Expectations from external stakeholders regarding competences and recognition processes of Non Formal and Informal learning (NFIL)

Study report

LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM
EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Erasmus+

GREAT

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In 2015, on the occasion of its 10th anniversary, The European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) became the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL-P) and adopted a new shortened name and visual identity.

1. Introduction to the initial research phase of the project

GR-EAT (2014-2016) aims to propose a comprehensive tool for the implementation of recognition systems that can be recognised externally, contributing to the overall advocacy process towards the acknowledgement of the non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) taking place within youth organisations. The final project outcome will be to develop guidelines for youth organisations and produce policy recommendations to improve the recognition of volunteering.

The project partners believe that it is crucial to find out about employers' needs and expectations regarding the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Since it is also essential to involve formal education stakeholders in the process of recognition of NFIL, as well as to understand their perspective on such a process, the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) were selected to work together during the initial research phase of the project.

One the one hand, the VUB worked on a study report to identify the expectations and needs from formal education stakeholders regarding non-formal and informal learning. Desk research was guided by 3 key questions: 1. How does a formal education stakeholder understand and define NFIL and "competence"? 2. How should the process of recognition of NFIL be carried out? 3. Which elements can ensure reliability of this process? In addition to this, several semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members of the VUB aiming to understand the internal processes and related challenges and perceptions concerning the validation of competences and the recognition process.

The research study enabled the VUB to explore the understanding of informal and non-formal learning and "competences" from a more formal stakeholder and to identify the expectations of a university regarding a recognition process of competences.

EUCIS-LLL, on the other hand, was responsible for writing a study report from a European perspective, using European reports and surveys such as the European area of skills and qualifications report requested by the European Commission DG EAC. It was also responsible for conducting research among employers in order to find out about their needs and expectations regarding competences and to raise the awareness of companies on the benefits and impact of long-term volunteering for transversal competence development. In order to do so, several companies from different sectors (non-for-profit, for

profit and public) were contacted and were asked mainly qualitative questions. The overall research question was: *What does a company really expect from a recognition process of NFIL in order for them to be able to take into account the competences gained by young people during a long-term volunteering within youth organisations?*

The research study enabled EUCIS-LLL to explore employers' understanding of what non-formal and informal learning is in the context of youth work and its value for young people; employers' perception of the skills required by young people entering the labour market and employers' needs regarding the recognition of learning experiences within the youth sector. The results can be found at the end of the study report conducted by EUCIS-LLL.

Volunteering is defined as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal, and is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation including youth work and community-based initiatives. The survey puts light on the employer's perception of volunteering and on the tools/ways to better recognise the non-formal and informal learning taking place during this experience. To better understand the expectations of external stakeholders, data was gathered through desk research, a questionnaire, interviews and meetings with experts.

As part of the research process, EUCIS-LLL and the VUB wrote two separate reports providing insight into the two different perspectives. VUB was in charge of providing the result of its research to EUCIS-LLL and both study reports can be found as an Annex to this document. In addition to the reports with which we aim to provide an overview of the expectations from external stakeholders regarding competences and recognition processes of NFIL, you can find a set of conclusions and recommendations based on the two reports. The results of this initial research phase will feed into the other intellectual outputs of the GR-EAT project and the development of the final project outcome, the guidelines for youth organisations.

2. Overall conclusions based on the outcomes of EUCIS-LLL and VUB

Both output reports equally brought to light similar concerns. To date, stakeholders involved have their own existent validation procedures. Therefore, all partners should be involved in their areas of expertise. The reason for this collaboration being twofold, 1) to gain confidence and 2) in order to obtain a shared 'currency' in the labour market and educational

sectors. More financial incentives to recognise prior learning and to build expertise regarding this matter may encourage all stakeholders to reckon with NFIL outcomes.

The studies also revealed several gaps between the different stakeholders on the level of communication. Communication is a vital component in ensuring the right fit and addressing the possible gap between education providers' curricula and employers' needs. Additionally, when employers place more importance in defining skills and qualifications required, the resulting impact and ability to embed these functionally into education programmes for young people is heightened. Also, the mismatch or complementation between the validation initiatives of both stakeholders is an area for future research.

Another point that was raised is that there is the existing tools to support the validation process in youth work are mainly unknown. Showing certificates is often the only thing that matters. Therefore, broaden the understanding of these tools is needed for all stakeholders because the tools not only aim to validate learning skills but also to increase overall self-confidence of volunteers. The use of self-assessment tools is important to equip young people to effectively negotiate with employers and education providers.

Indeed, it is essential that the acquired learning experiences of young people (i.e. youth field) in a NFIL context are transferable, enabling respective individuals for future professional mobility and cross-sectoral opportunities. All stakeholders need to understand the skills involved of the volunteering experience. Alternatively, youth volunteers should equally increase their employability skills and understanding about employers' respective expectations. Furthermore, volunteers should be able to have a record of their learning trajectory and communicate it in an efficient way to stakeholders. Their learning path record would enable youth to act in an informed manner: drawing up a learning agreement with education providers or responding to employers' needs. The use of self-assessment tools serves as an important validation to equip young people in effectively negotiating with employers and education providers.

Conclusively, all stakeholders should collaborate to obtain comparable measures to formal learning for NFIL. Shared understandings, trust and comparability of procedures and outcomes is therefore of crucial importance. Therefore, more qualitative research exploring the depth of informal learning is needed.

3. Recommendations based on the outcomes of EUCIS-LLL

3.1 For employers

Based on our research, employers should be more involved to better recognise NFIL and to give more attention to 'validation' of non-formal learning outcomes at the work place and in formal education and training (European Commission, 2012). Besides there are almost no initiatives led by employers on the recognition of such learning outcomes; some practices do exist to encourage their employees to act as volunteers in a top down approach (as part of their social responsibility and team building strategies). Our work shows that the impact of learning in youth work activities is undervalued and that the existing tools to support the validation process are often unknown. It also stresses the need to raise awareness of the value of youth work among key persons, employers, institutions and young people themselves and asked for developing effective and flexible ways for validation and recognition. Secondly, communication is vital to ensure that education providers are aligning the curriculum with employers' needs and to connect students to the job market. However, there is insufficient employer-provided communication as well as little communication between employers themselves.

3.2 For policy makers

Firstly, targeted measures should be financed to reach out to disadvantaged groups and be aimed at creating a sense of self-worth and self-confidence in order to give genuine opportunities and to enhance motivation to learn. Empowering learners is indeed a key to success. Measures shall also be adapted to learners' specific needs in terms of access and validation. Also, validation should not only aim to get a certificate but when this is the case the diplomas/certificates should have the same value as those delivered in the formal system. Finally, there is a need to rethink policies to better address what young people need, and to prepare them to face the challenges of the modern world (EUCIS-LLL, 2014). Secondly, volunteers need to be supported because volunteering plays an indispensable and capital role in lifelong learning. Policy makers should recall the importance of ensuring the possibility for volunteers to have their learning outcomes recognised and to push for the better social and political recognition of volunteering for society and for democracy.

3.3 For youth organisations

Youth organisations and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities. Although sometimes recognised by employers many volunteers are not aware or able to communicate the learning achieved through volunteering or non -formal education. Therefore, there is a need to develop tools not only to validate the learning gained but also to increase confidence and awareness by individual volunteers, so they can transfer their learning into the different areas of their life. The use of self-assessment tools such as portfolios appear to be supporting such self-awareness and contributes to better to equip young persons when negotiating with employers and educational institutions (i.e. during a job interview).

4. Recommendations based on the outcomes of VUB

4.1 For policy and practice

Firstly, policymakers should raise the profile of recognition, simplify recognition processes, give them greater validity, and find the right balance between benefits and costs, as to date, many recognition processes remain marginal, small-scale and even precarious (Werquin, 2010). Secondly, education providers have to explore how existing validation procedures for formal learning can be adapted to meet the needs of learners outside the formal system. If the recognition of NFIL is integrated in the national education system, waste of learning and competences could possibly be converted into visible and usable competences (Cedefop, 2009). Also, better financial incentives to recognise prior learning may encourage its use (OECD, 2014). Thirdly, Peeters and authors (2014) stress that policy and practice should include subtler and spontaneous ways of recognizing informal learning in addition to the validation of NFIL initiatives, because learners value the spontaneity of both informal learning and its recognition. Fourthly, a greater acknowledgement of the value of informality in learning in policy would encourage educational practice to bring informal learning out of the inferiority to formal learning (Coffield, 2000). We follow Coffield (2000) who stresses that informal learning needs to be regarded as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant (...) at other times not relevant at all. More insight in informal learning will reveal its own characteristics and will therefore no longer have to be approached by formal learning's criteria (Peeters et al., 2014). Fifthly, since informal learning is highly individual and cannot be planned, it can only be recognized after active

reflection (Marsick et al., 2009; Reischmann, 2008). Educators within and out-of-school contexts can help learners to recognize this learning when it takes place. To this end, they should dispose of sound knowledge of informal learning processes (Peeters et al., 2014). Finally, Dev Regmi (2009) notes that a new paradigm of education system in which NFIL has a valid position needs political and social commitment of all concerned stakeholders of education.

4.2 For recognition processes

First, validation connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies. The already articulated demand for competences on the labour market and the already developed supply of competences in education/training should be carefully matched. Also, all partners should be involved at the appropriate stages (e.g., design of assessment frameworks) to gain confidence and to obtain a satisfactory 'currency' in the labour market and educational sectors (Duvekot, 2009; Souto-Otero, 2010; Van de Poele et al., 2008).

Second, before and during the recognition process youth organisations can support and expand learner engagement in different ways (Duvekot, 2009; Smith & Clayton, 2009):

- Enhancing the awareness of learning (e.g., courses in self-management of competences and portfolio-build up);
- Providing tailored support for and motivating individuals to minimise drop out;
- Putting the individual learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-makership;
- Focusing on learning outcomes instead of learning-input;
- Reckoning with competence-systems (e.g., diploma-standards and competence management) which must be linked so that individuals know where, how and why to enrich one's portfolio;
- Making connections between learners and the process (e.g., information dissemination, clear guidelines etc.);
- Making the process of recognition as streamlined and user-friendly as possible.

