of the social partners

Finland has a strong tradition of social dialogue, a characteristic permeating the country's system of NFIL validation in the field of adult education and training and rooted in tripartite collaboration. This sees the social partners involved in validation from the local to the national level, as found in the *National Board of Education*, in the *qualification committees*, as well as in the assessment groups.

The National Board of Education (NBE) has overall responsibility for 'adult education' and the CBQ system. It is in charge of monitoring the work of the qualification committees and decides on the number of qualifications and of committees in the system. It is also responsible for collecting validation fees and managing the budget of the qualification committees. The NBE also has other important validation tasks, including issuing certificates (the NBE signs the final document certifying the 'partial' degree or qualification) and approving plans for the future supply of skills (*curricula*). The NBE meets once or twice a month. It is also responsible for training (five days per year) the

members of qualification committees. As it is impossible for the whole CBQ system to be run by the NBE or the government alone, trade union and company involvement are particularly important. Consensus between all parties remains a very important feature, allowing the system to operate without hitch.

The 26 sectoral qualification committees are responsible for anticipating each sector's needs for skills and qualifications, and the involvement of employer and employee representatives attests to the importance attached to the system. In this context, those working on the shop floor are well aware of what is required for a job in terms of skills. In total, the social partners are involved in 154 qualification committees composed of 1000 experts, working in conjunction with teachers. Each committee is responsible for one or several qualifications. The committees also have other roles, such as defining requirements for a qualification in the CBQ system, and approving individual validation plans. Committee members are selected for a three-year period. In theory, tripartite assessment groups are in charge of assessing an individual's skills during the competence-based tests. In practice however, it is not necessary for all members of the assessment group to take part in every step, and generally speaking only one member is present at each step of the process. The social partners plan and design the CBQ tests together with the training organisations, informing the authorities and the organisers about occupational requirements.

Trade unions also advertise the system to their own members. With regard to public dialogue and collective bargaining, the social partners participate in many workgroups or programmes² linked to education and training. For instance, the *Confederation of Finnish Industries (Elinkeinoelämän Keskusliitto, EK)* is running two projects looking at future needs for knowledge, skills and competences in companies (*Services 2020, Education Intelligence*).

2. For instance, the workgroups may have the objective to further develop the CBQ system, to deal with the information and guidance systems, to make working life more attractive to young people, to develop apprenticeship training for least privileged groups or to increase the motivation of women to take up applied sciences. The currently existing programmes include the *Kartuke* research and development project, the *Tykes* project for development projects of working communities, the *Oivallus* project initiated by employer organisations to discuss future training needs.

The involvement of unions in the CBQ system may also take the form of initiatives promoting NFIL validation (one example is highlighted in the next section). The involvement of unions gives them the opportunity to diagnose weaknesses in the system and to participate in defining proposals aimed at further developing it (see section 4).

3. Finnish experiences in NFIL validation and training

3.1 The Espoo 'Siikaranta-opisto' training centre: vocational education and general education.

Siikaranta-opisto is a college founded in 1964 by the construction trade union, *Rakennusliitto*, which provides vocational training and education and free adult education for construction workers. The training centre has had 'folk high school' status since 1981, allowing 50% state funding for the provision of free adult education. The rest of the funding comes from the confederation (SAK, see below) and from the student fees.

The centre is responsible for further and specialist vocational qualifications in construction and related fields. It is a key adult educational institute in the field of construction, offering over 250 qualifications in 2007 and some 700 different competence tests.

Students are skilled craftsmen "who don't necessarily need long 'theory-based' studies". Hence, the centre focuses on workplace competence tests ("real working life conditions and situations are required"). Teachers spend most of their time out in the field, arranging competence tests in conjunction with students and employers³.

The centre also provides general education for shop stewards, labour protection delegates and for the Construction Trade Union (on such subjects as legislation, negotiation skills, the significance of collective agreements, risk assessment, social issues, etc.).

3. "The more the teachers are absent from the college, the happier I am" (Principal Markku Hiltunen).

3.2 The involvement of trade unions in experiences promoting validation: the example of the SAK union and the Noste and Osaava Pärjää programs

SAK (*Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö, Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions*) is the most important trade union confederation in Finland⁴. Though mainly representing manual workers, one third of its members are non-manual workers. SAK has been very much involved since the beginning in NFIL validation, and has experts in all adult education fields⁵. Validation of prior learning and the CBQ system are very important for SAK trade unions, especially because a very significant proportion of the skills of SAK members are acquired at work (on-the-job experience). SAK gives support to certain members of the qualification committees, enabling them to participate in the voluntary work of the qualification committees, the National Board of Education, assessment groups, *etc.* The CBQ system is also important for SAK members since it represents a flexible way of having skills certified (skill validation modules, apprenticeships, *etc.*). Learning by doing is also very frequent for SAK members. One of the main motivations for the SAK to support the CBQ system is the equalization of opportunities, offering a ‘second chance’ to workers, or even ‘endless chances’ for lifelong learning. According to the SAK, the CBQ system also promotes ‘everyday innovation’ or ‘employee-based’ innovation.

SAK is involved in many programmes in the field of training and validation, as illustrated by *Noste* (see the Liljeström 2010 report). The Finnish Government’s *Noste* programme, covering the 2003-2007 period, was designed to raise the education and training level of adults with only basic education. The SAK education and training experts came up with their own project to support the *Noste* programme: *Osaava Pärjää (the competent will cope)*. The target group defined by the Parliament Adult Education Committee for the *Noste* Program were

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4. The other trade union confederations in Finland are STTK (*Suomen Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö, the Finnish Confederation of Professionals* covering the majority of non-manual workers), and AKAVA (*Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland*, mainly composed of graduate workers).
 5. In particular, the SAK staff involved in adult education knows the key people in the National Board of Education and in the Ministry of Education, the result of a long-standing relationship.

30-50 year old people without any secondary education⁶. The *Noste* programme provided funding for: 1) gaining qualifications within the CBQ system, 2) training for a “computer license” qualification, 3) studies promoting educational guidance, *etc.*, 4) outreach activities, information and counselling, and other measures promoting access to education and training.

The *Osaava Pärjää* project, launched in 2003 and focusing on SAK members, was based on these last activities (in bold), and was the only one launched by a labour market organization on a national scale. A number of union activists became so-called ‘*competence pilots*’, (voluntary) peer support people⁷ with the mission of encouraging employees to engage in education and training, and providing counselling and networking in that field. Some 26 000 adults took part in the *Noste* Programme, resulting in some 10 000 (full or partial) vocational qualifications being awarded. Surveys or observations made regarding the particular impact of the *Osaava Pärjää* programme suggest it “had a significant influence on employees’ decisions to take up studies, although in most cases it seems to have been indirect”. It also opened the door to better cooperation between trade unions and education providers. In 2010, the SAK launched a new follow-on project aimed at creating a permanent network of education counsellors, in collaboration with the TSL association.

4. Elements of assessment and perspectives for further developing the NFIL validation framework

The Finnish NFIL validation system is known for its very good quantitative results. For instance, between 1997 and 2008, the total number of CBQ participants rose from 5,967 to 65,267, as underlined in the Nevala report (2010). In 2008, 32,344 of participants obtained a

6. In Finland at the time, it was reported that 400,000 30-50 years old adults were without any secondary education. The SAK was notably involved in the Parliamentary committee to define the target group (Liljeström 2010).

7. All union activists were welcome to apply for training, with the result that 663 competence pilots were trained during the project. *Työvaen Sivistysliitto* (TSL), one of the biggest Finnish educational associations, the trade union institutes and the SAK ‘education and training’ team were responsible for providing the training.

full qualification and 16,094 a partial qualification. This represents a significant proportion of the population (Finland has a population of 5.4 million). Furthermore, women represented the majority of validation beneficiaries (around 55-56% since the mid-2000's).

Looking deeper at the results in qualitative terms allows these good quantitative results to be qualified. First, we may question who are the main beneficiaries of validation (target populations), and to what extent can the results obtained be qualified from a lifelong learning perspective. In addition, possible limits to the current validation system or to its implementation are addressed, with improvement proposals put forward by people involved in the training and validation system being looked at.

4.1 Qualifying CBQ results

Some disappointing results in terms of training and NFIL validation?

For certain Finnish actors involved in the NFIL project, what happened in Finland in terms of training and NFIL validation may appear somewhat disappointing from a certain perspective. Indeed, the quest for higher qualification levels desired since the 1990's for economic reasons⁸ has not worked too well. One of the main problems is that social bargaining is focused on labour market concerns and does not include training. While collective bargaining covers wages, working time and working conditions, *it does not cover training*, despite the fact that research, for instance by Laukkanen (2010), suggests that the wage returns from training could be substantial, or even very substantial, for Finland.

The concept of having employers and employees jointly assessing training needs dates back to the late 1970's in Finland. The idea was to come up with jointly agreed training plans. This worked quite well in practice in the 1980's, though the concept went adrift in the 1990's, a time when Finland was hit by crisis. There is particular concern that many companies are no longer interested in such plans, as illustrated by

8. The crisis started in the early 1990's.

the fact that in the period 1995-2008 only 50-60% of Finnish companies had such training plans. Eurostat statistics show that for Finland, but also for all other EU Member States, the time devoted to lifelong learning has started to decrease⁹ (see Chapter 1). At the same time, company-funded training has decreased while jointly-funded (*i.e.* by the state and companies) training has stopped increasing.

Moreover, the results of the CBQ system may be viewed as disappointing to the extent that around 20% of active 20-40 year-olds remained without qualifications higher than primary education at the beginning of the 2000's (Laukkanen 2010), indicating that the system has tended to benefit higher-skilled workers rather than lower-skilled ones.

Populations targeted for NFIL validation

In Finland, women on average attend more education and training courses than men (a little more than 50% of CBQ beneficiaries are women). At the same time, there is a somewhat “paradox” situation, in that the education returns accruing to men tend to be higher than for women, *i.e.* they benefit more in terms of higher wages on enhancing their qualifications. According to one interview, the fact that a large share of women work in the public sector is one possible explanation why they benefit less than men from NFIL validation in salary terms. Similarly, surveys in this field indicate that women use their new qualifications primarily to find better work (source: NFIL project meetings in Finland). A number of sectors reveal some substantial needs for validating women's NFIL. The ‘construction’ sector seems a typical example, where women are mainly to be found working in low-skilled jobs (*e.g.* cleaning).

Migrants similarly represent a specific group that could greatly benefit from NFIL validation¹⁰. The system has not worked too well for them, especially because of the language problem - it is necessary to speak Finnish to gain a qualification. Large numbers of migrants are to be found in the construction sector, with most of them working as low-

9. However, according to the available data, it also permits a better training balance between low-skilled and high-skilled workers.

10. Please note that there are a number of policies or programmes conducted by public authorities or trade unions specifically targeting these populations.

skilled labourers, not belonging to a trade union and not paid above the minimum wage stipulated in the collective agreements.

An important and recurrent discussion in Finland concerns the large number of school drop-outs each year. This population is a major concern for public policies. In the 2000's, the population of young people without any diploma was estimated at 40,000-50,000.

Finally, workers in traditional industrial sectors could also become a target for the CBQ system. These traditional industries, mainly the paper and metal industries in the northern Finland, are in a state of collapse. With restructuring the only option available, public policies need to focus on the consequences¹¹.

4.2 Limits and difficulties of the current system

The current NFIL validation system and institutional framework are now nearly 20 years old. This constitutes a wealth of experience in validation, though its limitations have been exposed in the previous sub-sections by interviewees involved in the training and validation system.

One of the reported difficulties is that the current system is based on voluntary work (for instance in the assessment groups and qualifications committees, and in the administration of the system). The free time available to representatives depends of their employment status or their role in the system, with 'normal' employees having to apply to their employers to be involved. Involvement requires much time, with meetings often taking place in the evening. Hence, a deep commitment to the system is required.

Another often-mentioned recurrent problem is that of resources, in particular in a system that requires voluntary work. For instance, qualification committee secretaries should have more resources for

11. This is a major concern notably because many employees work in these industries over generations.

administration (what is actually paid corresponds to the NFIL validation fees, in itself a rather 'small' amount).

It has also been pointed out that it is not always easy to organize assessment work, something particularly difficult for an individual worker.

Other difficulties frequently mentioned in the interviews include:

- Many adult students do not behave very autonomously during the validation process. They often think that they need preparatory training, even if their own learning does not require such, and feel somewhat 'insecure' on seeing the duration or the content of their studies reduced. The validation of prior learning also sees individuals avoiding studying in a group, even though collective study is important, especially for men.
- There may be competition between the validation process within the CBQ system and the offerings of VET providers, with training institutions receiving better financing when they have more students. In general, the decision of the path to follow is taken by the learner himself, after discussion with counsellors and teachers.
- To a large extent, opposition to the CBQ system comes from universities, even though a number of *polytechnics* have their own validation systems. Yet even here, recognition of prior learning is dependent on teachers' willingness.
- The current process of validation is often seen as too bureaucratic ("too much paper").
- The necessity to monitor assessment reliability (quality relies on the competence of each candidate being assessed the same way).
- The benefit from validation in terms of higher wages is not automatic. Theoretically, with a higher qualification, one should benefit from a wage increase. However, in many branches there are no collective agreements, and wage increases are dependent on the sector, or on the good will of the company.
- Theoretically, prior learning can be validated independent of how it was acquired. In practice however, validation mainly concerns learning acquired on the job.
- The possibility of validation is very much related to the good will of the companies, as the competence tests occur at the workplace.

4.3 Some proposals for the further development of the system

CBQ stakeholders, in particular the trade unions, have their own proposals for further developing the validation system (or its practical implementation). Against the background of the system questioned not only in its quantitative but also in its qualitative objectives and the need for the system to become more oriented towards specific target groups (see above), a number of possible improvements and proposals for the daily functioning of the system have been pointed out:

- Best practices should be highlighted, notably via benchmarking surveys/studies, organising forums, seminars, etc.
- The qualification committees should try and standardize methods.
- The administrative burden should be reduced, thereby simplifying the system, notably in relations with the NBE.
- The opportunities offered by validation should be highlighted more by employers, but also by teachers, notably in polytechnics.

Some specific ‘questions’ were also addressed. These regarded changes increasing the benefit to companies and/or their employees, and about how to make the system more understandable and better fitted to the needs of the Finnish economy:

- Diplomas issued tend now to be more general than some years ago. One open question is: “Should diplomas be more specialized”¹²? It should also be possible to reduce the number of available diplomas: there are currently some 400 different ones. Reducing the number would make it easier to classify workers in the “1-6” skill scale within a company’s workforce.
- Finally, skill requirements should also be reviewed, questioning the type of skills matching a certain qualification: how narrow or broad are the skills required¹³?

12. Seen from this perspective, requirements for the ‘specialist vocational’/expert level qualifications for instance are too narrow.

13. *e.g.*, very broad skills may be needed for a managerial position, while rather narrow skills may be required for more specific occupations.

Conclusion:

A mature validation system with potential to improve effectiveness

Finland benefits from a mature NFIL validation system, with the current institutional framework now twenty years old. Its functioning is dependent on the willingness of the social partners and on voluntary workers. Consensus, a very important factor in Finnish society, remains necessary for the system to work. Though Finland benefits from a long tradition of NFIL validation, there is room for the validation system to evolve, as suggested by some of its actors, both in the definition of objectives (target populations) and in practical ways.

Recent developments include a proposal put forward in June 2012 for a law on ‘competence development’ with quantitative and qualitative guidelines (including at least ‘3 mandatory training days per year’, and on the workplace assessment process). In addition, in mid-2012 the social partners agreed to raise the level of grants given by the Educational Fund to people participating in the CBQ system. The future law enacting a NQF in Finland is intended to improve the clarity and effectiveness of the Finnish qualification system.

In the context of the economic crisis and in particular the current situation in Finland, validation may be assumed to be needed more than ever. Boosted by the crisis, there is a growing trend, as seen in other European or OECD countries, towards labour market polarization in Finland (good jobs *vs* bad jobs: low-paid/precarious jobs versus good-paid/secure jobs).

Finally, the CBQ system and NFIL validation more generally remain a very relevant issue for Finnish society, as confirmed in the June 2011 programme of the (new at the time) Finnish government which contained a number of relevant points regarding NFIL validation, in particular for migrants: “The recognition of prior learning and learning acquired abroad will be made part of all education from the basic level to adult education. A competence-based definition of qualifications will be endorsed.”; “The integration and employment of migrants (...) will be promoted through education. (...) The recognition of existing competencies, language skills and vocational skills of migrants will be developed.” (Programme of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen’s Government, p. 51).

Chapter 3

France

Introduction

The introduction of a system for recognising experience in France is inseparable from issues related to the reform of vocational training. Since the end of the 1980s, this reform work has been focused on responding to changes in the content of jobs and the organization of the work but also on introducing greater flexibility into the labour market. The diagnosis of the vocational training system revealed three factors playing a crucial role in the emergence of VAE (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*), a system for validating prior learning:

- The need to strengthen the employability of less qualified workers: in 1995, four out of ten workers had no occupational qualification;
- the role of possessing a qualification - most studies show that this is one of the keys to sustainable employment;
- the weak upskilling dimension of company training, which is primarily aimed at supporting technological or organisational change and consequently often only targets employees who already have a qualification.

Introduced by the Act of 17 January 2002, VAE marks a significant break in the French educational system, establishing as a general principle the individual right to have one's prior experience recognised in the form of a certified qualification. In so doing, the legislator has put prior experience on a par with initial training - in a country where a school diploma often determines a person's professional and social destiny.

1. Recognition of prior learning in France

1.1 A legal instrument that initially lacked unanimous support

Legal provision for the validation of experience

In France, non-formal and informal learning practices have, at least partially, been institutionalised in a legal instrument. The *French Social Modernisation Act* of 17 January 2002¹ created the right to VAE (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*), a system for validating prior experience. This allows anyone, on the basis of at least three years' paid, unpaid or voluntary work, to acquire a full or partial recognised occupational qualification. The law also introduced the RNCP (*Registre National des Certifications Professionnelles; national register of occupational qualifications*), listing occupational qualifications recognised by the State and the social partners. To appear in this register, a qualification must be accessible via VAE. The register therefore includes a validation procedure based *inter alia* on a modular system. The national register is managed and controlled by the CNCP (*Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle; National Committee for Occupational Certification*), staffed by the social partners.

Initially reluctant stakeholders

The initial proposal, mainly targeting the low-skilled and jobseekers, was ultimately extended to cover the entire workforce, with the aim of avoiding the stigma of qualifications acquired this way. Nevertheless negative reactions initially came from certain stakeholders and in particular from the French education system, which felt that academic diplomas should remain the main route to gaining occupational qualifications. Trade union federations active in the education sector, such as the CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*) and the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*), also initially backed this opposition. Employers, on the other hand, contested the authority given to the CNCP, as they saw in it the State's desire to standardise all qualifications. Last but not least, the regional directors of the ANPE (*Agence Nationale Pour l'Emploi*, the French national

1. *French Social Modernisation Act* (LMS; *Loi de Modernisation Sociale*) no. 2002-73 of 17 January 2002.

employment agency) saw VAE as being equivalent to training, and that it was, in this respect, out of touch with the labour market.

However, these various reservations rapidly dissolved, and the education system is now a staunch supporter of the process - it alone accredits more than two-thirds of qualifications. As for the trade unions, they quickly realised the benefit to employees of becoming involved in the system. Employers also soon recognised the benefits of VAE in their employee development processes. Similarly, faced with rising unemployment, the national employment service has also changed its stance.

1.3 A simple process involving multiple stakeholders

VAE is an individual right exercised through a relatively simple process. A candidate identifies the qualification sought and then contacts the accrediting body which provides a list of documents required to prepare an eligibility application. If the body deems that the application for validation is eligible, the person prepares a claim describing his or her experience. At this stage, the law provides individuals with the possibility of taking twenty-four hours of leave from work and of receiving support from the accrediting body. Once the claim has been put together, the candidate presents it before an assessment panel, which may award either a full or partial qualification. This panel also specifies the skills that must be acquired, through experience or training, within the next five years.

VAE is a third way of gaining an occupational qualification alongside IVET (including apprenticeships) and CVET. It differs from the other ways in that it is based on the recognition of prior experience. However, as the stakeholders remain much the same, the VAE process replicates the complexity of the training system. A number of bodies are involved:

- **Awarding bodies:** these are responsible for implementing the validation procedure (receiving and studying claims, organising panel meetings, administrative aspects, etc.), and issuing qualifications after the panel has reached its decision. These are, for

the most part, public authorities² awarding occupational qualifications accessible via VAE. In addition, there are two categories of private stakeholders: the occupational sectors, which may award CQPs (*Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle; Occupational qualification certificate*), and the network of CCIs (*Chambres de Commerce et d'Industrie; Chambers of Commerce and Industry*), which award CCEs (*Certificat de Compétence en Entreprise; certificate of on-the-job competence*) on the basis of work-based assessment.

- **Financers:** Although the Act of 2002 did not provide for a budget, the VAE process must nevertheless be paid for. The funding individuals are eligible for is dependent on their status. The FONGECIFs (*Fonds de Gestion du Congé Individuel de Formation; Individual Leave Training management funds*)³ may cover expenses incurred by an employee in the private sector. Likewise, as VAE processes now fall into the field of company training, they can be financed by OPCAs (*Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé; Accredited fund collection agency*)⁴. Lastly, the French State, the public employment service *Pôle Emploi*⁵ and the regional authorities may support jobseekers in the VAE process.
- **Information and guidance services:** information and guidance have been provided at regional level since 2006, under the supervision of the Regional Council in partnership with the decentralised government offices responsible for qualifications, the public employment service and the sector's social partners. These services are organised around three relatively autonomous structures: the *Réseaux d'accueil-information-orientation* (Information-counselling networks), the regionally approved PRCs (*Points Relais Conseil; Information offices*), and the websites specific to each awarding body.

2. The French ministries responsible for Education, Employment, Health and Social Affairs, Youth and Sports.

3. FONGECIFs are joint labour-management bodies tasked with financing CIF (*Congés Individuels de Formation; Individual training leave*), and leave for skills assessments, with funding obtained through compulsory contributions paid by companies.

4. OPCAs are bodies jointly managed by representatives of the employers and trade unions that collect, manage and distribute the compulsory financial contributions paid by member companies for professional training.

5. *Pôle Emploi* is the French public body responsible for assisting the unemployed in their search for employment.

Generally speaking, the regional level is playing an increasing role in coordinating policies between VAE stakeholders: the State, Regional Councils, public employment Agency, OPCA and information and guidance networks (Aventur, Damesin and Tuchsirer 2007).

2. VAE practices

2.1 Domestic assistance

The home and personal care services sector appears to be the predominant user of VAE, with 21% of all qualifications presented via VAE (Besson 2008). This sector has seen strong growth over the last few years due to increased demand (on account of population ageing, increasingly individual lifestyles, and the increase in female participation in the workforce). The VAE process is of interest to the sector for more than one reasons:

- There are major recruitment needs.
- Employees, for the most part women, are recruited with few or no qualifications⁶.
- Business is largely dependent on certifications laying down requirements for employees' qualifications

In domestic assistance, a branch of the home and personal care services sector, VAE was introduced on a pilot basis at the beginning of the 2000's, influenced by a convergence of factors: the French Ministry of Social Affairs was reforming the associated diploma, the VAE process was being introduced, and the social partners were negotiating a new classification system. The process, which aims at candidates obtaining the DEAVS, (*Diplôme d'Etat d'Auxiliaire de Vie Sociale; Diploma in home care assistance*) – the prime qualification in the sector – follows the statutory format. The employee completes an eligibility application covering several criteria. Then, insofar as the criteria are met, DRASS (*Direction Régionale des Affaires Sanitaires et Sociales; Regional department of health and social affairs*), the agency representing the

6. 80% - 90%.

awarding ministry, provides a VAE claim form to be completed and then presented before an assessment panel. At this stage, the candidate has the right to the statutory minimum of twenty-four hours of support. The time between registering a VAE claim and the panel's decision is approximately six months.

The panel comprises employers, trainers and employees from the branch. It makes its decision on the basis of the written description of the experience given in the claim, and its oral presentation by the candidate. The interview lasts approximately one hour, during which the panel, which has read the claim, may ask questions. If a partial qualification is awarded, the candidate has five years to complete the missing modules. In the pilot project, approximately 70% of candidates were awarded the qualification, 24% the first time around and 66% following the award of a partial qualification.

The branch's trade unions, in particular the CGT and CFDT, supported the process from the outset, deeming that the employees needed it and that this recognition of their experience was rightful. They therefore carried out an information campaign throughout France to encourage employees in this branch to submit VAE claims. In addition to this campaign, the trade unions negotiated the reform of the old classification system, which did not make any distinction between skilled and unskilled employees and awarded them identical salaries, below the French minimum wage. They obtained salary recognition for qualifications, particularly those achieved via VAE. Ultimately, claims for the DEAVS are the ones most often presented (14.7% of all claims examined by the panels).

2.2 VAE for jobseekers

The public employment service has also undertaken, through its *Pôle Emploi*, to start jobseekers on the VAE route. This commitment has taken several forms:

- The recruitment of a VAE manager to train and inform officers and to develop tools for jobseekers.
- The signing of two agreements between the *Pôle Emploi* and the RNCP. This has created a link between the qualifications in the

register and the ROME (*Référentiel Opérationnel des Emplois et des Métiers; Job profile reference guide*)⁷.

- The creation of a VAE space on the *Pôle Emploi* website.
- The certification of 180 to 200 regional branches to counsel jobseekers on VAE.
- The signing of an agreement with the ANSP (*Agence Nationale des Services à la Personne; French national agency for personal and home care services*).

In addition, the *Pôle Emploi* launched pilot projects in three regions (Limousin, Midi-Pyrénées, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), working on the basis that jobseekers would want to use VAE to quickly return to employment. These projects particularly aimed at reducing the time taken to examine VAE claims⁸, improving synergies to boost relations between stakeholders, and reducing withdrawals of claims in process.

But the most tangible aspect of the implementation of VAE as part of the return-to-work process has been the creation of VAE workshops for unemployed people by the public operator. These consist of two parts: while the first is dedicated to providing information on the system, the second covers the phase prior to putting experience in writing. The latter starts by identifying the ROME profiles associated with the experience. This results in jobseekers having a summary sheet and an awarding body to contact. Where the claim is completed at the end of the workshop, jobseekers are put directly in contact with this awarding body, otherwise they may be redirected to the PRCs.

In 2010, 40,000 people were counselled on VAE, and approximately 10% attended a workshop. However, since this is an individual process, the *Pôle Emploi* has difficulties carrying out follow-ups and has no feedback on the exact number of jobseekers who have seen the process through to achieving a qualification. The awarding bodies are the ones in a position to identify the number of jobseekers from among those awarded qualifications.

7. ROME is the job profile reference guide used by the *Pôle Emploi* to help the unemployed look for work.

8. The awarding body may take two months to reply.

2.3 Club Méditerranée and VAE internationally

Club Méditerranée, a tour operator that organises holidays in holiday villages around the world, introduced a VAE system at the beginning of the 2000's. There are approximately one hundred occupations found in the company, mainly in hotels and entertainment, for a primarily seasonal business. One of the factors that led to the initiative was the realisation that the experience acquired by the employees of *Club Méditerranée* was not recognised outside the company. The project was put forward by a trade union, the CGT-FO (*Confédération Générale du Travail-Force Ouvrière*), but as there had always been initiatives for capitalising on expertise in the company, it was well received by management and the other trade unions.

To kick off the project, the trade union leader contacted a CAVA (*Centre Académique de Validation des Acquis; Academic centre for the validation of learning*)⁹. The centre conducted a 3-month study of the 93 job profiles within the company to identify possibilities for validation against State education qualifications. The people targeted were mainly “old-hands” with no qualifications. They had long experience not just in the work but also in mobility, as they had generally worked in holiday villages in different countries. The aim of the project was to have all holiday village employees worldwide, whatever their employment contract¹⁰, eligible to make a VAE claim, as long as they spoke French.

