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Recognition of non-formal learning in Europe:

Challenges and opportunities

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Recognition of non-formal learning in Europe: Challenges and opportunities

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The paper discusses some of the main obstacles and challenges to a wider recognition and social impact of non-formal learning (NFL) in Europe. After clarifying the key concepts involved, we briefly discuss the possible **motivations** driving NFL recognition, the **types of recognition** we can consider, the main **obstacles** and **challenges**, as well as possible **ways of moving forward.**

Preliminary clarifications

Although non-formal learning does not seem to depend much on specific institutional and legal arrangements, its social acceptance and professional recognition obviously depends on them. Learning - be it formal, non-formal or informal - is part of a social system in which intrinsic motivations (such as curiosity) and extrinsic motivations (such as employability or social status) interact and influence each other. Learning becomes socially relevant insofar as its results are recognized as valuable and integrated in the larger social system. This is where recognition and flexibility mechanisms play an important role.

The last ten to fifteen years have seen a growing interest in non-formal and informal learning in Europe and internationally. Recognizing the fact that learning takes place in many situations, many of them outside the formal education system, is hardly new. It is also generally acknowledged that most of this learning is valuable and deserves some form of recognition. But this raises questions about the right type of recognition and about ways of connecting these types to "formal" recognition (accreditation, validation, transfer).

Although policy developments, as well as political discourses, have become increasingly sensitive to these issues during the last years, **policy measures** are still one step behind the **political commitments** assumed as part of EU, OECD or other international initiatives. Apart from budgetary limitations and the (natural) resistance of national education systems to change, this gap may also have to do with a lack of clarity concerning what can be done in terms of NFL recognition and why it should be done. We will point out some of the elements of a possible answer. For reasons of succinctness, we will limit our discussion to non-formal learning.

First of all, what are we talking about? Traditionally, the distinction between formal, informal and non-formal learning has taken into account three key characteristics: "whether the learning involves objectives, whether it is intentional and whether it leads to a qualification" (Werquin 2008, 143). Learning in a formal setting assumes learning objectives and intentionality, while informal learning does not. Unlike formal education, informal learning does not lead by itself to a qualification. The understanding of NFL is less consensual, but it is safe to say that it generally implies intentionality and some degree of organisation. It may also have learning objectives, but "they are very broad unlike those in formal learning where learning objectives are spelled out and where the process to reach these objectives is formalized" (ibid, 144). What is important is that NFL can take place across a much broader range of contexts than formal learning, while having results that are amenable to assessment and validation.

Why do we need recognition?

While there is little debate on the importance of learning acquired in non-formal settings, how this should be reflected at the level of accredited qualifications, credits, certificates or diplomas has long been a matter of discussion and divergence. However, there are key points on which a relative consensus should not be hard to reach. Let's start with the rationale behind the promotion of NFL.

First of all, its role in the context of lifelong learning has been repeatedly pointed out. From the EC's "Memorandum on lifelong learning" (2000) to the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020", 2009), the need for concerted action in making NFL more visible and more integrated has gradually moved up the list of political priorities. In 2006, the Council adopted a Resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field, which led, among others, to the implementation of Youthpass. In 2009, CEDEFOP published the "European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning", aiming to "support this process by identifying the main challenges facing policy-makers and practitioners and - to a certain degree - pointing to possible ways to respond".

Other EU initiatives such as the European reference framework for key competences (2006) and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008) have integrated the issue of NFL recognition and linked it to the broader aims of lifelong learning and the knowledge society.

In this perspective, lifelong learning does not represent just another aspect of education and training; it is seen as the guiding principle for participation across

the full continuum of learning contexts. Learning cannot be characterized as a limited phase in childhood and youth dedicated only to the promotion of the individual's vocational career, but rather as a continuous activity extending to all areas and phases of life and encompassing personal, social and professional goals. The ET 2020 strategic framework acknowledges this approach, regarding lifelong learning "as a fundamental principle underpinning the entire framework, which is designed to cover learning in all contexts – whether formal, non-formal or informal – and at all levels: from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning".

But the relevance of NFL is not restricted to the context of lifelong learning. "Its current success has probably to do with the fact that it is also presented as a way of improving the efficiency of the labour market through increasing the mobility of workers; the visibility of skills, knowledge and competences; the opportunities for immigrants etc." (Werquin 2008, 143). In the context of a labour market which requires mobile workers, updating of skills and qualifications and rapid professional conversion, NFL could greatly add to the efficiency of formal education systems, which are struggling to keep up with societal changes and labour demands. It may also provide more flexible ways of certification for adult learners who have a poor record of formal education and have problems re-entering the education system or finding a better employment.