Third, to ensure a qualitative evaluation of NFIL achievements, it has to be accessible, voluntary, flexible, objective and reliable. Therefore, specialised training for tutors and assessors may be needed (Souto-Otero et al., 2005; Werquin, 2010). Also, assessment procedures need to be efficient in both time and cost to improve implementation and administration (Smith & Clayton,

2009).

Finally, youth organisations should be cautious for the fact that differences in procedures depending on organisations raise questions to the comparability of procedures and outcomes and even more to the equal treatment of candidates. Quality assurance is the key for realizing a broadly based support for the implementation of NFIL recognition, which should function as a subsystem of the quality assurance of the institution's activity. Above all, using a common understanding is needed to ensure consistency in practice (Van de Poele et al., 2008; Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009).

4.3 For research

The literature study reveals some promising ideas for future research. The validation methods least frequently used in the labour market are those most commonly implemented in public validation initiatives (i.e. assessments/exams). The mismatch or complementation between these sectors is an area for further research (European Commission, 2014). Finally, in line with findings of previous research (Colley et al., 2003; Peeters et al., 2014), we stress the need for more qualitative research that explores the depth of informal learning.

5. Annexes

5.1 Research from EUCIS-LLL relating the needs from employers' as regard to the competences of young people

Study report

Employers' needs regarding the competences of young people – A European Perspective

GR-EAT Project Research Phase IO1 EUCIS-LLL

EUCIS-LLL, February 2015

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1. Background

1.1 The role of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal education in the European and national context

The policy debate over the last 20 years has been about bringing together all types of learning, and creating the frameworks able to recognise and validate experience and learning achieved in different ways to confer qualifications. The logic is that qualifications need to be built to a common structure based on identified learning outcomes if they are to be achievable both through different types of formal learning programmes and recognition of prior experience and learning[1] (CEDEFOP, 2009). At European level, launching the European qualifications framework (EQF) has put learning outcomes firmly on the political agenda. The EQF is a tool to enable qualification levels (course certificates, professional certificates, etc.) to be better understood and compared, both by individuals and employers, across different European countries.

Within the Communication from the Commission, COM (2010) 477[2] and here in particular within the Youth on the Move[3] flagship initiative of the EU Agenda 2020, the European Commission aims "to expand career and life-enhancing learning opportunities for young people with fewer opportunities and/or at risk of social exclusion. In particular, these young people should benefit from the expansion of opportunities for non-formal and informal learning and from strengthened provisions for the recognition and validation of such learning within national qualifications frameworks."

Only three EU Member States have a high level of development in validation (Finland, France, the Netherlands)[4], while eleven have either a national system in its initial phase or a well-established, but partial, system of validation in one or more sectors. The countries with a well-developed system have a mainstreamed approach on validation within their lifelong learning system, an infrastructure supportive to validation, a strong involvement of stakeholders (in particular social partners) and accessibility of validation for applicants in financial terms. Others are developing strategies while a last group have no strategy in place. From the 2010 Inventory we see a progression from 50% to 75% Member States having a strategy in place or in development. Unfortunately, the current uneven availability of national validation policies and practices as well as existing disparities between Member States reduce the comparability and transparency of validation systems. They make it difficult for citizens to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, on different levels and in different countries. This is why the EU has launched the Council Recommendation to set up validation mechanisms by

[1] CEDEFOP (2009), *The shift to learning outcomes – Policies and practices in Europe*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of European Communities.

[2] European Union (15 September 2010), E*uropean Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - Youth on the Move An initiative to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union*, (COM 2010) 477. Accessed 24 February 2015. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/procedure/EN/199645

[3] Youth on the move is a comprehensive package of policy initiatives on education and employment for young people in Europe. Launched in 2010, it is part of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. It aims to improve young people's education and employability, to reduce high youth unemployment and to increase the youth-employment rate – in line with the wider EU target of achieving a 75% employment rate for the working-age population (20-64 years). http://ec.europa.eu/youthonthemove/

[4] EPAL (ePlatform for Adult Learning in Europe). For more information, please visit: https://ec.europa.eu/epale/en/blog/7-challenges-validating-non-formal-and-informal-learning-europe

2018.

At national level the rapid development of national qualifications frameworks (NQF) points in the same direction. The adoption of the Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012)[5] is a new political impulse with the goal of having national validation mechanisms in all countries by 2018. The aim is to link the learning taking place in a variety of settings such as educational institutions, in-company training, on-line learning (i.e. by making use of open educational resources), courses organised by civil society organisations, learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It follows from this that validation is not exclusively a tool for education and training institutions and systems – it is relevant for a much wider range of stakeholders and institutions, including those from the youth area, the voluntary sector and work.

The EQF specific intention is to bring into alignment different forms of qualification through the adoption of common levels based on generalised learning outcomes[6]. However, there are serious limitations even at the European level, where the development of the higher education framework (Bologna process) has occurred separately from the VET developmental work (Copenhagen process). In consequence, differing approaches are also being taken to credit accumulation and transfer in higher education (ECTS) and in VET (ECVET). The emphasis of learning outcomes is consistently identified with the need to define such outcomes within an inclusive approach to lifelong learning, rather than to be tied to particular kinds and phases of institutions, curricula and qualifications (EUCIS-LLL, 2013).

According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2009), the EQF aims to relate different countries' national qualification systems to a common European reference framework. Setting up a national qualifications framework (NQF) is relevant to validating non-formal and informal learning. The shift to learning outcomes promoted by the EQF, and increasingly part of new NQFs developing across Europe, may prove important for further development of validation. The EQF is expressed as a table of eight levels, each one defined by a series of statements relating to knowledge, skills and competence. These statements of learning outcomes are intended to coincide with the most widely recognised landmarks and stages in mainstream education and training systems, and, at the same time, with the extent of difficulty, autonomy and responsibility associated with different jobs in the labour market.

The EQF has been the main catalyst for the development of NQFs in Europe. While, in principle, countries can link their national qualifications levels to the EQF without an NQF, almost all[7] see the development of an NQF as necessary to relate national qualifications levels to the EQF in a transparent and trustful manner. The further implementation of NQFs in the coming years will show the extent to which countries move from the relatively modest ambition of communication frameworks towards the more challenging role of reforming frameworks.

1.2 Definition of lifelong learning, validation, recognition and volunteering

[5] Official Journal of the European Union (20 December 2012), *Council recommendations of the validation of non-formal and informal learning*. Accessed 25 February 2015. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF

[6] Coles, M. (2011), *Referencing national qualifications levels to the EQF*, Luxembourg: Publications Office for the European Union.

[7] The only exception is Italy, which intends to reference its qualifications levels to the EQF without an established NQF. The Czech Republic has developed an NQF for vocational qualifications and one for higher education and referenced on the basis of national classifications of educational qualifications types and the NQF for vocational qualifications.

The European Commission defined lifelong learning as[8]:

> *'All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'*

A literal definition of lifelong learning is simply 'all learning' that people acquire across their entire life spans – in formal, non-formal or informal settings. Therefore, learning is a continuous task of the society and the individual that extends to all areas of life 'from cradle to grave'. This concept emerged in European Union policy papers in the 1990´s. However, it is not new in international literature (UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe). Of particular importance, the two landmark UNESCO publications, *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972)[9], and *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al., 1996)[10] have been key sources for education policy makers and practitioners internationally. They have been influential in promoting an integrated and humanistic vision of education framed by the paradigm of lifelong learning and by the four pillars of *learning to be*, *to know*, *to do*, and *to live together*. The paradigm of lifelong learning, initially introduced in *Learning To Be*, is linked to the principle of equal opportunity in the perspective of the democratisation of education and training opportunities. In *Learning: The Treasure Within* lifelong learning is understood as 'a continuum of learning, expanded to the whole of society, open in time and space, and which becomes a dimension of life itself.' This approach has influenced the European Union.

Lifelong learning is about acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement (CEC, 2000)[11].

These inclusive life-wide definitions of lifelong learning suggest that it covers a broad spectrum of learning, learners, contexts and motivations for learning. However, in recent years, the EU's focus for lifelong learning has shifted to emphasise employability, (occupational) skills development and (upward) labour mobility. This approach was confirmed in the recent Commission's Communication "Rethinking Education for better socio-economic outcomes"(2012)[12]. The first sentence of the Communication sets the scene "*Investment in education and training for skills development is essential to boost growth and competitiveness: skills determine Europe's capacity to increase productivity*". A key priority of the European Union is indeed to better match the world of education and the world of work. In this document the concept of lifelong learning is somehow narrowed to adult education.

European Union (21 November 2001), *Communication from the Commission – Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality – "When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people". Chinese proverb*, (COM 2001) O678 final. Accessed 25 February 2015. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52001DC0678

[9] Faure, E. et al. (1972), *Learning to Be. The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*. Paris: UNESCO/Harrap.

[10] Delors, J. et al. (1996), *Learning: the treasure within. Report to UNESCO of the international commission on education for the twenty-first century*. Paris: UNESCO

[11] Commission of the European Communities (CEC), 2012, *European Union Policies on Lifelong Learning: In-between Competitiveness Enhancement and Social Stability Reinforcement.* Accessed 24 February 2015.
Available at: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042812012876

[12] European Union (20 November 2012), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions* – Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, (COM 2012) 669 final. Accessed 23 February 2015. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/procedure/EN/202132

Other institutions such as UNESCO have launched a global reflection to revisit the concept also called "Re-thinking education" that confirms the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach. **'***There appears to be general agreement that the integrated and humanistic vision of learning outlined in the Faure and Delors reports is of continued relevance in today's world; and that it constitutes a viable foundation for the rethinking of education. The vision is seen as a meaningful alternative to the utilitarian and productionist approach that has dominated international education development discourse and practice since the 1970s. In rethinking education today, a fresh reappraisal of this vision is needed that takes into account contemporary conditions***'.** (p. 11)

Validation and recognition

The meaning behind the terms of reference 'recognition' and 'validation' can vary according to context and use. This challenge was recognised by the Education Council in its 2004 conclusions[13] on common principles for validating non-formal and informal learning. The Council decided to refer to "*identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*" as a process that records and makes visible individual's learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but it may provide the basis for such formal recognition. The following definition was adopted in the Council Recommendation of December 2012:

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;
4/ Certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification.

