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

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1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN SPAIN

By Mencia de Lemus (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)

1.1 Introduction

Spain, as the other EU Mediterranean countries, has a positive attitude towards the introduction of systems and methodologies to validate informal learning. This favourable attitude is observed both at a public and private level, which are aware of how this type of learning is positive and valuable for the professional potential of a certain worker.

During the past years, Spain has given impulse to initiatives that seek the recognition or even the validation of informal and non-formal learning. EU encouragement has been very positive, and, the Leonardo and Grundtvig actions, within the Socrates programme, has stimulated partnerships and ideas that are gradually being established in Spain.

From the public administration side, the reform of the vocational training system is giving impulse in general to all that concerns professional skills and workers. The inclusion of the social actors in the public initiatives, which is an automatic practice at present, either fixed by law, as in the case of the Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training, or by Convention, such as the Tripartite Agreements for Continuing Training, is very positive, as it guarantees a social acceptance of this initiatives, which will also be more likely to be closer to the employment market.

In the following document, we will synthesise the different initiatives coming from the different sectors, on recognition and validation of non formal and informal learning¹. As we will see in this section, there are a number of initiatives towards establishing methodologies for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning in Spain. Although there are most probably a number of initiatives that are put in place in the private sector, it is extremely difficult to gather information about them, as there is no visible effort to disseminate these experiences. We will therefore base our brief report on those initiatives that have gone through an effort of publicity. These are the initiatives which are encouraged or financed by the public sector. This encouragement takes place in three different contexts:

- Initiatives done at a central administration level, among which the system that is being established based on the Law for Qualifications and Vocational Training, opens the possibility of obtaining a recognition of this type of learning at a national, official level.
- Initiatives done within the context of the EU Socrates Programme (Leonardo and Grundtvig).

¹ We are grateful for INCUAL's contributions to this chapter.

- Initiatives undertaken within the calls for proposals for complementary and accompanying measures to training, which are financed by the Ministry for Employment and Social Affairs.

We will describe the existing initiatives from the public, private and third sectors below.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

1.2.1 National System of Qualifications

The Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training (Ley Orgánica 5/2002 de 19 de junio, de las Cualificaciones y la Formación Profesional), of 19th June 2002, has, as main objective, to create a National System for Qualifications and Vocational Training that will give unity, coherence and effectiveness to the planning, systematisation and administration of the qualifications and vocational training. This way, the different ways of accreditation and certification of competencies and professional qualifications, obtained through formal, non formal or informal ways, will be integrated. This law, therefore, opens the way to set a system that will lead to the official recognition of non formal and informal learning.

The system designed by the Law will therefore assess and officially accredit professional skills, obtained by any means, through a process of identification, evaluation, accreditation and register of professional qualifications. This will be done with the creation of the National Catalogue for Vocational Qualifications.

The National Catalogue for Vocational Qualifications is the tool that systematises the qualifications that have been identified in the productive system and establishes, through a catalogue of modules, the training that is associated to those qualifications, attending to the requirements for employment.

The Catalogue, therefore, establishes the framework for the professional certificates and titulations that will form the training offer, and establishes the framework for the assessment, recognition and accreditation of the professional skills obtained through the professional experience or non formal learning. This accreditation will be valid for the whole of Spain.

The organisation of the qualifications in the catalogue is done by dividing them in professional families, attending to affinity criteria of the professional skills and adopting the model used in the initial vocational training and the continuing vocational training, in order to organise the certificates of vocational training and the certificates of professionalism.

Qualifications are structured in the Catalogue as units of competency, which are the minimal units that can be recognised and accredited and that relate both to the specific skills that are needed for a certain profession, and those needed for a correct professional performance.

The National Institute for Qualifications is the organism responsible for the elaboration and updating of the catalogue. It will count on the participation of the different levels of the administration and social actors (trade unions and employers associations), as well as

stakeholders of the different productive sectors, that will give their input for the elaboration of the modules that concern the professional families related to the professions developed on their sectors.

Following the mandate established in the Law, the Royal Decree 1128/2003 of 5/September/2003, regulates the National Catalogue of Vocational Qualifications, and finally, the Royal Decree 295/2004 of 20/February/2003 establishes the first set of professional qualifications to be included in the Catalogue, and their correspondent training modules which are also included in the Catalogue.

The evaluation and accreditation of professional competences obtained through professional experience or non formal learning will have the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications as point of reference and will be done taking into account a criteria that will guarantee:

- Reliability
- Objectivity
- Technical rigour of the assessment.

The recognition of professional competences assessed through this means, when they do not complete the qualifications that are included in a vocational training title or professional certificate, will be done through a partial accumulable accreditation, with the objective of completing the training that is needed to obtain a certain certificate or title.

