Youthpass

SALTO TRAINING & COOPERATION

VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES DEVELOPED IN YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTEERING

STUDY ON THE VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES DEVELOPED IN YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTEERING WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Insights from Estonia, France, Germany and Slovenia

erasmus+ and european solidarity corps agency

Erasmus+ Jeunesse et Sport
Corps européen de solidarité
FRANCE

MOViT

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

The transnational study that you are holding in your hands or reading on your screen represents an attempt to explore and explain, from the perspective of youth work and youth volunteering, the situation and the challenges of having the competences developed in these contexts validated within the respective processes of higher education institutions.

The study comes at a time when there have been several developments within the youth field that support the recognition of competences developed both by youth workers and by the young people involved in youth work and volunteering. The initiatives, tools and processes have been developed both at national and European levels. At the same time, systems and processes are evolving to enable the validation of non-formal and informal learning within various other contexts. There is progress within both youth and education sectors. However, the two sides do not yet seem to “speak” to each other – it seems to remain a challenge to have the competences developed in youth work understood and considered in higher education.

SALTO Training and Cooperation and the partners of this project – the National Agencies of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes in Estonia, France, Germany and Slovenia, embarked on a mission to shed light on

the expectations, processes, practices and problems related to this topic in our countries. We have not been able to fully disentangle this complex issue, but we hope that by shedding additional light on its various facets, we will contribute to a better understanding of the elements of this topic and how they impact each other.

The cross-sectoral nature of the validation of non-formal and informal learning is often challenging. It requires stakeholders from different sectors to make an effort to understand each other's contexts, concepts and terminology. There are many different sectors concerned with validation, and therefore many shoes in very different sizes to step into. It requires active efforts to reach out, explain the concepts and the value of the respective work, and establish the common points where the output of one sector contributes to the expectations within the other.

Youth work has its own specific nature and values that need safeguarding in order for it to be successful. With its young people-centred approach, youth work adds value to young people's personal and social development but also contributes to competences that are relevant to their professional pathway. However, this contribution is hard to pinpoint and measure on structured scales, as youth work is based on relationships and values flexibility, and it resists formalisation and instrumentalisation. Perhaps this difficulty is one of the main reasons why, at a policy level, youth work and volunteering are seen as parts of the relevant context for validation, but not often considered in its practical implementation. Furthermore, general understanding in society about the value of involvement in youth work and volunteering remains diverse.

Youthpass, the recognition tool for Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes, aims to bridge this gap and explain the educational nature of youth work and volunteering, as well as individual competence development. With more than 2 million Youthpass certificates currently issued across Europe, it has good potential to make this learning value visible to the other sectors that are involved in validation, and more generally to society as a whole.

The important milestones leading up to this project include the publishing of the Youthpass Strategy in 2021, which describes the envisaged action to support young people and youth workers through greater recognition of learning in European youth contexts, and the high-profile seminar held in 2022 during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU, on the competences developed in youth work and their recognition. The need for further exploration and efforts to enhance recognition became evident, and further National Agencies joined the cooperation. We launched the work on this study in cooperation with the National Agencies from the four above-mentioned countries in summer 2024. Through this project, we aim to gain an insight into the state of affairs and perspectives on this topic, as well as raise awareness of youth work and volunteering, of their learning value in the validation contexts, and of Youthpass as a channel to make it visible. Our aim is to explore what is needed to build trust and promote youth work, volunteering and Youthpass in validation contexts, share our findings and develop recommendations. We at the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre have Youthpass in

mind when implementing this project. What do these insights mean for Youthpass as a recognition instrument and for its implementation?

Through the study, we provide a snapshot of this topic based on desk research and interviews with relevant experts. We do not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic; there are probably angles and experiences that we have overlooked. We have limited the scope of our explorations to higher education, as there are generally well-defined validation processes and expectations within this context. We wanted to understand how, and to what extent, the competences developed within, and the recognition practices of youth work and volunteering contribute to these processes. Are they compatible in their nature? If not, why not? What is missing to make the validation mechanisms connecting these sectors work?

A second limitation of the study, and a strength at the same time, is the focus on the four countries involved. In our project, this meant very different country contexts, somewhat different research interests and perspectives, and different approaches to the study questions. As a result, we have four fairly different country chapters. The country chapters should first and foremost support the discussions in the respective countries. Additionally, the common insights help to generalise, define joint observations and draw overall conclusions.

We hope that the study offers you insights and inspiration, and supports the efforts towards better validation opportunities for competences developed in youth work and youth volunteering.

On behalf of the partners of the “Validation Project”,

Kristiina Pernits
SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre



SUMMARY

THE (EUROPEAN) CONTEXT

The recognition of youth work and learning that takes place within it has been a policy priority since the beginning of the 21st century, with initiatives from both the Council of Europe and the European Union emphasising youth work as a context of non-formal learning. The most prominent cornerstone for cross-sectoral debates around validation is the **EU Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012)**, which urges Member States to establish comprehensive validation systems.

Several national and European tools have been developed to support the policy frameworks on behalf of the youth field. **Youthpass**, with over 2 million certificates issued since 2007, encourages reflection and provides documentation for learning within Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. The **Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio** serves as a recognition tool for youth workers and leaders, combining self-assessment with evidence gathering. Additional European frameworks from the education sector include the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**, **the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS)**, and **Europass**, all facilitating validation and recognition across Europe.

Youth work and volunteering mainly involve non-formal and informal learning, and the competences developed within concrete experiences highly depend on the thematic focus, methodological approaches and individual tasks. Research from the RAY Network and Erasmus+ evaluation studies reveals broad diversity in learning outcomes within the EU youth programmes. The most common competence areas include **multilingual competence and cultural awareness**, with large majorities reporting improved ability to get along with people from different cultural backgrounds. Among **youth workers and leaders**, 83–95% report strengthened youth work competences, including fostering non-formal learning, selecting methods and dealing with ambiguity. **Personal development and self-efficacy** are also prominent, with 97% of participants saying projects contributed to their personal development. Importantly, **active citizenship and the European dimension** show persistent effects, with strengthened civic engagement and European orientation evident years after projects. Finally, participants demonstrate statistically significant increases in **learning propensity** and learning-to-learn competences.

Rooted in this particular context, this document explores how competences gained through volunteering and non-formal education under the umbrella of the EU youth programmes (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps) are validated in universities across Estonia, France, Germany and Slovenia. All four countries operate within the European validation framework, which consists of four phases: **identification** of prior learning, **documentation** of evidence, **assessment** against established standards, and **certification** through formal recognition.