To launch the initiative, the Human Resources (HR) departments and the CGT-FO¹¹ carried out an information campaign targeting holiday village employees throughout the world. The VAE process was the same everywhere. Following the information campaign, those interested in VAE were identified and recruited through interviews carried out via video conference by a unit composed of State education representatives and the *Club Méditerranée* HR departments. In the first year, fifteen people were identified. As the initiative gathered pace, *Club Méditerranée*

9. The *Centres Académiques de Validation des Acquis* (Academic centres for the validation of learning) come under the responsibility of the French Ministry of Education.

10. Fixed-term and open-ended contracts.

11. The CGT-FO union leader is also the project manager within the *Club Méditerranée* HR Department.

gradually involved the AFPA (*Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes*; Adult learning association), making it possible to extend VAE to CQPs and occupational designations and to implement methods other than those used in the French education system¹². In addition, higher education institutions were asked to offer validation for a Master qualification, particularly for holiday village managers.

Club Méditerranée then asked these partners to come to the villages and assist the project managers there according to demand and number of candidates (a minimum of ten people was required). Visits lasted one week and were funded by the company. On site, a series of meetings were held with all concerned. At the last meeting, each institution presented its process, the conditions for VAE eligibility, the claims preparation process, and the support available.

Bringing all stakeholders together at the same time in the villages supported the process:

- The employees were available for the duration of the stay.
- It was possible to identify their potential qualification.
- A work-based assessment could be carried out.
- The examination date could be set (six months or one year later).
- The documents required for any work-based assessments were on site.

At the end, candidates received an invitation to the exam, held in France for State education qualifications. An assessment panel comprising professionals and trainers met and decided on claims prepared by the employees. Full or partial qualifications were awarded, with supplementary modules to follow. One of the main difficulties involved the follow-up, once the validation group had left the village and the employees had returned to business as normal. Follow-up was carried out by the HR Department, trade union representatives and even the State education system, which had also set up support. In addition, if the employees required further information, they had the contact details of the people who had visited the site.

12. Unlike the French education system, the AFPA favours know-how rather than knowledge. Validation is based on role-playing which is observed and evaluated by a trainer and professional working together in team. It takes place on platforms that reproduce the work situation as accurately as possible.

OPCA financed part of the process, up to the statutory twenty-four hours. Employees who wished to acquire higher qualifications, requiring additional training modules, received an assessment of the training schemes available, with a focus on in-house ones. Trade union support focused on candidate funding and on getting managers to help employees start out on the VAE route. However, in some instances, employees were required to top up with their own funds. Supplementary modules took place during the low season for people working abroad, sometimes in academic institutions in the country in which the village was located.

Since 2002, 400 people per year have been through the VAE process, whereby the last two years have seen 100 people per year taking part. There is no commitment on the part of the company in terms of salary recognition for qualifications acquired via this route, but trade unions are pushing to promote them during wage bargaining. Employees may apply for positions based on the qualification acquired, but there is no obligation for HR to follow this through.

3. VAE: lessons learned

3.1 Difficulties encountered by VAE

Below-expectation results

The first observation is that VAE results fall short of expectations. In 2011, only 29,800 VAE claims led to qualifications being awarded (a total of 230,000 since the implementation of the Act). The target of 60,000 candidates per year is far from being reached, given that the potential target population is estimated at 6 million. In terms of the level of qualification targeted, nearly seven VAE candidates out of ten attempted, in 2011, to obtain a basic qualification¹³, while the others targeted higher levels. Two out of three candidates for qualifications defined by the French ministries of education, employment and agriculture had a job and nearly one third were jobseekers. It is therefore not necessarily the employees with greatest needs (the least qualified or jobseekers) who benefit most from the system.

13. Level V (the lowest level in the French classification system).

Critical points in the validation process

Explaining these results, the stakeholders interviewed highlighted several critical points in the validation process:

- *Upstream of the process*, the CGT and CFDT highlight a drop in the uptake of the processes they have supported. The reason they give for this is that it has worked up to a point: the most motivated employees took up the possibility first, and now greater effort is needed to interest and support others.
- *During the process*, two other problems emerge. The first concerns the significant number of qualifications accessible by VAE¹⁴ and problems of guidance. The second concerns the preparation of the eligibility application and validation claim which can cause problems for employees with poor writing skills.
- *After the process*, nearly all those interviewed highlighted candidates dropping out following the award of partial qualifications by the assessment panels. Both the CGT in the personal and home care services sector and the CGT-FO at *Club Méditerranée* are attempting to resolve this by regularly contacting employees faced with this situation.

At all three stages, lack of support was highlighted. The statutory twenty-four hours of support appear insufficient for some. Others, depending on their profiles, may require varying degrees of support, especially when validation is based on a written claim.

Is VAE too formal?

Among the reasons given to explain the limitations of VAE, some mention the formal nature of the procedure. There is debate on which validation format to use when going before the assessment panel, particularly for the least qualified:

- The French education system works on the basis of written skills, namely that a skill is described first in writing, and that this description is then presented to an assessment panel.
- AFPA has taken a more practical approach with the idea of using concrete work-based situations. It requires an eligibility application

14. In 2010, the register contained 7,088 occupational qualifications accessible by VAE.

and a pre-claim, but without the need to transpose occupational practices into writing. The panel then makes its decision on the basis of the work-based assessments.

In the cases studied, the majority of the stakeholders however work with both methods, with the content of the profiles above all determining the choice of method.

3.2 Areas of tension

Salary recognition of new qualifications

Employers and employees have a common interest in VAE. It allows employers on the one hand to develop career paths costing less than formal training, and also to recognise the skills of their employees and, in doing so, to motivate them. As regards employees, and particularly those who leave school with few or no qualifications, such recognition is important as it boosts self-esteem and can even restore self-confidence (as opposed to undertaking training).

However, interests diverge on the issue of salary recognition. For the CGT and CFDT, salary scales should recognise qualifications obtained via VAE. When VAE was first introduced, the employers' organisation, MEDEF (*Mouvement des Entreprises de France*), clearly warned that obtaining a qualification via VAE would not lead to salary increases, arguing that wage bargaining had nothing to do with VAE. In fact, the French system of collective agreements developed during the post-war years removed the link between qualifications and the classification system. With the exception of a few collective agreements, the French classification system does not provide that those doing the job with the right qualification(s) be paid more than without. Trade unions such as the CGT and CFDT are trying to use VAE to push the idea that qualifications are worth improved salary recognition, but without any real success. In most cases studied, with the exception of the domestic care branch, a qualification obtained via VAE does not influence, or only marginally influences, wages.

Mobility

The issue of moving up the career ladder, particularly outside the company in which a qualification is gained, is another stumbling point between the social partners. French employers, who have always

considered qualifications as a tool for mobility, see in the VAE process a risk of losing their employees. Conversely, all of the trade unions interviewed consider VAE as an opportunity for moving up the career ladder, particularly outside the branch. This explains why employers are inclined to favour, in the validation process, CQPs which are only valid within the branch, and which do not officially recognise any level. By contrast, trade unions such as the CGT prefer the acquisition of a qualification that recognises a national level and promotes mobility. This is also the viewpoint of the French education system which, through its qualifications, seeks to avoid a 'matching' approach, and promotes the acquisition of a base of transferable skills.

From this point of view, breaking down qualifications accessible under the RNCP into modules may pose an opportunity or a risk with regard to mobility. On the one hand, it offers the opportunity to establish links between the profiles of two occupations, allowing for common modules and not obliging the employee to re-take all of them if he or she decides to change course. Conversely, the award of partial qualifications may lead to an employee development process focused on a few specific tasks, much like the English example of NVQs, with the risk of holding employees captive within the branch.

VAE during or outside working hours

A final point of tension is the time spent on VAE: should VAE be done during working hours or conversely during an employee's free time? In the different cases covered, there does not seem to be a unanimous answer to this question. It all seems to depend on the power balance that the trade unions manage to establish.

On this point, the legal provision is fairly ambiguous. VAE is an individual process, but if the employee wants to make a VAE claim as part of a personal mobility plan and he or she does not therefore discuss it with the employer, then they will have to take days off. In addition, it will not be financed, unless the FONGECIF is mobilised under a still very complex procedure. To receive financial backing for VAE, the OPCAs must be involved, which also means making a request to employers.

3.3 Areas for improving VAE

Towards more effective links between validation and training

The lifelong learning system in France is over-serviced, with some 50,000 training providers of all colours, sizes and sectors making a living off the legal obligation to finance training. With several billion euros of guaranteed expenditure at stake each year, the system has little interest in developing a competing approach, i.e. VAE, providing an alternative and cheaper route to accrediting skills.

Beyond the structural aspects, VAE rethinks formal training-based vocational education. Recognising on-the-job learning is, by its very nature, individual, while the formal training system is a group approach. Employees are trained in groups within an educational infrastructure tailored to a group process (trainers, premises, technical facilities, etc.). In addition, gaining qualifications through training is based on the transmission of knowledge to the employee, more generally outside of the company. Conversely, the starting point for VAE starts is an employee's knowledge gained at work.

The weaknesses seen in VAE call for better links between the two processes. Illiteracy for instance needs prior basic skills training before starting a VAE process. Likewise, to gain a full qualification, partial qualifications require either additional experience or training. For the RNCP (see Asseraf 2011), this complementarity involves, for the training system, shaking up practices that have until now been based on knowledge content and the amount of knowledge to be acquired, i.e. an 'academic' approach. VAE forces the system to move towards a 'competence' approach in which the structure is based on a target occupation and its associated competences. The two approaches now mostly complement one another and share tools such as the skills portfolio which is presented before common assessment panels.

Increasing the number of assessment panels

Among the difficulties encountered by the VAE process, the issue of setting up assessment panels is widely addressed, as panels require a sufficient pool of trained, available professionals. In the opinion of all those interviewed - institutions, trade unions and employers - this is not currently the case for two main reasons:

- The pay is insufficient and even seems to vary depending on the level of qualification sought. In addition, the loss of earnings that an employee's participation in an assessment panel represents for the employer is not compensated, hence their reluctance to grant paid leave.
- Assessment panel members must be trained in the particular VAE assessment format. It is not an examination board making decisions based on lists of grades, but a validation panel working on the basis of individual interviews. Professionals with recognised skills who can comment on the candidates' practices are required.

With the lack of sufficient employees to make up the panels, deadlines are long, in turn discouraging VAE candidates.

VAE as a collective right

It appeared difficult for both the CGT and the CFDT to identify examples of VAE best practices. The reason for this is that, under the law, it is first and foremost an individual process, and not a group process, i.e. it is the employee who decides to initiate validation. It is therefore difficult for trade unions to address this question. However, we did note that there are indeed group VAE approaches, managed within a company and launched at the instigation of trade union organisations or management.

With regard to VAE weak points, the group approach presents certain solutions. Upstream, it is possible to identify the jobs in line with the business and therefore provide better guidance for candidates. During the process, the time dedicated to support can be increased, as can the resources (management can bolster the support provided). Downstream of the process, employees who have only achieved partial qualifications remain in the company and can therefore receive support more easily to carry the qualification through to completion. Lastly, collective VAE processes can potentially lead to negotiations in terms of salary recognition for the qualifications obtained.

Group VAE processes have been introduced by companies and are often well communicated, given that this is a way of boosting company image. However, the difficulty we had in finding examples leads us to believe that these cases remain the exception. Overall, companies seem little inclined to engage in a process with the potential to increase wage costs.

MEDEF commented on the absence of a legal framework for the group VAE concept. Beyond this lack of appeal for employers, the lack of training for trade unionists in companies may also explain the low number of group VAE initiatives. As mentioned by the CFTD's National Training Manager, the issue of VAE, like training, is low on the bargaining agenda, well behind such items as employment and working conditions and wages.

Conclusion

With the *French Social Modernisation Act* of 17 January 2002, the VAE became a third path for gaining a qualification in France. However, in 2010, only 29 300 certificates were acquired via VAE, against 118 500 CVET and 650 000 by IVET. In the ANI (*Accord National Interprofessionnel, Inter-professional National Agreement*) of 7 January 2009, the social partners stated their intention to develop VAE, *inter alia* by inviting certifying bodies to simplify access modalities and the procedures for preparing applications. The aim was to better define and strengthen supervision and to foster collective VAE approaches. However, the transposition of the agreement into the legislative Act of 24 November 2009 on training focuses mainly on the conditions under which employees can participate in an examination board, establishing the requirement for an employer to provide paid leave and regulating the financing of the related expenditure. The ANI of 11 January 2013 on competitiveness and employment security has done nothing to foster VAE, with no reference to it in the text. Under these circumstances, the development prospects of this innovative approach to certification in France seem only moderate.

Chapter 4

Germany

Introduction

Germany's economic success is partly built on the three-pillar structure of its education system. The first pillar is formal education, the second is vocational education and training (the apprenticeship system, also known as the "dual system", consisting of education in vocational schools and initial on-the-job training in companies), while the third pillar involves learning through civic engagement (alumni associations, sports clubs, social and political organisations, etc.). Though the recognition of general and specific non-formal and informal learning potentially belongs to the third pillar, the validation of skills acquired through NFIL seems to be a solution for an as yet little addressed problem, as the apprenticeship and vocational system to a great extent integrates competences gained in the workplace.

The concept of recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes is thus quite recent in Germany. The adoption of the European Qualifications Framework was an important incentive for VET reforms in Germany, putting pressure on national actors to facilitate further links between formal VET and the spheres of work and civil society. NFIL validation does not readily fit into an already very structured and demanding training system, which today sees vocational training as having to be of a high standard, going up to university level (ISCED 5). The role of NFIL is to fill gaps within that system.

Employees have at their disposal an individual, formal pathway for validating their prior vocational learning and thereby providing access to subsequent training courses, the so-called external examination or *Externenprüfung*, which targets 30,000 people per year. This path does not however seem adequate today to respond to the needs of those who escape the virtues of the apprenticeship system (*das duale System*): early school-leavers, migrants, etc. Where there are fault lines in the VET system allowing manpower to 'miss out' in a country facing population

ageing, better recognition of the importance of NFIL formalization has the potential to become a welcome adjunct to the high-level VET system.

Section 1 of this chapter presents the situation regarding NFIL validation in Germany. The new *Recognition Act* is presented in Section 2. A third section deals with the transferability of vocational knowledge into the higher education system. Finally, the involvement of social partners in the introduction of NFIL is discussed in Section 4.

1. A legal framework between stability and change

1.1 General situation

Germany, as other European countries (Switzerland, Austria and Denmark), has built and managed a successful “dual” education and training system based on apprenticeships. A high proportion of young people who leave school after completing their compulsory (lower secondary) education take up apprenticeships combining on-the-job training and courses at vocational college (*Berufsschule*). An apprenticeship leads to a formal qualification, legally required in many occupations. The political and social actors are actively involved in the system, which prepares young people for specific jobs through apprenticeship contracts. This system works as a “closed shop” and the only way to gain entry to many technical occupations is to join the system on leaving school. The effectiveness of the apprenticeship system contributes to the relatively low German rate of “NEET” (*not in employment, education or training*) among young people and its decrease during the crisis period (CESifo, 2013).

However the apprenticeship system is facing new challenges: demographic change and the need to integrate young people of migrant origin act as an incentive to complement the apprenticeship system by more effective NFIL validation practices. Young people dropping out of university before gaining a degree or trapped in temporary and precarious jobs are similarly target groups for NFIL validation.

Up to now, the success of Germany’s apprenticeship system provided no incentive to consider NFIL validation as a priority, but the changing context is inducing the social actors to integrate such validation as a

complementary element of the high-level vocational training system. In 2012, more than one million people moved to Germany and net immigration recorded the highest level for almost two decades (370,000), with most of the new migrants coming from the European Union (Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and the euro-zone crisis countries). In 2012 the federal government was among the first in Europe to implement the “blue card” system to admit skilled foreign workers from outside the EU. It also passed a law recognising foreign vocational qualifications. Though these new arrivals are better educated than previous migrants, many work in jobs beneath their qualifications (frequently because of linguistic barriers) and many others lack school or academic diploma.

1.2 External examination

VET in Germany is characterised by a formalised “dual” system of education and training, with the definition of curricula and examinations subject to consensus between the social partners and the education institutions. This leads to the system not being very open to the changes necessary to accommodate non-formal and informal practices outside the formal VET system. Nevertheless, the system does offer the advantage of constant quality control and the possibility of improved matching of trained workers and workplaces.

On account of this system being so formalized, the so-called “external examination” (*Externenprüfung*) related to vocational skills was introduced. The *Vocational Training Reform Act* of 1 April 2005 merged and reformed the *Vocational Education Act* and the *Vocational Training Promotion Act*. This reform includes provisions increasing permeability between vocational preparation (*Berufsvorbereitung*)¹ and an apprenticeship, and between full-time schooling and vocational training. It also facilitates access to testing for people who have not done an apprenticeship.

The external examination is considered very efficient in Germany. Depending on the *Bundesland*, the occupation/trade and the sector, either

1. *Berufsvorbereitung* is a year spent between leaving secondary school and starting an apprenticeship. In this year, students acquire the basic competences (often not acquired at school) needed to take up an apprenticeship.

the Chambers of Crafts or the Chambers of Industry and Commerce are responsible for the exam. The external exam is reserved for candidates wanting to have their on-the-job experience certified. It currently enables some 30,000 workers with on-the-job experience each year to enter the examination process. On successfully completing the process they receive the same certified qualification as those who have passed the exam at the end of an apprenticeship. The work experience required beforehand constitutes at least one and a half times the prescribed training period stipulated in the Vocational Education Act (i.e. four and a half years). The German Federal Institute for Vocational Education (*Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung*, BIBB) supports the process, developing certain services for the chambers. The examination is on a par with the apprenticeship examination, and is based on the assumption that a large proportion of the necessary skills and knowledge have been gained through non-formal learning. An estimated 7% of any age cohort uses this instrument to gain certification. Only full accreditation is allowed, with no possibility available for recognising individual modules.

As part of the DECVET project implementing the ECVET system, the German social partners have agreed for the moment not to introduce a points/credits system or the possibility of accumulating points/credits, even if this would increase considerably the transferability of skills. Nevertheless a new law has been introduced to increase the recognition of foreign credentials: the *Recognition Act*.

2. The new *Recognition Act*: the can opener for the German labour market?

In line with the EQF agreement, vocational qualifications from other countries are theoretically recognized in Germany. But in practice, German assessment examinations need to be passed for the qualifications to be recognised. The restrictive impact of this obligation justifies a specific path for recognising foreign qualifications.

The so-called *Recognition Act* (*Act to improve the assessment and recognition of foreign professional qualifications* or *Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Feststellung und Anerkennung im Ausland erworbener Berufsqualifikationen*) is a federal law on the recognition of foreign qualifications. It came into force in April 2012 and establishes a nationally

standardized system of assessing foreign professional and vocational qualifications in a way which will be more transparent and open for applicants². The previous individual equivalence review only applied to German repatriates and the system was not formalized across Germany. The new law is intended to help fill skill gaps in German companies. The *Recognition Act* includes a range of provisions related to the recognition of qualifications in "regulated occupations", such as occupations in academic areas, healthcare and crafts.

This law should considerably help improve previously non-uniform and thus occasionally discriminatory assessment practices. Every *Bundesland* has to implement the law in a transparent and coordinated way, providing uniform implementation criteria to the enforcement agencies responsible for the occupations concerned. It will be crucial for every *Bundesland* to have a standardized procedure for recognising qualifications. A web portal is available, enabling social partners and relevant institutions to define and map countries of origin, international collaboration programmes, and providing figures on the successful recognition of foreign professional and vocational credentials³.

The main principle established by the law is the equivalency of foreign professional and vocational qualifications to German standards. Thus, the responsible authorities will assess the candidate's qualifications on the basis of the equivalent occupation in Germany in order to maintain the high standard of German degrees and vocational certificates. This law also has the potential to boost NFIL recognition.

According to the interviews conducted for the NFIL project, the law could concern around 300,000 foreigners living in Germany. It could also have major consequences for the German VET system. A number of legal and business issues worry the social actors in sensitive sectors: possible discrimination of native Germans; conflictive discussions in

2. See the site of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (<http://www.bmbf.de/en/15644.php>) which presents the *Recognition Act*: "Germany needs experts! Many businesses, handicraft enterprises, hospitals and care facilities already depend on experts from abroad. For this reason, the Federal Government has created the Recognition Act as an instrument to secure the availability of skilled workers in Germany".

3. For more information, see the *Recognition in Germany* website: <http://www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de/html/en/index.php>

the Chambers about the validation of foreign credentials; greater competition on the labour market; increased labour immigration, particularly from EU countries.

3. A new challenge: the transferability of vocational knowledge to the German academic system

Universities are frequently convinced that they provide better qualifications than VET, though the formal boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. For many years, the social partners have lobbied the higher education system for easier access to universities.

Whereas apprenticeships are officially accessible to everybody (no high school diploma or *Abitur* necessary), universities normally restrict access for many courses, with the upper secondary school-leaving certificate (*Abitur*) being required. This has forced a lot of people without *Abitur* to invest in the *Zweiter Bildungsweg* (second-chance education) at a later stage in adult life to gain their *Abitur*. On the other hand, the *Abitur* has been excluded from the *German Qualifications Framework* (*Deutsche Qualifikationsrahmen*, DQR), because the German social partners do not consider it to be an official vocational qualification for the labour market, as it is not comparable to an apprenticeship.

Though the higher education system has recently become more open, uptake by workers is still rare. In 2009, the standing committee of the ministries for culture and education of the 16 *Länder* decided to increase permeability between vocational training and higher education (*Durchlässigkeitbeschluss*), thereby improving access of qualified workers to higher education. For example, the federal state of *Niedersachsen* allows people to access university exams without attending the preparatory seminars.

The ANKOM project has been developed with around 20 German universities with the objective of validating competences acquired on the job - a considerable step forward for universities. To further promote formal higher education during a working career, the joint platform “ways to study” was initiated by Federal Ministries, the Federal Employment Agency, the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce and university organizations.

In practice, non-formal and informal learning outcomes are seen neither as a danger nor as an opportunity for the higher education system. Academically educated employees often get time and financial support from their companies to study for an MBA, when the company sees added value in retaining the person in the company. This kind of option is rarely used or even offered to blue-collar workers and universities are not extensively promoting it.

It seems that in many sectors, the higher the level of education, the shorter academics stay in one company or sector. When they learn in a company, this is often used to start new studies (MBA, PhD). Blue-collar workers are less attracted by continuous learning, but they are also less mobile. Employers still have to find the right balance between academic and vocational education.

4. A progressive commitment of the social partners to integrate NFIL into the VET system

4.1 Social dialogue on vocational qualifications is cautious about NFIL

The architecture and concepts (e.g. levels of knowledge, competences and skills) of the *European Qualifications Framework* are not easily transferable to the German system, as the latter is structured according to a consistent conception of an occupation (*Beruf*), not easily broken down into modular skills.

The process of creating/modernising an occupation in Germany consists of three stages:

1. First a discussion (*Eckpunktesgespräch*) between the social partners on the creation or modernization of an occupation clarifies the main issues.
2. Then a tripartite committee of experts (social partners and the BIBB) unanimously defines and transposes the new occupation.
3. The new occupation is presented to the authorities for approval.

However, it is difficult to promote NFIL validation without allowing for a certain modular approach to qualifications. Within the DECVET project, Germany did look at the Swiss model of modular recognition and modular CVET.

The introduction of the EQF resulted in the adoption of a *German Qualifications Framework* (DQR) in 2009. However, this does not yet include the validation of NFIL outcomes. The process of harmonising examination rules and certification contents within the DQR is not yet complete. Through the DQR matrix, it should be easier for individuals and companies to define paths to validate continuous learning. Nevertheless, there seems to be competition between the award of vocational qualifications and academic degrees. The DQR reserves levels 7 and 8 for academic qualifications, which excludes some high-level vocational qualifications. The involvement of social partners has pushed the authorities to include certain vocational qualifications on levels 6, 7 and theoretically even level 8.

Cooperation between social partners in this field only occurs when there is an urgent case brought forward by a partner. The Chambers of Crafts have their own policy but are more cooperative than the Chambers of Industry and Commerce. The increasing independence of the Chambers leads to conflicts when social partners ask specific questions on behalf of their members. Professional mobility will be increased through qualified vocational certification, but for employers the trial period during which they can test apprentices is more important than official documents. Certificates given by employers often include the recognition of non-formally acquired skills, but these documents have no legal status. Nevertheless, these certificates could help define all NFIL elements, as they often describe working activities in detail.

Employers argue that the design of occupations in Germany is highly developed, meaning that greater recognition of NFIL would not help fill any gaps in the definition of these. NFIL could be important to increase transferability and links between occupations. Employers want to utilise all skills, and in particular the soft skills of their employees, using internal organization and management systems to identify competent personnel for a specific project. These systems are also used to hire the right VET graduates. NFIL outcomes are not honoured by higher

salaries, though this is also due to the lack of market power on the employee side.

Similar to employers, trade unions have little experience in the recognition and validation of NFIL outcomes. For the IG BAU trade union, the more important aspect is the dialogue with employers on defining occupations and their requirements. Nevertheless, trade unions have had to become involved in the European process of integrating NFIL outcomes, with some conducting projects on the recognition and validation of skills acquired on the job (see, for example, *IG Metall Job navigator*⁴).

Non-formal and informal learning outcomes play no direct role in collective bargaining. What is taken into account is the measurable and certified vocational experience in the sector. In terms of remuneration, formally certified education counts more than non-formal skills acquired in the sector.

4.2 One example of sectoral social dialogue: the construction sector

In the construction sector, the German trade union IG BAU and the German craft chamber are working on integrating occupational profiles into the EQF ranking system. For example, a certified site foreman (in German: *Meister-Polier*) would be ranked at level 6 in the EQF matrix, at the same level as someone with a bachelor degree.

To gain certification in Germany, a site foreman is examined by the audit committee of a trade association or Chamber of Crafts. Previously, he had to provide evidence of 600 hours of training, for example, a master craftsman course in a construction industry training centre. This course provides extensive knowledge of business administration, law, social studies etc. Such courses also contain very comprehensive elements of specific management techniques.

4. <http://jobnavigator.org>

CVET in construction sector companies has to be developed further and fully implemented. Though employees often have an appraisal discussion with their employer once a year (recorded in their personnel file), they rarely ask for interim reports on their work because they fear that it might affect the regular relationship with their employer. Asking for a work report seems to be perceived as an indication of looking for a new job.

Employees in the skilled crafts sectors, including construction, have the possibility of flexibilising training duration. If an employee wants to restart VET, employer and employee can jointly request the Chamber of Crafts to consider a reduction of the vocational study period, based on the skills acquired on the job.

Conclusion:

NFIL, not yet integrated in the social routine, is still a debate between experts

For some experts in Germany, the validation of skills acquired through NFIL seems to be a solution for a still rare problem in Germany, as the apprenticeship system has largely integrated skills and competences learned in the working environment.

Nevertheless, discussions abound on NFIL validation. The main question is the relevance of recognizing basic and elementary skills for securing workers' employability (*Verwertbarkeit*). This is a central issue needing to be answered if the establishment of new forms of certification is really going to help match supply and demand in the labour market, as examinations can be complicated and costly.

Many actors in Germany consider that the NFIL concept should be used to improve existing instruments. The Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the social partners and VET institutions are keeping the third pillar of NFIL in mind while reforming the existing system. Their coordinated work in specific sectors and occupations should progressively lead to more transferability of NFIL outcomes into the formal education system. But, for the moment, there is no haste on the part of the social partners to use ECVET as a system for validating vocational qualifications similar to the European Credit Transfer System.

