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Werquin, Patrick

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Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in OECD Countries: an Overview of Some Key Issues

von: Werquin, Patrick

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We are constantly learning, all of us, everywhere and all the time! While there is nothing new about this observation, the idea of exploiting learning that takes place outside the formal system of initial education and training seems to have emerged on a large scale only recently. Taking advantage of such learning requires it to be visible and therefore recognised. The aim of the paper is to give an overview of key issues involved in recognising non-formal and informal learning, ranging from the legitimacy of the learning activities in terms of the outcomes to be recognised, through the cost of the necessary assessment, and essential elements such as quality assurance, the standards used, the potential benefits and the real obstacles. The findings summarised here are based on a report that describes and analyses practices in the 22 countries that participated actively in an OECD study (2009), with participating countries from the five continents.

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Patrick Werquin

Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in OECD Countries: an Overview of Some Key Issues

We are constantly learning, all of us, everywhere and all the time! While there is nothing new about this observation, the idea of exploiting learning that takes place outside the formal system of initial education and training seems to have emerged on a large scale only recently. Taking advantage of such learning requires it to be visible and therefore recognised. The aim of the paper is to give an overview of key issues involved in recognising non-formal and informal learning, ranging from the legitimacy of the learning activities in terms of the outcomes to be recognised, through the cost of the necessary assessment, and essential elements such as quality assurance, the standards used, the potential benefits and the real obstacles. The findings summarised here are based on a report that describes and analyses practices in the 22 countries that participated actively in an OECD study (2009), with participating countries from the five continents.

1. The context: a lack of visible skills, knowledge and/or competences

The unprecedented raise in the level of qualifications¹ in the population of many OECD countries,² especially the economically active, has happened mainly through a massive increase of the level of qualifications of young people leaving the initial education and training formal system. This has at least two important consequences. Firstly, the overall level of qualifications among the adult population has not changed much. In short, the older the adults the more likely they left initial education and training at a time where most young people would not reach a high level of qualification and, in addition, most current adult learning does not lead to a qualification, whether recognised or not. Secondly, given the existence of high levels of unemployment over the last decades, and despite persisting acute difficulties in the transition from initial education and training to economically active life,³ young people have become severe

1 It is difficult to define all the terms as this paper uses a lot of technical ones that may have different meanings in different contexts. Nevertheless, qualification is an important one and is used here as “skills, knowledge and/or competences that are required to perform the specific tasks attached to a particular work position and made visible through an official document awarded by an accredited body”. It is often used as a synonym for certification – even if the certification is only one of several components of the qualification in some countries – which is only the formal outcome of an assessment process by an accredited body. See Cedefop (2009) for a general glossary or OECD (2009) for specific terms.

2 Korea and Norway are among the classical examples.

3 Also known as “School-to-work transition”.

competitors to adults; even if adults have, in theory, more skills, knowledge and/or competences acquired through experience that employers claim they value more than theoretical knowledge taught in the initial education and training formal system. As a matter of fact, what young people and adults seem to share is the difficulty to find a regular job when they do not have a recognised qualification (OECD 2008).⁴ This competition, which seems to favour young people, puts a lot of pressure on the adult learning system – defined here as a sub component of the lifelong learning system⁵ – as there is a glaring need for re-skilling and (new) qualifications among the adults. This need has been emphasised by the long term demographic decline and, more recently, by the economic crisis that began at the end of 2008 during which many workers have been made redundant, or temporarily laid off⁶ due to an overall lack of demand of goods and services.

The production of skills, knowledge and/or competences concerns all human activities, not only, nor obviously, in the context of formal learning situations. Learning that occurs on a daily basis could also represent skills, knowledge and/or competences that are more interesting and longer lasting because they take place in a practical setting, at work or in daily life. Whatever the case, skills, knowledge and/or competences representing non-formal and informal learning outcomes are likely to be very valuable, to judge by the interest shown by public authorities aiming to catch the train of economic growth, global competitiveness and human development. In many countries, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a possible solution to make skills, knowledge and/or competences visible as well as to deliver partial or full qualifications directly to individuals that meet the expected and agreed standards; without additional formal learning. In the most advanced countries, recognition of non-formal and informal learning has a double currency: it may give people access to the labour market as well as it allows them to re-enter the formal education and training system. When it comes to the latter, OECD (2007) identifies recognition of non-formal and informal learning as one of the 20 mechanisms, and a strong motivator, that may promote lifelong learning, together with *establishing a qualifications framework, providing credit transfer and/or involving all the stakeholders* for example.