Despite sharing this common framework and having established legal structures for validation, implementation approaches vary significantly. Estonia and Slovenia maintain strong links to national qualification frameworks, Germany relies on institutional autonomy across 16 federal states, and France operates a complex multi-layered system of measures. Three main policy motivators drive validation efforts across all countries: **mobility of learners** (facilitating movement of learners across borders and universities), **equal access and inclusion** (supporting vulnerable groups in accessing education and employment), and **civic engagement** (supporting active citizenship and personal development).

COMMON CHALLENGES: WHEN POLICY MEETS PRACTICE

A fundamental challenge within validation processes emerges across all countries: **formal learning remains significantly easier to validate than non-formal or informal learning**. Vocational skills and work experience are generally prioritised when validation is discussed, while volunteering and informal learning remain undervalued. This reflects a deeper **cultural and academic resistance** rooted in diploma-centred traditions and concerns about “lowering standards.” Germany exemplifies this with the principle of “equivalence but not equal” – non-university

qualifications are not recognised as equivalent to academic education per se. France's validation often runs parallel to formal curricula, resulting in certificates or diploma supplements with limited academic consequences.

The validation process itself shows imbalanced attention across its phases. While **certification** is well-developed, the crucial **identification phase** is often neglected due to lack of resources. Few universities provide coaching or counsellors, leaving learners to fend for themselves. Many struggle to articulate their competences, particularly when coming from non-formal contexts. **Assessment** of non-formal learning is time-consuming, resource-heavy and often subjective, lacking standardisation. Meanwhile, **documentation** works reasonably well when formal certificates exist but becomes problematic for informal learning experiences.

Lack of standardisation creates inconsistent outcomes even within single countries. Due to institutional autonomy, the same competences gained outside of formal education programmes may be credited with widely differing numbers of credit points at different universities. This fragmentation leads to inequality of access and outcomes. Additionally, **resource constraints** – insufficient funding and trained staff – limit what institutions can offer. Combined with **arguably low awareness** among learners about validation possibilities, uptake remains relatively low.

A persistent barrier is the **difficulty of assessing transversal skills**. Social, relational and organisational competences are harder to evaluate and objectify than academic knowledge, hampering institutional trust and transferability. Validation procedures designed for formal education pathways struggle with the flexibility and diversity of non-formal learning experiences.

LEADING THE WAY: YOUTH WORK STUDIES

Interestingly enough, **youth work, social work and health-related studies** demonstrate greater openness to flexible learning pathways across all countries. In Estonia, youth work curricula at two universities accept Youthpass as sufficient documentation when properly completed, and students can fulfil assignments with earlier experiences through simple agreements with lecturers. In Germany, certain degree courses have legal requirements to consider non-formally gained competences, and accreditation regulations require personal and social skills to be taken into account. These fields prove that integration of diverse learning pathways is both possible and effective.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Despite challenges, innovative practices emerge across all four countries. **Estonia** has developed digital evidence tools for portfolios and systematically uses Europass documents. The **PLAR Service** in the University of Oldenburg, **Germany**, provides centralised, portfolio-based recognition with dedicated advisory support, while a blanket credit transfer system at another German university allows state-recognised educators to receive up to 30 credits towards degrees. **France** implemented large-scale recognition through the Paris 2024 Olympic volunteer badge system (45,000 volunteers), experiments with AI-enhanced experience recognition (AIDEN project), and developed "Reversed VAE", which builds learning pathways for people with limited experience. **Slovenia** has systematically built a 30-year legal framework, established validation at all three state universities with clear procedures, and focuses on developing micro-credentials aligned with EU initiatives.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis, several priorities emerge. First, **raising awareness** of validation opportunities among students and staff is essential, particularly targeting vulnerable groups who benefit most. Second, **improving guidance and support** in early validation phases, especially identification, through templates, self-assessment tools and trained counsellors, would address a critical gap. Third, **harmonising practices** through national-level assessment criteria linked to the EQF while maintaining appropriate flexibility would increase trust and reduce inequality.

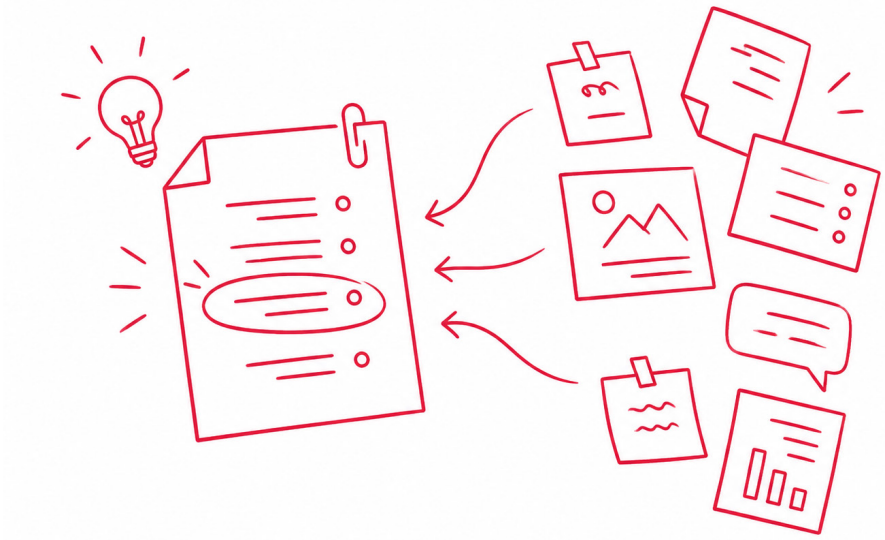
More fundamentally, a **cultural transformation** is needed: shifting from a diploma-centred to a competence-based approach that treats non-formal and informal learning as complementary rather than secondary to formal education. This requires **the development of competence-sensitive degree course design** with problem-oriented, practice-aligned curricula focusing on learning outcomes rather than learning contexts. **Training assessors and academic staff** in competence-based validation methods and pedagogical approaches for non-traditional learning is crucial to overcoming current resistance.

Expanding digital tools – online portfolios, badges, AI mapping, Europass and Youthpass – can streamline recognition and address documentation gaps. Crucial is also **sustainable funding** for dedicated validation units with trained staff, alongside resources for awareness campaigns and assessor training. Finally, **strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation** between education providers, employers, NGOs and state authorities would ensure validation outcomes are valued beyond academic contexts.