Chapter 5

Italy

Introduction: fragmented experience in NFIL validation

For many years now, Italian society in general and the trade unions in particular have been showing increasing interest in the principles of NFIL validation. While there is no national validation framework, many 'local' validation or 'certification' schemes have emerged in recent years at regional level or in certain universities. Furthermore, recent developments initiated in 2012 are preparing the ground for developing a national system of NFIL validation-certification.

This chapter starts by presenting the institutional and political context shaping NFIL validation in Italy, as well as the content of the June 2012 agreement establishing the first step in building a national validation system (Section 1). We go on to discuss the interests and involvement of trade unions in validation (Section 2). Next, we present significant NFIL validation schemes in one Italian region and one Italian university (Section 3). The last section (Section 4) looks at questions that may arise regarding the recent planning of a national validation system.

1. Italy: towards a national NFIL validation system

1.1 Political and institutional context: the path to the April 2012 agreement on NFIL validation

At the end of the 2000's, there were no common national occupational standards in Italy, though much effort had been invested in this field.

Awareness for the need for training is low in Italy. Training is not usually necessary for a worker's career in Italy, with the latter being mainly dependent on his loyalty to the company and on how long he has worked for it. In some specific sectors (such as the health sector) it is

possible for a worker to benefit from training, thereby enhancing his professional standing. But normally, it is not possible in the private sector. Some other notable exceptions are to be found in such sectors as construction¹ and textiles where newly-hired workers benefit from mandatory training. While there is a general lack of financial resources devoted to vocational training, it is reported to be difficult to use public funds for training. There has been controversy for example about the industry-based Training Funds, a form of VET funding considered as public: these funds were supposed to be organized as a private organisation, and not as a public organisation as was previously the case.

More specifically, until recently no agreement on a national NFIL validation framework existed in Italy. Four main steps can be identified between 2000 and 2012 in the process leading towards the planning of a national validation framework:

- Between 2000 and 2006, the Ministries of Labour and Education, the social partners and the regions set up a national board to build a national qualifications framework, strictly related to the European Qualifications Framework. The involvement of all actors was very high in that phase, though uncertainty existed on what the Italian government would do after that.
- Between 2006 and 2011, the work in progress was stopped by the Ministry of Labour in order to work on a new plan, even though the regions and the social partners were in favour of continuing the work.
- Between 2011 and April 2012, the issue disappeared from the agenda. Uncertainty prevailed at the time, on account of the new Italian government and the economic crisis. Indeed, the question of validation was not viewed at central level as a priority, as a relevant political issue.
- Finally, on 19 April 2012 an agreement was reached between the Italian regions and the government. This foresaw the introduction of a national system for validating and certifying competences gained in an apprenticeship. The subsequent agreement of 20 April and the Law of 27 June 2012 backed up this decision, establishing a roadmap for

1. The sector benefits in particular from the existence of Formedil (*Ente Nazionale per la Formazione e l'Addestramento Professionale Professionale nell'Edilizia*), a national organization for vocational training in the building sector with its own resources coming from the sector. At the time of the NFIL interview, more than 600 people were in the training centres in Italy and 3000 people were working as consultants in that field.

building a national NFIL validation framework. In January 2013, the Government issued an important legislative decree dedicated to NFIL recognition in Italy (For more details, see Section 1.3).

With VET a competence shared by the national and regional levels, Italian regions and provinces have a certain amount of responsibility for VET. Their role in building a system for validating competences is very important from this perspective. The regions have been considering validation standards since 2004, and some have now developed validation practices. In one project, a number of regions defined certifications for new positions. All regional ‘certification’ systems have been analysed, assessed and summarised, with a view to standardising the processes involved. The goal is to achieve a certain minimum standard for each region (thereby ensuring inter-regional mobility). Though there is a lack of occupational standards at national level, the regions have come up with a document linking national standards to regional occupational standards to describe profiles. The quality of the VET system is the responsibility of the regions, on the basis of the 2008 agreements in which the regions recast the accreditation system. All regions are involved in the IeFP (*istruzione & formazione professionale*) quality system.

The NFIL validation schemes introduced by Italian regions are very diverse and fragmented (see below the presentation of the *Emilia Romagna* scheme) and include in particular the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*, a document listing a citizen’s skills/training and tested in 2006-2009 in 13 Italian regions. In *Toscana*, the *Libretto* was generalized for unemployed workers receiving unemployment benefit in 2011, as well as in the *Sicilia* and *Lazio* regions. In January 2011, the *Toscana* region had 18000 *Librettos* filled in for unemployed people, listing their work experience to help them regain employment. *Librettos* are available at provincial level in the employment agencies, helping individuals looking for work not just to list their experience, but also to find certifiable competences and prepare for the exam. Once an individual has passed the exam, the region certifies his competences and records them in the *Libretto*. *Lombardia* is another region with its own validation scheme. Here, competences should be related to formal qualifications listed in the region’s catalogue of qualifications.

The catalogue is less exhaustive in *Lombardia* than in *Toscana* (there are 240 qualifications in the *Toscana* regional catalogue). All kinds of

experience may be certified via a formalised validation process that leads to ‘credits’ giving access to VET programmes. The *Valle d’Aosta* Region has a system of training credits facilitating the identification or recognition of learning. There are two ways of doing this: the first involves evaluating the learning acquired in all kinds of context, with credits awarded by a commission; the second, built in 2006-2009, consists of a certification system defining occupational standards, including a set of rules to maintain regional standards.

The regions have proceeded in a bottom-up manner in an attempt to boost the planning of a national validation system, but are now waiting for national guidelines. Once the central government takes the lead, the regions will be able to move forwards. Up to now, in the absence of central leadership, the regions have had to work together, designing and implementing a number of inter-regional projects with the potential to become a national system. The main problem is that the Italian government has shown no lasting interest in NFIL validation over time.

A number of Italian institutions are particularly involved in the analysis and promotion of NFIL validation, such as ISFOL and *Tecnostruttura*. ISFOL (*Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori*) is the *Institute for the Development of Vocational Training of Workers*.

Under the supervision of the Italian Ministry of Labour, this agency has set up a working group on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Surveys presenting an overview of what has been and what is being done and monitoring all schemes² (regional, national, stakeholders) have been carried out, providing a systematic analysis of the status of NFIL validation in Italy (see for instance the report by Perulli and di Francesco 2010). Benchmarking studies have also been conducted by ISFOL. *Tecnostruttura* is a technical association that works for the regions in particular, implementing VET policies and other ESF

2. In one ISFOL mission, 47 initiatives and good practices were looked at and a database containing relevant information on practices built. Other work involves a three-country study (Germany, Denmark and Spain) of NFIL validation and different approaches to building a national-level validation system. An overview has been compiled of the 21 Italian regions working on validation initiatives. 6 of them are well underway and 11 other regions are in an experimentation phase, focusing on specific target groups.

(European Social Fund)-funded projects. One of *Tecnostruttura*'s working commissions is dedicated to employment and education policies. For more than ten years, *Tecnostruttura* has participated in building the 'foundations' of a national validation framework, providing technical assistance throughout the process.

1.2 Current limits on establishing a national NFIL validation system

A first difficulty limiting the possibilities for Italy to set up a national NFIL validation framework involved the question of timing, against the background of the economic and political contexts in 2006-2011. For example, while a recent law of September 2011 on apprenticeships specifies that learning outcomes must be registered in the *Libretto*, the December 2010 University Reform Act has reduced the number of credits that universities may recognize for learning acquired in non-formal contexts. Moreover, a labour market reform was underway at the time in Italy, raising many questions. NFIL validation was therefore not regarded as a major or priority issue for a long time.

Italy benefits from many local schemes, possibly making it more difficult to create a nationwide system (even if some similarities or common points may exist between the different local schemes). Another difficulty involves certain divergences in terms of the interest attached to validation. While most of the social partners and regions have a longstanding interest in it, this is not the case with the Ministry of Education.

In addition, 'hard' evidence of the impact of validation (in terms of a rise in qualification levels, employment levels, wages, *etc.*) is rather hard to find at regional level. This does not provide any additional incentive to build a national system. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the qualitative surveys of 'local' certification/validation projects, operators, stakeholders and beneficiaries gave encouraging views on these schemes.

The following points reported in the interviews may partly explain the delay in building a national NFIL validation framework in Italy:

- The relationships between actors (regions and ministries...) make agreements difficult to reach, even if the social partners are very sensitive to the issue.
- Certain regions are so advanced that it may be difficult for them to go one step backwards, while other regions have not shown any willingness to initiate the process. Furthermore, in practice, it may be difficult 'at first sight' to implement a national validation system in a region where a 'local' system already exists.
- Institutional competences are not well shared. In addition, there is no national institution dedicated to validation (unlike the situation in many other countries). On a more general level, there are no national committees in which to discuss this topic.
- There is a general problem of funds dedicated to training. Furthermore, there is no central training institution empowered to collect funds for validation.
- Information for potential beneficiaries of local 'validation' schemes is not well publicised, with no campaigns informing workers of their training rights. In particular, regions with validation schemes are not distributing information to everyone, mainly because the current situation makes it impossible to offer validation to all 'users' (too costly).
- The interests of different sectors, at regional and national levels, can vary greatly. The same applies for companies: in particular, each company may want to recognize the skills of its own workforce.
- From a general point of view, the high rigidity of Italian society and the economy are counterproductive.

1.3 The planned establishment of a national validation system

Political consensus between the Italian government and the regions was finally established in the first months of 2012, paving the way for two agreements and one draft law setting up of a national-level system for validating / certifying competences.

On 19 April 2012, agreement was reached between the regions and the Italian government on setting up a national system for validating / certifying competences for apprenticeships, and including 'minimum' norms of certification. This was followed on 20 April 2012 by a further agreement strengthening the previous agreement with the government

by planning follow-up actions at regional level. The regions and both the Ministry of Education and of Labour have since decided that, before the implementation of a national certification system, the April agreement covers *all formal, non-formal and informal learning*.

On 27 June 2012 the national law on labour market reform was adopted, includes validating and certifying competences from formal, non-formal and informal learning. This latest labour market reform also empowered the Government to issue one or more legislative decrees on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Two further agreements reached at the State-Regions Conference (one on lifelong learning, the other on guidance) were signed on 20 December 2012. Another important step occurred in January 2013, with the Government issuing a legislative decree (DL n13 of 16 January 2013) defining general principles and basic performance levels for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning and minimum service standards for the national skill certification system in Italy.

2. Trade unions and NFIL validation: current situation and perceptions

The role of social partners is important at both the national and the regional government level. Regional committees participate in VET procedures, discuss a region's actions and are responsible for approving resources and funds in a cooperative approach based on social dialogue. For example, for discussions on skill needs, regional committees bring together representatives from regional and local authorities, trade unions and employers.

For several years, 28 social partners (4 trade unions and 24 employer organisations), the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Ministry of Education and Research and the regions have been involved in establishing common national occupational standards (that may lead to the validation of competences). However, progress is slow.

The three Italian trade union confederations, *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL), *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori* (CISL) and *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), share a willingness to establish a national system for the recognition of non-

formal and informal learning. This has led to the launch of a discussion forum involving the regions and social partners. However, differences between the stakeholders make it difficult to reach agreement. National-level vocational and training standards (also covering apprenticeships) have been discussed, though as yet no agreement has been reached on how to describe job profiles and VET contents, and how to certify competences and skills. It has turned out to be a very slow and difficult process, notably because of the different points of view held by the ministries. One of the main problems has been the lack of strong political leadership in this field. The social partners also asked different sectors how they would go about designing job profiles and skills, but the work was stopped due to a lack of leadership or political involvement.

Trade unions have stressed that the creation of a national system may be focused on its specific needs. One important problem to solve is the fact that companies are very much linked to their own sectors, as well as region. This means that national-level principles compatible with local needs have to be found. With so many stakeholders involved, this is a major challenge, as each wants to retain his role.

The trade unions and VET experts have also underlined the coordination problems due to the respective competences of central government (education) and the regions (VET). To make progress, mandatory national-level guidelines are needed, whereby European instruments (e.g. European directives and guidelines on the European Qualifications Framework) play an important role in constructing a national qualifications system.

For the trade unions and employers' organisations, the delay in building a validation system in Italy may also be explained by a 'cultural' problem. Indeed, it was reported that a major proportion of Italian workers hardly understand the relevance of having their learning validated, with workers generally focused on mandatory skills. The concept of NFIL validation seem very theoretical to many of them. Furthermore, most of the workers who have acquired skills at the workplace are unaware of validation possibilities (where they exist) or are unwilling to have them validated. NFIL recognition is a very important subject for the work of the trade unions, as individuals are at the core of the validation process. Unions are stressing the relevance of training for boosting a worker's career from a lifelong learning perspective, in line with the European approach.

3. Noteworthy NFIL validation schemes

3.1 The Emilia Romagna scheme

Emilia Romagna is one of the few Italian regions to have developed a validation system with both theoretical and practical sides³. The first tools appeared in 2003-2005 and the system became operational in 2005. Though already rolled out, the system is subject to ongoing development, and has the opportunity to evolve in line with national and European requirements.

Emilia Romagna now has a very large repertoire of occupational standards. Though not directly linked to European standards, work in this field at the national level has been started. Each qualification has the same template, composed of four competence units, each of which consists of four different skills.

The validation system is strictly related to the vocational system, *i.e.* focuses on people (employed/unemployed) aged over 16. One to four competences may be certified. One important validation step is the ‘check for evidence’, *i.e.* candidates have to provide proof of the competences in question. Such proof can vary greatly (workplace projects, official documents, coordination activities, etc.). Individuals may be required to sit an examination, a decision taken by the expert⁴ analysing the submitted documentation. If this is assessed as ‘sufficient’, the competence is certified. Different kinds of certification may be awarded:

- Full certification covering all four competences.
- Partial certification covering one, two of three competences.
- A certificate of knowledge or capability, based on the individuals’ declarations, with the involvement of teachers.

3. Please note that *Emilia Romagna* was a pilot region for the *Libretto Formativo Del Cittadino*.

4. Different kinds of experts are involved in the process: 1 – an expert certifying that the process is correct (often someone from an education centre), 2 – an external expert from the sector to which the occupational qualification belongs.

The main idea behind validation is very important: any person can be certified *whatever the way the skills are acquired* (a quite recurrent feature in many countries). However, it should be noted that around 95% of people obtain certificates resulting from training courses, with only 5% gaining their certificate through having their ‘experience’ validated.

The role of the social partners is quite weak in the regional validation process itself. But on a more general level, the social partners play a very important role in the development of the regional training system. Indeed, the system is more related to the vocational educational system than to the labour market. Trade unions discuss with the *Emilia Romagna* regional administration questions relating to the labour market. Important questions are: “does the labour market recognize the certification system?” and “to what extent are companies interested in the possibilities of validation?”. One particular problem is that it is difficult to match formal certifications with labour market needs.

The *Emilia Romagna* validation process has an average cost of around 300€ per person, with costs lower for a group and higher for individuals. Theoretically, many ‘target groups’ could benefit from validation. However, it is very difficult to assess the impact of validation in practice as this requires relating a qualification to a salary or position. However, certain occupations are strictly related to national qualifications with mandatory formal certification (*available in all regions*), including nurses, care workers and hairdressers.

One practical limit for applying the system in *Emilia Romagna* is related to how well the system is known. Indeed, though VET centres are aware of the existence of the system, employees are generally unaware of it.

Some projects run by the region have the potential to be recognized as best practices. These include the Leonardo Da Vinci (EU)-coordinated project *Rear window*⁵, involving such countries as Austria, the Czech

5. Two main objectives are pursued by this project: (i) creating tools and instruments for comparing national/regional qualification systems in the engineering sectors of the countries involved and (ii) creating and testing a system (procedures, tools and instruments) for the transparent validation of competences (inherent in the engineering area) acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. See for example this report: <http://librettocompetenze.isfol.it/materiali/strumenti-esempi/1.%20Analisi%20sistema%20delle%20qualifiche%20-%20Rear%20Window.pdf>

Republic and Italy (Toscana, Emilia Romagna) and recognised as a ‘best practice’ by ISFOL. Work is also ongoing on looking into the qualifications of migrants and the content thereof⁶.

Finally, in the view of certain validation and VET experts from *Emilia Romagna*, a very important step in the development of validation would be to involve the social partners, as the current system could work more efficiently if better matched to labour market needs.

3.2 The Roma Tre University scheme

In Italy, universities show no great interest in NFIL validation, as existing regulations offer little support for validation in universities. NFIL recognition via university credits is not yet very relevant because:

- There were (until recently) no national policies on this issue.
- The European document *Universities for Lifelong Learning guidelines* has not yet been adopted as a strategic perspective for universities.
- The recent Law of December 2010 seriously limited the possibility of recognizing prior learning, however gained, in terms of university credits⁷.
- It is very difficult to involve external partners (social, economic, institutional actors) in these activities because of a lack of attention to this question.

Nevertheless, certain Italian universities, notably the Roma Tre University (Roma III), offer good schemes in this field:

- To develop and guarantee the possibility for adults to (re-) enter university.
- To create new methods for reducing the gap between formal learning and NFIL.

6. Many migrants work in the region, representing a potentially interesting target for validation.

7. This law for universities reduced from 60 to 12 the number of credits that may be recognized in this regard.

- To increase the quality of human resources in terms of knowledge and competences, and thereby the quality of economic and social development.

In the field of recognising prior learning, *Roma Tre* University has done some research into didactic, organizational and institutional work. Some benchmarking has been done, in particular with the French *VAE* system and the British *APEL* model. An Italian validation model with its own procedures and methodologies has been built and put into practice through activities involving a total of 145 adults on a 2008-2010 degree course in Education and Human Resources Development. In this context, the criteria needed by students to apply for validation had to be defined, based on the development of competence-based strategies as a key element supporting professional transitions. It was also necessary to change the degree course regulations, introduce a number of new rules⁸.

A number of new forums for the discussion and promotion of NFIL recognition at university have been created. These include the *Research and Service Centre for Bilan de Compétences and Compétences Certification* created at the *Roma Tre* University. An Italian Lifelong Learning Network has also been constituted, modelled on the *European Universities' Charter*.

4. Questions on the recent planning of a national validation system

4.1 The need for a validation system

There is clearly a need for validation for specific target populations in Italy. Many people could theoretically gain great benefit from having some of their non-formal or informal skills validated. These include in

8. In particular, this work includes: (i) acknowledgment of the right of a student to apply for validation; (ii) definition of learning outcomes in terms of “knowledge, ability and competences”; (iii) new procedures to produce evidence, CVs; (iv) new activities and guidance, tutoring services; (v) new tools and instruments for the validation process, including assessment panels/committees involving teachers (internal and external professionals).

particular unemployed people financially supported by the government and migrants. The Italian context of a lack of resources devoted to vocational training, and the current context of economic crisis may help further develop validation practices.

In addition, somewhat peculiar situations can occur in Italy, as it is possible for an individual to have his non-formal and informal competences validated in some regions and not in others. At the same time, the prior learning validated in a given region is also recognized in all other Italian region. This situation has created inequalities between workers within Italy. From this perspective, establishing a national validation framework would promote equality between regions⁹.

4.2 The feasibility of a national system

According to ISFOL, implementing a national validation system would require certain guidelines, equivalent to technical guidance or to guidelines referring to the status or the competences of the people in charge of validation. But it is first very important to reach agreement on certain standards of competences, and to have a definition of what constitutes *non-formal* and *informal* learning, credits, lifelong learning, etc.

Is the current period the right time to build a national NFIL validation framework? On the one hand, it can be assumed that recent political and economic events¹⁰ may limit the feasibility of such a framework. On the other hand, the economic crisis makes a validation framework more desirable than ever.

Looked at practically, according to many actors, it would not be so difficult to build a national validation system in Italy. It was often reported in

9. Please note that in 2011/2012, the regions signed two agreements identifying 22 occupations related to three-year courses leading to a vocational qualification and 21 occupations for four-year courses leading to a professional diploma recognized in all regions.

10. On the date of the interview on which this testimony is based, Mario Monti's new government was in power in Italy. Moreover the country was in the grips of a major labour market reform (many problems were on the political agenda). At the date of writing of this book, there is a different government in office.

NFIL project meetings that one of the main factors for achieving progress was political willingness. Indeed, over the last ten years, many steps have been achieved in the work and discussions between regions, the government and the social partners (even though discussions tend to be stop-and-go). According to some actors, the establishment of a validation system with clear goals and political will would take about two years. This would involve building on what already exists and capitalising on the experience and work already available at the 'local' level. There is quite strong willingness on the part of the social partners to rapidly develop NFIL practices at national level, and certain institutions such as *Tecnostruttura* would work to support regions in such a project. A necessary precondition for a national system remains the gaining of consensus between central government and the regions.

Conclusion:

Sufficient conditions for establishing a unified validation framework?

Italy is a very interesting case of a country in a multi-year process of building a completely new national framework. The multiplicity and diversity of the existing Italian local schemes related to NFIL validation, but also the involvement of the social partners in questions relating to training and validation have created a favourable ground for establishing a national NFIL validation framework. Even if disagreement exists at certain levels, many conditions for a national system seem available. Last but not least, the political willingness and the labour market reforms have finally allowed consensus to be reached between the government and the regions on the setting up of a national validation system, allowing progress to be made. In a context of economic crisis and a recently reformed Italian labour market, the possibilities offered by NFIL recognition may represent an important asset for the Italian economy. The best practices of the 'local' Italian schemes are very important in this perspective, having the ability to boost the establishment of the planned national-level validation framework.

Chapter 6

Poland

Introduction

Compared to other European countries, Poland recorded high growth during the 2000's and stood up well to the crisis thanks to wise macroeconomic policies. Nevertheless, Poland is now experiencing a number of difficulties in fully and efficiently integrating its working population into the labour market, with activity rates remaining low, especially for people with low education levels. Skill mismatches also remain significant (Egert and Kierzenkowski, 2013). As a consequence, the Polish government is emphasising tertiary education and its vocational dimension. But there is a specific need for enhancing the VET system and encouraging lifelong learning.

Since Poland's accession to the European Union and its adoption of the *Act on Employment Protection and Labour Market Institutions* (2004), successive Polish governments have developed active labour market policies (ALMPs), including training programmes. Implementation of these policies has been effective, notably on account of the role played by district job centres. Two ways of adult vocational education were developed, including financial incentives for companies to participate: practical learning on the job, and training (VET) for a job. Both ways end with an examination, as a result of which a qualification may be awarded.

However, these policies seem too pro-cyclical to influence the growth model in the long term. The number of people actively engaged in programmes decreased substantially in 2011, with only 15% of the unemployed benefitting from them. ALMP effectiveness has been evaluated by quasi-experimental methods, showing that the net impact of VET measures on employment seems lower than other programmes (Wisniewski and Maksim, 2013).

How can the development of NFIL validation contribute to consolidating and increasing the effectiveness of ALMPs? Poland has not yet established a system to validate skills obtained in non-formal and informal settings. This situation is largely due to the priority given to formal learning in the education system. CVET is not well developed in company practices and is also of no real interest for employees. Nevertheless, there have been a number of schemes introduced over the last few years at local or sectoral level.

This chapter starts by presenting the current situation regarding education, training and NFIL in Poland (Section 1). It goes on to look at the involvement of the social partners in training issues in Section 2. Section 3 presents a selection of local and sectoral schemes linked to NFIL validation. The conclusion deals with the existing conditions and perspectives in Poland for establishing a national NFIL validation framework.

1. VET and NFIL in Poland: a system still in transition

The Polish educational system is slowly but steadily being reformed. This process is set to include NFIL recognition and validation at some time in the future.

1.1 Political and institutional efforts

Education in Poland is generally characterized by a high degree of formalization. The formal education system is considered by most Polish citizens as being the place where the necessary vocational skills for the labour market are acquired. Though Poland has a very good formal education system with nominally some of the best indicator rankings in Europe, the system is not sufficiently adapted to labour market needs. More and more students are now overqualified, and even hide their qualifications in order to get a job in the service sector. There is no permanent cooperation between higher education and employers. In response to some of these issues, Poland implemented its Higher Education Reform in 2011.

The debate on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and its national-level transposition triggered considerable efforts by the Ministry of Education and the social partners to adapt formal education, especially higher education and vocational education and training (VET), to the new requirements of the integrated European labour market. The Ministry of Education has started work, together with partners, on building a national qualifications framework, against a background of a rapidly changing labour market moving away from low-skilled manual jobs and towards higher skilled service and managerial occupations.

In the aftermath of the October 2011 national elections, the Polish government reorganized the national Ministry of Education and developed a new education policy prioritising a national Human Resource Plan. This plan targets the following groups:

- people affected by restructuring or getting prepared for it;
- people in need of vocational education;
- people with lower levels of education;
- people eager to improve their skills;
- public administration;
- unemployed young people.

One of the main problems is that the regions have different needs, meaning that target groups may be difficult to be defined at national level. The Ministry of Education and the IBE (*Instytut Badan Edukacyjnych, Educational Research Institute*) are very interested in feedback from the social partners, and in particular from trade unions, as increasing employability is a key challenge and social partners should have an interest in pushing this agenda. The IBE, which plays a key instigating role, builds infrastructural tools (e.g. a database of institutions, a digital platform for exchanging information). It is studying the basic requirements for implementing a National Qualifications Framework and a National Qualifications Register for lifelong learning.

KOWEZIU (*Krajowy Ośrodek Wspierania Edukacji Zawodowej i Ustawicznej, National Centre for Supporting Vocational and Continuing education*) is an institute in Warsaw specialized in providing training and certificates for teachers and trainers. Most of its projects are co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). The institute is working

on modernising learning and teaching standards, and provides help in developing learning modules. There is also a project for professional employment counsellors as well as e-learning courses for teachers.

1.2 Implementation of European standards in progress

The *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF) has led to new regulations in Poland. In 2008 work started on the *Polish Qualifications Framework* (PQF) covering the whole education and training field. One year later, in 2009, a proposal was submitted by a working group, which had analysed skills needs in the labour market. In 2010 a national steering committee adopted proposals as a basis for designing and implementing the PQF. The first consultation on the Polish Qualifications Framework took place in February 2011. A lot of European material had to be translated into Polish, and the Ministry of Education financed a project to develop a national glossary as a way of steering the discussion with the right key words and definitions. The whole consultation phase took one year and was completed in February 2012.

The government, with the support of IBE, is implementing the PQF in cooperation with the social partners and other stakeholders. The main step at the moment is to formulate the content of a register of all qualifications (*National Qualifications Register*). The PQF will include procedures for recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Considerable adjustments need to be made to introduce an appropriate credit system. So far, there are no clear procedures for validating NFIL. Similarly there are also no procedures for measuring and improving the quality of VET institutions.

The Ministry of Education is discussing the level of technical qualifications with the Chamber of Crafts and other chambers but also intensively with the social partners. Though sectoral frameworks are not obligatory, the Ministry of Education is encouraging their development with a view to developing descriptions of vocational qualifications for specific sectors. These sectoral proposals should start appearing in 2013.

1.3 The slow path to lifelong learning

Poland's VET system is not very well developed, with the high structural barriers to financial support one of the main reasons behind the lack of progress. Indeed, there is clearly a lack of funding available through training and labour funds.

Social partners sit on the national Parliament's Social Dialogue Committee, enabling them to discuss labour-related issues and put forward proposals to the government on how to allocate labour funds. The Polish Training and Labour Fund is co-financed by the European Union.

A further training fund exists for companies, with a focus on SMEs. It offers the opportunity to develop regional projects and sectoral projects. Each company can also set up its own training fund based on 0.25% of total payroll. Very small and micro companies, the majority of Polish companies, are unable to collect sufficient funds to be able to engage in training. In some regions, micro-companies and even big companies are in practice excluded from the use of national and local training funds. Available funding from the national Human Resources Plan covers 50% of cost, but it is not sufficient, according to the social partners. Moreover, this plan is not interesting enough for funding the training needs of SMEs according to the *Solidarnosc* education experts.

