
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Portugal - By Mencia de Lemus
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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN PORTUGAL

By Mencia de Lemus (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

1.1 Introduction

As detailed in this report, Portugal is putting forward measures to validate competences of its labour force, obtained through means other than formal education and training. These efforts are due to an important concern existing among the Portuguese public actors, with responsibilities for education and training; and employment and the labour market. Examining the low levels of formal skills within the labour force. The validation of non-formal and informal competences is seen as a tool to combat these problems. Studies reveal the importance and potential of non-formal learning, has in the country.

There are initiatives in the private sector that have proved to be beneficial at sector level. Nevertheless, as we will see, a new system for the validation of competences is being set up at national level by the public sector, which is likely to have a greater impact in the country.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

At present, there are two different systems for validating and certifying competences acquired through non-formal or informal means:

1.2.1 System for certifying basic competences of adults

There is at present a system for recognising, validating and certifying competences obtained through informal learning which is being set up by the General Directorate for Vocational Training (former ANEFA), which will be put in place for the whole country. The system has been under construction since November 2000, and is expected to be fully operational by 2006.

This national system for recognising, validating and certifying competences is a recent initiative of the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare and the Minister of Education. Which is being developed by; the General Directorate for Vocational Training through the creation of a network of Centres for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC). By 2006, 84 centres are expected to have been set-up throughout the mainland, at an average rate of 14 centres per year between 2002 and 2006.

The National Network of RVCC Centres is co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF), under Measure 4/Action 4.1- recognition, validation and certification of lifelong learned knowledge and competences, of Axis 2- Support to active life and the promotion of employability, of the Education Operational Programme (PRODEP III).

The objective's of the system is to enable the acknowledgement, by the Educational System and by the Vocational Training System. The competences obtained by adults, throughout their professional and personal careers, with a view to reducing deficits in academic and vocational

qualifications and help to eliminate under-certification¹. Adults who have not completed, the 9th degree (i.e. compulsory education), can therefore gain certificates. The certification will imply an exam, and if necessary, complementary training. The validation and certification of competences is subject to a *Key-Competence Guide*, which is divided into three levels (B1, B2 and B3), which corresponds to the first, second and third cycles of basic education (CBEs). The guide is based on four areas of key competences called Language and Communication (LC); Information and Communication Technologies (ICT); Mathematics for Life (ML); and Citizenship and Employability (CE). For instance, if an adult obtains level B1 recognition and validation in the four key-competence areas, they can be given legal certification equivalent to the first CBE.

According to the final results of the 2001 censuses, about 64.8% of the resident population in Portugal have a maximum of the second CBE. Therefore, have not had the compulsory minimum of nine years education. The education issue in Portugal is not only a matter of “numbers” or the short duration of most of the population’s schooling. It is also a qualitative problem, reflected in the lowest literacy indicators reported by the OECD, which demonstrate an inadequate “ability to use the competences acquired in reading, writing and arithmetic” (Benavente et al., 1996).

The implementation of the system has proved that there are adults who have a certain recognised level of education (usually less than the current minimum compulsory schooling). Who have acquired a series of competences through lifelong personal and occupational experiences. After these competences have been assessed and compared with a key-competence guide, these adults can obtain a higher level of education.

According to the evaluation carried out by CIDEC², the analysis of the situation proves that there is a problem of under certification in adults who have less than the 9th grade of schooling, which confirms the pertinence of the RVCC system. In view of this fact, adults are able to participate more effectively in the labour market and attend certain vocational training courses (such as IEFP courses). Adults need to have the equivalent to the complete third CBE, the RVCC system is an alternative enabling them to obtain schooling certification. This means that they have a wider choice of possible training and vocational outlets therefore improving their employability.

According to the mentioned evaluation, this system has greatly contributed to the reinforcement of self-esteem and self-improvement of participants and having a positive effect on the definition/reconstruction of their personal and vocational plans. According to the representatives of the RVCC Centres and the certified adults who were interviewed for the evaluation. Although the effects of the RVCC process on the certified adults’ relationship

¹ *The Impact of the Recognition and Certification of Lifelong Learned Competences*, March 2004, done by CIDEC for the General- Directorate for Vocational Training of the Portuguese Ministry of Education

² *The Impact of the Recognition and Certification of Lifelong Learned Competences*, March 2004, done by CIDEC for the General- Directorate for Vocational Training of the Portuguese Ministry of Education

with the labour market were not negligible, they were less important and intense than the subjective dimensions mentioned. However, the analysis of the transition rates between the different situations in the labour market (employed, unemployed and non-active) suggests that the process does influence the users' relationship with the labour market.