CONCLUSION

While legal frameworks exist across Europe and comprehensive policies support validation, implementation reveals a fundamental tension: validation promotes mobility, equal access and civic engagement in policy documents, yet formal learning remains privileged in practice and non-formal learning is treated as “not equal” to academic credentials. As the French study emphasises, “beyond the technical and organisational aspects, recognising skills acquired in non-formal and informal settings requires a fundamental cultural transformation in the attitudes towards training, experience and the value given to civic engagement.”

Successful validation requires more than policy. It demands dedicated resources, genuine cultural change, systematic institutional support and authentic commitment to recognising diverse learning pathways. Youth work studies currently demonstrate what is possible when institutions embrace this vision. The real effort now is to ensure that education more broadly can make the shift from viewing the validation of non-formal learning as an administrative burden to recognising it as a valuable complement to formal education: one that strengthens inclusion, supports diverse pathways and better prepares young people for the realities of contemporary work and citizenship.



VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES IN YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTEERING: THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The following chapter provides contextual information for the discussions on the validation of competences developed through youth work and volunteering. It looks at the nature of the competences developed in these contexts, and at the policy developments and European tools to support their recognition and validation.

THE LEARNING VALUE OF YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTEERING

GREAT DIVERSITY WITHIN REPORTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Youth work and volunteering are settings of learning, primarily non-formal and informal learning. As the primary context of the present study project is the Erasmus+ Youth[1] and European Solidarity Corps programmes, we refer to the data that describes the learning value of these programmes. The main sources of information at the European level that provide insights into competence acquisition within the youth programmes are the various research projects of the RAY

[1] Including the former *Erasmus+/Youth in Action* and *European Volunteering Service* strands within the previous programme generations.

Network and the Support Study for the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 Interim Evaluation and the Erasmus+ 2014–2020 Final Evaluation.

It is important to note that the educational value and competences developed through specific youth work and volunteering experiences highly depend on the thematic focus of the activities, methodological approaches and the individual tasks of the persons involved. We should therefore expect a *broad range of competences* to be developed through individual experiences. Indeed, according to the RAY Comparative Research Report focusing on Erasmus+ youth, areas of *knowledge* gained range from cultural diversity, youth and youth work, and non-formal and informal learning (the three highest-rated knowledge areas, confirmed by 51.1–69.5% of respondents) to sustainable development, youth policy development and European youth policies (the three lowest but still positively rated knowledge areas, confirmed by 16.3–17.7% of respondents). The knowledge areas in between range from various social and societal topics (education and learning, discrimination, human rights, inclusion, solidarity, environment, etc.) to political topics (European issues and EU structures, active citizenship, democracy), topics related to personal development, and practical knowledge (entrepreneurship, project management).

Additionally, participants consistently report significant improvements across a broad set of *skills*. The highest scores, across all age groups, are for the ability to get along with people from different cultural backgrounds and to cooperate in a team (≈95% of the respondents in the RAY Comparative Research Report agree/strongly agree). The lowest – but still positive – gains are reported for producing media content and for using ICT devices (≈57%). In between are a range of skill sets that include communication, negotiation and debating skills, logical thinking, creative expression, learning skills, abilities to put an idea into practice, to engage in tackling societal challenge, to interact with policy-making, etc. (RAY Comparative Research Report, pp. 21–26; RAY SOC p. 29).

Furthermore, the concept of competence includes the important role of *attitudes*. The RAY reports describe changes in attitude relating to self-confidence, empathising with others, and feeling more autonomous (RAY-MON 2021-2023, pp. 49, 53 and 55; RAY-SOC, p. 27, 29). Further attitudinal development areas mention the appreciation of cultural diversity, feeling European, and commitment to combatting discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia or racism as the areas with the highest increase (RAY Comparative Research Report, p. 32).

MOST COMMON COMPETENCE AREAS DEVELOPED

Below we list the most common general competence areas within EU-supported youth work and volunteering activities, based on the outcomes of both the projects of the RAY Network and the Erasmus+ evaluations.

MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

In the RAY MON and RAY SOC research reports, large majorities report an improved ability to "get along with people from different cultural backgrounds" and to "communicate with people who speak another language", following their participation in mobility projects. In parallel, the EU support study describes strong positive individual impacts, including improved language skills. Significant gains in *cultural awareness* were particularly evident among transnational youth-sector staff mobilities.

YOUTH-WORK RELATED COMPETENCES (FOR YOUTH WORKERS/LEADERS)

83–95% of youth workers/leaders report strengthened youth work competences (e.g., fostering non-formal learning, selecting/adapting methods, dealing with ambiguity and unexpected situations, and assessing learning). The Erasmus+ evaluation's modelling shows a large increase in the *likelihood to engage in further international collaboration* among youth-sector staff.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, SELF-EFFICACY AND SENSE OF INITIATIVE

According to the RAY report, 97% of participants say their project contributed to their *personal development*; 87% report an improved ability to *identify opportunities for personal/professional development*. The Erasmus+ evaluation finds statistically significant gains in the *sense of initiative & entrepreneurship* of young participants – especially those involved in the European Voluntary Service, DiscoverEU and Youth Dialogue.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP, PARTICIPATION AND EUROPEAN DIMENSION (INCLUDING SUSTAINED EFFECTS)

RAY's multi-year research and the qualitative follow-up show persistent effects on participation and citizenship competences and practices years after projects – covering civic engagement, democratic participation and a European orientation.

RAY's monitoring identifies an increase in knowledge, values and actions linked to citizenship/participation, alongside increased involvement in organisations and communities.

RECOGNITION AND COMPETENCE OF LEARNING

The longitudinal econometric analysis in the EU support study finds statistically significant increases in learning propensity – the inclination and capacity to learn and adapt – among youth programme participants (notably DiscoverEU, Youth Dialogue, EVS and Youth Participation Activities). The RAY report also shows high levels of *learning-to-learn* gains (planning and carrying out learning, identifying development opportunities).

EUROPEAN POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR THE VALIDATION OF COMPETENCES DEVELOPED IN YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTEERING

The recognition of youth work and learning within it has been a key issue since around the beginning of the 21st century, when several policy initiatives, both within the Council of Europe and the European Union policy frameworks,[2] emphasised the importance of the recognition of youth work and voluntary activities as contexts of non-formal learning. The most prominent cornerstone for the *cross-sectoral debates* and processes around the validation of competences developed in non-formal and informal learning contexts is the **EU Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012)**, urging Member States to establish comprehensive validation systems. This policy impetus aligns with the EU youth policies, most importantly with the current **European Youth Strategy (2019–2027)**. The latter explicitly emphasises recognition and validation of youth work and aligns with broader education agendas such as the **European Skills Agenda** and, most recently, the **Union of Skills**. The **Council of Europe** promotes recognition through political guidance such as the **Recommendation on Youth Work**, which asks governments to promote the recognition of the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes developed in and through youth work. Recognition is one of the key priorities within the **European Youth Work Agenda**, including the recognition of competences developed through participation in and practice of youth work.