Works on establishing a system of validation on non formal and informal learning within this context are ongoing. At present, the National Institute for Qualifications has developed a working document which is considered as the basis for the validation system.

The main characteristics of the recognition of competencies have been pointed out in this working document, such as the necessity of a framework which allows to identify the content of the competencies to be recognised, to guarantee the legitimacy and credibility of the actors participating in this process, to recognise what the person already knows and to complete the competencies still not acquired and to promote the ongoing learning.

According to this working document, the procedure for assessment, recognition, validation and registration, which is directly linked to the development of the National Qualification Catalogue, is based on some principles, such as: the recognition of the valuable diversity of significant learning experience and its achievements; the improvement of the employability from a perspective of promoting the values of lifelong learning; the prioritisation of the development of support and guiding systems to candidates; the flexibility in the use of assessment methods and its instruments; and the accumulation and assessment of learning acquired through vocational training.

The main objectives of this procedure are: to improve the quality and therefore the opportunities of employment of people; to develop the most effective competencies of workers and companies to adapt to technological and organisational changes; to promote ongoing learning; to capitalise the knowledge and competencies acquired in society; to

improve the effectiveness of vocational training subsystems; to improve the labour market transparency; to constitute itself as a professional scheme to validate professional competencies; and to provide a relevant information about the quality of validation criteria.

There are some pillars that have supported the elaboration of this procedure. Among these pillars, the following aspects can be highlighted:

- The evidence of competencies and its evaluation, defined as information that allows to witness the acquisition of professional competencies and to evaluate them in order to probe that these competencies are accorded to the requirements established for the correspondent professional qualification.
- The quality principles (validity, reliability, equity, impartiality, independence, integrity and accessibility), which must be present during all the procedure, aim to guarantee the credibility of this procedure.
- This procedure must recognise the importance of the equivalence between formal, non-formal and informal learning.
- The information, orientation and preparation services of this procedure are essential to overtake the obstacles and traditional barriers to the recognition of non formal and informal learning.
- This procedure must adopt a social construction approach in order to integrate the different interests, perceptions, motivations and attitudes of the different actors.

As the system is still in its initial phase, is it too soon to give any assessment on its effectiveness.

1.2.2 ERA Pilot Project

The ERA project is a pilot project that has tested the assessment, recognition and accreditation of competencies gained through professional experience, or through non formal and informal ways of learning. This project is interesting as it is a pilot that has used for the first time, the units of competency that form the different certificates of formal vocational training, and professional certificates, while the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications was being created.

The project was undertaken in 2003 by the Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, with the participation of the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, through the National Institute for Employment, Social actors and Autonomous Communities.

Beneficiaries of this project are workers that have professional competencies that are not officially accredited and that have a correspondence with some of the aforementioned Units of Competencies (Unidades de Competencia).

Professional experience must be demonstrable through documents.

In order to ease the follow up of the project, it has been concentrated on a limited number of Autonomous Regions, in each of them doing the pilot accreditation experience of one or two occupations each.

The most significant results obtained with the application of the ERA Projects are the following:

- The project was correctly applied in all the Autonomous Regions
- The project was accessible for most of the candidates that took part in the process. In this sense, 90% of the candidates obtained a positive result (77% of them obtained a complete qualification while 12% a partial qualification).
- Due to the ERA Project, the importance of the welcomed and orientation mechanisms and instruments has been recognised.
- The project has marked the importance of taking into account evaluation groups, integrated by members from all the learning areas.
- The project has shown the acceptance of “translating” the competitive references to the evaluation process, contextualising the criteria of professional realisation.
- The project has also pointed out the importance of mechanisms used by candidates, guides and evaluators.
- The project has finally contributed to the creation of the framework for effective cooperation between Autonomous Regions and the National Administration.

However, some measures have been proposed in order to improve the ERA Project:

- To boost the diffusion of the advantages of the recognition of informal and non-formal learning.
- To create an incentive framework that may allow a better participation of small and medium size enterprises.
- To use the validation as a means to promote lifelong learning
- To increase the level of qualifications for guides and evaluators.
- To solve the problem of co-ordination between the time of orientation and evaluation with the time of production of companies and workers.
- To improve the framework of collaboration and cooperation established in the Autonomous Regions and to integrate into it the social agents.

1.2.3 Other public initiatives

Although we have just seen the most notorious initiatives coming from the central public administration, there are also other initiatives that work towards the recognition and validation of non formal and informal learning. In this sense, and from a regional perspective, some regions are developing validation practices while the National Catalogue for Vocational Qualifications is elaborated. Based on the principles and method of the ERA Project, they are implementing the validation practices on an experimental basis for certain titles. Today, six regions (País Vasco, Cataluña, Madrid, Navarra, Castilla la Mancha y Comunidad Valenciana) have already set up such mechanisms which have a temporary character, until the Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training will be developed.