One major reason for the slow development of VET in Poland is the minor role played by lifelong learning. Despite the growing skill needs of the Polish economy there is as yet no widespread culture of lifelong learning. In the view of the *Polish Agency for Enterprise Development* (www.parp.gov.pl), the population lacks the social skills vital for a highly diversified economy. Once they have completed their schooling, people do not expect to continue learning. Available data show that only 5% of adults participated in CVET in 2011, a rate only increasing slowly. Steady and sufficient progress is needed to reach the European target of 15% by 2020. Political actors at different levels are now starting to pick up this challenge.

2. A lack of social dialogue on training issues

Employers frequently complain about the low level of qualifications in the Polish economy and emphasize the importance of high-standard investment in human capital. Though a large offer of training providers exists in Poland, a lot of the VET services provided do not meet the required standards. In particular, they rely on easy access to European funds, without any reliable evaluation of results. According to the interviews conducted for the NFIL project, customers are not satisfied. This is resulting in labour offices considering the introduction of vouchers for customers, thereby providing more effective incentives for VET providers to improve the quality of their services. Companies interested in training can apply for funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) at different levels (territories, *województws* or counties, the national level).

Another structural reason for lifelong learning not yet having the importance it should have in Poland is the fact that the economy is dominated by SMEs, including micro-companies employing 1-9 employees. It is particularly difficult to lobby for employee interests since, under Polish law, people working in such micro-companies have reduced labour rights. Training is not seen as a service provided by the company, but as a personal responsibility of the individual employee. Employers argue they would have to pay twice, once for the training and once more when the trained employee leaves the company.

The system is only suboptimal and still inefficient in parts. As regards social dialogue, it is particularly difficult for trade unions to discuss training issues with employers since there is no legal basis to engage in such a dialogue. Trade unions are having to build up their own capacities, but lack the resources to influence the design of VET services. Local labour offices rarely have relations with Polish trade unions and there are not many sectoral collective agreements setting objectives and rules on training.

Nevertheless, there are a number of Polish best practices in certain sectors, including ICT and banking where the institutional actors follow international standards and adapt Polish standards accordingly. One best practice example from the steel sector was the 2009 ArcelorMittal “Professional Qualification Today and Tomorrow” project. Against a background of a decreasing labour force in the coming years, the social

partners decided to step up their efforts (also financially) to train employees for the future. The building industry is another successful sector. Here, a number of weaknesses have been identified. Though technical skills and knowledge are sufficient, social competences are very low. A series of projects have helped identify weaknesses and ways of overcoming them. A project dealing specifically with non-formal and informal learning has also been initiated (see below).

3. Specific NFIL validation initiatives at sectoral and local level

3.1 A recent initiative in the building sector

One recent initiative was the project *Towards a Qualified Construction Workforce for Poland* (APL-Bud; *Accreditation of Prior Learning for Polish Construction*), implemented by the Polish trade union *Budowlani* in conjunction with national and international partners between 2008 and 2010. This pilot project has resulted in the initiation of changes in the legal framework for recognising skills acquired through non-formal learning. Appropriate changes were proposed to the Labour Code, and two specific legal acts in the construction sector were adopted – the *Law on Construction* and the *Real Estate Management Act*. Concrete recommendations have been made to design a national system for accrediting prior learning in the construction sector. The project also delivered practical insights into the need to develop a modular approach to qualifications.

Though the project played a major role in the reform of the Polish VET system, it also revealed the lack of an appropriate infrastructure for both theoretical and practical training and examinations, pointing to the need for cooperation and partnerships between education providers and employers.

3.2 A European project conducted by the teachers' union ZNP

In 2011 and 2012, the ZNP (*Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, Polish teachers' trade union*) participated in an EU-funded cross-border

project for assessing and improving vocational and educational counselling. The aims of this transnational project – *Guidance Dialogue 2* – involving Germany, Austria and Poland and set up by trade unions and vocational training institutions were to promote transnational dialogue on VET guidance, develop VET guidelines and contribute to the development of national strategies for educational guidance structures.

3.3 The Polish craft chamber initiative

The *National Chamber of Crafts (Związek Rzemiosła Polskiego, ZRP)* is an umbrella organization similar to the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (*Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks, ZDH*). It should be stressed that both Polish and German organizations enjoy good relations with each other and regularly exchange information on qualifications. Local crafts chambers are organised in 27 regional organisations and cover 480 skilled crafts. The ZRP cooperates with craft chambers in other European countries, particularly with German crafts chambers in order to get qualifications certified for companies working abroad.

The Polish regulation allows workers to have their skills certified by the chambers, with certificates on a par with secondary school certificates. Special “train the trainers” courses are organised by the ZRP to produce trainers and examiners qualified to certify specific vocational skills.

3.4 The Jagiellonian University (Cracow) scheme

The University’s centre for recognizing qualifications started up in 2011 and has taken two years to become fully operational. The goal of this pilot project is to build a centre for recognising qualifications gained through non-formal learning or on the job. The philosophy of the project is to transfer innovatory approaches from the EU’s *Leonardo da Vinci* programme (this EU-funded sectoral program focuses on VET) to Poland. The project partners, including the IBE, intend to test different solutions and as a result gain a clear picture of what procedures will be needed for recognizing qualifications. A handbook will be compiled, listing tools and explaining how they should be created and applied. A

group of ‘counsellors’ will train organizations involved in evaluating VET. The project’s management plans to provide open access to the research results, and there is hope that the results obtained may help in the process of building the PQF and the national register of qualifications.

Conclusion:

Step by step towards establishing a NFIL framework

The system for defining, recognizing and validating NFIL is not yet established in Poland. Many efforts are being financed by European funds and the Polish institutions involved are confident that they are on the right track. Though certain sectors are moving forwards faster than others, Poland is still far from introducing the validation of NFIL outcomes within a consistent national framework. The relevant actors are working on implementing the EQF at national level. The introduction of the European credit system for VET (ECVET) is a further topic as yet not discussed in Poland.

Most of the work needing to be done is in the field of recognising NFIL outcomes. Though the legal basis must be guaranteed, at the end of the day success is dependent on the idea of lifelong learning entering the heads of institutions, employees and employers. According to several interview partners, Polish employers, for the most part owners of micro-enterprises, have no appreciation of skills and competences acquired outside the formal system. Poland also has too many highly educated jobseekers, meaning that there is a substantial risk of workers taking on jobs where the required skills are below their qualifications.

In many sectors there are no regulations and no plans to validate experience acquired on the job. As Poland is in a learning process with regard to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, there is no pilot scheme, monitoring, or evaluation device in place at the national level. For regional-level actors, support from the national level remains vague since most of the frameworks (PQF and sectoral frameworks) are still under discussion and not really implemented. All in all, it can be stated that the implementation of European standards for measuring the outcomes of the Polish VET system is still at an early stage.

With the predominance of formal education in working life, lifelong learning and NFIL validation do not yet play an important role in Polish society. A number of important structural issues, such as the large share of SMEs in the economy, the lack of social dialogue on NFIL validation or the shortage of funds, make it difficult to implement training programmes. Nevertheless, the growing need to raise skill levels and employment in the Polish economy clearly calls for more progress on the VET front. Furthermore, certain sectoral schemes underline the need to improve employees' skills, while some other initiatives represent first practical approaches to validating NFIL at local or sectoral levels. The European tools and approaches linked to NFIL are starting to be implemented and represent first important steps for setting up a national NFIL validation framework.

Chapter 7

Portugal

Introduction

An OECD study published in 2006 (Guichard and Larre, 2006) expressed a clear-cut view on the performance of the Portuguese education and training system:

“The lack of human capital in Portugal has become a key obstacle to higher growth. ... Improvements are needed to narrow the significant human capital gap with other OECD countries. Despite progress in the past decades, Portuguese children spend comparatively few years in formal education, and they do not perform as well as children from other OECD countries. Adults, especially the least educated, do not participate enough in lifelong learning and training programmes. This situation does not stem from a lack of resources devoted to education and training but from inefficiencies and misallocation of spending, and weaknesses in the quality of the services that compound the low starting point of Portugal regarding education. Modernizing the Portuguese economy therefore requires a broad reform which increases human capital at all levels. The ongoing efforts of the authorities in the three areas - basic and upper secondary education, tertiary education and adult training - go in the right direction but implementation remains a challenge.”

The Portuguese rate of early school leavers was among the highest in OECD countries and the rate of workers' participation in continuing training among the lowest (see Chapter 2). Though the OECD views are debatable, similar views were sufficiently shared by the Portuguese political and social actors themselves to urge them to take strong measures to overcome this situation and get Portugal away from the bottom European rankings.

Section 1 presents the *New Opportunities* initiative launched by the Portuguese government in 2006 and its implementation until 2011. Section 2 emphasizes the strong point of this initiative: the cooperative

framework between institutional and social actors strengthening NFIL validation processes. Section 3 presents two examples of the practical interaction between vocational training and NFIL validation, while Section 4 looks both at the results and the limits of the initiative.

1. A large-scale public initiative: the *Novas Oportunidades* programme

The *New Opportunities* initiative (NOI) was launched at the end of 2005. It did not start from scratch, being based on a long tradition of attention to vocational training and on initial experience with NFIL validation in the early 2000's. Nevertheless, the NOI constituted a new step and a breakthrough, being a *large-scale* initiative explicitly supported by the social actors and intensively promoted by the media. Six years later, the results of an independent, collective and ongoing assessment of the initiative are available, allowing a qualified measurement of its impact (Carneiro 2011). Roberto Carneiro, head of the research team, defines NOI as “an innovative approach to motivate low-skilled adults to embark in a system of informal and no-formal skills recognition, accreditation and certification, with complements of formal learning, to obtain 4th, 6th, 9th and 12th grades education diplomas or/and a vocational certification”. This “offer of a radically new design of adult certification and skills upgrading” follows a twofold strategic plan: the qualification of adults, by offering them a new and fair opportunity to redress the lack of appropriate qualifications (the “stock”), but also the qualification of young people, by greatly reducing the high drop-out rates from initial education (the “flow”). The intermediary results of this assessment were useful for the institutions in charge of the NOI, helping them to adapt its implementation: the *Agência Nacional para a Qualificação* (ANQ, now called ANQEP, *Agência Nacional para a Qualificação e o Ensino Profissional*) and the *Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional* (IEFP).

The starting point is the reality of 3.5 million under-skilled workers (more than half the active population) without complete secondary education: a huge problem rooted in a low-skilled labour-intensive

economy. The ambitious goal was to overcome this massive “third world problem”¹ through appropriate policies and instruments, balancing the quantitative effort and the qualitative concern. The NOI was based on an inclusive approach, aimed at social cohesion through overcoming persistent social and cultural divisions created by initial educative inequalities. It was by no means a top-down policy, with social and local actors explicitly involved and a decentralised national network of 450 *Centros Novas Oportunidades* (CNO). A common framework and guidelines oriented the work of these CNOs, though they were incited to regulate and assess themselves. The human and financial investment was sizeable, involving teachers, trainers, technicians, psychologists, social scientists, etc. Over 9000 professionals work in the CNO network, nearly half of them new and often young professionals. A highly-qualified, enthusiastic and dynamic system has been built in a short time, based on learning-by-doing and networking. Though small employers were often initially suspicious of the NOI, employer acknowledgement has grown in line with the initiative’s implementation, with employers able to verify the positive impact of more autonomous and pro-active workers. However, the micro-firms typical of the Portuguese economy remain reluctant to be involved in the initiative.

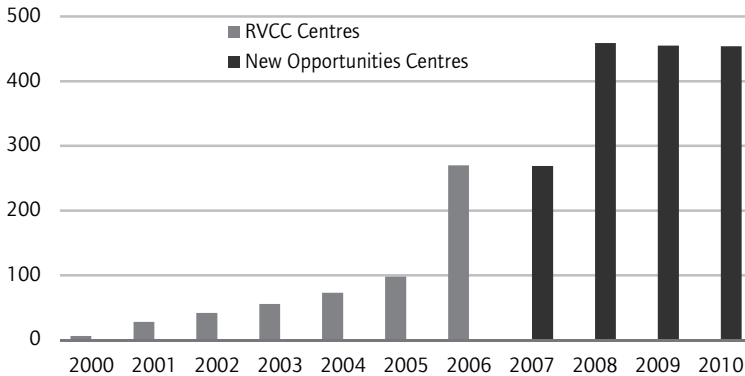
The main target was to certify 600,000 adults and to have 350,000 people participate in adult education and training courses between 2006 and 2010. One main challenge was to establish the secondary level (12 years of schooling) as the minimum qualification level of the Portuguese population. 5 years after the launch of the NOI, the 450 CNOs had enrolled 1.6 million people and topped 430,000 certifications (9th and 12th grades). The detailed quantitative targets were frequently exceeded (but not in the case of the upper secondary level or 12th grade, where it was impossible to attain the initial target).

Compared to the predecessor RVCC centres (*Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences* centres), the expansion of CNOs is dramatic. These CNOs use the RVCC methodology for recognising competences acquired through life and work experience and through non-formal or informal learning, converting these learning outcomes

1. A term used by Rodrigo Queiroz, one of the authors of the study led by Roberto Carneiro.

into formally validated and certified skills. In a context where, for decades, young people often left school with minimum qualifications to take up a job, the need for the formal recognition of acquired skills became a priority.

Figure 10 Number of RVCC Centres and New Opportunities Centres



Source: New Opportunities Initiative, ANQ, September 2010.

The objectives and principles of the NOI were for the most part supported by the two trade union confederations, CGTP and UGT, with some differences concerning particular issues. In February 2006, the CGTP and UGT signed an agreement with the employers' confederations. The agreement considers NFIL validation to be a necessary process. In March 2007, the UGT signed a tripartite agreement on the reform of vocational training, aimed at defining and implementing the NOI framework. The CGTP however rejected the agreement, notably because of a lack of answers to the specific needs of workers in small and micro-firms.

However, the situation has now become complicated due to the fiscal crisis and the 2011 change of government, and uncertainty clouds the future of the NOI. In January 2012, a new tripartite agreement on reforming the labour market was concluded, again accepted by the UGT, but rejected by the CGTP. This agreement reasserts the need to strengthen the NFIL validation system, but also announces the remodelling of the CNO network (and also the network of employment centres).

2. The strengths of the New Opportunities Initiative

2.1 A cooperative institutional framework: ANQEP, IEFP, the Sector Councils

NOI is a government initiative with a consultative board on which the social partners are represented. The board discusses all measures to be taken under the NOI umbrella. It has met 15 times since the launch of the initiative, the last time in June 2011 before the new government came into office. The initiative's strength implies a robust and reliable institutional framework. ANQEP and IEFP work closely together in a spirit of work sharing, with a view to developing a single integrated system of vocational training and skills validation, based on balanced cooperation between the Ministries of Labour and Education (but excluding higher education). Since its creation in 2007, ANQ/ANQEP has been responsible for tool design, while the IEFP's role is more operational. ANQEP and IEFP work together on monitoring the needs of the labour markets. However, as yet there is a lack of any systematic anticipation of skills needs.

The ANQ/ANQEP is now the body responsible for coordinating the national qualification and validation system. It is in charge of developing the *National Qualifications System (Sistema Nacional de Qualificações, SNQ)*, aiming to integrate existing qualifications into the *European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*. The SNQ covers the *National Qualifications Framework (NQF)* and the *National Qualifications Catalogue (NQC)*. Definition and updating of the standards listed in the catalogue (occupational profiles, training guidelines, RVCC standards) benefit from the work of 16 national *Sector Councils for Qualifications (Conselhos Sectoriais para a Qualificação)*, made up of representatives of the IEFP, the social partners, training providers and education institutions. The work of the councils and their stakeholders is heterogeneous, depending on the sector. It is sometimes difficult to identify members able to add value to the specific discussions on qualifications in a certain sub-sector. It is also difficult to take account of the needs of micro-firms, where the qualification levels of both employers and employees is frequently low. One challenge for the social partners is to play an educational role vis-à-vis their affiliated members. The Sector Councils constitute the link to the labour market. ANQEP staff would like to see a fresh impetus, making these councils more efficient in

producing information and making their members more participative and anticipative. The councils use an open model of consultation, allowing anyone to make proposals for creating or updating qualifications.

The IEFP, created in 1979 after the Carnation Revolution to revamp vocational training, is a public service administrated by a tripartite council and financed by EU funds and the Portuguese budget. It is in charge of implementing vocational training *and* employment policies (particularly jobseeker placement). IEFP has its own network of 86 employment centres and 32 vocational training centres covering the whole country. 27 other vocational training centres are jointly managed by the IEFP and social partners (unions or employers) in specific sectors (metalworking, woodworking, shoe-making, etc.). Trainers in these centres are self-employed workers paid by the hour on a contractual basis. The IEFP also coordinates the vocational training centres located in different educational institutions (schools, vocational colleges, private entities, etc.) and RVCC centres (now CNOs) throughout the country.

All unemployed people must register at an IEFP employment centre, with registration needed to gain access to unemployment benefits. Several upskilling options are proposed, dependent on the unemployed person's profile. These include RVCC and vocational training. In 2011, it became mandatory for anyone unemployed without the 12th school grade (equivalent to an A-level grade) and receiving benefits to engage in the first step (diagnosis) of the RVCC process.

2.2 Regulated and harmonized NFIL validation processes

The CNOs apply the RVCC methodology tested during the first half of the 2000's. In 2001 the *National System for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (Sistema Nacional de Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências, RVCC)* was created by the *Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação)* and the *Ministry of Labour and Social Security (Ministério do Trabalho e da Segurança Social)*, under the coordination of the *National Agency for the Education and Training of Adults (Agência Nacional para a Educação e Formação de Adultos, ANEFA)*. The initial network of RVCC centres was launched simultaneously. From 2004, responsibility

for the system was in the sole hands of the Ministry of Education, but it became a joint initiative of both Ministries again in 2007, under the responsibility of ANQEP.

The standardisation of this methodology for recognising and accrediting prior learning permits the uniform and fair implementation of the RVCC process throughout the national network of 450 CNOs, located in different places - in schools, companies, etc. The number and diversity of CNOs is explained by historical factors and is related to the regional diversity of occupations and pathways. A number of CNOs have since been closed down, on account of them being unable to comply with the methodology and quality criteria.

RVCC covers two processes (“dual certification”):

- The *School Process*, aimed at recognizing and improving the qualification levels of adults without basic or secondary education certificates. The certification process uses school standards for certifying key competences (*Referencial de Competências-chave*): For the basic level (9th grade), there are 4 areas of key competences: mathematics; language and literacy; information and communication technologies; and citizenship. For the secondary level (12th grade), the key areas are similar but in greater depth: society, technology and science; culture, language and communication; citizenship, human rights and duties; and the basic knowledge of a foreign language. Academic skills can be recognised on the basis of ad hoc training to achieve the 9th or 12th grade.
- The *Vocational Process*, for adults without a formal qualification in their occupation. The aim here is to recognize and improve their vocational qualifications. The recognition process is based on the vocational standards of each occupation. This process is still at an experimental stage, with limited implementation. Currently, some 30 occupations are involved in the process and the intention is to extend it soon to the 80 occupations already having a recognition profile (the NQC covers some 250 occupations).

The recognition process follows a modular design allowing personalized paths: academic and vocational competences are described in competence units, based on the NQC references. It is possible to obtain partial recognition, with a full qualification dependent on successfully

completing an appropriate training plan. The assessment panel is made up of evaluation experts. The final examination by the panel constitutes a well-prepared finish to the process, normally without surprise for the candidate - the candidate knows what the panel expects and the external experts have analysed the candidate's portfolio before the panel meets. But there are frequent cases of people dropping out. They are however allowed to resume the process, with a view to concluding it.

Though offering greater flexibility, the modular approach increases the need for serious individual and collective planning to successfully complete the process. It is compatible with a personalized and comprehensive roadmap for each candidate, from the initial interview and diagnosis, via the definition of a personal development plan, to the final examination and certification. Each candidate is encouraged to analyse his/her life and work experience and to summarize it in an individual skill booklet (portfolio), which can be used as an official document vis-à-vis potential employers. The process is very demanding for individuals.

A person can apply to take part in both processes (school and vocational). However, the main focus of the last few years has been on recognising academic skills (and not so much on vocational skills), in line with the main expectations of those engaging in the RVCC process. These people want to have their key academic skills recognised more than their vocational skills, without any immediate consequences for their occupational situation. The main individual objectives have been personal fulfilment, self-esteem, the ability to help children at home, and the will to move up the academic ladder (school, possibly even university).

2.3 Political, institutional and operational union involvement

The involvement of the two union confederations CGTP-IN and UGT is strong at the different levels of the NOI and its institutional framework. It involves:

- A clear commitment to supporting the fundamental objectives of the initiative. Awareness for the necessity to have education and skills catch up with European and world standards is shared by the unions.
- Active presence in the boards and councils contributing, at national, sector and local levels, to the NOI's orientation and

- implementation. The unions contribute specific and useful information for the guidance of the training centres and CNOs.
- Operational involvement, with the CGTP-IN and UGT directly running two CNOs: INOVINTER (CGTP-IN) and CEFOSAP (UGT). These CNOs play an important role in the fragmented CNO landscape, and enable the unions to express expert opinions about NOI results and its limits.

If the vocational component of the NOI develops as expected in the near future, union involvement should intensify, with investment in the recognition of occupational skills enlarging the role of the social partners. Their more direct participation would enable more people to be brought into the training and recognition system (particularly at lower qualification levels). It is even conceivable to have social partner representatives sitting on RVCC assessment panels.

The unions support the dual certification process (school and vocational). The school process meets the expectations of workers and citizens wishing to have their key competences recognised - in the Portuguese situation a normal strategic priority. However, it is easier to define and implement such a “universal” process on a large scale. By contrast, the recognition of more specific occupational competences needs a more tailored approach, custom-built to each occupation. In a phase of intensive economic restructuring, rising job mobility and unemployment, the development of vocational RVCC acquires a crucial status, with RVCC needing to contribute more to “securing” job transitions and career paths, in a lifelong learning perspective.

From this perspective, a number of adverse effects have the potential to weaken the impact of NOI. Where this is the case, it is necessary to correct them:

- The modular approach could have such adverse effects when not clearly integrated in a consistent personal career path. In the opinion of the unions, the government should develop incentives encouraging such integration.
- Over-emphasizing the quantitative targets (the number of candidates applying and the number certified) could distort CNO incentives, particularly if access to unemployment benefits is dependent on CNO registration. Adaptation to the needs of the

unemployed and/or low-skilled should not reduce RVCC reliability. The survey carried out by the Carneiro team reveals the presence of “sleeping” candidates in CNOs, even if spotting such “sleepers” is proof of the quality effort.

3. Vocational training and New Opportunities Centres: two examples of a successful mix

An interesting and stimulating aspect of the NOI is the mix between the predecessor vocational training centres and the CNOs incorporated in these centres since the launch of the NOI. Thanks to this mix, NFIL validation is *embedded* in vocational training, enabling the CNOs to progressively assert their role as “entrance gates” to lifelong learning. The joint operation of vocational training centres and embedded CNOs might not seem obvious a priori. However, as the centres move up the learning curve, synergies and economies of scale begin to appear. According to the statements of people running these centres and working in them, this mix is more an enrichment of their activity than a complication.

3.1 Centro de Formação Sindical e Aperfeiçoamento Profissional (CEFOSAP)

The CEFOSAP training centre is run directly by the UGT. It is not a “commercial” training centre, instead working for and with unions on the basis of national-level agreements. Its initial mission, as a training centre, was to enhance employees’ capabilities. Against the background of rising unemployment, it now faces a new challenge – how to get the unemployed back to work, thus securing their place in society. In 2011, 21% of candidates enrolled in CEFOSAP RVCC measures were unemployed. The regular training is organised on the basis of demand by trade-union partners and directly contracted with the workers concerned. The training is mainly “outside working hours”, as it is not always easy to get together the 35 statutory hours of training available to workers each year. Trainees come from different industrial and service sectors, with a certain amount of time variability.

CEFOSAP has been running RVCC since 2003 for people without formal school qualifications. It has incorporated a CNO since 2007. Based on the ANQEP guidelines, the RVCC methodology is applied at the different CEFOSAP locations throughout the country. Complementary training sessions, only for gaining school qualifications and limited to 50 hours per candidate, are held for people lacking competence units before full certification. The fact that certification sessions are public acts as an incentive for unions to participate, thereby enhancing their partnership with CEFOSAP. The certificates are handed over to candidates in ceremonies locally sponsored by the unions. In 2011, nearly 80% of candidates involved in RVCC process were members of UGT unions.

The figure below represents the scorecard of CNO-CEFOSAP activities for the period 2007 - 2011, distinguishing between the school process (Basic, until the 9th grade, and Secondary, until the 12th) and the vocational process. From it, we see that:

- There was a strong increase in the applications of candidates for the first two years, though dropping off in 2009 and the following years.
- The minor role played by the vocational process, and its limited expansion in 2010 and 2011.
- The clear difference between the number of certified candidates and the numbers of applications and of enrolled candidates; i.e. certification is not automatic.

CEFOSAP staff share the UGT opinion on the benefits of NOI. However, they also emphasize the present weakness of the NOI's vocational dimension. Its further development is dependent on a closer relationship with companies, and in particular small ones. One obstacle is the practical recognition of NOI certificates in a company. The CNO located in the CEFOSAP currently offers occupational qualifications for clerical employees, labour relations officers, IT and health and safety staff. CEFOSAP is involved in the discussions on the further development of occupational profiles, being invited in 2009-2010 to design an occupational profile and certification tools for labour relations officers. The profile was designed in partnership with CGTP-IN, while the certification tools were developed by CEFOSAP and UGT experts.

Table 2 Number of candidates received, enrolled and certified in the CNO-CEFOSAP

Type	2007			2008			2009			2010			2011			Global Results
	Basic	Sec	Voc	Basic	Sec	Voc	Basic	Sec	Voc	Basic	Sec	Voc	Basic	Sec	Voc	
Applications	692	1312	15	928	2037	-	335	395	-	214	413	42	158	161	36	6738
Candidates with diagnostic/orientation	300	846	-	794	1693	-	315	581	-	180	453	36	130	109	35	5472
Enrolled candidates	139	318	9	500	1046	-	463	1033	-	185	472	32	94	78	19	4388
Certified candidates	82	-	-	301	407	7	335	381	-	116	349	30	84	183	17	2292

Source: CEFOSAP.

For CEFOSAP staff, the necessary investment in the vocational RVCC process is also an incentive to establish a more selective network of CNOs. It is seen as necessary to identify those CNOs not fulfilling the requirements of the process and to close them down. A further requirement is to simplify the bureaucratic process and facilitate the effectiveness and efficiency of CNOs. CEFOSAP is a high-quality centre, with very demanding processes for trainees and candidates.

3.2 Centro de Formação Profissional dos Trabalhadores de Escritório, Comércio, Serviços e Novas Tecnologias (CITEFORMA)

CITEFORMA is a vocational training centre, established in September 1987 through an agreement between the IEFP and SITESE (the UGT-affiliated services workers union). CITEFORMA provides initial vocational training (IVET) for young people wanting to enter the labour market. It similarly provides continuing vocational training (CVET) for older workers in administration, commerce, services and new technologies. Since 2000, it has been developing flexible and modular training programmes, structured around personal paths. 2006 saw it opening a CNO, thereby underlining its commitment to the dual certification process. This RVCC activity only covers Lisbon and is financed by EU funds, with national co-financing. The CNO activities are free-of-charge for users but the vocational training offering can either be free (in the case of long-term training or for unemployed people) or require co-payment by trainees.