[2] The major early milestones on this topic in the youth field include: European Commission White Paper. A New Impetus For European Youth (2001), and Council Of Europe Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning of young people (2003).

VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN THE EU

Validation must be understood within the broader framework of recognition. While recognition can be political, social, individual (self-recognition) and economic, validation focuses on the assessment and certification of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts. As such, it is also referred to as formal recognition. The four stages of validation within the current European validation discourse are 1) **Identification** – Identifying the learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts, 2) **Documentation** – Recording evidence of the learning (e.g., portfolios, certificates, work samples), 3) **Assessment** – Evaluating the evidence against established standards or reference points and 4) **Certification** – Awarding formal recognition (e.g., qualifications, credits, diplomas) for the assessed learning.

The European Inventory on Validation aims to provide an overview of progress in validation practices and arrangements for non-formal and informal learning across Europe. The conclusions of the latest inventory (2023) suggest that "Despite this progress in the setting up of validation arrangements, disparities in their availability persist across countries and sectors, and validation is not available for all qualifications and connections between validation in different contexts remain limited." It concludes that "Current trends reflect a growing commitment to enabling individuals to validate their skills and experiences, but continued efforts to bridge gaps, enhance coordination, and adapt to evolving landscapes will be key in shaping the future of validation in Europe." Among other more specific findings, it concludes that effective outreach continues to be a challenge with regard to certain target groups and that a lack of awareness of validation constitutes a major barrier to access. Further, it observes that a growing number of countries report recent initiatives to develop micro-credentials and incorporate them within national qualification systems. More frequent use of micro-credentials could lead to a greater demand for validation services to obtain such credentials by demonstrating existing skills. However, the opportunities to obtain micro-credentials following a validation process remain limited.

EUROPEAN TOOLS AND INITIATIVES FOR RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION IN YOUTH WORK

YOUTHPASS

Youthpass is a European instrument for the recognition of youth work and youth volunteering. With more than 2 million certificates issued[3] since its launch in 2007, it encourages a reflection process and provides a certificate to document learning within the projects granted by the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. It is aimed at participants and team members of the projects, and is based on self-assessment, encouraging a dialogue process to support reflection. The main competence framework used in Youthpass is the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning framework, whereas the certificates for youth workers have been linked to the ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally.

Through its concept and functionalities, Youthpass supports the implementation of the first two stages of validation as listed above – Identification and Documentation. An important part of the concept is the reflection process, which supports the understanding and naming of competences developed, thereby also strengthening the individuals' awareness of their competences and of learning in general. The Youthpass certificate provides an opportunity to document competence development and to describe the learning context in general, as well as its specific characteristics such as duration, activities, language, etc.

Youthpass promotes learning as a key focus of EU-supported youth (work) projects. It provides an important channel to connect the learning that took place in the youth projects to the validation processes, and by providing a solution for the two first stages, it can also be used as a basis for the further stages of the validation process.

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE YOUTH WORK PORTFOLIO

The Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio is a recognition tool designed to help those doing youth work, primarily youth workers and youth leaders active at various levels, to assess and further develop their youth work competence. It enables them to analyse their competences, gather evidence of their work and explain it to others. By combining self-assessment with evidence of experience, references and certificates from further learning and training undertaken, the Port-

[3] The number of Youthpass certificates issued reached 2 million on 10 October 2025.

folio provides its holder with a history of their competence. Similar to Youthpass, it supports the implementation of the first two stages of validation, Identification and Documentation.

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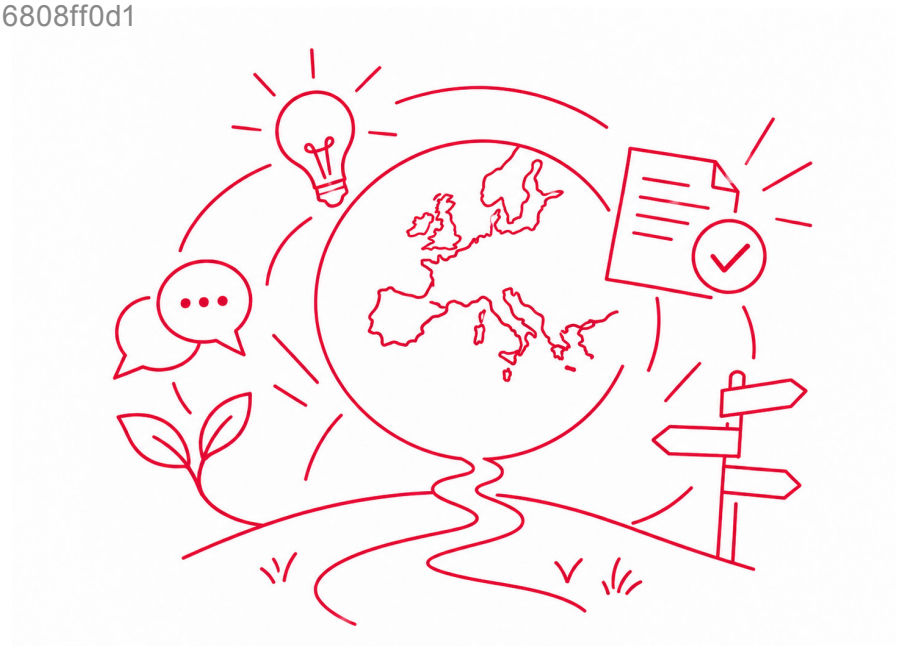
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COMMON INSIGHTS: MAIN PATTERNS FROM THE FOUR COUNTRY STUDIES REGARDING THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

POLICY CONTEXT AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

This study focuses on EU youth programmes (Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps) and how the outcomes of the learning opportunities they provide through different mobility formats are validated at universities in four different countries (Estonia, France, Germany and Slovenia).