This paper is about making skills, knowledge and/or competences recognised in the community, the economy and the society when they are not already so through a qualification delivered by the formal learning system. It provides an overview of the

4 The reasons for this will not be addressed in this paper but this is largely due to the role of the formal learning system that operates as a filter and the way employers operate when they hire workers, using qualification as a signal for productivity and rewarding workers on the basis of their initial qualification(s).

5 For individuals over 25 typically.

6 Not even mentioning unwanted occupational external mobility (from an employer to another) and massive reorganisation within companies with implied internal mobility (from a job to another within the same company, in the same plant or not).

main issues in relation to organising recognition of non-formal and informal learning, whether for vocational preparation or further general education.

2. Key issues in a nutshell

The development of lifelong learning policies and practices in many countries has revealed that skills, knowledge and/or competences also are acquired outside formal educational contexts. It is often called experience. For formal education and training systems this observation deeply challenges their qualification monopoly and therefore may engender some resistance. As a consequence, it may take some time before the acknowledgement of the existence of skills, knowledge and/or competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning becomes a reality.

Calls for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning often are based on considerations of social justice, but also an argument of economic efficiency can be introduced. In order to mobilise all available skills, knowledge and/or competences, knowledge economies can benefit from recognising those acquired in non-formal and informal learning. Many countries are now considering skills, knowledge and/or competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning as a potential source of still untapped human capital.

Although skills, knowledge and/or competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning have an economic impact by themselves, they mostly need a formal process of recognition to be transformed in economically applicable forms, in qualifications typically but not necessarily. This process does not need to be too formalised indeed; and evidence shows that many countries have adopted some light approaches to recognition of non-formal and informal learning such as self-assessment and/or portfolio. An analysis of recognition procedures in many countries shows that they contribute to making such skills, knowledge and/or competences visible and legitimate. As a consequence, such procedures also encourage people to engage and invest in (lifelong) learning. Therefore, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is high on the policy agenda in many countries as they see the need for investing in the further development and promotion of recognition procedures.

The recognition of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning has triggered a shift of focus from learning to assessment, from inputs to outcomes. In addition, there has been some significant progress made in the assessment of skills, knowledge and/or competences. As a consequence, formal educational arrangements and institutions could also benefit from this change of paradigm. Some countries have started using outcomes based curricula for instance. The entire Bologna process as well as the European Qualifications Framework – to name only two of recent European Union achievements – is based on the concept of learning outcomes (Bjørnåvold 2007). In short, it is not the number of years, nor where and when, that people have learnt that matters but what they know or can do. It is likely that this will soon have

an impact on assessment procedures and methodologies in the context of recognition of formal learning as well.

3. Main rationale and potential benefits of recognising non-formal and informal learning

Modern societies are founded on ideas, innovation and knowledge. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning reflects the notion that all learning is valuable, as long as its outcomes are made visible. Accordingly, such learning needs to be recognised throughout society, particularly in the labour market; to become visible, usable and used. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning also reflects the belief that learning outcomes are more valuable than the learning process itself, because what matters is what one knows or can do, rather than where, when and how the learning took place.

The idea of recognising what individuals learn by themselves, merely by existing and dealing with daily issues and problems has been frequently addressed and dates back to a long time ago in some countries⁷ but nowadays, the rationale for organisation such a recognition is based on the following arguments:

- Cost: the corresponding outcomes can be used and, if recognised, mobilised at lower cost.
- Effectiveness: knowing what people know and/or can do makes human organisations – typically enterprises – more effective, since each person can be assigned to the tasks in which s/he is best suited and/or most useful. Greater transparency of information makes the recruitment process easier.
- Equity: many individuals, in particular experienced adults, are considered qualified *de facto*, but they are not legally certified. Their skills, knowledge and/or competences are not recognised. As a result they are badly utilised or underutilised.

