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Validation of non-formal and informal learning: new opportunities for all?

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Policy recommendations

The aim of this Policy Brief is to highlight the key issues concerning recognition of skills as embodied in the project Actors, practices and challenges concerning non-formal and informal learning and its validation¹ and proposes ways of developing such validation. In the context of a growing need to raise levels of education, enhance skills and encourage occupational mobility the validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) is a key

stage in the proactive management of working lives. It could benefit numerous social groups, especially the most vulnerable. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that this right to recognition of skills is in fact exercised the relevant actors have to be mobilised, especially by developing collective bargaining on this issue. In order to increase the number of beneficiaries substantially access to certification must be fostered.

Major European issues

Within the framework of Europe 2020, the Education and Training 2020 strategy establishes five benchmarks that reflect the European Union's (EU) preoccupations with regard to education. In real terms, however, their reach and impact have fallen somewhat short.²

In particular, in the face of persisting deficiencies in all EU countries and in response to the urgent need to raise the skill levels of the active population training efforts will have to be stepped up.

Initial education is key to meeting this need but so too is participation in lifelong learning, hand in hand with personal

and work experience. The permanent need for education and training is illustrated by two things in particular:

- (i) The still high percentage of young people leaving education without qualifications: in 2012 this indicator was established as the number of European countries with values above the benchmark of 10 per cent. Moreover, young people aged 16–24 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) has mushroomed with the crisis (ETUI 2014), especially because of their lack of connection with training systems.
- (ii) Adult participation in lifelong learning and in training activities is fairly low in a number of EU countries (Eurostat, Labour Force Survey).³ The European average (EU27) stood at 9 per cent in 2012 and, for the majority of countries, this indicator

1 Implemented in 2011–2012 on the initiative of the European Trade Union Confederation, funded by the European Commission and conducted by a team from the Centre Etudes et Prospective, Sémaphores and ConsultingEuropa (Groupe Alpha). The study concerns ten countries: Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom. The results were published in Damesin, Fayolle, Fleury, Malaquin and Rode (2014).

2 The five benchmarks are: (i) an average of at least 15 per cent of adults should participate in lifelong learning; (ii) the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 per cent; (iii) the share of 30–34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40 per cent; (iv) the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 per cent; and (v) at least 95 per cent of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.

3 Around 40 per cent of people aged 55–64 do not have a higher secondary education certificate (EU27). In nine out of the 27 EU countries (2010) this figure is above 50 per cent (European Commission 2010).

lies below 15 per cent (benchmark laid down in Education and Training 2020). Furthermore, other European statistical sources confirm the low level of training in enterprises, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises⁴ (SMEs) (the Continuing Vocational Training survey and the Adult Education Survey).

In a context of rising unemployment the ongoing training deficit is all the more problematic because there is a growing need and demand for more safeguards for career paths and employment transitions, especially with regard to the less skilled (European Commission 2014). The problem of a mismatch between the supply and demand of skills is also serious and widespread in the EU (Pouliakas 2012), even though it is not merely a matter of lack of skills or low levels of education.⁵

Wide variation in skill recognition in Europe

As confirmed by numerous European initiatives,⁶ the development of skills and investment in training are all the more urgent because the skills available in the economy must be overhauled in response to the development of occupational mobility that will occur between the present and 2020 due to changes in production (especially as a result of the crisis⁷) and retirements (Fayolle 2011).

On this basis European action is of the utmost importance, although its impact seems limited in light of the discouraging results.

Particularly promising is the recognition of individual skills via the validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL, cf. definitions in the box hereafter). The validation of NFIL is part of a more general trend towards the individualisation of working careers, but extending it could also have beneficial effects on the functioning of the labour market.

Level of development of validation systems: three groups of countries

Experiences vary with regard to the validation of NFIL and the levels of development of these systems in the countries examined

4 For example, because of financial problems or the risk that an employee who has received training leaves the enterprise and uses his or her new skills at another company.

5 The phenomena of *overeducation* or of *overskilling* are widespread in Europe (Flisi, Goglio, Meroni, Rodrigues and Vera-Toscano 2014).

6 In particular: the *Europe 2020* and *Education and Training 2020* strategies and initiatives aimed at developing lifelong learning, the tools made available by the European Union (such as the European Qualifications Framework or the ESCO [European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations] programme, but also by means of Community law (directives or recommendations), as well as the work of the European social partners (such as the European Trade Union Confederation's Resolution 'More investment in lifelong learning for quality jobs').

7 Some sectors have been more affected than others, which has altered the structure of the available labour force and vacancies: from this standpoint, training and the validation of skills have an important role to play.

in the publication. Nevertheless, we can identify three relatively homogeneous groups of countries:

- *Countries with validation systems at national level* targeting all sectors of the economy (even if some sectors are particularly favoured) and in which the validation system is a component of the lifelong learning system, with close trade union involvement: Denmark, Finland, France and Portugal (at least until the crisis in the latter). In these countries validation of NFIL aims at a certain universality, although some differences exist: in Finland validation is a permanent fixture in a robust training system that fully integrates initial and further training; in Portugal there is a public programme of some magnitude, developed between 2006 and 2011, although its future is now uncertain.
- *Countries in which implementation of the validation process is primarily the result of local or regional initiatives* with social partners involved on a voluntary basis and targeted at particular sectors or professions: Italy and Spain.
- *Countries in which the trade unions have some involvement in organising training, in combination with an often only patchy system for validating NFIL, the development of which is not considered a priority.* Germany, United Kingdom, Poland and Romania. This group brings together countries whose occupational training systems have been developed to different degrees, but in all of which NFIL validation has been neglected.