With this in mind, the starting point for identifying commonalities among the four countries is highlighting that validation efforts are **aligned with the processes and policy developments at EU level**. The *European Qualification Framework (EQF)*, along with the National Qualification Frameworks, and the *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)* guide the structure of validation. In Germany, "the expansion of credit transfer and recognition procedures is embedded in the EU strategy for the promotion of lifelong learning and the creation of a European Education Area", while in Slovenia, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation bases its efforts on European recommendations, such as the Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012).

Tools like *Youthpass, Europass* and portfolios are present, however, perspectives from all four countries show that they are not widely used in the validation frame within higher education, with portfolios having a bit more applicability. In Germany, they are mainly used in career counselling to place people in jobs. In Estonia, although all universities and departments have their own practices for accepting earlier experience, it would appear that it is quite common that even if a portfolio or Youthpass is presented, there is still a need to compile an application that includes self-assessment, effectively doubling the effort required. In addition, across all four countries, **legal frameworks exist for validation**.

There are three factors that are highlighted for the adoption of validation policies and procedures (at European and/or national levels): **mobility of learners, equal access/inclusion and civic engagement.** At the same time, these three factors are at the core of both EU youth programmes, which means that the impact they have on learners makes a strong case for validation of their learning outcomes.

Mobility of learners/students is one of the main motivators for validation, mainly to encourage mobility between different universities. The Council of the European Union's Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning highlights the need to validate relevant knowledge, skills and competences for better employability, *mobility* and motivation for lifelong learning. The German study states: "In the interests of promoting student mobility and facilitating access to academic education [For this purpose, there is a push to recognise competences, as long as they can be seen as similar to those in the curricula], the German Rectors' Conference determined in 2013 that the equivalence check in credit transfer and recognition procedures should be designed to benefit students." Ultimately, validation should ease mobility of students across Europe, as it would recognise semesters completed in any other country. That said, learning mobility formats present in the two EU youth programmes are still a potential that has not been fully exploited.

Equal access. In Slovenia, it is highlighted that "the Ministry also acknowledges the importance of recognising non-formally acquired competences for the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Recognition can help individuals from less privileged backgrounds gain better access to employment and further education." The French study states that "Fair and effective recognition requires /among others/ targeting the most vulnerable groups." A concrete example from France demonstrates that "users learn to highlight all their professional, personal, voluntary and amateur sports experience. The scheme helps the most vulnerable to broaden their horizons, particularly through work experience, training and even job offers." In Germany, "Traditionally, vocational and academic qualifications represent two separate educational pathways. Access to higher education was (almost) exclusively possible via a school-based higher education entrance qualification (Abitur)." Overcoming this gap was seen as a way to ensure equal access to education "which is more in line with the diversity of individual educational pathways (Hemkes and Wilbers 2019, 12f.). [...] Taking individual educational and professional histories into account in this way also facilitates access to academic

continuing education for heterogeneous target groups and in turn strengthens their motivation to study and likelihood of success (Engenhorst 2020, 150f.)." In Estonia, socially disadvantaged groups are one of the target groups of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and one of the key objectives is to "Improve access to education, especially for individuals in socially disadvantaged situations, broaden opportunities for learning and labour market participation, and enhance the efficient use of resources at both individual and societal levels."[4]

Active citizenship/civic engagement. The aforementioned Council Recommendation emphasises that validation should support individuals' career and personal development as well as active citizenship. In France, the *Equality and Citizenship Law* of 2017 pushed universities to adapt curricula for student engagement. This reflects the desire to support the diversity of student pathways, to promote civic engagement and to better prepare young people for the reality of the labour market and for their future active citizenship missions.

FOUR PHASES OF VALIDATION

There is a difference in the definition of validation between the four countries, but there is a common understanding of the four phases of validation (2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning):

- *Identification* of prior learning (often through self-assessment or counsellor guidance).
- *Documentation* (portfolios, certificates, references, Europass, Youthpass, digital tools).
- *Assessment* (comparison of outcomes to standards via tests, interviews, work observation).
- *Certification* (credits, diplomas, partial/full qualifications, recognition statements).

Nevertheless, there is a difference in the level of attention given to the different phases, with certification seemingly given the most importance.

Identification, although widely regarded as the step holding the highest potential for increasing recognition, is often neglected, mostly due to a lack of resources. There is a lack of guidance in the first phases of the validation process, and learners frequently experience difficulty in articulating competences. In general, there are only a few universities that provide coaching or counsellors, so learners are expected to fend for themselves. In Estonia "Generally, students are

[4] https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-06/vota_kasiraamat.pdf

expected to determine for themselves whether they have experience suitable for recognition. Since self-analysis is not widely used, identifying learning outcomes can be challenging. [...] People who have attended some youth work activities are more successful in identifying non-formal learning, as self-evaluation and learning identification are part of the process." Nevertheless, each school has specialists who support learners in different phases of validation, however some students do not use this opportunity, while others would like additional support.

At the same time, in Estonia, "The **documentation** stage is quite well described in various instructions. Validation procedures rely heavily on documentation, as confirmed by interviews: students must provide concrete evidence of their learning (and learning achievements)." It could be said that the documentation works, given that formal education is used to relying on documents and diplomas/certificates. However, when there are no diplomas or certificates to present, learners often struggle to provide sufficient, credible evidence.

Assessment largely appears to be a time-consuming and resource-heavy process; some methods are subjective and lack standardisation. In Estonia, the study indicates that it is easier to assess formal learning outcomes, while assessing non-formal learning is considerably more time-consuming, or, in some cases, even more expensive. When it comes to self-assessment, which is widespread in non-formal learning contexts, students lack the skills to carry it out, and there are few opportunities for them to do so across all countries. In Estonia, self-analysis is quite often part of the APEL application process.

Certification (as the last stage of validation) is the most prevalent and well-developed in all four countries. In extreme cases, it is almost as if the whole process up to certification is expected to be completed by the learner themselves or supported by another organisation/institution/counsellor outside of the university context.

PROCEDURAL VARIETY

Besides the four-phase approach to validation, there are a few other common elements between the four countries. **Portfolio-based assessment** of non-formal learning is the most common method across all countries, using comprehensive documentation including certificates, work samples and reflective writing. There are examples of **individual case evaluation** (tailored assessment based on submitted documentation, including personal interviews when documentation is insufficient), as well as **expert consultation**, with subject matter experts involved in assessment decisions. In addition, there are quality assurance mechanisms in place, with multiple levels of review and oversight.