The combination of training and RVCC activities was a challenge. Initially they were two dedicated systems working separately. This has since changed, with the two systems now working together, as it has become apparent that certain people need to have their competences recognised before starting training. RVCC can act here as a gate-opener.

CITEFORMA has established training partnerships with companies and employer associations. In 2008, 75% of participants worked in companies and, previously, came after work. But things have changed since, and now about 50% are employed, many coming from companies and institutions that have signed an agreement with CITEFORMA (more than 40 agreements have been signed since 2006), while the

other 50% are unemployed. Relations with employers are progressing, with the latter increasingly directly contacting CITEFORMA. In-house training sessions are also available, with the agreement of the unions. This kind of training is becoming an effective opportunity for workers without previous access to vocational training. It reinforces the “learning pays” idea, despite the opposition of small employers to training during working hours. Though not always easy, it is now possible for workers to invest their statutory 35 hours of training per year in RVCC.

Between 2006 and 2011, some 8,000 people (aged from 18 to 82, 53% women and 47% men) came to the CNO-CITEFORMA, with more than 2,000 gaining certification. However, many drop out or are identified as needing specific training before certification. To be credible, the process has to be demanding, meaning that it requires strong personal motivation. Quality is monitored by the ANQEP and external auditors.

Certification is marked by a collective ceremony, symbolically acknowledging its importance for people and a way to keep in close contact with them. The definition of a personal development plan concludes the process. CITEFORMA staff is developing follow-up strategies targeting the young in particular with a view to assessing their labour market integration after completion of the training or certification.

The establishment of partnerships with academic institutions facilitates the development of specialised training modules usable as credits in a university programme. For CITEFORMA staff, this “is a big recognition of our work”. Nevertheless, university access conditions for candidates not meeting standard admission requirements remains a controversial issue in Portuguese society, despite the 2006 law stipulating these candidates can claim credits based on the recognition of prior learning.

In the opinion of CITEFORMA staff, the CNO system is well-established, though it needs certain adjustments as a decrease in the number of people to be certified is expected. Inefficient CNOs could be merged with more efficient centres. The active monitoring by the social partners acts as a performance guarantee. In the opinion of the unions, involvement in training and RVCC is a factor favourable to the unionisation of workers, though there is uncertainty regarding the long-term effects – once training and certification have been completed,

people tend to follow their own ways ... As regards the future, the clear priority, for CITEFORMA staff, is to develop occupational certification in service sectors.

4. NOI results and limits: *Novas Oportunidades* and the crisis

Among social partners there is major consensus acknowledging that the high qualitative and quantitative targets of the NOI were a necessary answer to a massive problem of Portuguese society: the lack of actual and/or recognized educational and vocational skills in too large a section of the population. From this point of view, this large-scale public programme for 2006-2011 can be considered as a necessity and a success. This general assessment does not however blind the social partners to distortions and imbalances in the programme's implementation. Such disequilibria need to be corrected in a "new cycle" (a term used by the Carneiro team) of the NOI scheme, without endangering the high-quality training and RVCC system built over the last few years.

The social partners and the experts consider that improving and validating key academic competences has strong positive effects on an individual's personal and family development and consequently on his social inclusion. Certification is often celebrated as an important symbolic event. NOI actors are very insistent about this very concrete NOI impact. The economic impact of this inclusion dimension is indirect, resulting in more motivated workers in companies and more employable people on the labour market. The long-term impact of, for instance, having better educated children points to a necessity to underline *potential* benefits for Portuguese economic competitiveness. Taking the demographic trend and the vocational training efforts with their focus on the young into account, the number of candidates seeking academic certification is expected to drop in coming years, even though this path retains its relevance for those with low skill levels not yet included in NOI.

At the same time, the social partners – whether trade unions or employer organisations – recognize that the scope of the NOI's vocational process remains too limited. In doing so, the trade unions underline the vocational needs of workers, while the employers

underline the skill needs of companies. Strengthening and developing the vocational path is the main challenge in promoting a “new cycle” of NOI. What is needed is a tailored adaptation of the processes (for example, the presence of the social partners on the assessment panels). Also needed is a stronger connection between NOI and collective bargaining in companies and sectors. This would involve the active joint definition of occupational profiles, joint anticipation of future skill needs and the consequences for training, the (difficult) linkage with current bargaining issues (such as wages). This presupposes a more direct and effective impact of a NOI “new cycle” on the labour market and on company productivity, with better skill matching for higher-skilled workers and with companies more committed to upskilling workers (including small and micro firms). The objective would be not only improved short-term matching on the labour market, but also the integration of vocational RVCC into an effective lifelong learning strategy, promoting a worker’s long-term employability².

A number of improvement priorities are outlined by the institutional and social interlocutors as a way of progressing in this direction:

- a more systematic overall and local anticipation of skill needs, currently too empirical and partial.
- better personalized follow-up of individuals after they have ended training or certification (at present, they are generally invited to express their personal opinion of the process in a questionnaire to be returned to the centre. The only national-level summary follow-up tool is an ANQEP survey).
- training and certification services more directly oriented towards specific company needs, including small companies (best practices of partnerships between CNOs and large companies or such sectors as security services or tourism show the possibility of progressing in this direction).

2. A *Going LLL Project* was presented in a workshop held by the ANQEP in February 2012. This project, again run by the “Carneiro team”, aims to convert the current New Opportunities Centres into Lifelong Learning Centres. For more details, see: <http://www.ucp.pt/site/resources/documents/CEPCEP/Relatório%20Final%20GOING%20LLL.pdf>

Rationalization of the CNO network (a smaller number of CNOs, merging less efficient ones with the most efficient) is needed not only for budgetary reasons (to foster economies of scale and reduce spending) but also as a way of strengthening and developing the vocational dimension. Certain social and institutional actors are afraid of the threat of massive cuts in the RVCC system by the present government. The high-quality system of trainers and RVCC officers needs to be safeguarded, thereby supporting the credibility and reliability of this path towards vocational training and certification. It could also be a way of improving access to the higher education system for people with vocational qualifications. As yet, permeability between the labour market and academia is limited, despite the 2006 law flexibilizing access to higher education. Relations between vocational and academic education remain strained!

Conclusion:

labour market deregulation is threatening NFIL validation

The large-scale *Novas Oportunidades* scheme was rolled out in 2006 with the aim of getting a maximum number of people up to a minimum qualification level, corresponding to twelve years of schooling. The scheme built on the experience gained in the prior skill validation scheme. The quantitative objectives of the new scheme were very ambitious and progress towards them was dependent on setting up a network of 450 *Novas Oportunidades* centres, often housed in already existing vocational training centres. The scheme's implementation benefited from good cooperation between the public institutions concerned and the active commitment of the social players at political, institutional and operational levels. The scheme involved a dual skill validation process, with a focus both on key academic competences and on vocational skills. Target fulfilment is noticeably more satisfactory for the former, limiting its impact on the labour market.

The current labour market deregulation trend could thwart the fundamental objectives of NOI by “de-qualifying” certain people and occupations with a view to paying them less. Looked at from this perspective, the national catalogue of certifications, promoted by the European orientation, could look like “rigidity”! As stated by trade unionists, we are clearly at a “very controversial moment”. While upskilling

people is necessary for overcoming the crisis, the blind management of the fiscal constraints thwarts this. The challenge is to consolidate the long-term prospects of a NOI new cycle, and not to destroy this noteworthy initiative.

The current Portuguese government has decided to replace the *Novas Oportunidades Centres* by a tighter national network of *Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education (Centros para a Qualificação e Ensino Profissional, CQEP)*, putting the focus on improving RVCC reliability. However, VET stakeholders fear major cuts in territorial cover and in the human resources available for running the system.

Chapter 8

Romania

Introduction

Lifelong learning and NFIL validation are clearly on the agendas of the Reform Programme (2011-2013) and the Convergence Programme (2011-2014) officially communicated by the Romanian government to the European Commission in April 2011. For coming generations, the concept of a personal skills portfolio is to be the norm:

“The portfolio will include all diplomas, certificates and other documents obtained following the assessment of skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning frameworks. Out of this individual educational portfolio one should be able to extract the following data: student educational pathway, his/her inclinations and skills and particular performances” (see Government of Romania, 2011, pp 109-110).

Section 1 summarizes the place of NFIL validation in the Romanian reform process. Section 2 goes on to detail the institutional framework of NFIL validation, while Section 3 emphasizes the involvement of the social actors, and the trade unions in particular. Section 4 presents some interesting local initiatives, while Section 5 underlines the current dualism between trade union work and the yet immature institutional framework. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity to progressively reduce this dualism.

1. The place of NFIL in Romania's convergence and reform process

There is probably still a long way to go before the objectives targeted by the national and European institutions are fully implemented:

- The institutional framework for LLL and NFIL validation is neither mature nor stabilised.

- In this situation of transition, the social partners, and especially the trade unions, are concentrating their efforts on the urgent training needs of workers with a view to improving their position on the labour market.

As stated in the latest NFIL inventory published by CEDEFOP (see Juravle, 2010), NFIL validation is gaining momentum through an increase in the number of certified validation centres and experts, improvements of assessment methods and clearer legal and practical procedures, under the control of the *National Council of Adult Training* (CNFPA). The CNFPA has responsibility for accrediting NFIL validation centres and coordinating the *National Qualifications Register*. A recent reform (2010) has established a *National Qualifications Authority* (NQA) through merging the CNFPA and the *National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the Economic Environment* (ACPART). Though the objective is to improve coherence between the national qualifications framework and NFIL validation, this reform is inducing controversial debates among the institutional actors of the NFIL system. At present, the consequences of this reform are not clear and this confusion does not facilitate social partner participation in the NFIL system, with the result that the social partners continue to run their own training programmes.

A natural meeting place for institutional actors and social partners involved in VET and NFIL are the Sector Committees. These committees have the task of mobilizing a sector's employee and employer representatives with a view to organizing social dialogue on the occupational standards upon which NFIL validation is based, in relation to on-the-job learning outcomes. Further progress seems necessary to enable these committees to play their full role, effectively linking up to collective bargaining in companies and sectors.

2. An institutional framework in search of balance and stability

2.1 The construction of the NFIL infrastructure

A set of laws and decrees adopted in the early 2000's organizes NFIL assessment independently of formal VET, with NFIL validation able to

take place outside a formal programme. These legal measures have widened the duties and responsibilities of the CNFPA.

The CNFPA accredits, controls and monitors the NFIL validation centres. As of 13 July 2010, there were 52 validation centres in the national registry of centres accredited by the CNFPA. Validation centres have to pay the CNFPA an authorisation fee for type of each qualification they are able to issue. The total fee is proportionate to the number of qualifications, as well as the number of years of accreditation applied for by the centre (between one and three years). The resulting revenues accrue to the state budget. Centres are financed by a mix, with a certain variation between centres, of payments by customers (employers and employees) and EU and national funding.

In 2009, these centres were responsible for assessing competences for 112 qualifications in various fields: social assistance, agriculture, construction, administration and public services, information and communication technologies, tourism, hotels and restaurants, retail, the food industry, forestry and wood processing, and welding. Centres can be specialised departments in private companies or training centres, as well as recruitment agencies or other types of organisations meeting the accreditation criteria stipulated by the CNFPA. Between 2006 and 2009, CNFPA-accredited assessment centres issued over 25,000 certificates for 150 occupations or qualifications. By October 2010, this number had increased to 28,000.

This NFIL infrastructure is now being subjected to reform in the context of the CNFPA-ACPART merger creating the new *National Qualifications Authority* (NQA). For the moment, the practical consequences of this merger for the validation centres are not clear, with opinions varying among system actors: some are afraid of possible academic domination by the Ministry of Education, reducing the role of the Ministry of Labour and the social partners. The threat involves the all too direct application of the higher education (HE) qualification system's philosophy and methodologies to the field of vocational skills. Historically, the link between the very academic Romanian HE system and the practical needs of the labour market seems weak, with non-formal or informal learning outcomes not yet having any place in academic culture. Higher education is closed to people without a high school diploma.

The social partners probably still have reserves about this recent reorientation, with employers needing skilled people immediately able to do certain skilled tasks, and trade unions expecting vocational training to be able to create the right people to perform such tasks.

2.2 The fundamental role of the validation centres

The role of the validation centres is essential for the equitable working of the NFIL system, with their quality supporting the credibility of the whole system.

CNFPA accreditation of validation centres is for 1, 2 or 3 years, depending on their track record; i.e. initial accreditation is always for 1 year. The accreditation process encourages the centre to take responsibility for defining its assessment instruments (for example, a list of “critical factors” or key competences concerning the execution of a certain occupation and based on experience). A certain leeway exists, with different validation centres able to choose different critical factors for the same occupation. Where a centre has experienced assessment experts, these can identify critical factors and the instruments to measure them.

A centre’s assessment experts need CNFPA certification in accordance with the “Evaluator of vocational competences” occupational standard. Centres can only gain accreditation to evaluate the competences of a certain occupation when they have at least two in-house certified evaluators, specialised in that specific occupation and who have carried out at least ten assessments in that particular field.

Validation of occupational competences is based on the assessment of competence modules, concluding with a result of the candidate being either ‘competent’ or ‘not yet competent’. Validation can be carried out on the basis of separate competence modules but no partial qualifications can be awarded - in such a case the separate modules are validated and the person is advised to take further training with the aim of acquiring a full qualification. Assessment methods vary, being adapted to different cases.

Until now, the NFIL validation system is only partially controlled by an effective quality assurance mechanism. The CNFPA process of accrediting validation centres is very bureaucratic, based on documents presenting the centre's work. Though the system's principles are good, its quality is not always assured. This weakness also concerns the training centres.

We detail below two centres: (i) a validation centre in the field of environmental protection; (ii) a validation centre for the tourism sector.

A validation centre in the field of environmental protection

Promediu is an ESF-funded project aimed at building a validation centre specialized in the developing occupations related to environmental protection. Benefiting from cooperation with European partners, it is involved in the definition of the occupational standards in this emergent field as a partner of the Vocational Training Sector Committee in the field of environmental protection, CSFPM. The validation centre, authorized by the CNFPA, is now up and running.

A validation centre for the tourism sector

Phoenix Consulting is a small validation centre specialised in tourism (hotels and tourist guides). Created and developed by six experienced tourist professionals, NFIL validation offered by the centre is seen as a way of reducing unemployment in a country where the potential of tourism is underdeveloped. It is also seen as a way of formalizing undeclared jobs in a sector where these are frequent and of making employers responsible for employee loyalty in a sector with a high turnover of young people. The centre has CNFPA accreditation for three occupations: tourist guides, receptionists and hotel managers. The centre works closely with training centres. *Phoenix Consulting* customers (employers or employees) contribute to the centre's financing.

The centre applies with care a methodology based on occupational standards. This allows it to assess the set of competence modules leading to full certification. The process is precisely defined:

- Welcome and candidate self-assessment.
- Compilation of the personal portfolio of experience and competences.
- Identification of the “critical factors” (key competences) in an interview.

- Practical assessment: written test, personal definition of a project, direct workplace observation (simulation in cooperation with hotels and tourism agencies, on a contractual basis).
- Compilation of a file containing the test results.
- Full certification when all competences required are proved; if not, the process continues (with complementary training sessions).

The centre's director emphasises "quality of service" as the "soul" of the competences in the tourism sector. The assessment by highly-skilled professionals from the sector guarantees the credibility of the process.

3. Pro-active trade union involvement in training and learning programmes

3.1 The strategic choice of *Blocul Nacional Sindical* towards an integrated service offering for workers

The strategic choice of the *Blocul Nacional Sindical* (BNS) union confederation is to develop an integrated service offering for workers, particularly in the field of professional careers and transitions in a market economy not yet really mature. The offering covers the following aspects: identification of personal training requirements and aspirations; assistance to workers facing difficulties on the labour market; and networking trade unionists involved in training. This strategy combines networking activists and experts, locally implementing projects and arranging access to European funds (ESF) for such specific projects. BNS cooperates with other organisations (NGOs, employer associations, social companies, etc.) in implementing this strategy. BNS is developing a technical support facility (on-line network and national database), enabling it to better target services to its members, who expect not only the defence of their rights but also practical assistance.

The BNS service offering has three main pillars:

- Services dedicated to the labour market and aimed at reducing workers' vulnerability "in the most hostile labour market environment": legal expertise; a database with job opportunities and a matching system for the unemployed; VET programmes and

- an e-learning platform; consolidation and recognition of skills; access to microcredits, helping people to set up and develop their own businesses; etc.
- Consumer assistance; distribution of non-expired products to people in social need.
 - Networking of experts (economists, engineers, technicians, etc.) with a view to mobilizing and supplying independent information and expertise in different fields and organising efficient lobbying for legislative initiatives.

This service platform, intellectually protected, is intended to be an open structure offering personalized information and assistance to employees, but also to the unemployed, retired and self-employed, to small farmers, etc. The objective is to enable a horizontal sharing of information, expertise and assistance for individual and collective needs, using the principle of subsidiarity. This is a factor attractive to new members. The national BNS centre, with its team of young experts and researchers, plays a key role in the implementation of this strategic orientation.

3.2 Training trade unionists in the field of learning

Together with a German partner, BNS is working on a 3-year project aimed at training trade unionists in the field of learning: “catalysts” collecting information on the learning needs of workers in companies and different regions; and “multiplayers” leveraging this information to propose and implement practical training programmes. The project’s objective is to develop a network of “trade union consultants” (200 catalysts and 20 multiplayers) able to anticipate skill needs and to come up with a corresponding training offering. These consultants can be seen as “learning representatives”, working as mediators in cooperation with companies. In the future, it is expected that the activities of these consultants will be self-sustaining.

BNS currently has four regional training centres and the objective is to extend this network. In 2009 – 2011, the Constanta centre carried out a project for training and certifying “local delegates” able to develop trade union leadership on labour market issues, social dialogue, collective bargaining and human resources management. New projects (training computer operators, e-learning) are on the centre’s schedule. BNS is

developing similar initiatives in other regions of Romania (for example, in Suceava, a town in the north-east of Romania).

4. The trade union contribution to local initiatives: training, skill upgrading, occupational transitions, NFIL recognition

4.1 The case of an old industrial region: Resita

The region of Resita (a mountain region in the South-West Romania) is an old industrial region faced with the long-term problems of economic transformation. Over the last eight years, BNS has been developing a partnership with a local NGO, “New Hope”, and with local authorities (the *Judet* [region] and town councils) aimed at providing a VET and re-training opportunities for workers, the unemployed and young people facing difficulties on the labour market - a “personal development club / vocational school”. Material support is provided by the local authorities. Access to ESF resources is organised systematically, with specific training offered in managing European projects targeting specific groups.

BNS leverages its local union network to attract workers and young people in need of (re-)training and career guidance. This club-school has a skilled team and a service offering ranging from the reception, coaching and training of candidates to help in finding a job. Made up of a manager, a psychologist, an economist, a jurist, teachers and technicians in different fields, the team provides individualised support in the form of skills assessment, psychological check-ups, advice and guidance on (re-)training opportunities. Cooperation with firms is actively developed as a way of fostering job matching.

Over the last eight years, 3200 persons have been welcomed. Results are significant, covering a wide range of occupations in both industry and services. The club / school is not yet a skill validation centre. This useful and courageous initiative is clearly at least a partial substitute for the failure of the public policies and of employers’ commitment.

4.2 Participation in managing vocational schools and training programmes

BNS participates in managing vocational schools and training programmes, in different places and occupational fields. BNS helps these schools and programmes by attracting motivated trainees, with BNS having the ability to identify and approach appropriate targets with a view to empowering them on the labour market. BNS also offers its expertise for accessing ESF funding.

Port School Foundation of Constanta

The Port School Foundation of Constanta (a major Black Sea port) is an NGO founded in 1997 in the context of a Romanian-Danish collaboration project with the support of the European PHARE programme. An adult learning institution, it targets port workers, the unemployed and trade union members. Foundation members are the local branch of the national trade union federation and the employers' organization (Port Operator of Constanta). The National Maritime Port Administration Company participates in the Executive Committee.

Vocational and trade union training is offered by the school in accordance with all national regulations on adult vocational training. A range of training programmes are offered: IVET and CVET, (re-)training, upskilling, specialisation, etc. The certified trainers are well-experienced in technical fields, with some being retired workers. The school issues occupational and graduate certificates recognized at national level, in accordance with official occupational standards. The latter specify the modules and skill levels associated with an occupation. With regard to the CNFPA, a number of staff members were involved as experts in the Transport Sector Committee, in charge of updating and validating qualifications in this sector. EQF alignment is currently underway, though proving to be a complex task.

The focus is obviously on port-related occupations, and requires constant dialogue with the port's large and small companies. Finding answers to company needs is not always easy on account of such factors as fluctuating levels of activity, planning difficulties and lack of funds. The planning horizon of the companies is frequently too short (just a few months) to ensure the sustainability of the programmes. Part of the

cost is borne by the trainee himself or, if unemployed, covered by unemployment benefits.

Trade union members can access educational programmes aimed at propagating new methods/forms of trade union activity, in accordance with national and international legislation. Specific programmes emphasizing social and personal skills are available for young people. The school is not yet a NFIL validation centre, and at the moment the co-founders attach no priority to moving in this direction. But it could become one in the coming years.

Grupul de Formare Profesionala Masters S.R.L (car maintenance, Bucharest)

The aim of this EU-funded project is to develop a reference vocational training centre in the field of car maintenance and repairs. However, sufficient co-financing by national fund has not yet been granted. Three partners are working together in this project: *Radacini Group*, a major player of the automotive market in Romania; *Master SA*, the National Research Institute for Internal Combustion Engines; and *BNS* with its ability to reach workers interested in such training. At present, the centre only covers the Bucharest region, though it would like to extend its geographical reach in the future. The centre is too young to yet have any strong relations with such car manufacturers as Dacia. Nevertheless contact has been established and can be developed in the future.

The centre welcomes any employee needing up-skilling. Each candidate has to be an employee, with a minimum 8 years of initial education. The primary target is to fully qualify 200 persons over three years. At the end of 2012, 40 trainees had graduated and 120 were currently in training.

Training combines very practical learning and modern teaching methods (e.g. simulators), under the motto: “touch, see, understand”. Teachers bring with them a wealth of experience, while training benefits from research contributions from Master SA, one of the centre’s partners. The teaching methods have been tested with the support of the CNFPA. The training combines technical up-skilling with the development of soft skills (high-quality work, personal responsibility, social competences), and all these components contribute to defining occupational capabilities. As trainees are of very different ages and have different levels of experience, they are divided into groups taking account of this heterogeneity.

The certification of competences, verified by a final examination after six months of training, is recognized in Romania and European Union. Representatives of CNFPA participate in the examination. Efforts are being developed to remain in contact with former trainees, via the website and personal assistance. It seems that half of the first class of trainees is now working in the automotive field.

5. A certain dualism between trade union activities and the institutional NFIL framework

5.1 Insufficient collective bargaining scope and maturity

An important issue is to increase social partner influence in the definition of occupational standards, particularly by strengthening their role in sector committees. Implementation of these standards has major potential consequences for the whole VET and NFIL validation system and also for collective bargaining in sectors and companies. Adopted in 2009, a new regulation compels sector committees to be registered with an administrative court. As not all sectors have complied with this requirement, only 15 committees were actually operational in 2012 (24 before the new regulation).

The process of defining occupational standards is a long one, and ends with validation by the CNFPA board. This process is particularly important in a phase of redesigning these standards, aligning them with the European Qualifications Framework. The classification of the qualifications associated with these occupational standards with respect to the eight EQF levels could influence the practical recognition of skills (also in respect of wages) on the labour market. The ambitious objective is to have, as soon as possible, a National Qualifications Framework consistent with the EQF. However, reformulating the list of Romanian qualifications in terms of the eight EQF levels is no easy task.

The role, expertise and influence of the social partners in these sector committees need to be increased and improved. A number of social partners are short of expert representatives in the committees, and the BNS is mobilising its affiliates to ensure effective representation.

In the present crisis, many employers consider that investing in training is not a priority, and it is thus difficult to ensure that employers comply with their legal obligations to plan training programmes.

The social partners also belong to the committees responsible for monitoring, in each *Judet* (region), vocational training centres and providers. The national trade union confederations have agreed to share this regional representation, with the result that BNS participates in 9 *Judets*.

5.2 Complementarities between European funds and European tools

In Romania, national reforms and the adoption of European tools (EQF, ECVET, EQUAVET...) are parallel processes, more or less harmonized. The complex Romanian training and validation system has its own internal consistency problems, with the relationship between training standards (for IVET and CVET) and occupational standards not very clear. The rising importance of European tools should be used not as a sledgehammer but as a pragmatic path towards progressively adapting and improving the consistency of the Romanian system, particularly with regard to quality assurance.

A large number of vocational training and skills validation programmes are supported, on convergence grounds, by sizeable ESF funding, with co-financing by the Romanian institutions. Other education and training programmes also benefit from EU programmes (Leonardo, Comenius, etc.). What is missing is a consistent assessment of the impact of all these programmes, especially on the labour market. The social partners could make good use of such an assessment to better adapt and focus their own and autonomous activities in the field of training and up-skilling. In this context of transition, the specific action of BNS constitutes an outstanding and interesting trade union initiative.

Conclusion:

A still immature NFIL validation system in need of greater cooperation between institutional actors and social partners

Romania has an NFIL validation system based on a set of laws and decrees adopted in the course of the first decade of the 21st century. This system makes explicit reference to the recognition of competences acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. Nevertheless, the system continues to seek balance, stability and credibility. The outstanding trade union initiatives, which involve converting trade union activists into specialists on training questions and running vocational training centres with the backing of other business and social players, provide substantial services to workers. However these initiatives do not always lead to official qualifications, and work still needs to be done to build a solid relationship with the institutional NFIL validation mechanisms.

Chapter 9

Spain

Introduction

The latest CEDEFOP-GHK inventory on NFIL validation indicates that “in Spain, some limited forms of non-formal and informal learning have been recognised in the national legal framework for decades” and that “the most [recent] developments have related to the validation of professional competences” (Alonso 2010).

Section 1 presents the evolution of the Spanish training and certification system over the last decade. Section 2 goes on to detail the NFIL recognition process, while section 3 looks at two regional NFIL recognition schemes. The conclusion underlines the vulnerability of the work currently in progress in the field of NFIL validation.

1. The last decade: major changes to the training and certification system

The developments of the last decade are to be seen as part of the general evolution of the continuous vocational training and certification system, on the basis of fundamental consensus between social and government actors allowing a balanced mix of continuity and change.

1.1 Strengthening the national legal framework

The last decade has been characterised by a strengthening of the national legal framework governing the system and common to all *Comunidades Autonomas* (CC.AAs), with a range of laws and decrees adopted since the Qualifications and Vocational Training Act of 2002 (*ley organica 5/2002, de 19 de junio, de las Cualificaciones y la Formacion Profesional*). The latter defines basic principles for an

integrated system (*Sistema Nacional de Cualificaciones y Formacion Profesional*):

- Occupational qualifications consistent with the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF).
- Reference to the *Catalogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales* (CNCP) for vocational training diplomas (*titulos de formacion profesional*) and occupational certificates of aptitude (*certificados de profesionalidad*), on the basis of social partner participation in the definition of occupational profiles and the design of each qualification.
- Universally accessible NFIL accreditation.
- Closer links between vocational training and the labour market and company needs, thanks to a more efficient and flexible VET offering.