A positive impact of the system has been observed with relationship between career progression and salary increase and an improvement of the contracting conditions (about 15% of the employees with a term contract at the time of registration were "permanent employees" six months after certification).

Finally, the system has also had a positive effect on further studies. The evaluation that was carried out showed that the RVCC process awakens people's interest and encourages them to take formal education or consider the possibility, as part of their personal plans.

1.2.2 The National System of Professional Certification

Another initiative which has been working for several years, is the one put into place by the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity: the National System of Professional Certification. Its main objectives are to valorise the labour force and to increase the quality of the vocational training, through the recognition and certification of the professional competences and of vocational training courses. The system has a tripartite basis (public administration, trade unions and employers organisations) based upon tripartite agreements. All three actors integrate the three organisms in charge of the system: the Permanent Commission for Certification, The Specialised Technical Commissions and the Certifying Entities. These bodies are responsible for the development and to issue vocational certificates defining the scope, content and level of a specific qualification. A certificate can be achieved either through traditional school based vocational training, recognition of qualifications acquired in other systems, or through assessment and recognition of vocational experience.

Other projects that can be outlined close to the overview of public initiatives for professional certification, which imply different initiatives such as establishing a common model of information on vocational or professional certification. Establishing a methodology to identify and recognise competences obtained in informal contexts, to create European networks of key organisations to exchange information on qualifications, etc

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

In addition to the assessment and recognition efforts covered by the systems mentioned above, a number of initiatives have been taken outside these structured systems. In all cases, social partners and stakeholders are involved with specific responsibilities.

One example is the Network of Centres for Recognition and Validation of Lifelong Competences and Qualifications in which the Confederation of Portuguese Industry is involved. The Centres (which can be schools, Professional Training Centres, enterprises, employers associations, etc.) allow the recognition and validation of competences of workers over 18 years old who do not have diplomas in spite of having acquired competences throughout their working lives through informal or non-formal learning. The first phase was

launched in the year 2000 and allows educational certification equivalent to 4, 6 or 9 years of schooling. The second phase, which started in 2004, allows vocational certification in a number of subjects.

The plan is to integrate gradually these autonomous initiatives with social partner and stakeholder involvement into an overall framework of the national vocational certification system. Recently, sectoral commissions have been set up in a number of sectors to prepare integration into the certification system. Examples of groups covered by these initiatives are transport workers, journalists, civil aviation employees, low-voltage electricity workers, merchant seamen and hotel/restaurant and tourism workers.

The positive effects of the recognition of non-formal learning in the private sector was outlined by Carneiro et al. (1998) in an article published in which it compared two Portuguese industrial sectors: shoe-industry, which is based on a very low level of formal education, and electronic-component industry, with high formal education and training. Carneiro uses the success story of the Portuguese shoe-industry, in which the ability to renew and grow has been very strong, to emphasise the huge potential of non-formal learning.

In order to identify the initiatives performed by the private sector, it is interesting to look at the projects that have been done in the context of Socrates initiative. Although, Grundvig should be the natural option to place projects for the validation of non-formal and informal learning of adults, there are not many initiatives in which Portugal has participated. An interesting project, which can be mentioned in the context of the joint actions Socrates, Leonardo and Youth. It is a project co-ordinated by the University of Coimbra, ORACLE, which seeks to develop a methodology for a European Certificate of Informal Learning. This methodology is based on the establishment of common coding and accreditation criteria in order to elaborate, within EU and the European Economic Area, an acceptable certification system ascertaining the nature and the degree of non-formal and informal skills achievement and learning, in a manner consistent with ECTS credits.

Within the context of the Leonardo programme, two projects co-ordinated by Portuguese partners are worth mentioning:

The ACEMD project for the Accreditation of European Skills for the Docker Trade, co-ordinated by the Institute for Ports Works, is a pilot project that has the goal of adapting the existing manpower to current and future needs by creating the tools necessary to evaluate and certify dockers.

The project Competence Evaluation: towards the development of New Vocational Training Certificates, is co-ordinated by the CENFANESP (National Centre for the Training of Trainers of the ANESPO, which is the National Association of Vocational Schools), and has been developed in co-operation with training institutions, educational establishments, accreditation authorities, trade unions and business. Its aim is to encourage initiatives for validating skills/competence developed during working life as a first step towards promoting new skills in response to changing market needs.