Despite this, while there is strong backing in EU policy and all four countries have established legal frameworks for validation, their implementation approaches and success levels vary significantly. Estonia and Slovenia use strong links to national qualification frameworks, Germany relies more on institutional autonomy and France operates a complex multi-layered system of measures. Furthermore, even within the same country, **validation processes differ across institutions (or even departments)** with regard to who initiates the process, what evidence is acceptable, and whether credits are awarded. There is no standardisation or harmonisation. In Germany, there is no uniform national education system and the practices vary across the 16 federal states. The lack of standardisation resembles the challenges faced within learning and training mechanisms in companies. “Universities and universities of applied sciences share this problem with companies. Here, too, the transferability of internally acquired skills to other companies is a central problem, as there is a lack of objective reference systems (Gutschow 2020, p. 466).” France and Slovenia both note “regional variation” in access and quality. In France, the **autonomy** of schools is a determining factor in the implementation of educational policies. “At the pedagogical level, universities freely determine their teaching and knowledge control methods, which explains the heterogeneity of practices, particularly in terms of validation of skills acquired in non-formal or informal settings.” In Estonia, interviews and questionnaires reveal that there are some differences in the way universities accept previous experience outside of formal education, but the general validation process is the same and is based on the four phases of validation.

This fragmented and inconsistent implementation often leads to **inconsistent outcomes**. In Germany “Due to a lack of standards regarding which non-university competences or certificates can be credited, these are sometimes credited or recognised in ‘degree programmes at different universities with a widely differing number of credit points’ (ibid. p. 192).” To ensure consistency, however, significant investment in training and resources would be required. In France, the systematisation of recognition remains incomplete. “Recognition remains largely limited to local initiatives, pilot programmes or sector-specific schemes, which are insufficiently integrated into a national framework leading to fully recognised qualifications, even though advances are ongoing. In practice, implementation of these schemes varies across institutions and sectors as universities retain considerable autonomy in how they apply them.” There is a significant investment from the State, “[...] mainly through calls for projects in educational innovation. A remaining challenge improving the implementation of a common recognition framework.

NON-FORMAL LEARNING MORE CHALLENGING TO VALIDATE

In all four countries, **formal learning remains easier to recognise in practice**. This means that the implementation of different phases of validation across formal education institutions, as well as the validation of competences gained through work experience, runs more smoothly than the validation of competences gained through non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Volunteering and informal learning remain undervalued compared to formal credentials. The German study highlights that "[...] in German-language specialist literature but also in handouts, vocational skills are generally meant when credit transfer and recognition procedures are discussed. [...] The certification or validation of informally acquired skills outside of professional contexts, e.g., from voluntary work, continues to play a subordinate role in Germany." The Estonian study highlights that "[...] since prior formal learning is easier to identify, document, assess and certify, it is more commonly recognised." In addition, "For some students, it is or it seems too difficult to explain and describe what they have learned from non-formal learning. Interviewees also mentioned that students who are also working and have a family tend to be on autopilot: it is easier to do what is said or what the curriculum says than to figure out how to describe the previous learning experience or how to compensate for some of the classes." Furthermore, France highlights the "subjectivity" of transversal skills: "Interdisciplinary, social, interpersonal and organisational skills are more difficult to assess than academic knowledge, which presents challenges for measuring and integrating them into qualifications. This can, in turn, undermine institutional confidence and the transferability of schemes." In Slovenia, the study reports difficulty in translating informally gained skills into the language of formal education: "The issue is how to assign credit value to knowledge and how to integrate these non-formal competences into the formal study structure."

Furthermore, in Germany, there is a distinction between **flat-rate** and **individual credit transfer procedures** (combined procedures are also observed). Flat-rate procedures are fairly standardised, but they cannot encompass non-formal learning experiences. "On the other hand, there are individual crediting procedures, which amount to an individual case-by-case assessment. Decisions are made here on the basis of the documents submitted by the applicant (educational certificates, work references, skills assessments, etc.). The qualifications framework or databases can be used for the equivalence check. Furthermore, more detailed information on the competences/achievements to be recognised can be obtained in personal discussions, or competence/achievement tests can be carried out. Individual credit transfer procedures are generally used for the transfer of non-formally and informally acquired competences (Müskens and Lübben 2018, p. 116)."

In Slovenia, the University of Ljubljana adopted the Rules on Procedures and Criteria for the Recognition of Non-Formally Acquired Knowledge and Skills (2007), which was a very significant step towards validation of specifically non-formal learning. The procedure relies strongly on evidence: "Candidates must submit evidence such as participation certificates, records of non-formal education, or employer references. Recognition is granted if competences match the learning outcomes of the study programme, thus enabling more flexible entry into higher education."

The validation procedures observed remain rooted in the frameworks of formal education. It is difficult to compare non-formally gained learning outcomes with formal education curricula and the language used within them.

As a result, and despite progress made in developing different tools and processes of validation, there is still a **low awareness** among learners and, consequently, a **low uptake**. Even with supportive legislation, many learners are unaware of their right to validate non-formal education or informal learning, and relatively few of them apply for validation.

INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND STRUCTURE

Another reason for the lack of trust and effort invested in validating non-formal learning is the cultural/academic resistance. Individual professors or even entire institutions sometimes distrust the equivalence of non-formal/informal learning. The culture of diplomas and external assessment prevails, and the fear of lowering standards or undermining formal study remains a barrier.

In the case study of Estonia, it is noted that "therefore higher education institutions take the validation process rather seriously. The exceptions are youth work curricula where non-formal learning is officially part of some subjects and does not require extensive proof or assessment beyond self-evaluation (can be part of Youthpass)." While this may not have been the intention, here "seriously" implies extensive evidence and (external) assessment. That is, unless it concerns youth work curricula, which are already familiar with non-formal education approaches. Additionally, there are doubts about using self-assessment as an equally valid proof of prior learning experiences.

Furthermore, the German study highlights the issue of "**Equivalence but not equal**: a fundamental problem in the German higher education sector is that non-university qualifications and skills are not recognised as equivalent to academic education per se." The main concern behind this is a "loss of standards in higher education".

Validation in France seems to be the most deeply rooted in the "diploma-centred culture". "Although the boundaries are gradually changing, the French education

system continues to prioritise degrees and qualifications as key markers of professional and social legitimacy. Historically, an individual's recognition has been based primarily on having a nationally recognised title or degree." Recognition of experience gained through involvement within associations is often regarded as a supplementary asset rather than a genuine means of obtaining a qualification.

These cultural patterns also lead to a **lack of flexibility** when it comes to pathways and methods for assessment. External assessment of competences gained through previous formal education is relatively established and everything else, compared to that, takes extra effort and additional resources. In Estonia, according to official documents, validation and the tools used need to be tailored to each individual learner. "However, interviews did not show the usage of flexible methods."