Recognition of prior learning means the validation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education, non-formal or informal learning, acquired before requesting validation.

There are broader concepts involved in validation such as 'social validation or recognition' of learning. It is common for a learner to document achievements against standards (occupational standards, qualification standards or advertised expectations for a specific job) and for this documented evidence to be sufficient to gain social recognition, for example being offered a better job or a place on a higher education programme. In this process, that is addressed as 'social validation of learning', certification and formal recognition (by institutions awarding qualifications) do not occur. Most of our organisations are asking for such recognition especially for their volunteers. The following definition by CEDEFOP[14] reflects this broader approach:

Recognition of learning outcomes:

(a) Formal recognition: The process of granting official status to skills and competences either through the:
   - Award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); or
   - Grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or

[13] Council of the European Union (18 May 2004), *Conclusions of the Council and representatives of the governments of Member States meeting within the Council on common European principles for the identification and validation of non - formal and informal learning.*
[14] CEDEFOP (2009), *European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning,* Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

competences

(b) Social recognition: the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders.

Volunteering: The Compact Code of Good Practice on Volunteering[15] stated "we understand the term volunteering to include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and campaigning". Volunteering is defined as an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives.

[15] Home Office (2005), *Volunteering: Compact Code of Good Practice*, London.

2. Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning

According to the European Commission[16], coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies are needed to achieve the ET2020 Strategic Framework objectives and equip learners with the adequate transversal competences needed for their personal and professional life. Coherence means building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal education so that only learning outcomes matter, whichever way you acquired them.

The European Commission also thinks that in the past years this focus on flexible learning pathways has led to increased attention paid to the validation and recognition of learning that takes place outside formal systems. Yet, if those mechanisms are now acknowledged as concrete tools for employment and vectors of personal development and social inclusion, their implementation remains very different from a Member State to another (today, only 3 have comprehensive validation system) and a strong political will is needed to boost the process.

2.1 The importance of lifelong learning for validation

Validation is a key in lifelong learning: it contributes to linking the learning taking place in a variety of settings: educational institutions, companies, on-line learning, courses organised by civil society organisations or resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure (EUCIS-LLL, 2012). As statistics show[17], the majority of people who participate in lifelong learning take part in non-formal education and training activities and as a result there is an increasing demand to take the full range of knowledge, skills and competences that are being developed in non-formal and informal learning (NFIL) environments into account. Additionally, it is important to stress that non-formal and informal learning plays a crucial role as a tool for people's empowerment. It increases democratic participation, improves social inclusion, well-being and health and provides people with the pathways to come back or remain to the labour market. Many interesting data to illustrate the wider benefits of participation in lifelong learning can be found in the PIAAC Report of the OECD (2013)[18].

2.2 The different steps in the validation process

The Council Recommendation on validation (2012) identifies four main stages involved in the validation of non-formal and/or informal learning:

- Identification of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,
- Documentation, of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,
- Assessment of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning,

  Certification of the assessment results in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form.

[16] European Commission (2014), *Erasmus + Programme Guide. Accessed 23 February 2015.* Available at: *http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/documents/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en.pdf*

[17] SOLIDAR (October 2014), *European strategic guide for fostering participation and raising awareness on validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning*. Available at http://www.solidar.org/IMG/pdf/pvnfil_book_final.pdf

[18] OECD (2013), *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). Accessed 23 February 2015.* Available at: *http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/*

3. The role of civil society organisations and the recognition of competences by employers

3.1 The role of civil society organisations

Civil society organisations have been asking for the social and formal recognition of their volunteers for several years. During the European Year of Volunteering 2011 a working group focused on the recognition of volunteers (P.A.V.E)[19]. Although sometimes recognised by employers many volunteers are not aware or able to communicate the learning achieved through volunteering or non-formal education. Therefore, there is a need to develop tools not only to validate the learning gained but also to increase confidence and awareness by individual volunteers, so they can transfer their learning into the different areas of their live.

3.2 How does the EU define the role of youth organisations and civil society organisation?

In the Council Recommendations (2012) it is stated that "*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".*

In the European Guidelines, the key question for the non-formal education sector is how to create closer interaction with formal education and the labour market while, at the same time, safeguarding key attributes of independence and the concept of volunteering.

3.3 Non-formal learning and education in the youth field – Characteristics and impact

In February 2004, the Youth Directorates of the Council of Europe and the European Commission published a joint working paper 'Pathways towards Validation and Recognition of Education, Training and Learning in the Youth Field'[20]. It highlighted a strong need for social and formal recognition of non-formal and informal education/learning in youth work activities. The paper argued that non-formal education/learning in the youth field is more than a sub-category of education and training since it is contributing to the preparation of young people for the knowledge based society. It also stressed the need to raise awareness of the value of youth work among key persons, employers, institutions and young people themselves and asked for developing effective and flexible ways for validation and recognition. A number of concrete activities and commitments were proposed in the paper, addressed at the European institutions, the Member States, the NGO sector, the education and training field and specifically the youth sector.

Now, six years after publishing the first Pathways paper and more than 10 years after starting the development and implementation of respective strategies to better recognise non-formal education/learning, the partnership team of the Council of Europe and the European Commission in the field of youth, in cooperation with the European Youth Forum and the

[19] EYV (2011), *Policy Agenda on Volunteering in Europe P.A.V.E Working towards a true legacy for EYV 2011.* Accessed 26 February 2015. Available at: *http://www.eyv2011.eu/images/stories/pdf/EYV2011Alliance_PAVE_copyfriendly.pdf*

[20] Council of Europe (January 2011), *Pathways 2.0 towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and of youth work in Europe.* Accessed February 23, 2015. Available at: http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/3084932/Pathways_II_towards_recognition_of_non-formal_learning_Jan_2011.pdf/6af26afb-daff-4543-9253-da26460f8908

SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre[21], realised the need to update and re-focus the strategy as outlined in the first paper, in order to give the strategy a new impetus for a better recognition of non-formal learning in youth activities and of youth work in general. The recognition of non-formal education/learning - and of youth work in general - is an important goal for the two institutions and its partners in the youth field (Council of Europe, 2011). It is not an aim in itself, it is part of a coherent vision on how to improve the inclusion and well-being of young people in our society and empower them to be active citizens. In this respect, youth work plays a crucial role as outlined in the political documents and expressed at various occasions with the aim of granting youth work a better position and more political recognition in our societies. This is also reflected in the Resolution of the Council of the European Union on Youth Work (November 2010) which stresses the importance of recognising the crucial role of youth work as a provider of non-formal learning opportunities to all young people. Non-formal learning and education, understood as learning outside institutional contexts (out-of-school) is the key activity, but also the key competence of youth work.

The Council of Europe also stated that all learning in the youth field enables young people to acquire essential skills and competences and contributes to their personal development, to social inclusion and to active citizenship, thereby improving their employment prospects. Participation in activities in the youth field contributes in various ways to the acquisition of the Eight key competences as identified in the framework of lifelong learning: communication in the mother tongue as well as in a foreign language, mathematical and scientific competence, digital competence, social and civic competences, learning to learn, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression.

Non-formal learning/education in youth work is often structured, based on learning objectives, learning time and specific learning support and it is intentional. It typically does not lead to certification, but in an increasing number of cases, certificates are delivered, leading to a better recognition of the individual learning outcome.

3.4 Employers' needs regarding competences of young people

More than a quarter of European employers are struggling to fill vacancies at the same time as young people face high levels of unemployment (McKinsey, 2014). There are varying degrees of youth unemployment in different countries in Europe, largely depending on economic performance (Ashton, 2007). But even in the most developed countries with strong levels of social cohesion the global rate of youth unemployment is increasing because of skills mismatch. Skill mismatch refers to the notion of skills available within the working population not matching those of demand, or what employers are seeking. '*Skills mismatch is the outcome of the complex interplay between the supply and demand of skills within a market economy both of which is constantly affected by adjustment lags and market failures and is shaped by the contextual conditions prevailing, such as demographics or technological developments. Mismatches can also be created by a lack of flexibility in education and training systems, for instance due to slowness or unwillingness of educational institutions to respond to labour market signals, inadequate skills guidance, insufficient validation of non-formal and informal learning and inadequate continuing training or further education offered at and by the company and sector level*' (ESU, March 2014). That is why employability skills are a set of skills and knowledge that all participants in the labour market should possess to ensure they gain employment in their chosen occupation and have the capability to be effective in the workplace. They benefit individuals, their employer, the workforce, the community and the

[21] For more information on Salto-youth training and cooperation resource centre, please visit: https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/

economy. A recent survey carried out in nine European Member States[22] listed the skill needs from the employers' point of view (CEDEFOP, 2013).

According to this study, the skills that employers are seeking include the following:

- Entrepreneurial spirit;
- Advanced literacy;
- Leadership/management skills;
- Communication skills: the ability to convey information effectively so that it is received and understood; appropriate verbal/nonverbal communication with others;
- Teamwork;
- Innovation and creativity: the ability to apply both logic and creativity to solve problems is highly valued by employers (CEDEFOP, 2013);
- Digital skills;
- Flexibility/adaptability/managing multiple priorities;
- Global awareness;
- Motivation: interest/ engagement, effort and persistence/ work ethic;
- Confidence;
- Enjoying challenges;
- Applying knowledge;
- Problem-solving/reasoning attitude: It involves the ability to find solutions to problems using creativity, reasoning, and past experiences along with the available information and resources;
- Self-esteem: a positive or negative orientation toward oneself; an overall evaluation of one's worth or value;
- Independence;
- Punctuality;
- Work/life balance;
- Positive attitude;
- Assertiveness.