Undoubtedly the most frequent argument put forward to justify the introduction of a system for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes is an economic one, especially when certifications are needed, for quality assurance or regulation purposes. It reduces the costs of access to certification by proposing alternatives to the traditional certification which follows a period of education and training in a formal

⁷ See Plato (*laws*) for the very first reference to learning outside formal settings. See also: Andersson et al. (2004); Anderson/Harris (2006); Bjørnåvold (2000); Burns (2001); Cedefop (2008); Coombs et al. (1973); Coombs/Ahmed (1974); Duvetot et al.(2005); Ecotec (2007); Eurostat (2006);Evans (1992); Fordham (1993); Friberg (2007); Harris (1999, 2000); Heyns (2003); Livingstone (1999, 2001a, b); Luckett (1999); Luciani (2001); NALL (2000); Schugurensky (2000); Singh (2009a, b); Steele/Taylor (1995); Tissot (2009); Thompson (1981); Torres (1990); Van Kleef (2006) and Werquin (2007a) for a survey.

setting. It also reduces the costs of formal learning by shortening its duration, with more opportunities for access and exemptions from certain parts of the programme or course. But the potential benefits go way beyond the economic argument.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning can change attitudes by replacing the duration of learning with the idea of learning outcomes as an assessment criterion. It can also free young people from the pressure exerted by the front loading “all or nothing” approach still predominant in the initial education and training formal system, because the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes would allow them to take advantage of opportunities to learn through experience (travel, jobs not necessarily intended to be permanent or long-term, and personal experience of all kinds) and take time out from their studies.

It remains also true that business is always likely to benefit if a firm can advertise the fact that its employees are formally qualified to a particular level. This is above all a condition for securing certification by quality assurance systems that use international standards (e.g. ISO), or tendering in the area of public or international procurement and/or for consumer protection (health sector), for example. Finally, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes may make it easier for employers to motivate employees to embark on courses leading to a certified qualification.

4. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning revisits the usual perspective

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is a major development in the culture and practices of creating and using human capital. The system of formal education and initial training produces titles, diplomas or other forms of certification. Historically, it enables individuals to enter the labour market and, for active and adult life more generally. The overall direction goes from assessment and recognition to the labour market and active life. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes works in the opposite direction. It takes account of people’s experience of life and the labour market, to give them an opportunity to have their skills, knowledge and/or competences recognised and eventually obtain a certification. The crux of the process thus becomes assessment rather than learning; and the process of acquiring skills, knowledge and/or competences – the input process – is no longer the centre of interest. For example, assessment is what quality assurance should focus on in this case. Lastly, the learning process and the use of the corresponding learning outcomes become totally decoupled in time and space; there is no longer any relation between teaching and assessment, for instance.

There is no consensus on the definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning; and recognition can have several objectives. OECD (2009) proposes that the terms formal learning and informal learning should be internationally standardised. If

a consensus can be reached on these two concepts,⁸ then the definition of non-formal learning, which is historically situated somewhere between the other two, could vary to allow countries and regions to reflect their specific requirements. It is probably neither possible nor suitable to try to reach an agreed unique definition for the three terms and this midway approach allows for discussions and mutual understanding in international forums while preserving country specificities. The important point is that when one talks of non-formal and informal learning, one needs to think of “outcomes”. It is outcomes that are assessed; it is outcomes that are valuable; it is outcomes that make it possible to find or keep a job and/or resume studies at an appropriate level. It is because the assessment of learning outcomes is quality assured that end users can have confidence in recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

5. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is particularly important nowadays

Recognition has become a key issue also because populations are shrinking in many OECD countries. In addition, the structure of qualifications poorly reflects individuals’ real skills, knowledge and/or competences, particularly those of economically active people. There is a need to reduce costs of qualifications acquisition. Demands in the labour market are often mismatched with the system of education and training, which is seen as unresponsive⁹. The idea of motivating adults to return to the formal lifelong learning system, particularly within certain target groups; an argument often linked to self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as adults’ inability to find time for training (opportunity costs, constraints of adult life ...).

In addition to the potential benefits listed above, there are other numerous reasons to make visible and exploit non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Recognising them goes hand-in-hand with the most recent developments such as “real-time learning”, “learning on demand” and/or fashionable tools such as the certification framework, whether national or international since it is also heavily based on the notion of learning outcomes rather than inputs.

The key aim of leading countries is to study the conditions under which learning outside formal settings can be exploited and thus become less expensive for society, and particularly for the individual, because it becomes an integral part of life and does not necessarily entail specific additional costs. It is also powerful motivator because non-formal and informal learning is often more natural and more recreational than learning that takes place in formal settings.

8 In short, *formal learning* is structured in terms of content, time, organisation and funding; it is intentional and there are learning objectives. *Informal learning* is never structured, has no clearly stated learning objectives, and is never intentional on the part of the learners.