On the other hand, in Slovenia, accepted evidence for recognition includes:

- Certificates from training providers.
- Company confirmations of practical work.
- In some cases, creative works, patents, employer letters or self-learning.

YOUTH WORK STUDIES LEAD THE WAY

Interestingly enough, youth work studies, social work studies and in some cases health-related studies seem to be more open to flexible learning pathways and to considering competences gained through non-formal and informal learning, including volunteer work.

The Estonian study clearly states that there is more openness towards recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the youth work curricula (including the statement that "Youthpass is enough if it is filled in properly"). Furthermore, "In youth work studies, it seems to be quite common that in agreement with the lecturer, students can compensate for some of the coursework or parts of the subject with their previous experience. There may not even be a need for a special application or additional self-analysis".

In Germany "For some degree courses with restricted admissions (e.g., human medicine), there are legal requirements to take non-formal and informal skills into account when allocating study places. The accreditation regulations for quality management at universities stipulate that personal, social and other socially relevant skills must be taken into account in the curricular definition of learning objectives in degree programmes. There are credit transfer options for non-formal or informal skills acquired outside of higher education (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) 2017a, 9f.)."

INSPIRING PRACTICES IN THE FOUR COUNTRIES

ESTONIA

Youth Work Programmes' Integrated Approach

Perhaps the most inspiring practice from Estonia comes from youth work curricula at two universities, where:

- Special time slots and subjects are dedicated specifically to non-formal education experiences.
- Students can compensate for coursework or parts of subjects with their previous experience through simple agreements with lecturers.
- The Youthpass certificate is accepted as sufficient documentation when properly filled out, without requiring extensive additional applications or self-analysis.

Counsellors at Each University

In Estonia, each university has its own counsellor to support learners in validating their prior learning.

- The counsellors may be for the whole university or allocated to a certain department.
- It is a valuable tool for engaging students who might not be as proactive or competent to follow the different phases of validation.

Digital Evidence Tools for APEL

The study programme regulations allow for the transfer of voluntary activities within the framework of APEL (Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning):

- Digital tools are being used to create and manage digital evidence, though in several universities only the application is "digital", while self-assessment is written and uploaded as a Word document.
  In addition, there is some dissatisfaction with the use of digital tools.
- Online portfolios are being developed and utilised.

- This digital approach makes evidence more credible and portable across education and employment systems.
- Digital tools help address one of the main barriers to recognition – the lack of proper documentation.

“However, Jana Tomson highlighted one of the pervasive problems in her 2012 master’s thesis on the example of Tallinn University: APEL counsellors see APEL as a transfer of subjects rather than as the recognition of previous knowledge and skills, which means that the individual development and self-reflection of the applicant is overlooked.”

Europass Integration

The report notes that digital evidence tools are becoming increasingly important for making documentation more effective and addressing the common problem of lost or missing documents that prevent students from applying for recognition of their non-formal learning experiences. The systematic use of Europass documents is highlighted as good practice because they:

- Have a common, pan-European format.
- Include comprehensive guidance materials.
- Emphasise non-formal learning experiences.
- Facilitate the documentation process.

GERMANY

PLAR Service at the University of Oldenburg

PLAR (“Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition”) is a centralised, portfolio-based recognition service for informally and non-formally acquired competences, using a comprehensive portfolio approach. It advises and supports students in recognising creditable skills and in submitting applications.

- Serves as a single point of contact for all students across the university. Afterwards, applications are forwarded to the respective subject representatives for equivalence assessment.
- Uses “authentic evidence” including “learning or work samples” beyond just formal certificates.
- Provides dedicated advisory support to help students identify and document their competences.
- Relies on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for

systematic equivalence assessment.

- Offers direct competence validation when portfolio evidence is insufficient, which enables a very individual case-by-case assessment.

AnKE Recognition Procedure at Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences

A blanket credit transfer system that allows state-recognised educators and curative education nurses to receive up to 30 credit points towards a bachelor's degree in Social Work.

- Provides significant study time reduction (up to 30 CP).
- Based on systematic curriculum comparison rather than individual assessment.
- Targets specific professional groups with relevant experience.
- Streamlines the process while maintaining quality standards.

Multi-Criteria Medical School Admission System

A comprehensive admission system for medical studies that systematically incorporates non-formal learning alongside academic grades.

- Uses multiple quotas (30% grades only, 70% combined criteria) to ensure diverse pathways.
- Recognises professional training, volunteering and community service through standardised lists.
- Employs innovative assessment methods like "situational judgment tests".
- Addresses the critical need for social and communication skills in medical professionals.

Alice Salomon University's Portfolio Method with Skills Assessment Forms

A structured portfolio approach that provides specific forms for students to describe their competencies and acquisition contexts, supplemented by validation interviews.

- Offers structured guidance through specialised forms.
- Combines written documentation with personal interviews for comprehensive assessment.

- Focuses on social and health sector competences where non-formal learning is highly relevant.
- Demonstrates commitment to supporting all students in articulating their learning.

FRANCE

Paris 2024 Olympic Games Open Badge Initiative

A large-scale open badge system created to recognise the skills of 45,000 Olympic volunteers. This represents the first large-scale institutional recognition of volunteering skills in France, creating a "stepping stone" for volunteers to formally enhance their experience in future career paths:

- Volunteers automatically acquired 15 of 30 core competencies through their Olympic experience.
- Skills were integrated into the national skills passport managed by the Ministry of Labour.
- Focused on "transversal" skills: communication, teamwork and problem-solving.

The AIDEN Project: AI-Enhanced Experience Recognition

An experimental project using artificial intelligence to accelerate skills recognition in digital formats. It makes complex competence frameworks more digestible for all users:

- AI analyses elements transmitted in natural language to understand and translate experiences.
- Works with French start-up QAnswer for GDPR-compliant processing.
- Teaches learners to think in terms of "skills" rather than just experiences.
- Facilitates awareness and verbalisation of learning outcomes.

PARCOURSUP Integration of Extra-Academic Experiences

France's national higher education application platform that values non-formal experiences in admissions. This systemic approach integrates non-formal learning recognition and validates diverse pathways to higher education:

- High school students document and promote their non-formal experiences alongside academic grades.
- Extracurricular activities, citizen commitments and sports experiences influence admission decisions.
- Creates strategic incentives for young people to engage in meaningful activities before graduation.