Further laws and decrees clarify and detail the implementation of these principles. One important recent step was Royal Decree 1224 of 2009, establishing the procedures and requirements for NFIL validation (*procedimiento de reconocimiento, evaluacion, acreditacion y registro de las cualificaciones profesionales*). These procedures are selective, with the decree being restricted to certain levels of competence defined in the annual calls for examination (*convocatorias*) applying to specific economic sectors. The competent regional authorities in the *Comunidades Autonomas* (CC.AA) decide on these calls, provide the requisite information and carry out the associated procedures. The reference base for the modular evaluation and accreditation is constituted by the summative competence units of the CNCP, regularly updated by the *Instituto Nacional de Cualificaciones* (INCUAL). The INCUAL is also responsible for standardising process methodology. Acquiring these units requires precise amounts of work experience (in years) and training hours, depending on the level of the competence unit (level 1, 2 or 3). Supplementary training is recommended when the lack of a certain competence prevents a full qualification being obtained. Statutory training hours at the disposal of company employees can be used for this purpose.

1.2 The growth of vocational training programmes

These legal developments have gone hand in hand with the growth of vocational training programmes over the last decade, under the supervision

of a consultative Council (*Consejo General de Formacion Profesional*, CGFP) made up of the social partners and the CC.AAs. The overall percentage of companies training their workers increased progressively from 4.3% in 2004 to 24.6% in 2010. Broken down by company size, the increase was from 2.4% to 20.5% for micro firms (1-9 workers); from 15.7% to 52.8% for SMEs (120-249 workers); and from 68.3% to 89.7% for large companies (250 workers and more). The number of workers participating in company training programmes increased from less than 500 000 to more than 2 100 000 over the same period. However, participation rates differ from one region to the next, being around 25% in Madrid, Castilla y León, Asturias and Cataluña, and less than 20% in Canarias, Rioja, Melilla (*Observatorio de la Formacion para el Empleo y Fundacion Tripartita para la Formacion en el Empleo*, 2011).

1.3 Training for employment (CVET): a cooperative institutional framework

The *Fundacion tripartita para la Formacion en el Empleo* provides a cooperative institutional framework supporting the development of *Formacion para el empleo*, a CVET-oriented sub-system of the vocational training system. This tripartite public sector foundation is managed jointly by the Ministry of Labour, the employers' organisations and the three trade union confederations UGT, CCOO and CIG. The Foundation runs the state training programmes targeting workers employed in companies and the unemployed. It also provides technical support to the CC.AAs for their own initiatives, through collaboration agreements. *Formacion para el empleo* programmes combine:

- The support provided by the State Employment Agency and by the Foundation for training requirements directly expressed by companies (this kind of training is not, a priori, integrated into a certification process).
- The training programme' offering jointly proposed by the State Employment Agency, the Foundation and the CC.AAs for both employees and the unemployed.

The Foundation plays an important role in managing the pooling and distribution of the funds available for CVET (more than EUR 2.6 billion in 2011).

1.4 Critical assessment by the social partners

However, after a decade of change in the field of vocational training, the assessment of the social partners is critical. Though the CNCP has been finalized (about 650 qualifications), the actual offering of certifications (*titulos de formacion profesional* and *certificados de profesionalidad*) and joint training is considered too rigid, not sufficiently “agile” (a word frequently used by the Spanish social partners) to easily and rapidly meet company needs - training modalities and content have not kept step with the development of the formal reference base established by the CNCP. Training supply and demand matching remains inefficient and links to the detailed needs of companies remain too weak. It is also difficult to take the specific needs of small firms into account.

However, Ministry of Education and INCUAL officials consider this to be “normal work in progress”, with the CNCP intended to progressively become a practical reference base for collective bargaining and agreements. The priority is to consolidate the national system of vocational training and qualifications. The European tools, such as EQF, are not always perceived as a concrete help in establishing the national system of qualifications: EQF descriptors are very generic, especially in the case of middle-level qualifications, which play a key role in the transformation of socio-economic structures. Full EQF convergence is seen only as a long-term objective.

The legal changes are focused on standardising definitions and integrating the system, thereby establishing a common normative reference base for all actors with a view to guaranteeing the reliability of certificates and their value on the national labour market. But the system remains too complex, with duplication between bodies and regions fostering neither the efficient use of resources nor quality control. The leadership exercised by the CGFP is weak, despite its useful consultative role. Coherence between the sectoral / territorial approaches and the harmonisation of regional initiatives remain limited. The lack of State leadership and the difficulties coordinating the work of the Ministries of Education and Labour are a factor explaining this situation. New institutions, such as the *Centros Nacionales de Referencia* (CNR) y *Centros Integrados de Formacion Profesional* (CIFP) have difficulties finding their place in the system and affirming their role. With their observation and experimentation mission for

specific occupational families and areas, the CNR are in a position to test methodological innovations in training and accreditation processes. By contrast, the CIFP mission is to react to the training needs of companies, helping them to innovate in this matter. Consolidation of these centres still has a long way to go.

2. The NFIL recognition, evaluation and accreditation process

2.1 An embryonic process: political, administrative and financial obstacles

This critical assessment concerns particularly the NFIL validation process (*procedimiento de reconocimiento, evaluación, acreditación y registro de las cualificaciones profesionales*), legally defined and implemented in 2009 to certify work or other non-formal experience. Small-scale local schemes existed beforehand, such as the 2003 pilot project ERA (*Evaluación, Reconocimiento y Acreditación de las Competencias Profesionales*), which covered seven CC.AAs and a limited number of occupations. Over 300 candidates took part in it. For the trade unions, the 2009 legal initiative satisfies a more general demand for NFIL validation, expressed by them as a priority objective for quite some time. The present challenge is to step up and consolidate its implementation¹.

However it has taken a lot of time, since the adoption of the *organic law (ley organica)* of 2002, to get this process started. In addition, the initial programme was limited to certain occupations (socio-cultural services such as domestic care and children's education, and specific

1. This chapter presents the main NFIL validation process, though some more specific processes do exist. There is for instance a process for recognizing the basic key competences of persons at the lowest qualification level, without any vocational training, but it does not really work, according to the UGT. Proposals to speed it up, in a lifelong learning perspective, exist in the Ministry of Education. There is also the *Pruebas libres* (free tests) process to obtain academic recognition of prior learning and work experience, at different levels. At a higher education level, each university can decide, within certain limits, how to validate training modules or competence units for their own courses and diplomas. As yet, university access on the basis of prior learning remains limited.

industrial occupations, for example in the field of renewable energies). There is not yet an overall system, though sub-programmes exist at CC.AA level. The State is dragging its heels with regard to developing major national-level programmes. In the view of the trade unions, there is a lack of financial support from the State, given existing needs: in 2011, some 3.5 million workers were considered as not having their occupational competences recognized. Though officials at the Ministries of Education and Labour are working together, they do not always follow the same concepts, a factor slowing down the implementation of a standardized process (the *unico procedimiento* foreseen in the 2009 Royal Decree). Though the Royal Decree defines common standards and norms, practical implementation is more complex. The existence of a joint committee of both ministries to guarantee the development of the validation process is useful but not enough to fill the gap. There is no unified State leadership to promote the validation of non-formal and informal competences.

These difficulties are more political than technical, as practical tools exist and function: *guías of evidencias* define clear, appropriate and practical guidelines for experts in guidance, evaluation and accreditation (notably the professional experts responsible for the competence units to be evaluated using appropriate methods: interviews, evidence of work experience, simulated occupational situations, workplace observation). The trade unions support the NFIL validation objectives, without interfering with the work of these experts.

Though the legal and technical framework exists, its de facto implementation does not satisfy the social partners. The Ministry of Education anticipated that 8000 individuals would apply for the first call for examination (*convocatoria*) (2011), 25000 for the second call and 50000 for the third one. The Ministry has a “regional cooperation programme”, responsible for providing funding to the CC.AAs (EUR 20 million in 2011), proportionate to their population, to implement the process. As yet, NFIL validation is an embryonic and experimental process, though the system is open to new initiatives. For Ministry of Education staff, it is desirable to use the existing structures in order to boost implementation of the process in a cost-efficient manner.

The UGT sees obstacles within society, with a general lack of sensitivity and information on the importance of lifelong learning. This applies

also to workers and unions, and NFIL validation is not a top priority in collective bargaining. Cultural changes are necessary. In the view of Ministry of Education officials, the unions could play a greater role in detecting, informing and counselling people willing and able to enter into a process of training and accreditation.

In the view of trade unionists, the employers' attitude is ambivalent. Though employers recognize the need for training and qualifications, they are afraid of the possible impact of official validation on job classification and wage claims.

There are some interesting company pilot projects involving groups of workers in a collective process of accreditation, with complementary training. Agreements between the Ministry of Education and companies promote such collective processes. For the *Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales* (CEOE, employers' organisation), these initiatives are interesting, though it is seen as necessary to review their compatibility with the common national framework (competence standards and quality criteria). In a period where the current reform of the labour market is fostering mobility, the transferability of skills, whether recognized or certified, to another company becomes a priority. This transferability presupposes an appropriate mix of polyvalence and specialization. The reform foresees personal "training capital", transferable between companies, on the basis of 20 training hours per year. This also opens the door to labour contracts combining work and training (dual training), in turn dictating the adaptation of training standards and a commitment of employers to provide financial support and quality criteria.

2.2 Implementation depends on initiatives at CC.AA level

A website managed by the Ministry of Education (<http://todofp.es>) announces the annual *convocatorias* for specific occupational families in the different CC.AAs, which are responsible for issuing these calls. Responsible for assessment, the CCAA's education authorities set up assessment panels for carrying out validation. Certain CC.AAs show more dynamism than others in taking the initiative and planning *convocatorias* in specific occupational fields. The definition of the priority *convocatorias* – which occupations and people are targeted – is

not really concerted at national level in line with sector needs, raising the question of fair treatment of the Spanish citizens throughout the country. Clarification of responsibilities and funding (for example, for recruiting and training evaluators) between the State, CC.AAs and the sectors is desirable in order to ensure uniform process quality. Issuing *convocatorias* seems easier for social occupations protected from international competition than for occupations directly facing such competition. Nevertheless, extension to industrial occupations is in progress, especially in CC.AAs actively involved in the process, such as Galicia².

The Ministry of Education website puts a personal and practical guide at the disposal of candidates (Ministerio de Educación, 2013). This describes the complete process, right up to accreditation (*Título de Formación Profesional* or *Certificado de Profesionalidad*). A personal CVET plan can be elaborated at the end of the process to further develop the skills of a certified candidate, in a lifelong learning perspective (*aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida*). The website also lists the *convocatorias* for the current year, providing links to the specific CC.AA websites.

3. Regional NFIL recognition schemes: two examples

The table below presents the *convocatorias* situation in April 2012 in the different CC.AAs for the occupations concerned. Two regional schemes (Galicia and Aragon) are then discussed.

3.1 Galicia

Galicia is considered one of the leading CC.AAs in implementing NFIL recognition, evaluation and accreditation (in Galician: *Procedemento de reconecemento das competencias profesionais adquiridas pola experiencia laboral*), having started before the State Decree of 2009 on the basis of small-scale pilot projects.

2. Cf.: <http://todofp.es/todofp/formacion/acreditacion-de-competencias/convocatorias.html>.

Table 3 **Calls for examination planned in April 2012**
(convocatorias, according to the Royal Decree 1224 of 2009)

	Health transport	Health urgencies	Care to persons at home	Care to dependent persons in social establishments	Child education	Others	TOTAL
Andalucía	1.000	700	4 900	3 000	2 400	-	12 000
Aragón	-	-	-	540	225	150	915
Asturias	-	-	50	100	50	-	200
Baleares	-	-	200	200	50	300	750
Canarias	300	300	300	300	500	-	1 700
Cantabria	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Castilla y León	-	-	1 000	1 000	600	55	2 655
Castilla La Mancha	-	-	693	900	553	-	2 146
Cataluña	300	-	2 700	3 518	500	1.100	8 118
Comunidad Valenciana	200	200	-	200	-	-	600
Extremadura	-	-	405	600	100	-	1 105
Galicia	-	1 700	1 500	1 300	975	8 030	13 505
Madrid	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Murcia	-	-	150	150	150	-	450
Navarra	60	30	165	165	120	270	810
País Vasco	350	-	950	1 300	-	320	2 920
Rioja	40	-	90	210	65	40	445
Ceuta	30	30	60	60	60	260	500
Melilla	30	30	60	60	60	260	500
TOTAL	2 310	2 990	13 223	13 603	6 408	10 785	43 319

Source : CCOO, Secretaria Confederal de Formación para el Empleo

The region has a low-skill labour-intensive economy, with specialisation vulnerable to international competition, and there is common awareness of the necessity to streamline production, with training playing a crucial role. The Galician efforts benefit from pro-active social dialogue, led by the partners *Consejo gallego de Formacion Profesional*, *Comision gallega de Formacion Continua*, *Fundacion gallega de Formacion para o traballo*, and the 26 sector committees (*Comision Sectoriais de Cualificacion e Formacion Profesional*). Galician vocational training plans have been drawn up in tune with expected business needs, and an agreement on training and employment was signed in June 2010 by the social partners (*Acordo en matria de formacion para o Emprego*).

The trade unions, CCOO and UGT, actively support these efforts and are involved in this network of institutions. They contribute to specific programmes (for example, a professional insertion programme for the young in priority occupations, through apprenticeship contracts and company incentives to conclude such contracts). The unions have their own foundations, centres and plans for training, in partnership with public institutions. These also cover the unemployed. However the unions play no operational role in the processes organised by the public institutions, such as the *convocatorias* for the recognition and accreditation of competences. Nevertheless, they have access to the relevant information and are able to make their influence felt. With NFIL issues also on their own agendas, they hope for better integration in the validation process and in the assessment panels, as their experts have background work experience in firms. The latter also contribute to informing workers about NFIL validation.

2012 was the second year of the *convocatorias* planned in the context of the 2009 decree by the Ministries of Education (for formal vocational training) and Labour (for *formacion para el empleo*). However, coordinating the two administrations is not always easy, and the unions would like to see the labour administration playing a bigger role. In 2011, the *convocatorias* for “care of dependent persons at home or in institutions” attracted a quantity of candidates (about 8000) far above the offer of certifications (300), meaning that a selection had to be made. The level of applicants was boosted by a new regulation requiring, as of 2015, a minimum certification for people working – often informally – in this field. Certification is welcome and useful for those concerned (mainly women, frequently aged between 45 and 55

years, with 10 – 15 years of work experience). The diploma award ceremony is a public and symbolic event, at which the unions are present.

In 2012, the *convocatorias* were extended to other qualifications, and now include industrial qualifications (important for a region with an industrial tradition). The objective is to extend them to occupations (often largely female) where training is mainly non-formal and where *prima facie* qualification levels of workers are low. Recognition gives access to complementary training (including during the process itself, in order to gain the competence units necessary for a full qualification).

Though in itself positive, the process remains too narrow, too long and too bureaucratic for people not used to such a process. A more simple and open process would be welcome. Recognition of work experience is attractive for workers, but too many administrative obstacles could discourage them. Similarly, increasing fiscal constraints could make the process still more selective.

3.2 Aragon

The process is clearly in the hands of the Aragon administration, monitored by the *Agencia de la Cualificaciones Profesionales de Aragon* and with the involvement of such consultative institutions as the *Consejo de Formacion Profesional de Aragon*. The social partners in Aragon are actively involved in the training issues and respect the national framework. As in Galicia, recognition of competences through *convocatorias* currently focuses on socio-cultural occupations (domestic care and children's education), though slowly being extended to others in services and industrial fields. The social partners play an active role in informing and orienting people potentially interested. However, media attention remains too limited.

Financial constraints have increased over the last two years, slowing down the complex and costly evaluation and accreditation process (in particular due to the necessity of mobilizing highly-skilled experts). In Aragon as well, coordination between the education and labour administrations is difficult, and the process is weakened by its complexity. It would be desirable to have a much more “agile” process, making the final step (accreditation) a more tangible expectation for workers

motivated by this possibility. The training offering is not sufficiently flexible to rapidly complete any missing competence units necessary for a full qualification.

Company hopes are directed at validating and certifying the practical capabilities of candidates at the workplace, though the validation process raises the cost. There is a need to plan upcoming *convocatorias* more in tune with company needs, with a focus put on small companies and their need for polyvalence. At stake for the trade unions is the impact accreditation has on the situation of workers in companies and sectors, via collective agreements, though employers are somewhat afraid of this possible impact. It is difficult to measure the impact of recognition on company productivity and the quality of their services.

Criticism regarding the limits of the present evaluation and accreditation process (*convocatorias*) is similar to that expressed in Galicia, though scepticism concerning its impact on improving matching on the labour market seems higher in Aragon. In the view of the unions, all workers should have the opportunity to have their occupational experience recognized, as a component of lifelong learning, and hence the process should be improved in this direction.

Conclusion:

Work in progress, but still needing to be securely anchored

The process of skill evaluation and accreditation initiated by the Royal Decree of 2009 and implemented by the CC.AAs, via the *convocatorias*, allows two distinct points of view:

- A too limited, too selective and too bureaucratic process facing financial and administrative obstacles and not allowing a flexible answer to company and individual needs.
- An emerging “learning” process, encompassing more and more occupations, and testing societal demand for NFIL recognition as a way of combining work and training and opening the door to lifelong learning.

The abyss between these two points of view is not only a question of belief. It also raises the question of the impact of the current labour market reform. This reform, together with fiscal constraints, is having an uncertain impact on the NFIL evaluation and accreditation process and its role in the current adjustment of the VET system, and especially the *formacion para el empleo* sub-system. Deregulation of the labour market could go against the certified recognition of skills and competences, weakening the role of occupational categories in collective agreements. This contradiction needs to be highlighted, as, at the same time, training and certification demand from the unemployed and young people having difficulties finding a job is set to rise. While European policy endeavours to enhance occupational and geographical mobility through the certification of vocational skills and competences, excessive labour market deregulation in Spain could have exactly the opposite effect.

Chapter 10

United Kingdom¹

Introduction

The UK has institutionalized a variety of methods and ways of recognizing and validating NFIL. One of the older ways (dating back to the 1980's) is integrated in the *National Vocational Qualification* process. Moreover, ways of recognizing prior learning used for admission to or within further and higher education were introduced in the early 1990's.

Does this mean that the system is highly developed? We will see that the variety of methods involved also makes it difficult for users to navigate their way through NFIL recognition, highlighting the need to progressively achieve a common language. Though the social partners contribute to this harmonisation, it is not currently one of their main focuses, in a context of government spending cuts in the education field.

1. Too many paths to NFIL recognition?

1.1 An impressive range of paths

Over the years, a number of acronyms have sprung up with reference to NFIL recognition, underlining the diversity of methods and ways to achieve recognition:

- APL, *Accreditation of Prior Learning*
- APEL, *Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning*
- AP(E)L *Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning*
- APCL, *Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning*

1. This chapter looks at the situation in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, countries sharing the same Qualifications and Credit Framework organising units and qualifications.

- APECL *Accreditation of Prior Experiential and Certificated Learning*
- APE(C)L, *Accreditation of Prior Experiential and (Certificated) Learning*
- APL&A, *Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement*
- ARPEL, *Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning*
- RPL, *Recognition of Prior Learning*.

Actors involved in RPL have often underlined the problems of such diversity, as in the so-called *Pineapple Project* (APEL methodology) report of 2009, “It is likely that the lack of consensus on terminology is a contributory factor to the confusion, lack of understanding, inconsistency (even within institutions) and marginalisation” of this process².

Beyond this terminological diversity, one can identify three main ways of NFIL recognition:

- The Recognising and Recording Progress Achievement in Non-Accredited Learning (RARPA) methodology. This was developed as a high-quality method for assessing non-accredited courses and became a tool supporting progression from non-formal to formal learning. Deriving from a national *Learning Skills Council* (LSC) initiative, it was developed in conjunction with the NIACE (*National Institute of Adult Continuing Education*) and the LSDA (*Learning and Skills Development Agency*). The NIACE, the UK’s leading independent non-governmental organisation and charity for lifelong learning, provides training on the implementation of RARPA, with a method comprising five stages (LSC, 2005):
 - *Stage 1*. Set aim(s) appropriate to an individual learner or groups of learners.
 - *Stage 2*. Carry out initial assessment to establish the learner's starting point.
 - *Stage 3*. Identify appropriately challenging learning objectives (initial, negotiated and revised).
 - *Stage 4*. Recognise and record progress and achievement during the programme (formative assessment), including tutor feedback to learners, learner reflection, progress reviews.

2. McDermott Anne, Stillwell Robert, Dismore Harriet and Witt Neil (2009).

- *Stage 5.* Carry out end-of-programme learner self-assessment, tutor summative assessment, review of overall progress and achievement in relation to appropriately challenging learning objectives, identified at the beginning of or during the programme. It may include recognition of learning outcomes not specified during the programme.

Recognition in an NVQ context. Since the creation of NVQs during the 1980's, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is "identified as one means of generating evidence for the (accreditation) units, which comprised the qualification", as underlined in the recent GHK & CEDEFOP study (2010, p.2). There is no prescribed learning programme for NVQs:

"To guarantee consistency on a national basis, awarding organisations certify a learner's achievements on a unit by unit basis. When assessing NVQ portfolios, all awarding organisations follow a set of key messages and principles, and adhere to the same stringent quality assurance processes. These quality assurance and control requirements are outlined in the NVQ code of practice 2001 and the NVQ code of practice 2006".

To gain NVQs, accreditation of prior achievement is a means of generating evidence: NVQs are broken down into units (corresponding to job standards) which can be achieved via recognition of prior learning.

- Recognition in an academic context, in relation to further and higher education (used both for admission and for awarding degrees). The *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland applies to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards (other than honorary degrees and higher doctorates) granted by a higher education provider in the exercise of its degree-awarding powers.

"The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than years of study. (...) These outcomes represent the integration of various learning experiences resulting from designated and coherent programmes of study. (...) For any qualification, study leading directly to the qualification will normally build on learning from earlier stages of a programme of study, or from other assessed prior learning." (FHEQ, 2008)

1.2 The Qualifications and Credit Framework, setting the overall scope

The 2008 *Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)* issued by *The Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator* state that “the awarding organisation must have procedures in place to recognise, and monitor on an ongoing basis, centres to offer assessment leading to awards within the QCF.”

To develop such practice, and whatever the way (either NVQ or academic) chosen, the *Qualifications and Curriculum Authority* (2010) gives general scope for claiming credits to

“everyone who learnt something but has never received formal recognition for this learning through a qualification or other form of certification. Within the QCF an individual is able to ‘claim’ that he or she knows or can do something already and does not need to attend a course to learn it again. If he or she can prove this claim (through assessment of relevant evidence), then credit can be awarded for that achievement in the same way as any other credits. In the QCF, RPL [recognition of prior learning] refers particularly to previously uncertificated learning, and achievements through RPL always lead to the award of credit.”

The process described above has since been adapted to the European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and is now explained and formalized (see box 7 and figure 11).

This favourable context for recognizing prior learning is reinforced by the fact that, in England, the *Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulation* (OFQAL, the regulator for all external qualifications) does not impose any restrictions on how the learning should take place. This basically means that any qualification awarded by a recognised awarding organisation can be attained by proving non-formal / informal learning equivalent to the required learning outcomes.

This new framework covers NVQs and the academic learning context, though in practice it is most commonly associated with vocational training and is not a systematic approach.

The only fully implemented systematic programmes are:

- ITQ (IT users qualifications)
- Adult literacy and numeracy (English and maths)

There is no overall system evaluating the spread and use of this new RPL scope.

Box 7 The five RPL principles

- *Principle 1:* RPL is a valid method of enabling individuals to claim credit for units in the QCF, irrespective of how their learning took place. There is no difference between the achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a unit through prior learning and through a formal programme of study.
- *Principle 2:* RPL policies, processes, procedures, practices and decisions should be transparent, rigorous, reliable, fair and accessible to individuals and stakeholders to ensure that users can be confident of the decisions and outcomes of RPL.
- *Principle 3:* RPL is a learner-centred, voluntary process. The individual should be offered advice on the nature and range of evidence considered appropriate to support a claim for credit through RPL, and be given guidance and support to make a claim.
- *Principle 4:* The process of assessment for RPL is subject to the same quality assurance and monitoring standards as any other form of assessment. The award of credit through RPL will not be distinguished from any other credits awarded in the QCF.
- *Principle 5:* Assessment methods for RPL must be of equal rigour as other assessment methods, be fit for purpose and related to the evidence of learning. Credit may be claimed for any unit in the QCF through RPL unless the assessment requirements of the unit do not allow this, based on a rationale consistent with the aims and regulations of the framework.

Source: Qualification and Credit Framework (2010)

Figure 11a **Assessment through RPL**

**A learner has worked in retail for the last five years.
He would like to achieve a level 2 award in retail knowledge.**

Learner and learning provider to establish opportunities for RPL.

Learning provider to conduct own research as to which QCF unit may be appropriate to RPL. Also make contact with awarding organisation to identify methods to assess this experience and follow a quality assurance RPL process implemented by awarding organisation.

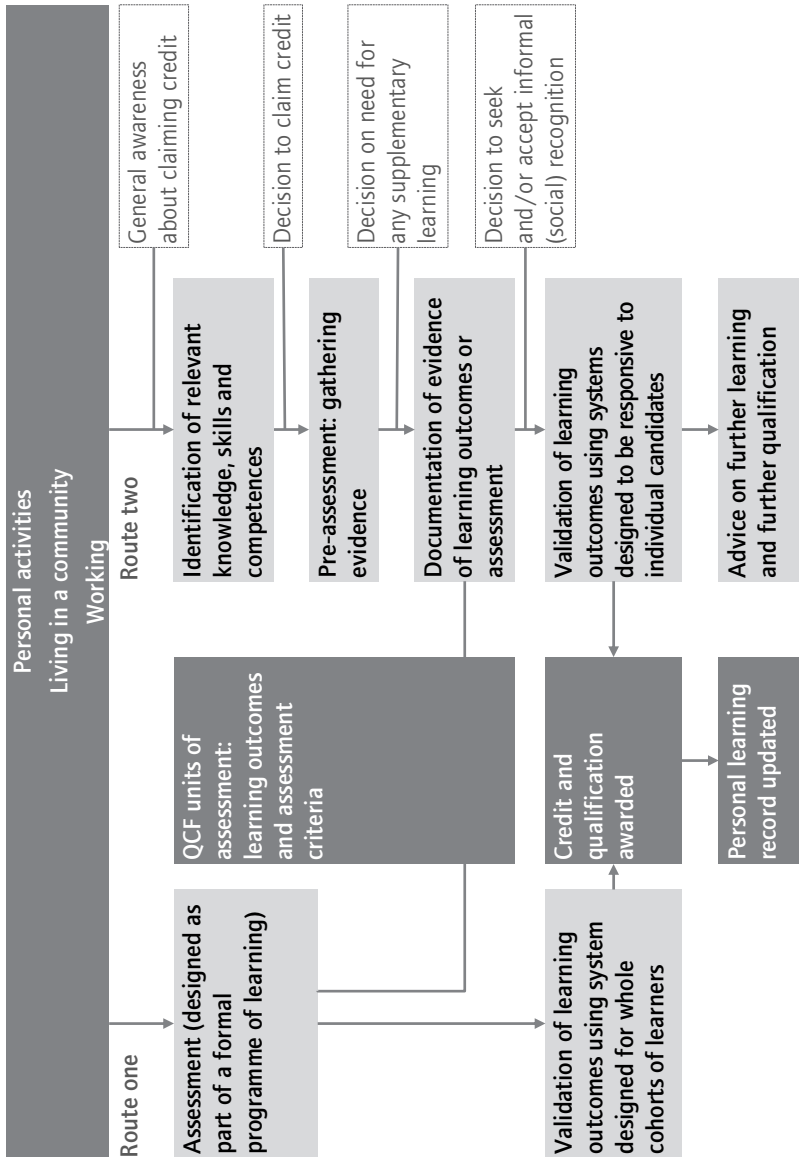
**Unit recognised for RPL =
Understanding customer service in the retail sector.**

Learning provider to assess learner's experience against the assessment criteria and learning outcomes through a recognised approach recommended by awarding organisation. This could be a one-to-one discussion or a witness testament provided by a colleague.