9 It may not have to be responsive but, for the sake of space, this issue will not be addressed here.

6. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning heavily relies on thorough assessment processes

Analytical research has identified “good practices” in systems and procedures for recognising non-formal and informal learning (OECD 2009). In short, what is needed is an information and guidance system (always rather indigent in most countries), some form of personalised support (there is strong evidence it is a key determinant of success) and the introduction of a recording system, such as a portfolio or a competence passport for example (it could even be electronic), to record achievement (the German *ProfilPASS* is a good example). This corresponds to the documentation and identification phases.

Then there is an assessment stage. Depending on the level of formalisation in the recognition process, assessment could range from a simple raising of awareness of a applicant’s capacities through to full certification (as in Ireland), including the granting of credits and/or the exemption of certain academic pre-requisites, or exemption from all or part of a programme when studies are resumed. In the case of total or partial certification, the use of benchmarks, either specific or shared with the formal education and training system, is essential. Generally speaking, the assessment also establishes a level of skills, knowledge and/or competences.

7. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning leads to a continuum of possibilities

One of the key advantages of the approach that recognises non-formal and informal learning outcomes is that it provides a continuum of outcomes. The result of the process of recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes depends on the type of assessment used. The potential for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes for the applicant also varies according to the context, depending on the degree of trust prevailing in a given country, for example.

Someone who has undergone a non-formalised personal self-assessment process, e.g. for training or job-search purposes, could use the document thus produced (competences passport typically) to explain his or her aspirations. It may typically support a job application. This might also be sufficient to find a job or obtain an exemption in some countries, if the level of trust is high or if this type of process has a good reputation (Norway is a good example).

At the other end of the scale, if the system allows it – and not all systems yet do – an individual seeking certification would have to be assessed through a highly formalised recognition process. This might involve examinations, i.e. the same as passed by applicants in the formal system (Spain and Germany are good examples), an interview with an *ad hoc* jury, or else some totally different form of assessment: simulation, situational observation, dossier ... All countries have a mix of all these practices.

The assessment continuum produces a continuum of outcomes; which can be tailored to the needs of individuals. These are often left to institutions' discretion, e.g. when universities can decide whether to waive course admission prerequisites, and/or grant exemption from part of the programme for recognition-applicants intending to return to studies. Employers can also emphasise certain outcomes of the recognition process such as the portfolio, which specify what the applicant knows and can do.

This is where the differences between countries are greatest. Many, for instance, do not offer full certification based on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes alone; some require complementary education and/or training, often if only to make it possible to receive enrolment fees. Nonetheless, practices seem to be converging: today, few of the countries studied still rely solely on the diploma issued at the end of secondary education for entry to higher education, for example.

8. Despite all these potential benefits, there are obstacles

The main obstacle to the development of recognition of non-formal and informal learning on a widespread basis is probably cultural. Recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes also means these outcomes and therefore non-formal and informal learning have some legitimacy. This psychological barrier can be found even among employers who often only recognise a single filter, the formal system of initial education and training, as the indicator of skills, knowledge and/or competences.

Financial barriers are possibly still somewhat underestimated, but awareness seems to be increasing: the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is neither free nor always cheap (Werquin 2007b). Convincing applicants that they have skills, knowledge and/or competences is sometimes a lengthy and costly exercise in terms of support staff, particularly for those with least qualifications. This piece of evidence can be found among practitioners typically who describe the complexity of dealing with people denying their own skills, knowledge and/or competences, especially when they are poorly certified.

The evidence shows that there are still many other difficulties, several of which are related to the nature and quality of the assessment. Other issues include the assessor's profession and appropriate training, which is often poorly defined. All of these obstacles can be encapsulated in a single concern: many countries and regions have good practice but the challenge is to create a sustainable system for recognising non-formal and informal learning.

9. Does this give too much importance to the diploma?

A particular concern among detractors of recognition, especially in very "credentialist" countries, is that it may give even more importance to the parchment. However, awarding certification is not the ultimate goal of recognition of non-formal and in-

formal learning, let alone an observed consequence. Only the mode of access to the certification is expanded, for equity and efficacy purposes. It is likely that until now the value of a certification stems from its rarity; even when it sometimes does not really represent real skills knowledge and/or competences. By expanding the sources of certification, one may hope to move towards a situation where certification will be a faithful reflection of skills, knowledge and/or competences; rather than a tool that serves merely as a social filter, or for accessing the primary segment of the labour market, hence making life of job seekers, mobile workers and employers typically a lot easier.