Definitions

Non-formal and informal learning (NFIL): *Non-formal learning* is purposeful learning on the part of the learner and is part and parcel of planned activities, although generally it does not lead to certification. *Informal learning* is the result of daily activities related to work, the family or leisure and is not usually deliberate (and does not lead to any certification). The meaning and use of these terms may vary in accordance with local or national context.

The validation of formal, non-formal or informal learning involves confirmation by a qualified institution that acquired skills have been evaluated and conform with established standards in the education and training system. Validation leads to certification (award of a qualification) by a four-stage process in accordance with European standards: (i) *identification* of the skills to be validated by examining the candidate's profile; (ii) *gathering supporting* documents proving past experience; (iii) *presentation* before a panel for *evaluation*; and (iv) *award of certification* or of credits to be used in the course of further training.

Very often at national or regional level only some of the elements of this process exist. A fortiori the terms used in given countries to describe these elements are not always directly comparable with the European terms, which testifies to the limits of the Europeanisation of the labour market.

Involvement of the social partners

The involvement of the social partners in training and validation systems is an important issue, which comes to light in particular at two levels:

- *Upstream*, via the agreed definition of occupational standards by sectoral committees or councils, with which social partners, employee representatives and experts from the education and training system are often associated. Such committees exist in a majority of the countries under study here, although their capability levels can vary enormously. The involvement of the social partners makes it easier to identify the skills needed due to changing occupational profiles. These councils have an important role in framing and updating directories or catalogues of occupational qualifications. Reference to the European Qualifications Framework or to such frameworks at national level is not a matter of course nor necessarily immediate, even though that would make it easier to identify skills that could be subject to validation and certification.
- *Downstream*, via collective agreements at enterprise or sectoral level. Such agreements can include organisation of training and NFIL validation. However, although employees' skills can be brought out in this way employers often fear that demands for higher wages may ensue or that more skilled employees may be lured away by competitors and so are reluctant to validate skills. Collective bargaining exists to resolve this contradiction by nurturing win-win situations. At present, however, there are too few interesting European examples of collective agreements of this kind, especially because training is often perceived as outside the realm of collective bargaining. It is thus essential that more attention be paid to such issues in collective bargaining in order to increase the level of skills validation adequately.

Moreover, the link between the apparatus for validating skills and the training system is an important means of getting people to participate in lifelong learning, certifying skills and thus enabling people to move up the professional ladder. This link can take the form of bodies dealing with training and validation in which the social partners may participate (for example, in Finland and Portugal). This complementarity between validation and training ensures that the validation of NFIL is not perceived as certification *on the cheap* which rather stigmatises than valorises the career paths of people who started out with only limited training. It also encourages pathways between training and validation systems and makes the acquisition of qualification more flexible.

Systems of NFIL validation are often complex and not sufficiently promoted

A validation process comprises a number of phases (see Box) and requires resources and a dedicated organisation. In the countries of the first group referred to above, which have well established validation systems, validation processes are often formalised, with the involvement of institutions linked to training, the social partners, experts and the public authorities. However, in all these countries validation processes remain complex; it takes time to compile a case file and a substantial managerial effort is often required. This is

why, in all these countries, the aim is to simplify such processes and thereby make things easier. Thus in Finland and Spain, according to the people we interviewed, there is a recognised need to make administrative processes pertaining to validation less onerous (number of forms to be filled in).

From early on in the validation process it is thus essential to keep those⁸ applying for validation informed (concerning what is possible) and to offer them guidance (as validation proceeds), both of which should be improved.

Recognition of skills: new opportunities for all?

We consider it important to emphasise many of the beneficial effects of NFIL validation, which play a part in making occupational careers and transitions more robust. Workers expect to receive a wage rise in recognition of new skills, but this is by no means assured. In fact, it depends on the link between the wage level and job classification within the enterprise. A 'reward' for new recognized skills is rarely mentioned in collective agreements. This 'reward' generally concerns an increase in options with regard to internal and external mobility, improved employability, putting acquired skills to better use, greater autonomy at work and greater individual capabilities. It also concerns the personal development and self-esteem of those involved. More generally, it prepares them better for professional transitions. It also makes it possible, by widening the range of recognised skills beyond initial qualifications, to bestow on employers a better understanding of the skills of their employees or of job candidates. Reaching beyond the initial level of education by recognising participation in training or new skills validation makes it easier to reconcile labour supply and demand. Finally, by improving the links between skills and diplomas/qualifications, NFIL validation encourages educational establishments to make more explicit the skills associated with the diplomas they award and improves the labour market integration of those with qualifications (especially young people).