Awarding organisation to verify evidence used for RPL and award credit for unit achieved.

Learner achieves 3 credits for Understanding customer service in the retail sector.

Figure 11b Validation through RPL



Source: Official document of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2010)

2. Non-formal v. formal learning: the significant role played by informal adult community learning

Next to NVQs and academic learning, the UK has developed another learning practice: *Informal adult community learning (IACL)*. Under the NIACE definition, IACL “is an umbrella term describing a broad range of learning that brings together adults, to pursue an interest, address a need, acquire a new skill, become healthier or learn how to support their children. This kind of learning, usually unaccredited, is an important part of the wider learning continuum. It can be undertaken for its own sake or as a step towards other learning/training. It can be delivered by providers in the public, voluntary or private sector. It can also be organised by people for themselves through the many groups, clubs and societies where people get together to learn”.

All sorts of individuals and organisations are actively involved in helping make informal learning happen. Some people are paid but many others are volunteers. Some organisations are funded by the taxpayer and many are not. Lots of local voluntary organisations and community networks deliver and support the informal learning found in libraries, museums, community centres, union learning centres, universities, extended schools, children’s centres, colleges and workplaces.

The *Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)* is investing £210 million a year up to 2015 on IACL through the *Adult Safeguarded Learning* budget. *Skills for Sustainable Growth* announced the protection of this budget in the Government’s 2010 spending review settlement, subject to a review of BIS-funded IACL in order to maximise its role in:

- supporting relevant Government policy objectives, such as building the “Big Society”;
- motivating people from disadvantaged groups to learn and progress, including to further learning and employment.

NIACE is particularly involved in IACL, ensuring that its benefits can be felt as widely as possible, especially by groups of people most marginalised by the education system. It has supported the government in developing a range of resources to help provide the kind of environment where informal learning can flourish. NIACE initiatives include funding innovative projects through the *Transformation Fund*, developing a

toolkit for clubs and groups to plan their own learning, providing training for using technology to support informal learning, offering advice in opening up spaces for learning and identifying good practice in informal learning in care settings. Within the scope of the “New Challenges, new chances” consultation, as one part of this consultation was about IACL, NIACE produced a specific response (August 2011) encouraging IACL development and underlining its positive impact on learning behaviour.

The TUC answered the same consultation in October 2011, supporting IACL and arguing:

“The experience of union learning representatives has demonstrated how IACL – often in the form of taster sessions, informal classes, or demonstrations – has formed a valuable stepping stone to the achievement of qualifications and valued workplace learning and skills. It also has a positive impact on wider areas such as health and wellbeing (...) Union learning representatives and workplace learning champions do not treat IACL as separate to other forms of learning but as part of a strategy to build and maintain a culture of workplace and community learning. There are, as NIACE’s initial comments point out, many connections to different elements of adult learning particularly with respect to information, advice and guidance and literacy and numeracy.” (TUC Response to the Government consultation, 2011, p.15)

3. Social partners involved in developing formal learning access and NFIL access, but not focused on recognition

3.1 TUC and unions

Trade unions often point out that they have a role to play in supporting RPL opportunities. For example, the UK country report for the *Transfine project* (Storan 2003) underlines this, stating that

“The role of trade unions and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in supporting opportunities for APEL amongst its members illustrates yet another strand of training provision which enables learners to gain accreditation based in this case on their trade union activities.

Through partnerships with the National Open College Network the TUC is offering, for example, routes to Open College accreditation based in part on the assessment of prior learning.” (p.9)

More globally, the TUC is deeply involved in learning development. Former (Labour) governments and the TUC agreed on the need to increase union presence at the workplace with regard to learning:

- The *Union Learning Fund* (ULF) created in 1998. The first 11 rounds mobilised £121 million supporting 522 projects, 57 individual trade unions, creating 600,000 learning opportunities and training 22,000 *Union learning representatives* (ULRs).
- ULRs, who gained statutory rights in 2003.
- *Unionlearn*, the TUC’s learning and skills function established in 2006, helps unions to deliver their ULF projects and supports unions more widely in developing their learning and skills work.

Better learning access is clearly one aspect of the unions’ “service offer” taking into account the expectations of workers and the need for life improvements (personal and working life). They are committed to actions with NIACE and the *Campaign for Learning*³, to the *National Learning at Work Day* and the *National Workplace Learning Network*. Skill development aimed at making workers employable and competitive on the labour market is also one of the goals of such events and the “every day” union commitment to learning.

We will highlight two pillars of union action promoting learning access: union learning representatives (ULRs) and union learning centres.

Union learning representatives (ULRs)

TUC and unions have trained more than 27,000 ULRs. ULRs have two main roles: to provide learning opportunities to people (mainly union members) and to support them during the learning process. But they don’t have the right to negotiate with or consult employers on training issues.

3. The *Campaign for learning* is working for a society where learning is at the heart of social inclusion. Research shows that lifelong learners are more likely to be happier, healthier, have better jobs, contribute more to society and live longer and more fulfilled lives. <http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/cfl/index.asp>

They are mainly (61%) to be found in public administrations, in education and the health sector. A third of them are new activists, whereby these are more likely to be women and younger than the others. They spend 4 hours a week on union learning activities and receive on average only 2 hours paid time-off from their employers (Unionlearn, 2009).

The two main roles mentioned above (to provide learning opportunities and support people during the learning process) have pragmatic implementations:

Table 4 Nature and extent of ULR activity (% ULRs)

Provided information and advice to colleagues on learning opportunities	94%
Networked with ULRs from other workplaces	79%
Arranged (or helped to arrange) courses for colleagues	77%
Recruited (or helped to recruit) new members into the union	74%
Conducted a learning needs assessment	53%
Helped colleagues to get funding for learning	48,5%

Source: Unionlearn, 2009.

The service offer is heterogeneous. One of the most significant disparities regards the provision of *information, advice (IA) on learning opportunities*. IA is a key opportunity to develop a taste for learning, and some unions do not do more than provide this initial information and advice. Others go further and also offer guidance (IAG). For example, Unison, the POA (Prison Officer Association) and the CWU (Communication Workers Union) all have all ULRs trained in IA, with some also trained in IAG. A number of union learning centres have even been awarded the Matrix Standard (quality standard for information, advice and guidance services).

All these activities are having a positive impact on the number of learners, which is generally increasing where ULRs are in place. One interesting piece of information produced by *Unionlearn* is that the impact is not only on a certain section of learning practices and themes, but on all of them: recognised and non-recognised qualifications, basic literacy and numeracy skills, leisure courses, professional development.

Union learning centres

Union learning centres have been created to coordinate the numerous union learning activities within the same place. All the unions we visited have developed their own learning centres.

- Some centres are set up at the workplace in partnership with the employers, permitting a co-investment in developing learning access.
- They are sometimes “open” to family, friends, or communities.
- They can be linked to the *Unionlearn* network and users can follow online courses (mainly IT courses).

Box 8 focuses on two learning centre schemes aimed at developing both formal and non-formal practices.

Box 8

Focus 1: The POA Learning Centre and learning access for prison staff

The Prison Officers Association (POA) is the largest union in the United Kingdom representing Uniformed Prison Grades and staff working within the field of Secure Forensic Psychiatric Care. The union has 35000 members, working in the public and private sectors.

The union learning centre at HMP Highdown, Sutton, for example, provides access to a large range of learning possibilities. The POA presents this centre as a structured and professional service centre: “Whether you are looking to update your skills, re-train for a new job, or to simply study for pleasure, Hatfield and Full Sutton Learning Centre offers a wide range of flexible courses and facilities designed to fit around work commitments and busy lifestyles. With a wide range of flexible on-line learning opportunities, you can study for a recognized qualification, without the restrictions of traditional college, choosing when and where you study. (...) Monday 9:00 – 16:30 Tuesday 9:00 – 20.00 Wednesday 9:00 – 20.00 Thursday 9.00 – 20.00 Friday 9:00 – 16.30”

Courses cover a wide range of skills, from literacy and numeracy to the psychology of criminal profiling, and the centre also has its own IT platform and a library.

A 2012 agreement between the employer and the union defines resources and responsibilities. Under it, union learning representatives are for example responsible for:

- ensuring liaison between the internal training department, POA learning centre staff and staff;
- offering advice and guidance regarding the use of facilities and access to learning;
- recording all learning activity arranged by them within the workplace;
- providing detailed feedback to the regional POA Learning Centre managers and the home establishment for use by the training department;
- making available results from the annual learning needs analysis undertaken.

...

From the prison governor's point of view, ULRs and the Union Learning Centre are useful and necessary. Financially, it is a good deal for him, as he only has to bear ¼ of total costs.

In the views of the governor and the trade union, the impact on employee behaviour is good: they seem more motivated to learn, and more confident at work following training sessions.

Once a year, a barbecue/learning party is the occasion to find out what the union learning centre has on offer, and to test various learning sessions (foreign languages, IT, etc...). This day is considered as one of the most important learning events for the governor and for the trade union, giving a taste of what is possible and facilitating learning access for employees who would not otherwise consider it.

Focus 2: Unite – A learning project for migrant workers

The Unite project aims to improve the lives of migrant workers, giving them access to basic formal and non-formal learning, in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 26): "Everyone has the right to education. (...) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

In its first phase, the Migrant Workers Education Project worked closely with formal institutions to deliver ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), ICT and numeracy courses. Because of a cut in the education providers' budget, the union was forced to rebuild its offering, creating an "Alternative Education Model" with its own teaching resources.

Now called the "United Migrant Workers Education Project – UMWEP", the project covers four groups:

- Justice for cleaners campaign (J4CC) – workers in the cleaning industry around London
- Justice for Domestic Workers (J4DW) – a 100% migrant workers organisation
- Hotel and Catering Branch 1647 – a majority of migrant workers
- Chinese Migrant Network (CMN).

Within this project:

- education is free and based on voluntarism. Teaching is based on interaction between tutors and learners;
- the skills developed are "life skills" and do not lead to accreditation.

Faced with funding cuts, the focus of the alternative model is now clearly on non-formal learning. The goal is not only to deliver basic education to migrant workers but also to organise them through education.

This means that language skills, self-confidence and IT skills are not only delivered for social inclusion purposes, but also to encourage migrant workers to become union members and activists. Principles of equality, respect and tolerance, employment rights, trade union history are subjects taught to improve working skills and worker awareness.

3.2 Employers and Sector Skills Councils

Employers are generally positive about the impact of union learning representatives and their tools. Research by Leeds University found that 68% of employers said union activity had raised demand for learning, while 42% said staff morale and trust between union and management was higher (Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change 2010). Similarly, a *Unionlearn* survey (2011) also shows that employer views on the impact of these tools and union commitment (ULRs, learning centres) seem positive, underlining the importance of the union action and/or the increasing need to share learning costs in a context of state funding cuts.

Traditionally, employers have an important role to play within the NVQ system:

- They provide “the physical base for training, which can lead to the accreditation of work-based learning through the N(S)VQ system as described”.
- They contribute to “the setting of the occupational competences which form the basis of N(S)VQ, and enable individuals to have their work-based and broader experiential learning accredited.” (UK country report for the *Transfine* project, 2003, p.9).

At a sectoral level, Sector Skill Councils, recognised (licensed) throughout the UK as independent, employer-run organisations ensuring that the skills system is driven by employers' needs, are involved in developing the occupational standards used for vocational qualifications in the UK:

- they create and maintain *National Occupational Standards* (NOS);
- they work in partnership with *Awarding Bodies* to develop and maintain qualifications;
- they develop *Sector Qualification Strategies* identifying the qualifications needs of their industry;
- they help influence the *Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme* in England, Northern Ireland and Wales;
- they develop *Apprenticeship Frameworks*;
- they also work with other organisations that want to develop frameworks, including employers, learning providers and awarding organisations.

Box 9 SSC commitment to RPL – The Cogent sector qualification strategy, 2007

The Cogent Sector Skills Council (SSC) covers the Chemical, Nuclear, Oil and Gas, Petroleum, Pharmaceuticals and Polymer industries throughout the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

"Developing a clear and consistent approach to Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), and enabling employers/providers to gain recognition with awarding bodies for their training schemes is a key delivery objective for both of the NSAs. The creation of modular, credit -based qualifications will also enable APEL to happen more easily." (Cogent 2007, p.8)

System for APEL

"Employers across the sector are clear about the need to gain recognition for the huge amount of non-formal learning that goes on outside of the qualifications arena. Traditionally 'accreditation of prior experience and learning' (APEL) has offered a potential solution by providing opportunity to transfer the value of previous learning towards the achievement of a full qualification. However, employers have shown that they are confused by the term and the practicalities of gaining recognition" (p.50).

Recognition and accreditation of the learning and experiences gained during an individual's working life, both within the Cogent sector and other related sectors, will be fundamental to upskilling the workforce.

Currently a great deal of 'non-formal learning' is accessed by the sector - through private training providers, in-house training programmes, colleges, and equipment suppliers - but is not accredited.

Recognising these other types of learning has a number of benefits:

- It avoids unnecessary or repetitive learning;
- It shows employers all of the learner's achievements, including formal and non-formal training;
- It also boosts the value of learning and is motivational, particularly when it comes to committing to continued learning.

Implication for future qualifications

Cogent intends to work closely with providers to develop units of assessment which capture the learning outcomes/assessment criteria of valued non-formal learning. This will allow the content of such programmes to be submitted to the appropriate qualification frameworks and given a nationally recognised credit and

...

...
level value. The credit achieved by learners undertaking these training programmes can be transferred towards the achievement of other related units and qualifications, and will contribute towards any relevant Gold Standard role profiles. An example of this approach can be seen in a new vocationally linked qualification for Nuclear which is being developed as an additional employer requirement for apprentices entering the industry.” (p.55)

According to the Qualification and Curriculum Authority statements (2010), SSCs are in “a key position to play a leading role in promoting RPL in their sector. SSCs may support RPL in order to:

- recognise skills, knowledge and competences important to their sector
- address skills shortages and gaps
- contribute to career development systems and staff development
- increase highly skilled and highly qualified workforces.”

For its part, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills underlined in 2010 that “Common principles for credit should be utilised and built upon. Higher education institutions should make greater use of and seek to develop common approaches to accrediting and recognising prior learning.” (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010, p.47).

Similarly, *National Skills Academies* (NSA) - networks of learning stakeholders working on skills, setting professional standards and demanding the highest quality training – often promote RPL.

Conclusion:

A challenge, but not a priority

There is a long tradition of recognizing prior learning in the UK (mainly deriving from the NVQ system and the roadmaps taking people from informal and non-formal learning to certificated skills). However, stakeholders do not seem fully focused on this.

On the one hand, actors may sometimes be very ambitious, as stated by NIACE during the “New Challenges, new chances” consultation:

“a workable approach lies in developing a framework that (...) would encompass progress in learning, learning outcomes and progression from learning and could incorporate tools and approaches such as RARPA. It would recognise multiple outcomes and lateral as well as vertical progression and provide flexibility to accommodate a range of contexts and learning outcomes. It would also support learners to self-define their progression, which can change and expand within as well as beyond the course of learning”.

On the other hand, the financial crisis and the new coalition government led to a review of learning practices and funding priorities, resulting in a large number of structures and ways of funding learning being reformed. In such a context, a recent *Unionlearn* survey (*Unionlearn* 2011) underlines the fact that, during the crisis, employers cut job-related training (11%) and spending on training (29%). Nevertheless, one third of them increased their cooperation with unions, providing organisational support for union learning activities. Furthermore, there is an increasing need for co-investment in training, involving individual employers, individual employees, trade unions and providers, in the aftermath of major cuts in state support for adult learning and skills. Within the current context of a lack of funding, neither the Government nor the social partners seem to attach a core importance to prior learning recognition.

Furthermore, even though the *Qualifications and Credit Framework* boosts the visibility of what is possible to achieve through assessing prior learning, the process remains complex, using a plethora of methods. And prior learning recognition is not on the short-term policy agenda.

Conclusion

Perspectives and recommendations for public policies and social dialogue on NFIL recognition and validation

Current attention to NFIL validation rests upon the trend emerging over the last few years in Europe in favour of recognising learning outcomes. The aim is to give competences acquired through vocational development and social involvement a greater role, with attention focused on the outcomes of individuals' continuing training over the course of their active lives, more than just on the diplomas they earn from their initial education.

The Commission's communication *Towards a job-rich recovery*, published by the European Commission on 18 April 2012, recalls and underlines the role needing to be played by the documented and certified validation of competences in regulating a labour market organised at the European level. The European Council recently adopted a specific recommendation (*Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning – 2012/C 398/01*). The objective of the general implementation of NFIL validation frameworks “no later than 2018” is ambitious and its achievement is still distant, given the disparate national realities. The text sets forth principles which should apply “taking into consideration national, regional and/or local, as well as sectorial needs and characteristics”.

1. European mechanisms: a constraint or a lever? From mere wishes to a European Council recommendation

The European mechanisms are ambitious, seeking to foster the mobility of Europeans both within the training system and on the labour market by breaking down the barriers compartmentalising general education and vocational training and incorporating initial education and continuing training into a unified qualifications framework. In doing so, the *European Qualifications Framework* (EQF) acts as a kind of *Esperanto* or common language, providing useful principles for the recognition of

qualifications and competences. It offers a reference that can be mobilised in exchanges between government and social partners during the first steps of constructing a national framework (as in Poland) or in later steps (as in Italy), with reference to the EQF making it easier for workers to gain pan-European recognition of their skills.

That being said, the European mechanisms are not always easy to implement. Transposing them comes up against national conceptions and practices rooted in countries' history and in the traditions of their social players. This equally holds true for the qualities and deficiencies of national systems, whose evolution is necessarily progressive. Even if credited with good intentions, the European mechanisms and tools often seem look too abstract, too 'top-down', and too far removed from national perceptions. The EQF is not yet an operational tool for practically establishing the equivalence of qualifications and thus supporting freedom of movement on the European labour market, being still too remote from the language spoken and the representations made by national players. The EQF is difficult to apply directly when there is a binary system of higher education with a sharp distinction between vocational and academic settings. Community vocabulary itself can be surprising - in various European countries, players committed to and well-informed about the training system are still disconcerted by the term 'non-formal and informal learning'.

The European institutions have drawn up guidelines for identifying and validating NFIL, which have become more clear-cut over time. The European Council framed a number of general principles in 2004 for identifying and validating NFIL: individual rights and fair treatment of people; stakeholder obligations; procedural reliability, credibility and legitimacy. The Guidelines published by CEDEFOP in 2009 refer to these principles, without constituting a regulatory framework (CEDEFOP 2009). Instead they offer a set of operating instructions for the European instruments, making the process of identifying and validating NFIL more robust and comparable between countries. They form a practical evaluation tool at the disposal of NFIL stakeholders.

The analytical and normative framework they offer was used by GHK to describe and evaluate national practices in the context of the latest European NFIL inventory (see Cedefop, European Commission and GHK 2010). The effective understanding and use of these guidelines by

the national players cannot be taken for granted however, as we can see from the interviews conducted in the course of the national surveys.

Reluctance vis-à-vis European tools which are both too exhaustive and too abstract is common. German players find the EQF not to be very operational from a vocational point of view, with the German concept of *Beruf* (occupation) insisting on an integrated approach to overall occupational capability, rather than a modular approach to competences. In Spain, the institutional players intend to complete the elaboration of the national qualifications framework before aligning it to the general references of the EQF. Taking national realities into account leads to a certain pragmatism, giving national players a certain leeway in developing their national qualifications frameworks and catalogues and coping with the implications for the validation procedures.

What we are suggesting here is that the European mechanisms should be regarded as levers, driving national practices forwards towards convergence, rather than as constraints around which the national systems need to be aligned as quickly as possible. These systems show great diversity – for instance there is no uniform definition of the notion of competence. Some of them, such as the British NVQs, give priority to the ‘fine weave’ of competence, conceived as the ability to carry out a set of elementary tasks associated with a particular job, while others, as in Germany and France, take a more integrative approach to competence, which is taken to be a mastery of both theoretical and practical knowledge. It is not enough to have carefully-designed European reference frameworks and to ensure transparent correspondence between national systems: the conceptual differences between these systems are rooted in longstanding national customs, as reflected in the operation of the institutions. The European frameworks can be mobilised as a tool to reveal the differences and tensions existing between the national approaches, in a spirit of mutual trust. The problems posed by these differences between countries need to be resolved without being artificially erased.

Taking more explicit account of learning outcomes in skill reference material opens the door to more generalised NFIL validation. It encourages the educational system to ensure that the diplomas issued be more defined by the competences that they certify (the outcomes)

than by the input. This – in theory – allows non-formal methods of acquiring competences to be recognised as equivalent, all other things being equal. The objective is not inaccessible, with countries such as Finland well on the way to achieving it, based on the central role accorded to the recognition of competences, however acquired, in the Finnish CBQ (*Competence-Based Qualifications*) system.

Looking at universities and the role they play, we see in many countries fairly generalised resistance to NFIL recognition as a door to higher education. Nevertheless, a few schemes do exist, as for example at the Roma Tre University in Italy or at the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, or with regard to certain programmes in the ‘Universities of Applied Sciences’ in Finland. But higher education receptiveness to NFIL recognition, according to well-defined rules guaranteeing equal treatment for people who have taken different routes to acquire their portfolio of competences, remains a tricky issue. In Germany, with its highly competitive economy and efficient vocational training system, higher education is becoming increasingly active as a driving force for upgrading vocational competences.

These normal differences in approach between countries should not mask a common issue: it is not a matter of the outcome of NFIL validation being a ‘poor man’s diploma’ or a low-cost qualification enabling minimum employability in precarious labour markets and economies with low competitiveness. On the contrary, NFIL validation must be integrated into a general process of upskilling, offering people without initial diplomas access to lifelong learning, and helping them to benefit from a cumulative process of skill recognition and improvement, with the ultimate aim of improving both their employability and their possible access to higher-level training. In several of the countries surveyed, programmes embarked upon by the public authorities, with the participation of the social players, are moving in this direction, even if they are still only halfway towards achieving the ambitions announced. It would be deeply damaging to the competitiveness of Europe’s economies for such programmes to be among the first victims of fiscal austerity.

Following a large-scope consultation in 2010 and 2011, in which respondents frequently focused on the needs for communication and information aimed at users, on the need for confidence in the procedures

and on the need for customised guidance and support for individuals, the Commission stated in 2012 that without any voluntarism,

“the current situation of validation is expected to change only slowly, implying that the limited availability and use of validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences, as well as the lack of a comparable and coherent approach in validation across Europe, will remain.” (see Box 10).

Box 10 **Commission analysis of the NFIL validation situation**

In its *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning* (SWD (2012) 253 final), the European Commission described the current situation as follows:

- “Validation of non-formal and informal learning is taken into account in European policies concerning education and training, employment, youth and active citizenship;
- Existing European instruments, in particular the EQF Recommendation, call for the possibility to validate experiences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, without indicating how to do it;
- The Common European principles on validation adopted by the Council in 2004, the European guidelines on validation by Cedefop, as well as available funding through the Lifelong Learning Programme, the future "Erasmus for All" Programme and the European Social Fund, as supporting tools for validation policy and practice in the Member States will continue to be relevant;
- Validation is part of the policy agenda in most Member States, but only implemented in a comprehensive way in a few Member States;
- Member States exchange experiences on validation under the Open Method of Coordination (in particular in the EQF Advisory Group).”

The results of the preceding public consultation, before the proposal, “showed a lack of overall coherence in the approaches towards validation within and between Member States, as well as a large number of constraints on the effective implementation of validation in practice. Responses showed overwhelming consensus on the importance of making the skills gained through life and work experience visible. They showed broad support for a European initiative in order to enhance validation policy and practice in the EU Member States.” (COM(2012) 485 final).

In line with those statements, social partner debates and the Commission proposal, the European Council adopted a specific recommendation in December 2012 (see appendix). This text states that Member States should:

“have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to (a) have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources; (b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences.”

This recommendation is not a directive: it only underlines what Member States and the European Commission *should* take as measures. There are still lots of steps before a clear and accessible system of NFIL validation becomes available to every European citizen.

2. Proposals to improve NFIL validation visibility and access

This section aims, without claiming to be exhaustive, to frame a set of recommendations for tackling the major issues identified in the context of the surveys conducted on the ground, and the problems highlighted in their synthesis. These recommendations take account of the contributions from the ETUC Lisbon conference on 26 - 27 June 2012. They also reflect CEDEFOP studies, the concerns expressed by the respondents to the public consultation organised by the European Commission in 2010-2011, and European Council Recommendation.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning requires action in a number of directions in order to extend people’s effective access to the mechanisms that already exist, in the context of making their career paths more secure. It is also a matter of allowing countries or regions which are not yet highly mobilised to make a commitment to the more resolute implementation of NFIL validation mechanisms.

The proposals described below therefore have:

- on the one hand the qualitative objective of improving the services provided to users (individuals and enterprises) and the efficiency of existing mechanisms;
- on the other hand, the more quantitative objective of extending access for workers in large and small enterprises, as well as for the unemployed, to NFIL recognition and validation.

These recommendations identify a number of paths for progress and some ways forward. They rely on the observations emanating from the national surveys and covered in this book; they take account of the diversity of national systems and points of view; they cover the entire validation process and are attentive to its prior stages (information, advice, guidance, etc.) and its follow-on stages (follow-up, support, etc.).

2.1 Improving the coordination and follow-up of NFIL recognition and validation actions

NFIL validation processes are, by definition, multi-player, and the coordinated mobilization of all players determines the scope and success thereof. At every geographical level, consultation and partnership between these players have priority. In particular, enterprises, within which people's career prospects are often determined, need to fully participate in these partnerships. Explicit protocols of agreement between enterprises and training and validation bodies are one way to organise collective processes for the recognition and validation of competences acquired through NFIL, in accordance with public standards and criteria.

Enriching consultation and partnerships between players at territorial level

Those providing advice, guidance and training services, together with those providing funding and certification, are the technical players with a pivotal role to play in organising and running the validation process. Effective deployment of their action to cover the target categories identified implies close contacts with business, social and institutional players in the territories within appropriate consultative bodies. It is not automatically a case of adding specific bodies, but more of ensuring that the existing bodies in the field of employment and training do indeed properly take on board the issue of NFIL recognition and validation.

Incorporating protocols for partnership with training and competence validation providers into sectoral and enterprise-level collective bargaining

Collective bargaining, whether in sectors or enterprises, would take more notice of the issue of NFIL validation if the implementation of the agreements concluded between employers and unions could rely on easy access to protocols for partnership with training and certification providers. Disseminating specimen protocols would help foster a better understanding, by employers, staff and staff representatives alike, of the prospects opened by NFIL validation. Depending on trade union options and sectoral or local situations, validation of prior learning can be a full-fledged subject for negotiation, or perhaps integrated into a broader field of discussion (training policy, anticipatory management of employment and competences, etc.).

Upgrading the observation and evaluation of individual career paths during and after validation

Data on career paths helps to steer the validation mechanisms and evaluate their costs and benefits. At present, such data is often difficult to compile and provides only a partial picture of NFIL activities. More and/or better available information is therefore desirable:

- on beneficiaries' (career) paths on the way to seeing their competences recognised and validated, and on the various hurdles (abandonment, total or partial success, access to complementary training, etc.)
- on beneficiaries' later careers, after recognition and validation: what impact does it have on a career, on vocational mobility, on remuneration?

European-level statistical surveys do exist, specifically under the Eurostat aegis. It would be useful to examine the extent to which they already provide, or could provide, information that can be mobilised regarding the "return on investment" of the training and validation routes people take. At territorial level, closer to the social and institutional players, enhanced tools would be welcome, for instance piloting databases on validation pathways. Such databases would enable the definition of samples of workers, allowing them to be directly questioned about their perception of the route they have taken, and its impact on their career development.