From a wider perspective, we can also outline the co-ordinated effort that the different EU countries are doing within the context of the CEDEFOP, on an ambitious project on the issue.

Some regions are developing validation practices, based on the principles and method of the ERA project, implementing them on an experimental basis, for certain titles. Today three regions have already set up such mechanisms which have a temporary character, until the Law on Qualifications and V.T. (see above) will be developed in the next regions: País Vasco, Cataluña, Comunidad Valenciana, Castilla la Mancha, Navarra and Madrid.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector

As mentioned before, efforts of the private sector to recognise competencies acquired through non formal or informal learning are difficult to spot, as they are not given publicity. It could be due to an idea that it is the administration, through its National System of Qualifications who is responsible for doing an official system.

Nevertheless, multiple informal practices can be noticed in the management policies and methods of managing the workforce (in particular at the time of recruiting workers²).

Examining the initiatives from the private sector that have been undertaken in the context of the call for proposals for complementary and accompanying measures to training or within the Leonardo or Grundtvig actions (Socrates Programme), we can find sectoral initiatives at national level, e.g. from the Spanish Association for welding and union technologies, from the National Federation of Food, Beverage and Tobacco, and from the Spanish Confederation of Young entrepreneurs, initiatives at regional level e.g. from the Federation of Chemical companies from Aragón, or on a more individual basis, such as the Institute of Theatre of Barcelona (Institut del Teatre de la Diputació de Barcelona), the Technological Institute of Castilla y León, among others. These initiatives are done towards the validation of skills obtained through different means, and have different levels of development of methodologies to do so.

It is also worth mentioning in this context the CAST project, put in place by the Hotel sector of Playa de Palma, in Mallorca. This project is an effort to homogenise competences in the sector, at European and International level, and to combat the problem of lack of formal competences of workers of a certain age, which have obtained their competences throughout their professional life and need to see them validated. One of the outcomes of the project is a guide for the validation of non-formal and informal competences in the hotel sector.

As mentioned before, Trade Unions and Employers Organisations are also present in the process of elaboration of the National Catalogue of Qualifications.

Apart from this important role, these social actors have also had a number of initiatives towards the validation of informal and non formal learning, such as elaboration of guides for the accreditation of professional competencies, undertaken by UGT (trade Union), and a project, also done by UGT that designs, tests and gives feedback to a model for the accreditation of professional competencies within a company.

² “Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Spain”, CEDEFOP 2000

The employer organisation of Cataluña (SEFES has a pilot experience on validation of the system in the electronic sector in 4 regions.

Other experiences exist in different associations such as the Association for the Lifelong Learning of Adults, and the Research Centre on the Education of Adults, of the University of Barcelona, who are partners in the Grundtvig project APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning), the Fondo Formación Fondo Empleo, who co-ordinates a Grundtvig project on the development of tools for the valorisation, development and mobility of competencies gained through informal learning, or the Fundación General of the University of Valladolid, that has developed tools for the Validation of competencies, in a project financed by the INEM in the context of the accompanying and complementary measures to training. Other and associations have also different experiences related to the issue we are analysing e.g. Galician Foundation for Training and Employment.

All of these initiatives can be placed, in relation to the Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training, as parallel efforts, towards the validation of formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, it has to be said that these projects have a minor role as a contribution to the official system that is being established in Spain for the recognition of informal and non formal learning, although sometimes the procedures establishes in them are very similar to the ones established with the Law.

We can outline that there are some common aspects in these projects: mainly there are three key efforts:

- An effort towards the recognition or analysis of the new skills or new training needs that are being needed in some sectors of the economy;
- An effort towards a validation, at European level, of certain trainings or certain skills as valid to undertake certain professions
- An effort to draw guides or methodologies for recognising and validating informal learning within a sector of the economy.

Several of these projects are very interesting as they develop a know-how in the field of recognition and assessment of non formal and informal learning which is a relatively new field for Spain. Among the projects we can mention several Grundtvig projects on the accreditation or assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, and a Leonardo project that seeks validation of previously acquired business skills,

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

Although the Leonardo Programme is mainly oriented towards youth, there are not many initiatives regarding validation of informal and non formal learning coming from the youth or voluntary sector.

On the first phase of the Leonardo Programme, the project VALIDE developed a method on validating previously acquired business skills at European level. This project had as co-ordinator, the Spanish Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs (CEAJE).