1.4 *Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector*

The role of voluntary of youth organisations in the context of initiatives, contribute to the validation of non-formal and informal learning is not notorious as the main sources of literature consulted. Nor can we observe a curriculum of projects within the European funding programmes, that could finance actions of this type, and therefore, we can't draw a perspective of the contribution of the third sector to this topic.

1.5 *Stakeholders' responsibilities*

1.5.1 *System for certifying basic competences of adults*

- **Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity**
Responsible for the creation of initiatives.
- **The Vocational Training Department of the Ministry of Education**
Is the institution responsible for the accreditation of RVCC centres. The new Basic Law of the Ministry of Education, Decree-Law n° 208/2002 of 17th October allocated these powers to this department, which takes over the responsibility that belonged to the ANEFA (National Adult Education and Training Agency).
- **Centres for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC).**
RVCC Centres are promoted by, both public and private organisms. With a significant implantation at local, regional or national level, duly accredited by the National System of Accreditation of Entities. They are privileged places for the mobilisation of adults and for the application of methodologies for the recognition and validation of competencies.

The RVCC have responsibilities on three areas of intervention:

- Recognition of competences
- Validation of competences
- Certification of competences

1.5.2 *The National System of Professional Certification*

- **Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare**
Is the public organism responsible for the certification system. It is part of the Permanent Council for Social Concertation, which signed (together with the trade unions and employers organisations) the Agreement on Vocational Training Policy; which started the setting up of the system.
- **Social partners (Trade Unions and employers organisations)**
Is part of the Agreement on Vocational Training Policy; which was the basis for setting the system. Part of the main body responsible for the management of the

system: the Permanent Commission for Certification and the Specialised Technical Commissions

- ***Permanent Commission on Certification (CPC)***

It has a tripartite composition (8 representatives of the public administration, 4 representatives of the trade unions, 4 representatives of the employers organisations, 2 representatives of the autonomous regions and one representative of the INOFOR (Institute for Innovation in Training)). The presidency of the commission is carried out by the president, of the; Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP)

The PCC is the co-ordinating body of the whole certification system. Its functions are:

- To approve the creation of Specialised Technical Commissions
- To approve the professional profiles relative to the professions that are to be certified
- To approve the accessing rules to the Certificate of Professional Aptitude (CAP)
- To approve the conditions of homologation of the training courses.

- ***Specialised Technical Commissions***

Have also a tripartite composition (Ministry of Labour, Trade Unions and employers organisations) and are created in each sector of activity with the finality of certifying professions of the sector.

Their functions are:

- To select the professional profiles to be certified
- To give favourable opinion on the contents of the professional profiles
- To define the accessing rules to the Certificate of Professional Aptitude (CAP)

- ***Certifying entities***

Organisms that can give certification of professional aptitude and can homologate vocational training courses. There will be only one certifying entity responsible for the certification of each profession.

- ***Certification Department of the IEFP***

Is part of the IEFP and gives technical support to the whole structure of the National System of Professional Certification.

It is also responsible for issuing the Certifications of Professional Aptitude and the Homologation of courses for sectors which the IEFP is the certifying entity.

1.6 Conclusions

With the overview to the existing panorama in Portugal, the following conclusions can be outlined:

- In Portugal there is a major problem concerning the low educational and certification levels of the population: recognition, validation and certification of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can help to improve this situation as under certification is one of the components of the problem.
- The concern of public authorities in the need to upgrade the workers skills have found in the validation of non-formal and informal experience, a pathway to this upgrading.
- There is an involvement of social partners in all the public initiatives. The participation of trade unions and employer organisation's to give public initiatives a guarantee of connection with the real situation in the private sector, both from the employers and from the employee's perspective.
- Public initiatives are solid, numerous and cover all the national geography. The situation at present combines different possibilities and systems through which an adult can see his or her experience validated. A first evaluation of the system developed by the Directorate General for Vocational Training, although it is still being set up show important effects in the motivation and self esteem of participants, and also in their relation with respect of the labour market, in their careers and in an improvement of the working conditions, although it has to be said that subjective benefits are greater than objective ones.
- European funding has given great impulse to initiatives for recognising, validating and certifying non-formal and informal learning, through operative programmes (PRODEP III, which co-finances the certification of basic competences system, but also through programmes, such as Leonardo and Socrates which give impulse to new action.