2.2 Informing and advising workers about NFIL, its recognition and validation

Ensuring that accessible and precise information on ways of recognising and validating NFIL is widely available

As things stand, there is a wide diversity of methods used by trade unions in communicating information and advice on NFIL recognition and validation. Without wishing to standardise these practices, a basic pillar might be proposed and discussed in the context of European sectoral social dialogue:

- to promote harmonisation of the information made available to potentially interested people by the social partners and the certifying bodies, on the web or on paper. This would help reassure people about the accessibility of the process.
- to distribute such information to the various contact points and intermediaries on the ground: reception and guidance centres and networks, bodies funding and providing vocational training, certifying bodies, trade associations, etc.
- to raise awareness among these intermediaries on the ground and put them on a professional footing, specifically by organising regular information sessions about the mechanisms that can be mobilised.
- to get large companies' HR departments involved in the dissemination of the information; to use targeted campaigns to raise awareness of those in charge in small enterprises.

In many countries, a number of public institutions in charge of questions of training and certification have a legitimate ability to stimulate and coordinate this communication effort. To be effective, this effort needs to rely on a network of committed intermediaries and players.

Encouraging pilot schemes providing in-depth advice to specific groups targeted by NFIL validation, and, after evaluation of these schemes, defining ways of making them widespread available

People remote from work or in a precarious situation (the long-term unemployed, workers undergoing retraining, people in vocational and social integration programmes, those with low skills, migrants with non-recognised qualifications, etc.) are in particular need of appropriate information and advice.

Thought could be given to conducting pilot schemes with enhanced advisory services for these groups, whereby process ‘specifications’ could be defined on a partnership basis at local or sectoral level. They would focus on identifying competences, recording and dealing with the obstacles to vocational progress (such as illiteracy), and the possibility of coupling the recognition of competences with a realistic vocational project.

Developing information and advice targeting workers in enterprises, and encouraging the integration of NFIL validation into HR management

Workers’ access to NFIL validation involves raising awareness within enterprises, specifically in the context of HR management practices and via groundwork by staff representatives. Within the enterprise, joint employer-union action is crucial, guaranteeing proper ownership of the issue. Promoting this ‘learning organisation’ principle therefore implies:

- capitalising at national and European levels on actions fostering company involvement in NFIL validation;
- promoting dissemination and professionalization measures around NFIL validation tools, involving those responsible within HR management and staff representatives. Unions might call for and monitor the execution of such measures.

In addition, thought might be given to actions promoting these practices at the level of major European groups, for the sake of guaranteeing their dissemination, regardless of the state of progress and maturity of national NFIL validation systems.

2.3 Supporting workers in having their competences recognised and validated

The quality of support workers enjoy plays a key role in how successful they are at having the competences they have acquired via non-formal or informal learning validated.

Enhancing support before, during and after validation

A set of specimen specifications for support could be drafted at European level. They would serve as a reference pillar for those providing and funding such support in the various countries, but also for unions wishing to make their support measures part of the services they provide.

Adapting support services to the specific categories of people

Support must match personal situations, particularly when these are people facing major difficulties in vocational integration or retraining. Care must therefore be taken:

- to tailor the support to each category.
- for each category, to ensure the coordinated mobilisation of the various service providers, thereby providing people with readily accessible local support.
- to develop complementary services specifically in support of people faced with the greatest difficulties (particularly those who suffer from illiteracy or disability).
- to get trade unions involved in monitoring the specific support actions.

Guaranteeing the professionalization of support providers

Information on and practical knowledge of support service specifications (possibly in the form of a charter) are crucial to their quality. Professionalisation measures targeting support service providers would be needed if the above actions are adopted.

2.4 Encouraging the full validation of competences, through access to certification

Improving NFIL validation management by assessment panel members

Managing the way an assessment panel works requires methodological criteria which are distinct from those used in the usual assessment of training courses. The focus is on evaluating people's practical competences in their vocational context. Exchanges of best practices and the pooling of evaluation criteria among panel members (from different countries or regions) could for instance be further developed.

Guaranteeing access to training modules complementing partial validation

During and after validation, certain applicants need complementary training modules to fill gaps in their knowledge. These gaps – of an educational or vocational nature – may be evident when they enter the validation process. In other cases, candidates may fail to have their competences validated. Access to complementary training courses must therefore be organised with flexibility, i.e. involving appropriate modularity. In those countries where such modularisation is not present, joint

thought might be given to this matter between the providers of training and validation services, funding providers, and representatives of the trade unions and professional organisations concerned.

The above recommendations have a limited ambition. They do not claim to offer a complete, definitive and normative framework for NFIL validation, and in that sense they do not compete with the CEDEFOP Guidelines. They seek simply to draw attention to certain key points and to the need for better observation of the actions conducted, once NFIL recognition and validation have gained their rightful place in the overarching education and training system.

The validation of skills acquired through formal, non-formal and informal avenues is a matter, at both European and national level, of public responsibility in the field of training. The effective exercise of that responsibility is important for the fate of workers faced with the insecurity of the labour markets at a time of crisis, and for the proper functioning of European economies, whose competitiveness is increasingly dependent on the skills of their workers. These are strong reasons for trade unions to clearly and robustly state their points of view on these questions, in an attempt to convince employers to include this issue in the collective bargaining agenda.

Glossary

Foreword

The NFIL formalization advocated at Community level is intended as a complete, integrated process, structured according to a clearly ordered series of stages, with validation of the competences acquired non-formally and informally covering the identification, documentation (or registration), evaluation and recognition of these competences, right up to the awarding of a possible qualification.

Very often at national or regional level, only certain segments of this validation chain exist. A further problem is that the national terms for describing these segments do not always directly translate the Community terms. Some terms are more used or are preferred, and even the sense may differ in the official national terminologies related to the validation processes¹. Certain terms may have different meanings in the European Community approach, making it even more difficult to translate certain ‘national’ terms to their EU equivalent. Below are *three examples* illustrating this problem:

1. In French, the term *qualification* refers to the process of certification and not to the outcome, as illustrated by the French translation of “European Qualifications Framework” as “*Cadre Européen des Certifications*” (CEC).
2. In France, the official term for NFIL recognition is *Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience* (VAE, literally ‘validation of acquired experience’). In Spain, the official term for NFIL recognition refers to ‘accreditation’ (in Spanish, *Acreditación de Competencias Profesionales*).

1. See for example the book by Brockman, Clarke and Winch (2011) that addresses the question of comparability of qualifications across the European countries.

3. The Adult Education Survey (AES) coordinated and centralized by Eurostat contains statistics on formal and non-formal learning, but data on informal learning is not published. Due to translation problems in some countries, there is confusion over the content of the ‘incidental’ and ‘informal’ learning categories, making it impossible to compare informal learning between countries (source: Statistics Finland²).

Proposing a unified and ‘clear’ terminology related to NFIL validation, the glossary hereafter lists the European definition of common notions (terms and expressions) used in this book. It contains a selection of the terminology presented by Cedefop (2008)³.

Accreditation of an education or training programme

A process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to a programme of education or training, showing it has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards.

Related term: accreditation of an education or training provider

Accreditation of an education or training provider

A process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to an education or training provider, showing it has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards.

Related terms: accreditation of an education or training programme

Accreditation of learning outcomes/of prior learning

See recognition of learning outcomes; certification of learning outcomes; validation of learning outcomes

Apprenticeship

Systematic, long-term training alternating periods at the workplace and in an educational institution or training centre. The apprentice is contractually linked to the employer and receives remuneration (wage

2. http://www.stat.fi/til/aku/2006/04/aku_2006_04_2009-04-24_laa_001_en.html.

3. A glossary of terms related to NFIL validation is also available at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-edefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-glossary.asp>

or allowance). The employer assumes responsibility for providing the trainee with training leading to a specific occupational qualification.

Assessment of learning outcomes

The process of appraising knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria (learning expectations, measurement of learning outcomes). Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification.

Comment: in the literature, ‘assessment’ generally refers to appraisal of individuals whereas ‘evaluation’ is more frequently used to describe appraisal of education and training methods or providers.

Related term: certification of learning outcomes

Certificate / diploma / title

An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following an assessment and validation against a predefined standard.

Related terms: assessment, awarding body, certification of learning outcomes, qualification

Certification of learning outcomes

The process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard.

Comment: certification may validate the outcome of learning acquired in formal, non-formal or informal settings.

Related terms: assessment of learning outcomes, awarding body, certificate / diploma / title, qualification, validation of learning outcomes

Competence

The ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development).

Comment: competence is not limited to cognitive elements (involving the use of theory, concepts or tacit knowledge); it also encompasses functional aspects (involving technical skills) as well as interpersonal attributes (e.g. social or organisational skills) and ethical values.

Related terms: skill

Continuing education and training

Education or training after initial education and training – or after entry into working life – aimed at helping individuals to:

- improve or update their knowledge and/or skills.
- acquire new skills for a career move or retraining.
- continue their personal or professional development.

CVET (continuing vocational education and training) relates to the vocational ‘part’ of continuing education and training.

Comment: continuing education and training is part of lifelong learning and may encompass any kind of education (general, specialised or vocational, formal or non-formal, etc.). It is crucial for the employability of individuals.

Related terms: adult education, lifelong learning, CVET

Credit system

An instrument designed to enable accumulation of learning outcomes gained in formal, non-formal and/or informal settings, and facilitate their transfer from one setting to another for validation and recognition. A credit system can be designed:

- by describing an education or training programme and attaching points (credits) to its components (modules, courses, placements, dissertation work, etc.); or
- by describing a qualification using learning outcome units and attaching credit points to every unit.

Related terms: European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

Curriculum

The inventory of activities implemented to design, organise and plan an education or training action, including the definition of learning objectives, content, methods (including assessment) and material, as well as arrangements for training teachers and trainers.

Comment: the term curriculum refers to the design, organisation and planning of learning activities whereas the term programme refers to the implementation of these activities.

Related term: programme of education or training

Education and training path

The sum of learning sequences followed by an individual to acquire knowledge, skills or competences.

Comment: a learning path may combine formal and non-formal learning sequences, the validation of which leads to certification.

Related terms: education or training pathway, European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), learning, open learning

European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

A scheme in which qualifications are expressed in units of learning outcomes to which credits are attached, and which is combined with a procedure for validating learning outcomes. The aim of this system is to promote:

- mobility of people undertaking training.
- accumulation, transfer and validation and recognition of learning outcomes (either formal, non-formal or informal) acquired in different countries.
- implementation of lifelong learning.
- transparency of qualifications.
- mutual trust and cooperation between vocational training and education providers in Europe.

Comment: ECVET is based on the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences), organised in transferable and accumulable learning units to which credits are attached and registered in a personal transcript of learning outcomes.

Related terms: credit system, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

A systematic way of describing a higher education programme by attaching credits to its components (modules, courses, placements, dissertation work, etc.), to:

- make study programmes easy to read and compare for all students, both local and foreign.
- encourage student mobility.
- encourage the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning.
- help universities organise and update their study programmes.

Comment: ECTS is based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a programme, specified in terms of learning outcomes to be acquired. The student workload of a full-time study programme in Europe amounts in most cases to around 1500-1800 hours per year and in such cases one credit stands for around 25 to 30 working hours. Individuals who can demonstrate similar learning outcomes acquired in other learning settings may obtain recognition and credits (waivers) from the degree awarding bodies.

Related terms: credit system, European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)

A reference tool for the description and comparison of qualification levels in qualifications systems developed at national, international or sectoral level.

Comment: the EQF's main components are a set of 8 reference levels described in terms of learning outcomes (a combination of knowledge, skills and/or competences) and mechanisms and principles for voluntary cooperation. The eight levels cover the entire span of qualifications from those recognising basic knowledge, skills and competences to those awarded at the highest level of academic, professional and vocational education and training. EQF is a translation device for qualifications systems.

Related terms: qualifications framework, qualifications system

Formal learning

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or within an apprenticeship) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

Related terms: certification, informal learning, learning, non-formal learning

Informal learning

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. 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. Informal learning does not lead to certification.

Comments:

- informal learning outcomes do not usually lead to certification but may be validated and certified in the context of recognition of prior learning schemes.
- informal learning is also referred to as experiential or incidental/random learning.

Related terms: formal learning, learning, learning outcomes, non-formal learning, validation of learning outcomes

Initial education and training

General or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system, usually before entering working life (or in an apprenticeship).

IVET (initial vocational education and training) relates to the vocational aspect of initial education and training.

Comments:

- some training undertaken after entry into working life may be considered as initial training (e.g. retraining);
- initial education and training can be carried out at any level in general or vocational education (full-time school-based or dual school/work training) pathways or an apprenticeship.

Related terms: compulsory education, continuing education and training, CVET, IVET

Learning

A process by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences.

Comment: Learning may take place in formal, non-formal or informal settings.

Related terms: formal learning, informal learning, non-formal learning

Learning outcomes

The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, whether formal, non-formal or informal.

Related terms: assessment of learning outcomes, certification of learning outcomes, formal learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, validation of learning outcomes

Lifelong learning

All learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

Related terms: adaptability, adult education, continuing education and training

Non-formal learning

Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. Non-formal learning tends not to lead to certification.

Comments:

- non-formal learning outcomes may be validated;
- non-formal learning is sometimes described as semi-structured learning.

Related terms: formal learning, informal learning, learning, validation of learning outcomes

On-the-job training

Vocational training given in normal work situations. It may constitute the whole training or be combined with off-the-job training.

Related term: off-the-job training

Prior learning

The knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired through previously unrecognised training or experience⁴.

Qualification

The term qualification covers different aspects:

- (a) formal qualification: the formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the

4. Source: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory-glossary.aspx>

labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade (OECD).

- (b) job requirements: the knowledge, aptitudes and skills required to perform the specific tasks attached to a particular work position (International Labour Organisation).

Related terms: certification of learning outcomes, competence, European Qualifications Framework, formal learning, informal learning, learning outcomes, non-formal learning, regulated profession, skill

Qualifications framework

An instrument for developing and classifying qualifications (e.g. at national or sectoral level) according to a set of criteria (e.g. using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes.

Comment:

A qualifications framework can be used to:

- establish national standards of knowledge, skills and competences.
- promote the quality of education.
- provide a system of coordination and/or integration of qualifications and enable comparison of qualifications by relating qualifications to each other.
- promote access to learning, transfer of learning outcomes and progression in learning.

Related terms: European Qualifications Framework (EQF), qualification system

Qualifications system

All activities related to the recognition of learning outcomes and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. These activities include:

- definition of qualifications policy, training design and implementation, institutional arrangements, funding, quality assurance.
- assessment, validation and certification of learning outcomes.

Related terms: assessment of learning outcomes, certification of learning outcomes, qualifications framework, validation of learning outcomes

Recognition of learning outcomes

(a) Formal recognition: the process of granting official status to skills and competences either through the:

- award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); or

- grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences;
and/or

(b) Social recognition: the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by business and social stakeholders.

Related terms: certification of learning outcomes, mutual recognition of qualifications, validation of learning outcomes

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

See recognition of learning outcomes; certification of learning outcomes; validation of learning outcomes

Skill

The ability to perform tasks and solve problems.

Related terms: competence

Standard

A series of elements whose content is defined by concerned actors.

Comment:

One can distinguish between several types of standards:

- competence standard refers to the knowledge, skills and/or competences linked to the practice of a job;
- educational standard refers to the definitions of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements as well as resources required to meet the learning objectives;
- occupational standard refers to the definitions of the activities and tasks related to a specific job and to its practice;
- assessment standard refers to the definitions of the learning outcomes to be assessed and the methodology used;
- validation standard refers to the definitions of the level of achievement to be reached by the person assessed, and the methodology used;
- certification standard refers to the definitions of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.

Dependent on the system, these standards can be defined separately or be part of one document.

Unit (ECVET)

A set of knowledge, skills, and/or competences which constitute a coherent part of a qualification. A unit can be the smallest part of a qualification that can be assessed, transferred, validated and, possibly, certified. A unit can be specific to a single qualification or common to several qualifications.

Comment: the characteristics of units (content, size, total number of units composing a qualification, etc.) are defined by the competent body responsible for the qualification at the appropriate level. The definition and description of units can vary according to the qualifications system and the procedures of the competent body. However, the ECVET system proposes to provide for every unit:

- the generic title of the unit;
- the knowledge, skills and competence which are contained in a unit;
- the criteria for assessing the corresponding learning outcomes.

Related terms: European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

Validation of learning outcomes

Confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.

A validation process consists in four distinct phases (European Community standards):

1. Identification through dialogue of an individual's particular experiences.
2. Documentation to make visible the individual's experiences.
3. A formal assessment of these experiences.
4. Certification of the assessment results, which may lead to a partial of full qualification.

Related terms: assessment of learning outcomes, certification of learning outcomes

Vocational education and training (VET)

Education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market.

VET may relate to initial (IVET) or continuing (CVET) vocational education and training.

Related terms: CVET, IVET

Appendix

Appendix 1

Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01)¹

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Articles 165 and 166 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

(1) The validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility, as well as increasing motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified.

(2) At a time when the European Union is confronted with a serious economic crisis which has caused a surge in unemployment, especially among young people, and in the context of an ageing population, the validation of relevant knowledge, skills and competences has an even more valuable contribution to make in improving the functioning of the labour market, in promoting mobility and in enhancing competitiveness and economic growth.

1. Source: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

(3) Employer organisations, individual employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognising professional qualifications and in assessing and certifying learning outcomes, employment services, youth organisations youth workers, education and training providers, as well as civil society organisations are all key stakeholders with an important role to play in facilitating opportunities for non-formal and informal learning and any subsequent validation processes.

(4) The "Europe 2020" strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth calls for the development of knowledge, skills and competences for achieving economic growth and employment. The accompanying flagship initiatives "Youth on the Move" and the "Agenda for new skills and jobs" emphasise the need for more flexible learning pathways that can improve entry into and progression in the labour market, facilitate transitions between the phases of work and learning and promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

(5) The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) [1] noted that lifelong-learning should be regarded as a fundamental principle underpinning the entire framework, which is designed to cover learning in all contexts whether formal, non-formal or informal.

(6) The "EU Strategy for Youth — Investing and Empowering; a renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities" of 2009 called for better recognition of skills acquired through non-formal education for young people and stressed the need for full use to be made of the range of tools established at EU level for the validation of knowledge, skills and competences for the recognition of qualifications. It was endorsed by Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) [2].

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

(8) The Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education held in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve on 28 and 29 April 2009 underlined that successful policies for lifelong learning should include basic principles and procedures for the recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes, while the Council conclusions of 28 November 2011 on the modernisation of higher education [3] called upon Member States to develop clear routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training.

(9) Council Resolution of 28 November 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning [4] defined as one of its priority areas for the period 2012-14 the putting in place of fully functional systems for validating non-formal and informal learning and promoting the use by adults of all ages and at all qualification levels, as well as by enterprises and other organisations.

(10) The Council Resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training [5] and the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002 requested the development of a set of common principles regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

(11) The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 18 May 2004 promoted Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

(12) A European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning containing up-to-date information on current validation practices in European countries has been published regularly since 2004, while European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning were published in 2009.

(13) Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass) [6] established Europass, a European portfolio which citizens can use to better communicate, record and present their competences and qualifications throughout Europe.

(14) The Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 18 May 2006 on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field [7] invited the Member States to enable the identification of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, with a view to their recognition on the labour market.

(15) The Youthpass was created as a transparency tool for participants in projects funded by the "Youth in Action" programme established by the European Parliament and the Council in Decision No 1719/2006/EC [8].

(16) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong-learning [9] invited Member States to relate their national qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework and to promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accordance with the Common European Principles agreed in May 2004.

(17) The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) established in 1989 within the framework of the Erasmus programme awards credits for formal learning based on learning outcomes and student workload, and also facilitates the award by higher education institutions of credits based on learning outcomes for non-formal and informal learning experiences.

(18) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training [10] stated that that Framework should support the implementation of the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, improving the interrelationship of education, training and employment, and building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning.

(19) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 [11] established a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) to be used for the transfer and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes achieved in formal and, where appropriate, non-formal and informal contexts.

(20) Consultations in the form of an online survey, discussions in relevant policy bodies, as well as a variety of peer learning activities involving the social partners indicate an overwhelming consensus on the importance of making visible the knowledge, skills and competences gained through life and work experience, and show broad support for a Union initiative to enhance validation policy and practice in the Member States,

HAS ADOPTED THIS RECOMMENDATION:

1. THE MEMBER STATES SHOULD, WITH A VIEW TO OFFERING INDIVIDUALS THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEMONSTRATE WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED OUTSIDE FORMAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING – INCLUDING THROUGH MOBILITY EXPERIENCES – AND TO MAKE USE OF THAT LEARNING FOR THEIR CAREERS AND FURTHER LEARNING, AND WITH DUE REGARD FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY:

1. have in place, no later than 2018, in accordance with national circumstances and specificities, and as they deem appropriate, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to:

(a) have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources;

(b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences, without prejudice to other applicable Union law, in particular Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications [12].

Member States may prioritise certain areas and/or sectors within their validation arrangements in accordance with their needs;

2. include, as appropriate, the following elements in arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, whilst allowing each individual to take advantage of any of these, either separately or in combination, in accordance with his/her needs:

(a) IDENTIFICATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;

(b) DOCUMENTATION of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;

(c) ASSESSMENT of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;

(d) CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate;

3. apply, as appropriate, the following principles in arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, whilst taking into consideration national, regional and/or local, as well as sectoral needs and characteristics:

(a) the validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European Qualifications Framework;

(b) information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for validation, as well as on the relevant procedures, are available to individuals and organisations;

(c) disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, are particularly likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, since validation can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market;

(d) individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment have the opportunity, in accordance with national legislation and specificities, to undergo a "skills audit" aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences within a reasonable period of time, ideally within six months of an identified need;

(e) the validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible;

(f) transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools;

- (g) provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors;
- (h) qualifications or, where applicable, parts of qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes;
- (i) the use of Union transparency tools, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass, is promoted in order to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes;
- (j) synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET;
4. promote the involvement in the development and implementation of the elements and principles referred to in points 1 to 4 of all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations.

To foster participation in this process:

- (a) employers, youth organisations and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant Union transparency tools such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass;
- (b) education and training providers should facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings;

5. promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas.

2. THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING MEASURES:

(a) follow up this Recommendation through the European Qualifications Framework advisory group set up under the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning [13] (EQF) and involve, as appropriate, relevant youth organisations and representatives of the voluntary sector in subsequent EQF advisory group activities;

(b) report on the progress made following the adoption of this Recommendation in future Joint Reports by the Council and the Commission under the "ET 2020" strategic framework and in future Joint European Union Youth Reports under the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field;

(c) support the implementation of this Recommendation by using the expertise of Union agencies, in particular Cedefop, and by reporting on the situation with regard to the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the annual report on the development of National Qualification Frameworks.

3. THE COMMISSION SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING MEASURES:

(a) support Member States and stakeholders by:

- facilitating effective peer learning and exchanges of experience and good practice,
- regularly reviewing the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, in full consultation with the Member States,
- regularly reviewing the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in cooperation with the Member States;

(b) before 2018, consider further developing, in consultation with the Member States, as specified in Decision No 2241/2004/EC, instruments under the Europass framework which facilitate the transparency across the Union of validated learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning experiences;

(c) ensure that, in cooperation with the Member States, the Lifelong Learning and "Youth in Action" Programmes and, without prejudice to the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, the future European programme for education, training, youth and sport and the European Structural Funds, are used to support the implementation of this Recommendation;

(d) assess and evaluate, in cooperation with the Member States and after consulting the stakeholders concerned, the action taken in response to this Recommendation, and report to the Council by 31 December 2019 on the experience gained and implications for the future, including if necessary a possible review and revision of this Recommendation.

Done at Brussels, 20 December 2012.

For the Council
The President
E. Florentzou

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- [1] OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.
 - [2] OJ C 311, 19.12.2009, p. 1.
 - [3] OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 36.
 - [4] OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 1.
 - [5] OJ C 13, 18.1.2003, p. 2.
 - [6] OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p. 6.
 - [7] OJ C 168, 20.7.2006, p. 1.
 - [8] OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 30.
 - [9] OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.
 - [10] OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 1.
 - [11] OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 11.
 - [12] OJ L 255, 30.9.2005, p. 22.
 - [13] OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.
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ANNEX

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this Recommendation, the following definitions shall apply:

(a) formal learning means learning which takes place in an organised and structured environment, specifically dedicated to learning, and typically leads to the award of a qualification, usually in the form of a certificate or a diploma; it includes systems of general education, initial vocational training and higher education;

(b) non-formal learning means learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher relationships); it may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers; very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group or the general public;

(c) informal learning means learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure and is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner's perspective; examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned and intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home (e.g. taking care of a child);

(d) open educational resources (OER) means digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research; it includes learning content, software tools to develop, use and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open licences; OER also refers to accumulated digital assets that can be adjusted and which provide benefits without restricting the possibilities for others to enjoy them;

(e) a skills audit means a process aimed at identifying and analysing the knowledge, skills and competences of an individual, including his or her aptitudes and motivations in order to define a career project and/or plan a professional reorientation or training project; the aim of a skills audit is to help the individual analyse his/her career background, to self-assess his/her position in the labour environment and to plan a career pathway, or in some cases to prepare for the validation of non-formal or informal learning outcomes;

(f) a qualification means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards;

(g) learning outcomes means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competences;

(h) a national qualifications framework means an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society;

(i) validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

1. IDENTIFICATION through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual;
2. DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual's experiences;
3. a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and
4. CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification;

(j) recognition of prior learning means the validation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education or non-formal or informal learning, acquired before requesting validation.

Appendix 2

List of meetings organised and persons met for the NFIL project
(December 2011-March 2012)

Denmark

Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening Fagligt (DA), Danish Employers
Ann Poulsen, Chief Consultant

Fagligt Fælles Forbund, The United Federation of Danish Workers
Poul Christensen, Advisor in professional education and training

FTF, Confederation of professionals in Denmark, Hovedorganisation for 450.000
offentligt og privat ansatte
Jørgen Pater, senior advisor
Erik Schmidt, senior advisor

LO, Landsorganisationen i Danmark
Heidi Rønne Møller, EU senior advisor
Morten Smistrup, adviser in the department of education

National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning, Nationalt
Videncenter for Realkompetence
Kirsten Aagaard, Head of Centre

Ministry of Education (Ministeriet for Børn og Undervisning), Department of
Youth Education and Vocational Adult Education and Training
Benedikte Maul Andersen, Head of Section

TUR, Transporterhvervets Uddannelser, National transport training board
Hans Christiansen, Managing Director,

Finland

Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö (SAK, Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) Headquarters

Kirsi Rasinaho, Adviser Education and Training

Markku Liljeström, Head of Unit

Erkki Laukkanen, Economist

Työväen Sivistysliitto (TSL) - Workers' Educational Association

Katri Söder, Information and International Issues

Mervi Ylitalo, Training Planner

Suomen toimihenkilöiden (STTK) Headquarters

Mikko Heinikoski, Senior Adviser Education Policy

Siikarantaopisto Institute (Rakennusliitto, Construction Trade Union)

Kyösti Suokas, Rakennusliitto Second Chairman

Vesa Holappa, Siikarantaopisto Principal

Ministry of Education and culture

Petri Haltia, Counsellor of Education

Elinkeinoelämän Keskusliitto EK (Confederation of Finnish Industries)

Tarja Tuominen, Senior Adviser

National Board of Education

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