We can note that **soft skills** are highly asked by employers. Of course, the relative importance of those skills tends to vary across occupations. The survey shows that examples of skills considered of high importance among most occupational groups include team-working skills (on average across occupations 89.5% of employers cite this soft skill as important), the capacity to learn new ideas, methods or techniques (88.4% of employers cite this as important) and adaptability to new equipment or materials (81% of employers cite this as important).

A trend to green occupations is also apparent, as practices to reduce use of resources are important in many occupational groups (CEDEFOP, 2011). In fact, Climate change and environmental degradation are jeopardizing the sustainability of many kinds of economic activity around the globe and, at the same time, moving towards a greener economy is creating opportunities for new technologies, investment and jobs.

In our study we also found that digital skills are a key element to employment, but there is still a way to go. Employers increasingly require validation of **digital literacy skills** and

[22] Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Poland and Finland. Seven sectors were selected for the report and, within each sector, the three most prevalent occupations (based on labour force data) were chosen. In total, 8500 local establishments were sampled.

employability can depend on it. 81% of employers require their workforce to have digital skills, but only 52 % of employers believe that their workforce has the right future skills (BCS, 2014). Employers want people to have the skills to be productive straight away in a new role and believe digital skills improve employee efficiency and increase business productivity. However, more training on digital skills should be given to young people. The 2nd high-level Conference of the European Commission eSkills for Jobs 2014 year-long campaign[23] held in Rome identified which skills young people must possess to tap into the digital boom and concluded that e-skills are a necessity in our times, but they are not sufficient to get a job as companies are also looking for entrepreneurial competences alongside them with the ability to think creatively and problem-solve. According to Junior Achievement – Young Entreprise Europe (JA-YE Europe), closer alliances between business and education, targeted teacher training, and the combination of ICT tech skills with entrepreneurial training are the keys to unlocking the future of young people and unleashing the economic value of Europe's creativity for growth and prosperity. Therefore, education professionals should go beyond simply introducing young people to devices. They should enable them to use those technologies to become entrepreneurs and drive technological progess (JA-YE, 2014).

Some issues were found while working on employers' needs regarding competences of young people. Firstly, employers report a lack of skills by job applicants; in particular soft skills around **work ethic and problem-solving ability** are often insufficient. For example, Germany has the second-lowest number of employers (26%) reporting that a lack of skills causes problems for their business. German employers see the largest gaps in soft skills, in particular in work ethic and problem solving and analysis. This may reflect an education and attainment gap: around 7 percent of youth leave secondary school without any formal qualifications; 12 percent do not complete their apprenticeships; and up to 30 percent who start university do not graduate (European Commission, 2014). Policy makers and education professionals should emphasize those skills in order for young people to be more confident.

Secondly, There are skill gaps in the workforce for tasks rated as increasing in importance concerning **communication skills** (foreign language and capacity to delivery speeches and presentations), planning or persuasion skills, and ICT (CEDEFOP, 2013) it is therefore crucial to bring greater efficiency on this field. There is also a lack of communication between stakeholders. Communication is vital to ensure that education providers are aligning the curriculum with employers' needs, and to connect students to the job market. However, only 37% of French employers say they communicate with education providers several times a year. Employers that work together on defining the skills and qualifications they require can have greater impact on embedding these into the education young people receive. However, as with employer-provider communication, there is little communication between employers in France. Only 45% of employers communicate with other employers on the topic of skills, also well below the survey average (55%), so it is urgent to tackle this main issue (Mc Kinsey Center for Government, 2014). Millions of young people run the risk of exclusion from the labour market and formal economic activity. Young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than older people. So how can policymakers address this problem? Several recommendations emerged from the high-level panel:

- The European Union and Member States should try to ensure that their policies are all pulling in the same direction;
- Build training programmes to give young people skills that better match the needs of businesses;

[23] For more information, please visit: http://pr.euractiv.com/pr/digital-skills-entrepreneurial-training-key-next-generation-e-leaders-121230

- Encourage young entrepreneurs;
- Focus on new technologies, a realm that offers some of the best opportunities for educated young people;
- Civil society organisations should open their doors to young people so that they can become more involved in promoting democracy and social change.

Thirdly, the National Youth Agency highlighted in a report (2007)[24] **the difficulty of differentiating between skills and learning gained through volunteering**, and those resulting from other interventions, such as the youth work which provides the context for volunteering, from particular life changes such as becoming a parent, or from simply growing up. This difficulty is, of course, not unique to volunteering. However, the ability of some young people to make clear distinctions between the skills gained through volunteering and their experience of formal education and employment indicates that more could be done to help young people and those working with them identify the skills developed through different types of settings and activities.

It is clear that the labour market needs work force skilled with a set of key competences among which soft skills play an increasing role. Problem solving, intercultural skills, team spirit, creativity etc. are exactly the competences that young people acquire in non-formal learning schemes of youth work. Unfortunately, while in the political debates a lot of attention is dedicated to 'validation' of non-formal learning outcomes at the work place (and in formal education and training), the impact of learning in youth work activities is constantly undervalued, particularly on the side of employers. Even if employers are positive toward young people's experience in youth organisations, **a common understanding and language should be developed in order to provide the employment sector with appropriate information on the potential of non and informal learning in youth work and youth work needs to identify its potential of providing competences for the labour market**; at the same time it must be made clear where the limits of this role are (European Youth Organisation, 2013).

Today and in the future, young persons will **need a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills** in order to succeed in their life. Their capacity to achieve goals, work effectively with others and manage emotions will be essential to meet the challenges of the 21st century. While everyone acknowledges the importance of socio-emotional skills such as perseverance, sociability and self-esteem, there is often insufficient awareness of what works to enhance these skills. Teachers, parents and education professionals do not really know whether their efforts at developing these skills are paying off, and what they could do better. Policies and programmes designed to measure and enhance socio-emotional skills vary considerably within and across countries. That is why it is important to ensure that the European Union and Member States' policies, including those for education and training, are all pulling in the same direction (OECD, 2014).

3.5 The European Key Competences

The adoption of the 2006 European Key Competences Framework is a **reference document** in the sense that it embodied the European Union's will to follow the pace of international developments and **shift to a learning outcomes approach through a basic set of core competences for all individuals**. It was essential for Europe to align with UNESCO (1998 Delors

[24] The National Youth Agency (2007), *Young People's Volunteering and Skills Development.* Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RW103-S.pdf

report) and OECD (2001 DeSeCo project) and define what learners should know, understand and be able to do at the end of the learning process in a common framework. The European Key Competences Framework operated a **broad paradigm shift** because it corresponds to different levels and to different sectors of education and training and thus contributed to foster a **lifelong and life-wide learning perspective**. It was also very innovative in putting all eight competences on the same level, and defining them in precise knowledge, attitudes and skills. It contributed to place basic skills in the spotlight with requirements in mother tongue, foreign language and STEM skills that are today still very much valued and closely monitored under ET2020 benchmarks but also under PISA and PIAAC - two surveys that were also greatly influenced by this new approach and that assessed competence use in real-life situations, a genuine methodological revolution. It also enhanced digital literacy as an essential asset, almost ten years before the Opening Up Education Communication. Finally, it ranked high in the EU political agenda transversal competences that are also still very much relevant today when adaptability is the key word to cope with labour market and societal changes. By trying to implement the Framework, almost all Member States adapted to this new vision of education and made of the competence-based approach a policy priority. The influence of the Framework **incited governments to reshape their teaching and learning systems**, as implementation needed a cross-curricular vision, collaborative, interactive and technology-enhanced learning environments as well as properly trained and committed educators. A **lot remains to be done in terms of teacher training, learner-centred pedagogy and new assessment methods, implementing functioning validation arrangements and guidance infrastructures**.

3.6 The links between voluntary sector and the labour market

The European Commission[25] believes education and training are crucial for both economic and social progress, and aligning skills with labour market needs plays a key role in this. In an increasingly globalised and knowledge-based economy, Europe is in need of a well-skilled workforce to compete in terms of productivity, quality, and innovation. Putting lifelong learning centre stage is highly strategic, for our citizens' employability but also for their social inclusion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment.

Indeed, employability is only the top of the iceberg when it comes to active participation of individuals in democratic, social and economic life, to what they can bring to our knowledge societies –and this contribution is part of the bigger picture of each citizen's development. Voluntary sector organisations are amongst the most active users and designers of validation procedures, often of a formative character (European Commission, 2014):

- In Austria, the voluntary sector is actively involved in developing and implementing the strategy for including qualifications acquired in non-formal or informal learning contexts into the future NQF.

- In Sweden, 'Folkbildning' is a parallel educational pathway to the formal system, which is considered to be part of the voluntary sector and has strong connections to various NGOs. The 'Folkbildningsrådet'[26], the National Council of Adult Education, is one of the partners that is consulted by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education regarding validation.

[25] For more information about education and training for growth and jobs, please visit: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/growth-jobs_en.htm

[26] For more information, please visit: http://www.folkbildningsradet.se/

- In Switzerland, many voluntary sector organisations active in the field of equal opportunities, education and training of adults and voluntary work, and have led the way in developing and implementing a large number of validation initiatives. Yet in some other countries (e.g. Slovenia), it is reported that the voluntary sector is currently not fully consulted by the government as part of the design of validation policies. In some countries and particularly in Northern Europe (Iceland, Denmark, Sweden), the voluntary sector plays an important role in promoting the use of validation and its delivery, for instance clarifying, wording and documenting their prior learning, including through the use of portfolios.

