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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNCIL

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

of 20 December 2012

on the validation of non-formal and informal learning

(2012/C 398/01)

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.
- (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

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

- 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) ⁽¹⁾.
- (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 ⁽²⁾ 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 ⁽³⁾ 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 ⁽⁴⁾ 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) ⁽⁵⁾ 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 ⁽⁶⁾ 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 ⁽⁷⁾.
- (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 ⁽⁸⁾ 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 ⁽⁹⁾ 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.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 311, 19.12.2009, p. 1.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 36.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 1.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 13, 18.1.2003, p. 2.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p. 6.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 168, 20.7.2006, p. 1.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 30.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 1.

- (19) The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009⁽¹⁾ 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⁽²⁾.

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;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 11.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 255, 30.9.2005, p. 22.

(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⁽¹⁾ (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 Multi-annual 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. FLOURENTZOU

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.

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.
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