The recognition of skills can be a fairly flexible process, depending on the country. Thus Finland and France, for example, have modular systems, in which the acquisition of modules (or credits) is spread out over time, resulting in a diploma or qualification when a certain number have been obtained. The possibility of combining modules via the validation of skills with complementary training also benefits from a flexibility derived from training and validation systems that are more adaptable to the needs and preferences of beneficiaries.

According to some of the employees' representatives and people involved in the validation and training system whom we interviewed the validation of acquired skills makes it possible to give people a 'second chance'. In particular, the less qualified and those most estranged from the labour market can benefit from recognition of their skills and enjoy a less erratic and more

⁸ Because those who have access tend to be the best qualified it is important to focus the provision of information and guidance on the least qualified.

rewarding working career: in this perspective better access to validation for the most vulnerable in society (low skilled young people, older workers, immigrants and so on) is particularly desirable. For them, the 'signalling' effect of NFIL validation can do much to help them transcend the level of initial education.

Validation also encourages innovation in the workplace to the extent that it promotes and values creativity on the part of employees by recognising the full range of their skills: it often reflects acquired skills that hitherto have been hidden and which, once brought to light, are recognised more properly and valued more, at least in terms of work organisation.

Improving visibility of and access to skills validation

The validation of skills seems to be beneficial for both employees and employers, necessary for fairer recognition of skills and innovative in that it promotes creativity and employees' willingness to participate in further training.

At the European level guidelines for NFIL validation are issued by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), while the European Council established a recommendation on non-formal and informal learning in December 2012, accompanied by an ambitious aim of setting up national validation frameworks for NFIL 'by 2018 at the latest'. The various European mechanisms or tools such as the European Qualifications Framework are indicative in nature and are intended to guide national policy, which is useful, but often give rise to a certain mistrust because they are sometimes at odds with national priorities or approaches. Despite providing a certain juridical value – for example, recognised by European courts – the recommendation of December 2012 is not a directive: rather it presents measures that ought to be adopted or objectives to be met.

Reflecting the concerns of the Council recommendation, the studies carried out by CEDEFOP and the contributions made by the conference organised by the European Trade Union Confederation in Lisbon on 26–27 June 2012,⁹ the main educational challenges presented above and the lessons learned from the variety of incarnations of NFIL validation in the 10 countries studied the report makes a number of major proposals. The proposals that follow, together with the development of collective bargaining on this issue, are aimed at complementing existing initiatives and practices in order to improve access to and the visibility of NFIL validation.

Improving coordination and follow-up with regard to NFIL recognition and validation

- Develop partnerships between public and social actors at the territorial level in order to consolidate (or foster) the apparatus for NFIL validation.
- Introduce protocols for partnerships with training centres and the validation of skills in agreements arising from sectoral and enterprise collective bargaining.
- Improve the monitoring and evaluation of individual career paths during and after validation.

Informing and advising people on NFIL, as well as its recognition and validation

- Ensure that accessible and accurate information is widely available concerning how to obtain recognition and validation.
- Encourage pilot projects to provide accurate advice to sets of beneficiaries targeted with regard to NFIL validation and, after evaluating these projects, find ways of disseminating them.
- Develop ways of providing information and advice aimed at workers in enterprises (and in particular the less skilled) and encourage the integration of NFIL in human resource management.

Guide workers through the process of recognition and validation of skills

- Improve guidance before, during and after validation.
- Adapt support services to specific categories of people.
- Ensure that staff providing personalised guidance are professional.

Encourage full validation of skills via access to certification

- Improve management of NFIL validation by members of the relevant evaluation panel.
- Ensure access to further training modules supplementing partial validation.

Conclusion

The recognition and certification of skills represents a great opportunity for employees, but also a positive necessity for enterprises and the economy as a whole. However, validation of NFIL must not resemble a 'ghetto', stigmatising those whose initial education is limited. It must thus be part and parcel, linked to the education and training system, of a general and equitable raising of the level of education and the development of skills. .

At the European level there is a wide range of experiences with regard to validation, but also a significant disparity between countries in terms of existing devices and level of implementation. However, even if there is a 'right' to validation it is not necessarily activated or exercised, often due to lack of information or guidance: it is partly for this reason that the various proposals presented above

⁹ See the website presenting the event: <http://www.etuc.org/etuc-conference-%C2%ABinformal-and-non-formal-learning-nfil-parallel-practices-systemic-integration%C2%BB-1>

have been formulated. It is important that all actors address the issue of skills validation: enterprises, trade unions, employees, training professionals and public authorities in order to create the conditions for adequate implementation of mechanisms for NFIL validation that are open and efficient and to give impetus to recognition and development of skills in general. It is particularly important that collective bargaining be developed on the recognition of skills.

At a time when social gains are being eliminated or threatened in many European countries (Schömann 2014) the permanent freeze on education and training efforts represents an additional blow to social and economic development in Europe. It is essential that European efforts in the area of training and education are fully realised on the ground by ensuring the possibility of skills recognition for all in order to better protect people – especially the most vulnerable – but also to ensure better anticipation and management of occupational mobility.

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