3.7 Results of our research among employers about their needs and expectations regarding competences

EUCIS-LLL was responsible for conducting research among employers in order to find out about their needs and expectations regarding competences. In order to do so, several companies from different sectors (non-for-profit, for profit and public) were contacted and 8 questions were asked. Employers' surveys provide a first overview on skills needs directly from employers. It gives access to the qualitative information on skills and competence requirements, their changes, and skills gaps among specific categories. Employers' surveys allow to collect information and to verify already available data and to better understand the phenomena on the labour market. The overall research question was: *What does a company really expect from a recognition process of NFIL in order for them to be able to take into account the competences gained by young people during a long-term volunteering within youth organisations?*

It was very difficult to create a dialogue with employers about this topic. We have contacted 20 organisations and companies by phone and by email but only four of them responded:

- Raúl Iglesias Durán – Project Officer at Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Cáceres (Spain);
- Daniela Slinki – Human resources at Coopération Bancaire pour l'Europe (CBE);
- Patrick De Bucquois – Head of Human Resources at Caritas International Belgium;
- Juan Carlos Carabias Fuentes – Iberia Training, Development & Universities Relations Manager de Atos

The research study enabled EUCIS-LLL to explore employers' understanding of what non-formal and informal learning is in the context of youth work and its value for young people; employers' perception of the skills required by young people entering the labour market and employers' needs regarding the recognition of learning experiences within the youth sector. According to the results, the 3 main competences gained by young people during a long-term youth volunteering period that are most relevant for the labour market are:

1 – The capacity to take initiative and entrepreneurial mindset;
2 – The sense of initiative and pro-active attitude;
3 – Intercultural and interpersonal skills.

The survey respondents agreed that it is crucial to take initiatives because proactive people are constantly moving forward, looking to the future and making things happen. They also stressed the importance of soft skills acquired through a volunteering period because these skills are transferable and can be used in many different types of jobs. They are personal

qualities and attitudes that can help young people to work well with others and make a positive contribution to organisations they work for. However, this is not to say that technical skills and knowledge are not important as well particularly computer skills. But the respondents agreed to say that technical skills could be taught more easily than soft skills, which tend to be either personal characteristics or skills that have been improved over a period of time.

Nevertheless, even if the same respondents ensured that they value the fact that an applicant was active as a volunteer in the final decision to hire him/her compared to other aspects, they also agreed that the competences of an applicant gained during a volunteering period could not be as valuable to a company as the competences gained through formal learning because employers still value formal education as essential for a successful career. It is especially the case in Spain where volunteering is not recognised enough according to Raúl Iglesias Durán, Project Officer at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Cáceres, but all the respondents agreed that even short-term work experiences could be valuable as a way for young people to develop skills, contacts, and awareness about career options. That is why the respondents to our survey said that certificates or portfolio that describes the competences of young people are needed in order for the training and learning of a young applicant to be considered. In addition, all the respondents stressed the importance of self-assessment to be able to be our own judges.

Finally, the survey shows that relatively few employers know and use the competences frameworks and recognition tools (e.g. the 8 key competences as defined by the European Commission or Youthpass) which means that there is a need to clarify the usefulness of the existing tools. This has been confirmed by EU surveys (Special Eurobarometers, European area of skills and qualifications).

To conclude, we can state that validation and recognition arrangements should be developed in a comprehensive way by being possible in all sectors and levels of education and training. Relevant stakeholders should be involved in the development, monitoring and evaluation of validation mechanisms of assessment frameworks. It is important to understand and promote the personal and social benefits of non-formal education in civil society. Sources relating to employers' needs regarding the skills required by young people entering the labour market are very little so there is a need for the employers and stakeholders to be better informed and it is necessary to developed sources to understand the needs. However, the outcomes of our work show that soft skills are highly asked by employers such as communication skills, planning or persuasion skills and team work (CEDEFOP, 2013), a better explanation is therefore recommended to bring greater efficiency on this field. Policy makers and education professionals should emphasize those skills in order for young people to be more confident.

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5.2 Research from University side - VUB

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Research from the university side

GR-EAT Project Research Phase 1

VUB, February 2015

Dr. Free De Backer
Prof. dr. Koen Lombaerts

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Introduction

A lot of learning takes place outside the formal education curriculum and training system (e.g., in a youth organisation, at the workplace, etc.). Cross (2007, in European Youth Forum, 2013) notes that only 20 per cent of learning throughout life occurs in the formal education system. Making these learning outcomes visible appears to be at the forefront of a lot of public policy in the European Union and the OECD countries, as it is considered to be one of the possible options to make lifelong learning for all a reality (OECD, 2014). Also, it is crucial to use all available competences, irrespective of where and how they have been acquired, considering the combination of a rapidly changing labour market, an ageing population and increased global competition (Cedefop, 2008). However, little consensus exists about the extent to which non-formal and informal learning should be recognised. Therefore, this literature study aims to identify the expectations and needs from formal education stakeholders regarding competences and recognition processes of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL). Conclusively, a set of recommendations is provided for youth organisations to build their own tools of NFIL recognition.

I. Non-formal and informal learning

1/ Definitions

Lifelong learning includes formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences (see Appendix 1). Formal learning processes take place in ‘‘education and training institutions, leading to recognized diplomas and qualifications’’ (European Commission, 2000, p. 8). Learners intentionally participate in formal learning and are conscious of their learning during the learning activity. Non-formal learning occurs in all organized educational activities (usually short-term and voluntary) that are outside of the formal school system organized by a mixture of actors (Schugurensky, 2000; Schugurensky & Myers, 2003). As in formal education, teachers (instructors, facilitators) play a crucial role in these programs. Unlike formal education, prerequisites in terms of previous schooling are usually not mandatory to be admitted to the curriculum. Occasionally, however, a diploma certifying competence or attendance is granted (Schugurensky, 2000). The structured and goal-oriented nature of non-formal education is contrasting to informal learning (European Youth Forum, 2013). Informal learning is regarded as ‘‘the natural accompaniment to everyday life’’ (European Commission, 2000, p. 8) and is

described as a ‘‘very normal, very natural human activity’’ which is ‘‘so invisible that people just don’t seem to be aware of their own learning’’ (Tough, 2002, p. 2). These three types of learning are considered to interact and overlap (Schugurensky & Myers, 2003). Some authors therefore prefer (in)formality stressing a continuum rather than distinct categories with each its own characteristics (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003; Reder & Strawn, 2006).

Informal learning processes are conceptualized into three categories, i.e. self-directed, incidental, and tacit learning (Table 1). First, self-directed learning is a conscious process that follows a prior intention to learn. Mostly, self-directed learning trajectories do not include actual educators, though other persons may be perceived as valuable resources for learning (Schugurensky, 2000). Second, incidental learning takes place unintentionally from the part of the learner but becomes visible during or straight after the learning activity (Schugurensky, 2007). Incidental learning mainly occurs as a by-product of some other activity and generally starts while people are not aware (Marsick et al., 2006). Third, in contrast to self- directed and incidental learning, tacit learning remains mostly intangible. It is also referred to as socialization and involves the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviour, and knowledge occurring in daily life (Schugurensky, 2000). Polanyi (1996, in Schugurensky & Myers, 2003, p. 326) describes tacit learning as ‘‘those things that we know but we cannot tell’’. Despite its implicit nature, learners can become aware of their tacit learning after a process of retrospective recognition (Peeters et al., 2014).

Table 1. Informal learning (Peeters et al., 2014)

Type	Initiator	Structure	Intentio	Awareness
Self- irected	Learner	Pre-set goals	Yes	Yes
	Example: Contacting mum to ask her how to make your essert.			
Incidental	Not the learner	Unstructured, nbedded in daily life	No	Yes
	Example: Watching television and learning about the newest astry.			
Tacit	Not the learner	Unstructured, nbedded in daily life	No	No
	Example: A child imitating how to eat with knife and fork.			

These three informal learning subcategories are positioned on a continuum: as intention, reflection, awareness, and accessibility increase, the focus moves from the unconscious forms of informal learning to self-directed learning (Marsick et al., 2006).

Informal learning experiences can lead to participation in formal education and the other way around. Informal and formal learning processes sustain one another and should therefore be considered as complementary (Reder & Strawn, 2006; Reischmann, 1986, 2008; Smith & Smith, 2008). Although people barely ever oppose informal learning to formal education, informal learning processes can also take place within formal educational institutions but outside their formal curricula (Jarvis, 2008; Schugurensky, 2007). Whereas formal learning refers to the fixed, intended, and formally provided curriculum (Ozolins, Hall, & Peterson, 2008), informal learning is related to the informal and hidden curriculum (Marsick et al., 2009). It is assumed that blending both learning types in classrooms results in more significant learning experiences (Colley et al., 2003).

There is a wide range of views around the classification of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The boundaries between them are still questioned. The context plays an important role in influencing the form of the classification. For example, the terms non-formal learning and informal learning are often used as synonyms (Colley et al., 2003). Following Eraut (2000), some authors favour the term nonformal consisting of three types of learning (Table 2) to avoid misunderstanding with common and colloquial meanings associated with the term ‘informal’ (Mirzaee & Hasrati, 2014).

Table 2. Eraut’s typology of nonformal learning (2000)

Type	Learning that does not follow from formally organized learning programs or events
Reactive learning	Near spontaneous and unplanned learning, the learner is aware of it but the level of intentionality will vary.
Deliberative learning	Learning is planned and time is specifically set aside for it to happen.
Implicit learning	The acquisition of knowledge independently of conscious attempts to learn and in the absence of explicit knowledge about what was learned.

2/ Benefits of NFIL

Generally speaking, non-formal and informal learning outcomes affect different life domains (Peeters et al., 2014). First, on economic and professional level, the validation of non-formal and informal learning results in shortened study trajectories, reducing costs, and training students more quickly for work. Second, on educational level, the recognition of NFIL learning can be the key to lifelong learning. Learners are more able to identify the connections between the diverse learning activities, and may improve self-understanding and awareness of personal learning preferences. Third, on a personal level, examining one's own informal and non-formal learning achievements is considered an empowering exercise when becoming aware of one's own capabilities. Additionally, such personal gains may impact the broader community, since an increase in self-esteem and confidence building are considered important facilitators of active citizenship. Finally, by not neglecting non-formal and informal learners, education and society by large may involve far more learners dedicated to lifelong learning (Peeters et al., 2014).