Different institutions (technological institutes, entrepreneurs' associations, trade unions) have presented several projects in the period 2000-2004 within the framework of the Leonardo Programme. These projects have aimed to prepare procedures and systems to recognise, evaluate and certify the competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. For the present year 2005, new initiatives have given priority to the certification of non-formal and informal learning.

The INJUVE (Youth Institute), which is the organism that centralises actions or policies undertaken on the youth sector, does not consider the validation issue in any of its programmes. However, it authorises some organisations to issue certificates for trainers for leisure time. These organisations issue a non formal certificate, which allows trainers, for instance, to work with children. As the Youth Institute is aware that these certificates are not enough, they have contacted the INCUAL (Instituto Nacional de las Cualificaciones) to ask for a definition of this qualifications so that they can be validated within the new Law. The Youth Council (Consejo de la Juventud) does not have any line either.

Apart from some initiatives that would come from Universities (Fundación General of the University of Valladolid, Research Centre on Adult Education of the University of Barcelona, Deusto University, Granada University), but that does not necessarily imply that there is an implication of the youth sector, and the mentioned VALIDE project, there are no initiatives to be outlined.

1.4.1 Public/ private/ third sector partnership initiatives

These initiatives are financed by FORCEM, the Foundation for the Continuing Training. These Accompanying Measures to Training are studies that help some industrial sectors in which learning has a great importance, especially in those areas where it is very hard to find accredited workers. These experiences ask for, within the framework of the National System for Qualifications and Vocational Training, the development of a credible procedure of recognition and certification of professional competences acquired through professional experience.

1.5 Stakeholders' responsibilities

As the National System for Certifications is both for the recognition and validation of non formal and informal learning and certification of vocational training, responsibilities on the system refer to both of them:

1.5.1 Central administration

The Central administration is responsible for the regulation and co-ordination of the National System for Qualifications and Vocational Training, without prejudice of the competences that correspond to the Autonomous Communities (regions) and social actors.

The government, after consultation with the General Council for Vocational Training, will establish the procedures and requisites for the evaluation and accreditation of competencies, and their effects.

1.5.2 General Council for Vocational Training

Is a consultative institution with institutional representation of both the public administration and social actors. It assesses the government on vocational training affairs, without prejudice of the competences of the School State Council. It belongs to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

1.5.3 National Institute for Qualifications

Is the technical institution that supports the General Council for Vocational Training and is responsible for the definition, elaboration and updating of the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications and its correspondent Catalogue of Vocational Training Modules.

1.5.4 Public companies, Chambers of Commerce, Universities and private companies

These stakeholders are asked to help in the elaboration of the system by identifying and updating the needs of qualifications, as well as their definitions and the required training to obtain them. There will be established procedures for collaboration and consultation with the different productive sectors and with social actors.

1.6 Conclusions

In Spain, according to all the previous studies undertaken on the issue, there is an enormous potential for the validation of informal and non formal learning. At present, the main initiative is the one undertaken within the context of the Law on Qualifications and Vocational Training. The development of the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications is being done at present so we will still have to wait to be able to assess the experience.

The conclusions of the ERA Project have been already highlighted. However, some reflection deserves to be done concerning this subject. ERA represents an initial step that has made available, for the first time, relevant data to justify empirically the development of a procedure to recognise and evaluate non-formal and informal learning, including working experience. However, more research is needed in order to:

- To determine capacities parameters in the administration of the evaluation, recognition and certification of informal and non-formal learning procedure.
- To study and analysis the professional orientation of guides and evaluators.
- To analysis the affected actors.
- To create a confident scenario that can facilitate the validation of the results achieved through informal and non-formal means.
- To elaborate sectorial evaluation studies of the impact of the recognition of competences in enterprises and workers, identifying priority sectors for action.

As mentioned, this great experience of the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications represents the great official public initiative. This leaves the rest of the initiatives as less important in impact and number of beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the initiatives done in the private sector are important as they outline an increasing interest of Spain in recognising skills that have been obtained through informal and non formal means. This growing interest could be influenced by the growing importance that is given at European policy level, to lifelong learning, and the existence, in Spain of an important group of population that would benefit from the recognition of competencies that have not been obtained through the traditional formal way.

It is difficult to find information on private experiences, which reveals a lack of interest of disseminating different practices (be them formal or informal), which are developed in the private or third sector. This, could be seen as a situation in which, in the private sector, a knowledge of the importance of this type of learning but there is no real interest on institutionalising official practices to validate it. Or, the private sector, relies on the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications Project, as being the official system to validate informal and non formal learning. On the other hand, and although the public sector has financed, through the resources devoted to the development of complementary and accompanying measures to training, some experiences on the field, the main action in the political agenda of the government, regarding the validation of skills obtained through non formal and informal learning, is the development with the National Catalogue of Qualifications.