In fact, these two dimensions overlap, as the individual moves across different opportunities for lifelong learning and between jobs. NFL recognition can facilitate both transversal mobility (between different qualifications or specializations) and longitudinal mobility (from one learning context or employment to the next one).

What kind of recognition?

Clarifying what recognition means in this context, and what types of recognition are suitable to NFL, is a clear prerequisite of policy development, particularly as part of EU-wide initiatives which require collaboration of Member States with different political, institutional and socio-cultural contexts.

Broadly, we can distinguish between recognition of learning and recognition of learning outcomes (Werquin 2008, 144). The former concerns the visibility and impact of the learning process as such, while the latter is concerned with assessment procedures, evaluation methods and standards of proficiency that apply to learning outputs. These two types of recognition interact and reinforce each other. The interest of employers or learning providers in the recognition of NFL outcomes depends on how visible and accepted these outputs are in the broader social context. At the same time, social acceptance depends on a history of proven success of accreditation or validation tools for NFL. This calls for a policy approach whereby both types of recognition are considered simultaneously and stakeholders are able to contribute to the policy-making process. It is important to stress the contextual nature of NFL assessment and recognition: "when taking place in social and material settings, knowledge and competences are very much the result of participation in 'communities of practice'" (Bjornavald 2000).

Obstacles and challenges

While many problems are context-specific and require solutions that are customized to the particular situation of a country or a group of countries, we have focused on some of the main obstacles that seem to be common to most European countries. This is by no means an exhaustive list of potential obstacles.

Standards and procedures for assessment

In contrast with formal education, where procedures and standards for assessing and validating performance have been in place for a long time and their social recognition is high, NFL assessment and accreditation procedures are still poorly developed, although the value of NFL and the need to offer some form of recognition is generally acknowledged. One key problem is that NFL recognition has been developed, in some countries, as an alternative way of obtaining qualifications needed on the labour market, which the formal system is unable to deliver. One attractive solution is to use recognition systems primarily to meet specific needs identified in the labour market in order to generate interest and encourage participation (Werquin 2008, 146). While this has the advantage of flexibility in adjusting to shifts in qualification demands, the downside may be its disconnection from the recognition procedures applied in formal education. If recognition mechanisms are developed as a clear-cut alternative to formal education, they may come to be perceived as a "second-rate" certification of qualifications, to be adopted primarily by those who failed the "real" certification system.

Participation

Learner participation depends on motivational factors, which in turn rely on social perceptions of usefulness or relevance. NFL has to deal with the (still widely spread) perception that learning is supposed to take place in a formal setting and that alternative learning platforms may imply a compromise in quality. While this challenge can best be counteracted by gradually building up trust and demonstrating that quality learning results can be achieved irrespective of the context of learning, other issues may prove to be more challenging. Participation is greatly influenced by the chosen communication strategy (message, channels of promotion etc.), particularly in the case of learners at risk of social or professional exclusion (the low-skilled, people who did not complete compulsory education etc.), Another problem is that learners with a poor record in formal education may be unwilling to take another chance with NFL due to fear of failure. Also, correlating recognition mechanisms developed for NFL with those applied in formal education is difficult, due to the different nature of learning processes and the potential unwillingness of education institutions to recognize NFL as an "alternative" way of getting qualifications.

Costs

Although the costs of setting up NFL systems are relatively small in comparison with learning in formal settings, the resources needed to run the system and deliver results (recognized competences, accredited qualifications) are comparable with (if not higher than) those required for formal education. This has to do with the individualized, contextual and (partly) tacit nature of NFL and of evaluating its outcomes: the assessment of competences developed in NFL contexts is generally done on a case-by-case basis, and information and guidance services need to be customized to the situation and needs of different target groups. Moreover, the poorly developed recognition and transfer mechanisms between the non-formal and formal systems are likely to add to the costs, when it comes to obtaining a certificate or diploma that are

validated by the public authorities. The type and level of **recognition of NFL outcomes** is critical here, as many learners may be unwilling to invest in a form of recognition that does not offer social and professional benefits comparable with those of formal education. Mechanisms for credit transfer or transfer of competences across sectors (NFL/formal or academic/professional) could help in bridging this gap.