II. Competence

Many definitions of the term competence appear in literature as well as derivative concepts such as "competency", "competencies" and "competences" which are used interchangeably, without any explanation of difference in their meaning (Pukelis, 2009). By way of illustration we report some examples.

- "Competence is regarded as the possession and development of integrated skills, knowledge, appropriate attitudes and experience for the successful performance of one's life roles" (Struyven & De Meyst, 2010, p. 1496). This definition focuses on the learning outcomes of an individual realized through an action, a choice, executing a social role, a personal project, or a specific professional situation (Socius, 2006).

- "A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context" (OECD, 2005, p. 4). According to Schuller and Desjardins (2007, in Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010), this definition abandons the narrow perspective of competencies, as so much of what people need to do to succeed in work and life goes beyond the notion of knowledge and skills.

- Sundberg (2001, p. 104) uses a pragmatic definition of competence encompassing the

combination of person's "knowledge (what people learn in education), experience (what people gather in their job, at their workplace and in social life), and abilities to use their knowledge and experience".

- "Competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy" (European Communities, 2008, p. 11).

The competence-based approach to the development of the EQF is based on increased attention being paid to concepts of lifelong learning, adaptive and workplace-oriented learning processes, as well as the abilities and knowledge necessary for employability in a rapidly changing society (Bohlinger, 2008). To date, limited studies directly assess the effects of competencies on individual or organizational outcomes, partly because of the lack of common measures of these competencies (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010). In that sense the Council of Europe (2007) has a tool for assessing competences of youth leaders and youth workers, which helps to increase the recognition of non-formal education and learning and youth work. Its concept of competence is the following:

"Competence means the ability to apply knowledge, know-how and skills in a stable/recurring or changing situation. Two elements are crucial: applying what one knows and can do to a specific task or problem, and being able to transfer this ability between different situations" (Council of Europe, 2007).

Consequently, in their tool, competence in youth work is understood as having three interlinked dimensions: knowing (knowledge), knowing how to do (skills), and knowing how to be (attitudes).

III – Validation of NFIL

1/ Validation of NFIL: context and meaning

Validation of NFIL outcomes can be described as the process of identifying, assessing and recognizing a wide range of competences developed throughout life and in different contexts. It neglects the way and the time learning outcomes were acquired. The term validation has been

mostly connected with lifelong learning instead of formal learning. The latest is always validated, while validation of NFIL is still under discussion. Also, the word validation is often alternated with other terminologies like accreditation, certification, recognition, assessment, acknowledgement, equivalency test, identification etc. As far as NFIL is concerned these terminologies can be considered synonymous (Dev Regmi, 2009).

Souto-Otero and authors (2005) explain the appearance of validating NFIL on countries and organisations' agendas based on five emergent challenges, which are in line with the abovementioned benefits of NFIL:

1. it is relevant to the needs of the knowledge economy by increasing geographic mobility and enlarging the labour market;
2. it enables the identification of employees' competences and professional development needs, which contributes to business's quest for a qualified workforce;
3. it has the potential to improve access to the formal education system. Validating NFIL is indispensable to provide direct routes to acquiring formal qualifications or to pave the way to higher education training;
4. it may enhance the efficiency of the education system since the duration and costs associated with attending formal education can be significantly reduced;
5. it may empower socially isolated citizens to re-enter the labour market and society.

According to Werquin (2010), recognition of NFIL should be better integrated into existing qualifications frameworks to fortify its place as part of a coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategy. However, although the growing national qualification frameworks encourage developments in and 'mainstreaming' of validation, evaluation and recognition of NFIL still remains one of the major discussion areas of the education policy in the European countries (Cedefop, 2008; Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009).

Recognition of learning outcomes is typically provided by public authorities, educational institutions, and professional bodies or through collective bargaining (Perulli, 2009). Dev Regmi (2009, p. 38) states that in some countries the validation of NFIL is carried out by governmental organizations (like ministries of education) through a nationally recognized qualification but without consistency. The most important target groups potentially interested in validation are employed, unemployed, immigrants, and young people looking for professional steadiness or willing to get recognition for their voluntary experiences. No official statistics concerning the population involved in validation processes exist, but according to a survey carried out by Isfol and the University of Rome, almost 36 per cent of youngsters

between 18 and 33 years would access to a validation service if it was available (Perulli, 2009).

Instead of essentialising approaches (see e.g., Bjørnavold, 2000), a situated learning perspective should be used to examine the validation of prior learning in specific contexts. Indeed, the idea that validation has a liberating effect should not be taken for granted (Diedrich, 2013).

Werquin (2010, p. 8) distinguishes a succession of steps within the recognition of NFIL outcomes:

1. *identification and documentation* – identifying, recording and establishing what someone knows or can do. This is a personal stage of self-evaluation occurring with or without feedback/guidance or an external evaluator is involved when there is significant formalisation;
2. *validation* – establishing that what someone knows or can do matches with certain requirements, points of reference or standards. In this stage, a level of performance is set and necessitates the involvement of a third party;
3. *certification* – stating that what someone knows or can do matches with certain requirements, and awarding a document testifying to this. In this stage, an accredited authority is involved to certify performance and possibly the attained level;
4. *social recognition* – acceptance of what someone knows or can do.

Eventually, a recognition process could deliver fully equivalent qualifications to those obtained through formal learning.

2/ Benefits from RVC of NFIL

The process of recognition, validation and certification (RVC) is supposed to be beneficial for individuals, enterprises and the society at large (Dev Regmi, 2009). The challenge for policy makers is to find the right balance (Werquin, 2010). However, little research-based evidence exists pertinent to the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits for individuals due to participation in the recognition process (Smith & Clayton, 2009). In general, UNESCO (2005, p. 17) identifies five benefits of RVC of informal and non-formal learning:

1. entrance into formal education systems for further education or training;
2. improvement of learners' employability in the labour market;
3. certification of prior learning for enterprises;
4. transfer of skills acquired from different fields;
5. enhancement of universal basic education (i.e. causing flexibilisation in present formal and non-formal education systems).

As Cedefop (2009, p. 39) noted, from the perspective of education providers, engaging with validation of NFIL can provide significant benefits. First, the needs of mature learners and part-time students can be addressed by recognising alternative forms of entry requirement and shortened study trajectories through earning exemptions. Second, people who are developing competences in, for example, third or voluntary sectors can be engaged. Third, improving support strategies for retention, guidance and learner support are advanced whereas learners' needs are identified before entering a programme. Fourth, validation of NFIL can contribute to curriculum development on the nature of learning, knowledge and assessment. Fifth, a consistent and recorded approach to validation for entry to or exemption within a programme can increase transparency of decisions regarding entry and credit. Sixth, validation of NFIL can stimulate the development of learning partnerships between different learning providers across different sectors to ensure the needs of the learner are most effectively met.

3/ Challenges during RVC of NFIL

Various reports state some challenges when validating NFIL. First, focusing on assessment which is the basis of awarding accreditation, can restrict informal learning outcomes and consequently lead to lower expectations of what can be achieved in the recognition process (Batsleer, 2008). Second, another concern is that trust should be restored when national education systems substitute the traditional benchmark by learning gained in a wide range of very diverse settings (Cedefop, 2009). Indeed, the principles of consistency and reliability are always deemed as a big challenge (Dev Regmi, 2009). However, UNESCO (2005, p. 5) asserts that "a precondition for lifelong learning is the existence of an overall qualification framework that covers any kind of learning". Third, caution is needed when sorting out the learning outcomes from the ones that are not likely to be validated. In this case, a suitable method of assessment has to be developed (Dev Regmi, 2009). Fourth, some major barriers to engagement with recognition of prior learning are determined, including a lack of awareness of recognition, the complexity of the process together with the difficult language surrounding recognition; depreciation of their own experiential learning; and favouring training itself instead of entering into a recognition process (Smith & Clayton, 2009). Fifth, when adopting a validation approach it is essential to consider that the amount of time people spend in learning processes is not necessarily positively correlated with successful learning outcomes. Up to now, limited research has looked into the actual competencies that people have gained from their informal

learning activities, partly because many of the criteria of successful informal learning outcomes are themselves informally determined (Livingstone, 1999).

4/ Methods for validating NFIL

According to the report of the Thematic Group of Leonardo da Vinci program (2007, in Dev Regmi, 2009), there are five approaches of validation:

- traditional test and examination (e.g., Austria, Germany etc.): several countries use formal exams to validate NFIL, which guarantees the fulfilment of all criteria (i.e., validity, reliability and authenticity) through a procedure that is both tailored to the subject and objective (Souto-Otero et al., 2005);
- declarative method (e.g., France, Netherlands etc.): the individual declares that his/her knowledge and skills relates to a particular set of requirements defined in standards which seems to be relevant to enterprises (Dev Regmi, 2009);
- methods based on observation on-site (e.g., Belgium, UK etc.);
- simulation (e.g., France);
- evidences extracted from works (e.g., Netherlands): collecting evidence of learning outcomes related to work situation, voluntary activities, family or other settings.

The portfolio method (e.g., France, UK etc.) is a blend of the abovementioned methods (a mix of self-assessment, external assessment and written tests). This reduces the subjectivity of test results and enhances reliability, authenticity and validity (Souto-Otero et al., 2005). Students often lack familiarity with portfolios. Therefore, a well-structured portfolio should be used and a descriptive and detailed assessment system which helps to compensate for the complexity of the learning outcomes (Gregori-Giralt & Menéndez-Varela, 2015). To date, portfolio approaches are frequently applied (Souto-Otero et al., 2005). However, the value is unclear. Instead, or in addition, countries could draw more extensively on the formal learning methods, including selective testing (Werquin, 2010). When neither formal exams nor the portfolio method is used, an external assessor is often involved, who takes a leading role in certifying an individual's competences. Due to the possibly variation of external assessors, a fully standardised final examination system cannot be achieved. Consequently, results vary from school to school (Souto-Otero et al., 2005).