Moreover, if the skills, knowledge and/or competences of all individuals are visible through the certification that they can present, certification will move towards the heart of recruitment and give a *raison d'être* to tools such as the National Qualifications Framework. Lastly, by increasing the number of access routes to certification, other concepts and dimensions are placed at the centre of the recruitment process rather than the parchment alone.

10. Diplomas will not be issued to everyone: assessment remains the cornerstone of the system

Assessment is just as important in the context of recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes – if not more so, particularly because there is no control over the process by which skills, knowledge and/or competences are acquired (inputs). It is mainly this lack of control over the learning process that literally scares the detractors of recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

In addition, quality assurance must be at the heart of the assessment. The system for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes does not imply a general handout of certification with nothing in return, because only individuals that meet the assessment criteria will have their learning outcomes recognised, and sometimes certified in the case of a highly formalised recognition process. In fact, the assessment procedures used in systems for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes nowadays tend to be more demanding than their counterparts in the formal system.

Moreover, in future the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is bound to use more flexible assessment methods, which sometimes are draconian specifically to avoid provoking the wrath of supporters of the formal system. It should also be remembered that assessment is essentially based on sampling even in the formal system. No graduate of the formal system, in whatever domain or level, has been assessed in all dimensions of all subjects in the programme. Greater flexibility will also involve sample-based assessments in the system for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes; and group assessments will probably have to develop, too.

11. Ways forward

Several countries have a quasi-system (Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway for example); others have a consistent set of practices (Australia, Canada, South Africa, UK, Belgium (Flanders)); while others still have fragmented practices (Germany, Spain, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Iceland, Switzerland). Lastly, some are in the initial (Austria, Chile, Slovenia) or very initial (Hungary, Greece, Czech Republic) phase. Even in the most advanced countries, the number of people participating remains quite small, with some exceptions in some sectors or regions; a sign of rigidities, particularly in terms of information and orientation. Psychological barriers also clearly translate into real, physical barriers, even for the most motivated.

More and better communication is therefore required. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes needs to become more transparent, without promising more than can be delivered. Communication needs to be taken closer to the stakeholders and reach everyone: small and medium-sized enterprises, professional training institutions, higher education institutions, the public employment service, families and individuals themselves. There is a need to demonstrate what works and under what conditions. This may entail clarifying vocabulary, along with information and guidance to put recognition at the heart of individuals' careers, ranging from information to complementary training for those seeking certification, and a resumption of studies in the formal system where appropriate. Individual careers need to be viewed globally, from assessment to validation and additional required formal learning to certification if necessary.

Innovative solutions are needed that stress the value of recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes; e.g. for dealing with failure in secondary education, since a large fraction of each cohort of young people leaving school do so without a qualification of any value, even though they have obviously achieved some learning outcomes. Although these are clearly not sufficient to allow for the awarding of a full qualification, they must be documented to transform potential early drop-outs into effective lifelong learners.

Recognition methods need to be devised, either individually or for groups. Quality assurance procedures also need to be developed.

It must also be accepted that recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes does not necessarily suit everyone in all situations. Countries therefore need to define the conditions under which recognition is a credible alternative to education and training; in terms of duration, typically, and hence cost (Werquin 2007b). This may mean that eligibility criteria have to be strengthened and improved. Nonetheless, they are not likely to be more specific in terms of duration of experience, precisely because the essence of recognition is based on outcomes and not the duration of the acquisition process. Variants, such as interviews, preparatory dossiers, etc., are already being used in some countries.

Doubtless, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes may not be applicable to everyone. Nonetheless, it is sometimes the only possible route or the best one, particularly for population groups that have dropped out of formal learning systems for personal reasons not linked to their (potential) skills, knowledge and/or competences. In all other cases, apart from equity considerations, each country or region must make an effort to spell out the conditions under which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes can function and be really useful; and the degree of formalisation involved. Otherwise, the system will again be prone to criticism because the failure rate could be high.

Lastly, all programmes and systems for recognising non-formal and informal learning requirements in the countries covered by the study depend on trust. While this is a sign of strength among the promoters of this approach and its quality, it is unlikely that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes can be sustainable without compiling data and evaluation programmes¹⁰ to prove that the process is well founded. It is because there are many reasons for believing in the efficacy of the tool that it needs to be based on a scientific approach, rather than a mere belief that it works and that it is good for people.

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10 See Recotillet/Werquin (2009) for an attempt at using microdata for evaluating recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

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