Political commitment and involvement of stakeholders

As with most learning-related policy, NFL developments require constant resources and coordination of efforts over time. However, at national level it also depends on political priorities associated to electoral cycles and ensuing governmental changes. EU-wide initiatives ensure a broad convergence on key issues, but national policy-making remains essential in integrating these issues in specific contexts. In order to ensure consistency of political action across the electoral cycles, many countries have generally adopted multi-annual strategic documents. Peer-pressure has also been shown to work, as national governments are sensitive to results of international assessments of learning outcomes and comparative studies of learner performance. But political action has to be supplemented by action from the educational community itself, as well as from businesses and NGOs: "A number of political and institutional preconditions have to be met to attribute some actual value to the assessments in question. This can be done partly through political decisions securing the legal basis for initiatives but should be supplemented by a process where questions of 'ownership' and 'control' as well as 'usefulness' must be clarified." (Bjornavald 2000, 26). Motivating various stakeholders to get involved, collaborate and develop a sense of ownership is never easy, as they have different aims and approaches to how NFL should be integrated into the overall learning process.

Options for future developments

Considering the diversity of issues highlighted above and the influence of political, institutional and cultural factors on how they manifest themselves in different national contexts, it is clear that there is no single 'recipe for success' to be applied across Europe. Working solutions will most likely comprise a combination of elements in varying proportions. Some of these elements are outlined below.

Highlighting good practices that can be transferred to other contexts

The experience of trans-national projects and regional initiatives in lifelong learning is still not sufficiently visible. There is a wealth of information available, but it remains fragmented among many "project communities". In particular, bringing the results of projects financed in LLP or Youth in Action to the attention of decision-makers and experts would certainly facilitate convergence on policy developments regarding NFL recognition. There are some promising signs in this respect – several thematic projects focused on identifying common challenges and good practices that can be transferred to new contexts of lifelong learning have had an impact on national initiatives of the partner countries[1]. Involving key stakeholders from the early phases of project implementation and creating networks of collaborators focused on common objectives, not just one-off activities, are just two recurring recommendations made by panels of experts.

[1] For instance the thematic monitoring projects financed by the European Commission and implemented by LLP National Agencies: http://ec.europa.eu/ education/ lifelong-learning-programme/doc2414_en.htm.

Synergies with assessment and accreditation procedures in the formal system, to ensure compatibility and facilitate transparency of qualifications and cost-effectiveness.

Compatibility, transfer and/or transparency arrangements have already been developed in initial or continuing professional training, and the development of National Qualification Frameworks on the basis of the common EQF will certainly facilitate the transparency of qualifications. However, this process needs to be extended to general secondary education and higher education. The key point is to ensure bi-directionality (ensuring that learners have further access to formal or non-formal learning opportunities no matter what system they are coming from). The quality criteria and standards for NFL proposed in 2008 by Helmut Fennes and Hendrik Otten (Fennes & Otten 2008, 42-49) offer a good starting point.

Political convergence through networking, peer-pressure and support initiatives at EU or international level

Although legal and political aspects cannot guarantee acceptance by the labour market and the society at large, they play an important role in ensuring that NFL outcomes are regarded as socially relevant. Transnational initiatives in the context of EU or international programmes facilitate political convergence beyond the electoral cycles of national politics, as they are usually framed over several years. Moreover, the "open method of coordination" approach, based on voluntary participation based on common objectives, cross-comparison and peer-pressure, may prove to be more effective in the long run than uniform, top-down application of common rules. Much of the motivation and willingness of decision-makers and experts to develop NFL recognition depends on **connectedness**, that is, on being part of a "community of practice" in which participants share results, identify common difficulties and transfer tried-and-tested solutions to new contexts.

Ensuring the compatibility of existing initiatives

The previous three points all depend, to some degree, on policies, initiatives and instruments that are still to be created. However, there is already a great deal of work done in different fields of lifelong learning. What lacks is an integrative platform for discussion and exchange of expertise. A model of **gradual development** by mutual adjustment of existing initiatives seems to be a reasonable (and cost-effective) way of moving forward, in the context of multiple and sometimes divergent national approaches. Strengthening the compatibility of existing instruments (Youthpass, Europass, ESCO, the common framework of key competences) is at least as important as developing new ones (notably the European Skills Passport). In particular, the potential of Youthpass to develop a critical mass towards a greater social recognition of NFL is still not fully used. With its focus on reflection upon the personal non-formal learning process and on the integration of learning with civic participation and professional development, Youthpass can offer a model of "soft recognition" that could easily be extended to NFL beyond youth learning and youth work.

No matter what approach to NFL recognition one adopts, it will have to include a medium and long-term perspective that takes into account the interplay of various factors (social, institutional, political). Social and professional recognition are mutually reinforcing and an attempt to develop one in isolation from another would very likely prove unsustainable.

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The essay 'Recognition of non-formal learning in Europe: challenges and opportunities' discusses the main obstacles and challenges to a wider recognition and social impact of non-formal learning. Also, some elements to possible solutions are proposed.

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