Although methods are often combined to enhance the reliability and robustness of the

assessment in validation, particular methods are favoured and accepted in relation to the abovementioned different stages of the validation process. Portfolio is by far the most frequently accepted method in documentation, followed by declarative methods, and simulations/evidence extracted from work. Tests and examinations become the most accepted method during assessment. Unfortunately, this may disadvantage less favoured groups of learners, in particular those with negative previous experiences of formal education (European Commission, 2014).

Smith and Clayton (2009) inventarise three effective approaches to support candidates in the recognition processes of NFIL:

- support by mentors or assessors with available time to assist, explain and encourage;
- involvement of coaches and peer support networks;
- enhancing interactions between learners and the assessor in order to help individuals identifying their learning from their experiences.

The recognition process should be promoted to potential candidates in such a way that they can clearly see which benefits that can be gained, where their NFIL fits or matches with learning outcomes, or the system that they were wanting to access. Also, for improving recognition outcomes it is essential to share information, to have clear guidelines and a range of communication mechanisms beyond the printed form (Smith & Clayton, 2009).

5/ Evaluation procedure

The evaluation procedure of NFIL achievements is characterized by several consistent and integrated stages: informing, consulting (which involves preparation for the assessment), assessing and decision-making. First, during the informing-stage the applicant is introduced to the NFIL evaluation procedure (incl. principles, standards, and possible outcomes). Second, the consulting-stage is aimed at preparing the applicant for the evaluation process, which includes elaborating on the duration, level of applicant involvement, evaluation criteria, etc. Consultations take place on individual as well as group level. Third, the assessment-stage covers all activities focusing on assessing applicants' learning achievement as presented by the applicant through the folder of learning achievements. Assessors evaluate the presented evidence with regards to the programme's study outcomes and context. Importantly, the authenticity, diversity, and duration of the applicant's experiences that led to the reported learning achievements should be taken into account. Fourth, the decision-making phase entails

the (non-) recognition as reported by the evaluation committee. Although not frequently granted in Europe, applicants may receive a diploma attesting to the qualification when learning achievements fully correspond with the programme's study results and related competences. In case of partial correspondence, the applicant can be granted a certificate certifying competencies (see Appendix 2) (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009).

Ultimately, as Cedefop (2008) explains, candidates can use their certificate in two different ways: a formative (as career and personal guidance) or a summative (as recognition and transfer of competencies) way. The formative function refers to providing certificates or proves of competence, which is not a purpose on itself, but only a mean to demonstrate the progress of individuals and how this development can be further promoted. The summative function is realised when a civil effect is granted to the recognized competences. The civil effect can manifest itself in more opportunities on the labour market or education trajectories can be optimised tailored to individual needs (by shortening study duration, exemptions…). Although the formative approach focuses on the learning process contrary to the summative approach stressing the learning outcomes, this distinction should not be overly polarised. It can be perceived as two generalised ways to meet learners' needs whose skills are being assessed (Berglund & Andersson, 2012). Recently, the balance between formative and summative approaches has developed differently in European countries (Bjørnavold, 2009).

6/ Quality requirements for the process of recognition

Assessments need to be reliable, consistent and demanding in order to guarantee qualifications as credible proofs of competence (OECD, 2014). Unfortunately, European stakeholders consider a lack of reliability and validity in validation methods as a barrier to accept these methods to validate NFIL (Souto-Otero et al., 2005). Therefore, all relevant partners should be involved in the design, updating and delivery of assessment frameworks and participate in assessments to raise trust and confidence (Cedefop, 2009; OECD, 2014). Also, employers, for example, have an idea about the necessary qualifications in the labour market and the associated required skillset (OECD, 2014).

To ensure the quality of evaluation two forms of evaluation should be applied: an internal and external evaluation. First, the institution responsible for the recognition of competencies carries out the internal evaluation of the activity itself according to the prepared evaluation

methodology. Besides the reflection of the consultant and evaluator experience, a candidate's opinion about the evaluation organisation and the methods applied can be significant to improve the evaluation process. Second, when the results of the internal evaluation are unsatisfactory, an institution authorized by the state will conduct an external evaluation. Importantly, the quality assurance system of evaluating NFIL achievements should function as a subsystem of the quality assurance of the institution's activity (Van de Poele, Janssens, & Debusscher, 2008; Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009). In various sectors a trend is observed moving from quality control (internaly and after the procedure) to warranty of quality (externaly and permanent control). The latter aims at establishing and as much as possible guaranteeing specific quality requirements in advance (Van de Poele et al., 2008).

Based on experience of different countries, Cedefop (2008) identified common principles determining the quality of non-formal and informal learning evaluation. It has to be accessible, voluntary, flexible, objective and reliable.

- Evaluation *accessibility*: "accessible to all interested and does not depend on the mode of acquisition of competences. Considering this principle, conditions are created to evaluate one's learning achievements at the time and place suitable for the person interested in" (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009, p. 124).
- The person *voluntarily* decides on the participation in the evaluation process, is motivated, thoroughly prepared, responsible for the evidence of achievements produced for the evaluation, and is more consciously planning further studies at higher school (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009).
- Evaluation *flexibility* involves the methodology to evaluate learning achievements acquired in a formal, non-formal and informal way (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009, p. 125).
- The assurance of evaluation *transparency* and *objectivity* aims to expose candidate's learning achievements at the maximum, avoid the evaluator's subjective attitude towards the candidate, procedures and criteria, and ensure that clear standards are applied (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009, p. 125; OECD, 2014). At any point in time the procedure should be open for scrutiny to avoid doubt or suspicion regarding the assessment itself, the recognised learning outcomes or qualification (Werquin, 2010).
- Evaluation *reliability* indicates that the qualification is recognised for people who have acquired all learning outcomes covered by the national professional standard or study

programme (Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009). In this case, reliable means that the same results must be attained when assessment processes are administered several times under the same conditions (i.e. the same candidates with the same learning outcomes). Ensuring fairness might be costly, as it requires the standardisation of quality assurance procedures (Werquin, 2010).

Werquin (2010) adds one more principle to the assessment process. It must be valid too as people whose learning outcomes are recognised deserve this. Essentially, tutors and assessors must be of high quality for the successful integration of validation methods as reliable, valid and authentic methods. Therefore, specialized training may be needed, even for those with experience in the evaluation of learning outcomes in formal education system (Souto-Otero et al., 2005; Werquin, 2010).

7/ Formal education stakeholder: Vrije Universiteit Brussel as study case on recognition of NFIL competences

Some interviews with key actors were conducted to investigate the validation procedures of NFIL at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium, E.U.). The university distinguishes two possibilities: the EVK (previously acquired qualifications) and EVC (previously acquired competencies) procedure. On the one hand, students can be exempted from a course unit if they can present a qualification (inland or foreign) that proves they have passed an equivalent course unit at another institute of higher education (EVK-procedure). The validation of EVK occurs in the institutions, especially through the study trajectory guide within each faculty with approval of the professors concerned. Only in case of doubt whether it is EVK or not, the EVC-procedure will be followed. The regulation concerning exemptions has been tightened by decree. In case an exemption is not allowed, argumentations are needed to create the opportunity to lodge an appeal against the decision. In theory, only certificates are in place, but in practice, the study trajectory guides also occasionally reckon with other acquired competences and experiences. On the other hand, when subscribing to the EVC procedure, students' study trajectory can be shortened when they have acquired the competences of a course unit elsewhere, for example as the result of a professional practice, leisure or self-study. These previously acquired competences outside a classroom can sometimes lead to a total or partial exemption from course unit(s). But candidates can even apply for a proof of evidence on bachelor or master level. Depending on the level, the cost for the investigation of competences differs.

The EVC regulations were established in application of the Decree of April 30, 2004 concerning more flexibility in higher education in Flanders (Universitaire Associatie Brussel, 2013). The acknowledgment of EVC occurs at the level of the association who defines the regulations, which shall be applied by each partner institution in the association. Because of the association's autonomy, it is difficult to construct an appropriate government policy and develop knowledge and expertise. The regulation within the Brussels University Association (2013) contains six steps:

1. application by letter;
2. if the letter is allowed, the application will be registered;
3. the applicant submits a well-reasoned portfolio (see Appendix 3);
4. allow or dismiss the portfolio;
5. if allowed, the evaluation of the application for recognition of previously acquired competences starts,
6. if the final decision is positive, the validating institution delivers a proof of competence for the acquired competences.

The study trajectory guide on faculty level is again involved in this procedure. They are in charge for doing an admission interview and coaching the candidate. The abovementioned quality requirements also apply to the EVC-procedure which are in line with those used during testing and examining within a formal education setting: validity, reliability, objectivity, transparency and standardisation (Van de Poele et al., 2008).

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel has only five applications per year approximately, which are mostly addressed to the human sciences. Higher institutes deal with more applications than universities due to the difficulties in relating professional experiences to academic skills. Moreover, academic skills are difficult to translate in learning outcomes. Also, the procedure takes a lot of time for the institution (i.e. man-hours), but also for the candidate. It takes longer than the presupposed three months. In the beginning, the portfolio method was preferred from a holistic point of view. This vision is adapted along the way. At present, supplementary to the portfolio, an admission interview is taken place in the beginning of the procedure with all involved partners in order to clarify the expectations. Additionally, the candidate can be invited to comment briefly on his/her portfolio. However, individual professors or study trajectory guides often discourage candidates to participate because the procedure is time-consuming for both parties and complex, and therefore hard to attain. Moreover, assessment of informally

acquired skills is technically demanding since such learning is usually poorly documented (OECD, 2014). Also, in line with previous reports (e.g., OECD, 2014; Van de Poele et al., 2008), the interviewees confirm the fear for diploma inflation and loss of status that goes with it. Perhaps only people's experience will be appreciated and not so much what they have learned from that experience. A number of professional educators are even unwilling to accept that the competences they teach can be acquired in diverse learning contexts, and even informally.

Van de Poele and colleagues (2008) suggest that a Flemish model for quality assurance of EVC should contain the following elemements:

- warranty of quality as permanent process;
- common and broad supported criteria (quality standards);
- implementation of the quality criteria through EVC-providers (internal self-assessment);
- external audit of the EVC-quality through control authorities;
- publication of the results which extends possibilities for monitoring validation initiatives;
- recognition (or label) for the organisation.

IV – Conclusions (cf beginning of the doc)

The underlying assumptions within this project are that non-formal and informal learning outcomes can and should be evaluated to obtain the same status as formal learning (Berglund & Andersson, 2012). However, as long as formal education stakeholders do not change their vision about NFIL competences and certification, the universities will try to stay away from recognition processes due to the time-consuming procedure, limited expertise and for the protection of their status. It explains why universities do not advertise for validation of NFIL. Consequently, it will be difficult to win acceptance.

A successful lifelong learning strategy implies that individuals should be able to transfer and combine the outcomes of learning experiences in diverse contexts, nothwithstanding if these competences are for example gained either from studying at a university or volunteering in a youth organisation. The possibility to progress vertically as well as horizontally within systems should be stressed (Bjørnavold, 2009). Therefore, if you like to reach recognition of NFIL competences, it is recommendatory to involve formal education stakeholders in the design of assessment frameworks because they are aware of what is needed to get a certification. Also, it is important to operationalize competences (learning-made-to-measure) to receive an

exemption or certificate. Perversely, listing competences received a negative connotation too. Indeed, through this inventarisation the recognition process results in ticking off competences through which people get also an idea about where they are not good in. This turns out to be a mainly behaviouristic approach. This is a side effect through which people could feel down. Importantly, people should know that a validation process does not assess person's competences, but matches person's abilities to the competences in accordance with professional standards (Pukelis, 2009). The latter aims to value previously acquired competences instead of indicating which competences are missing. A situated learning or authentic learning approach is therefore recommended with a primary scope on practical skills instead of blinding with gathered knowledge.

V – Recommendations

1/ Recommendations for policy and practice

Firstly, policymakers should raise the profile of recognition, simplify recognition processes, give them greater validity, and find the right balance between benefits and costs, as to date, many recognition processes remain marginal, small-scale and even precarious (Werquin, 2010). Secondly, education providers have to explore how existing validation procedures for formal learning can be adapted to meet the needs of learners outside the formal system. If the recognition of NFIL is integrated in the national education system, waste of learning and competences could possibly be converted into visible and usable competences (Cedefop, 2009). Also, better financial incentives to recognise prior learning may encourage its use (OECD, 2014). Thirdly, Peeters and authors (2014) stress that policy and practice should include more subtle and spontaneous ways of recognizing informal learning in addition to the validation of NFIL initiatives, because learners value the spontaneity of both informal learning and its recognition. Fourthly, a greater acknowledgement of the value of informality in learning in policy would encourage educational practice to bring informal learning out of the inferiority to formal learning (Coffield, 2000). We follow Coffield (2000) who stresses that informal learning needs to be regarded as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant (...) at other times not relevant at all. More insight in informal learning will reveal its own characteristics and will therefore no longer have to be approached by formal learning's criteria (Peeters et al., 2014). Fifthly, since informal learning is highly individual and cannot be

planned, it can only be recognized after active reflection (Marsick et al., 2009; Reischmann, 2008). Educators within and out-of-school contexts can help learners to recognize this learning when it takes place. To this end, they should dispose of sound knowledge of informal learning processes (Peeters et al., 2014). Finally, Dev Regmi (2009) notes that a new paradigm of education system in which NFIL has a valid position needs political and social commitment of all concerned stakeholders of education.

2/ Recommendations for recognition processes

First, validation connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies. The already articulated demand for competences on the labour market and the already developed supply of competences in education/training should be carefully matched. Also, all partners should be involved at the appropriate stages (e.g., design of assessment frameworks) to gain confidence and to obtain a satisfactory 'currency' in the labour market and educational sectors (Duvekot, 2009; Souto-Otero, 2010; Van de Poele et al., 2008).

Second, before and during the recognition process youth organisations can support and expand learner engagement in different ways (Duvekot, 2009; Smith & Clayton, 2009):

- enhancing the awareness of learning (e.g., courses in selfmanagement of competences and portfolio-build up);
- providing tailored support for and motivating individuals to minimise drop out;
- putting the individual learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-makership;
- focusing on learning outcomes instead of learning-input;
- reckoning with competence-systems (e.g., diploma-standards and competence-management) which must be linked so that individuals know where, how and why to enrich one's portfolio;
- making connections between learners and the process (e.g., information dissemination, clear guidelines etc.);
- making the process of recognition as streamlined and user-friendly as possible.

Third, to ensure a qualitative evaluation of NFIL achievements, it has to be accessible, voluntary, flexible, objective and reliable. Therefore, specialised training for tutors and assessors may be needed (Souto-Otero et al., 2005; Werquin, 2010). Also, assessment procedures need to be efficient in both time and cost to improve implementation and administration (Smith & Clayton, 2009).

Finally, youth organisations should be cautious for the fact that differences in procedures depending on organisations raise questions to the comparability of procedures and outcomes and even more to the equal treatment of candidates. Quality assurance is the key for realising a broadly based support for the implementation of NFIL recognition, which should function as a subsystem of the quality assurance of the institution's activity. Above all, using a common understanding is needed to ensure consistency in practice (Van de Poele et al., 2008; Kaminskienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2009).

3/ Recommendations for research

The literature study reveals some promising ideas for future research. The validation methods least frequently used in the labour market are those most commonly implemented in public validation initiatives (i.e. assessments/exams). The mismatch or complementation between these sectors is an area for further research (European Commission, 2014). Finally, in line with findings of previous research (Colley et al., 2003; Peeters et al., 2014), we stress the need for more qualitative research that explores the depth of informal learning.

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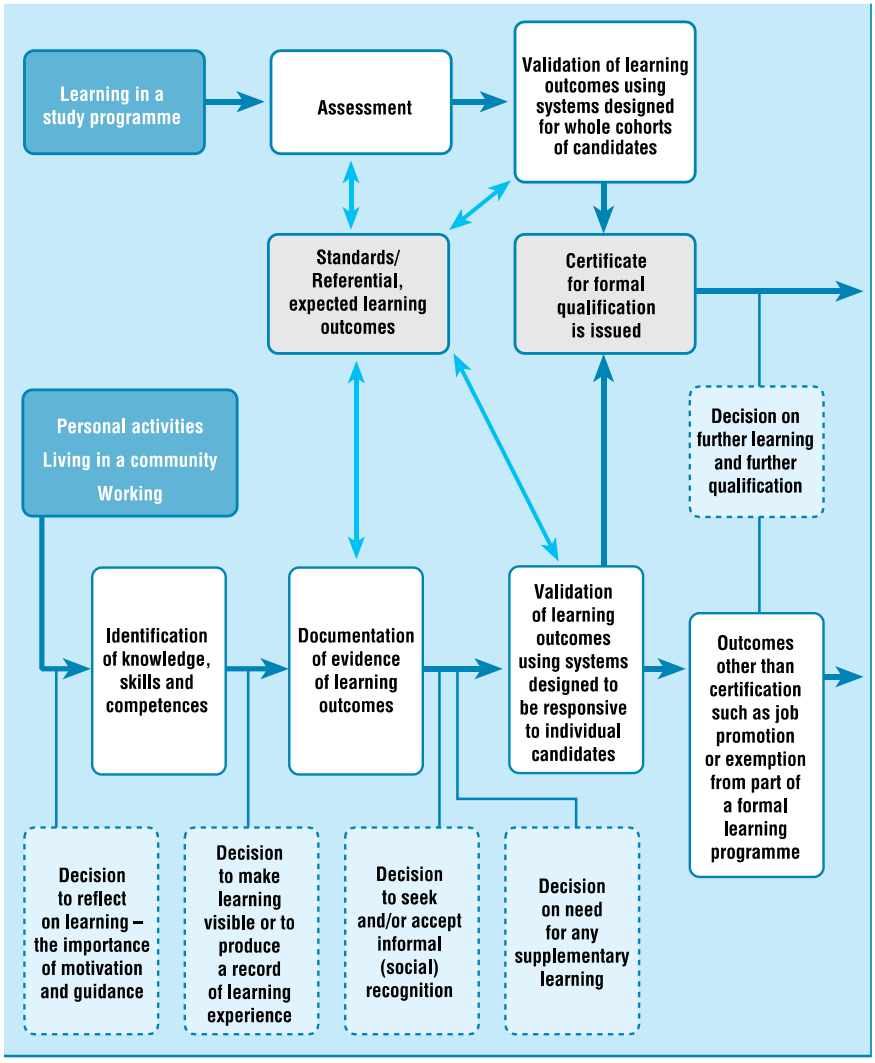
Appendices

Appendix 1. European Commission communication on lifelong learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning

	Formal learning	Non-formal learning	Informal learning
Location	Education and training institutions	Not provided by an education or training institution. Bulk of learning occurs in the workplace Pre-school playgroups, etc Community groups and voluntary sector	Daily activities at work, home, leisure, in community Youth organisations Intergenerational learning
Degree of structure	Highly structured objectives, time and support	Structured objectives, time or support	No structure
Intentionality	Learner's perspective is intentional	Learner's perspective is intentional	Rarely intentional, typically 'incidental'
Certification	Leads to certification	Not usually certificated	Not certificated
Facilitator	Teacher/trainer	Trainer, coach, mentor, childcarer	

source: Colley et al. (2003, p. 24)

Appendix 2. Routes from learning to certification



source: Cedefop (2009)

Appendix 3. Overview EVC portfolio

The portfolio should contain the following clearly distinguishable elements.

Curriculum Vitae a. General details b. Overview work experience c. Overview education/courses/training	
Self-assessment for each competency	
Overview of formal documentation	
Formal documentation (proof) for each competency	
Overview informal documentation	
Informal documentation for each competency	

source: Universitaire Associatie Brussel (2013)