Passport of Engagement

An innovative certification system currently being introduced, which allows institutions to validate skills developed through associative and volunteer activities. It represents a direct bridge between civic engagement and formal education, making volunteer work and associative activities count toward academic credentials:

- Universities validate competences gained from engagement in associative or volunteer activities through Educational Units (EU).
- Skills are converted into formal academic credits that count towards degree requirements.
- Planned to allow capitalisation of ECTS credits for extra-academic experiences.
- Students document their civic engagement activities and associated learning outcomes.
- Aligns with European guidelines for skills recognition and credit transfer.

“Reversed VAE” (Validation of Acquired Experience) Experiment

An innovative reversal of traditional experience validation, designed for people with little professional experience. This approach is particularly relevant for young people and career changers, as it creates opportunities for those who traditionally couldn’t access VAE due to lack of experience:

- Instead of validating past experience, it builds a learning pathway within companies.
- People gradually acquire experience while receiving pedagogical support.
- Based on an alternating model with individualised monitoring.
- Skills are validated progressively as they are developed.

SLOVENIA

Comprehensive Legal Framework Development (2000–2030)

Slovenia has systematically built a strong legal foundation for recognition of non-formal learning over two decades, starting with the National Vocational Qualifications Act (2000) and evolving through multiple policy documents:

- Long-term commitment spanning 30 years of policy development.
- Integration across different education levels (vocational, higher education, adult education).
- Alignment with European frameworks while maintaining national specificity.
- Clear legal basis that enables recognition.
- Established nationally recognised National Vocational Qualifications certificates that enhance employability and provide formal recognition for experience-based learning.

It is worth noting that this example is similar to the practice in Estonia.

Validation present at all three state universities

All three major Slovenian public universities have developed comprehensive rules for recognising non-formally acquired competences, establishing clear procedures and criteria while maintaining institutional autonomy:

- Recognition based on competences regardless of where/how acquired.
- Multiple forms of evidence accepted, from certificates and employer references to self-authored publications and patents.
- ECTS credit integration: clear framework for converting non-formal learning into academic credits.

Ministry Focus on Micro-Credentials as Recognition Tool

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation is actively developing micro-credentials systems for non-formal learning recognition:

- It is arguably future-oriented, considering digital technologies, green industries, etc.
- Direct connection between learning recognition and employment needs.
- Aligned with EU micro-credentials initiatives for international comparability.
- Specific attention to vulnerable groups and less privileged backgrounds.

COMMON CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the case studies indicates that, while all four countries have established legal frameworks for validation, their implementation approaches and success levels vary significantly. The most successful practices across all countries combine systematic institutional support, innovative assessment methods, professional expertise and strong European integration. The common thread is that validation cannot be treated as a simple administrative task – it requires dedicated resources, cultural change and genuine commitment to recognising diverse learning pathways.

ALL FOUR CASE STUDIES POINT TO SHARED LESSONS

First and foremost, there is a need to raise awareness of validation opportunities among students and academic staff. Many students, workers and even educators are unaware that validation is possible (especially for non-formal/informal learning). In addition, as pointed out in the French case study, there is a **need to target audiences** better: “Measures must be primarily geared towards those who have the most to gain from the recognition of informally acquired skills: young people who are far from the job market, who have dropped out of school or who are changing careers.

Nevertheless, awareness could be raised among different youth work and volunteering stakeholders, who have unique opportunities to support learners in different stages of validation of learning outcomes of their non-formal and informal programmes and activities.

Connected to that, there should be **improved guidance** and an imperative to **provide support** for the identification and documentation of prior learning. Specifically, there is a need to strengthen counselling, provide clear information at entry, offer self-assessment tools and use success stories to illustrate benefits. As the Estonia study points out, it is highly advisable to “include templates and guiding questions to assist in understanding whether and what has been learned. [...] In youth work programmes there seem to be more templates, instructions and flexibility to identify prior learning beyond predefined areas” and those could be shared with formal education counterparts. Similarly to that, the case study of Slovenia highlights that “Faculties and recognition bodies would benefit from:

- Templates for collecting evidence (e.g., learning logs, self-assessment tools).
- Guidelines for matching competences with study outcomes.
- Examples of good practice from other institutions.”

In addition, further developments could be achieved through **training assessors and academic staff in competence-based validation methods**, as they often lack the pedagogical or methodological training to recognise non-traditional learning.

One of the imperatives in all four countries is to **harmonise practices**. In order to avoid inequality of access and outcomes, as well as to increase trust, it would be essential to **avoid fragmentation** and work towards **standardisation** (e.g., different rules at each university or department), as standardisation increases trust. Some examples include: developing national-level assessment criteria and tools, linked to the EQF and occupational standards (Slovenia already partially does this); sharing assessment databases to reduce duplication; further work on integration of standardised portfolio instruments, such as Youthpass or the ProfilPASS. However, as indicated in the German study, "The challenge here is to provide evidence of effectiveness for instruments that are already available or to select suitable procedures for the university context." Part of this evidence could come from the youth work and volunteering providers, from their perspective of non-formal and informal education.

On a more systemic level, there is a need for a **cultural transformation**, as indicated in the French study: "Beyond the technical and organisational aspects, recognising skills acquired in non-formal and informal settings requires a fundamental cultural transformation in the attitudes towards training, experience and the value given to civic engagement." Part of this would include promoting non-formal and informal learning as complementary, not secondary, to formal education.

This cultural transformation would hopefully lead to a strengthening of the **competence-based approach** and introduction of **flexible pathways**. It is important to work towards integrating validation into curricula through flexible course design, which makes room for recognition of prior learning. The German case study makes the case for a "competence-sensitive degree course design". This implies that "degree courses are understood as learning paths that are formulated in a problem-oriented way and can therefore be more easily linked to practical activities and problems in application practice. This would also expand the possibilities for credit transfer (Elsholz et al. 2022)." The competence-based approach would imply:

- A shift from diploma-centred to competence-based thinking.
- Developing problem-oriented and practice-aligned curricula.
- Focusing on learning outcomes rather than learning contexts.

In Slovenia, "the Ministry sees the recognition of non-formally acquired competences as an opportunity to modernise the education system. However, its primary focus is currently on developing micro-credentials as a key tool for formalising and validating such learning. While challenges related to standardisation and implementation remain, the goal is clear: to promote flexibility and accessibility in higher education, including recognition of diverse learning paths." In France,

"In response to societal changes, the innovation economy, new forms of work, international mobility and social expectations, professionals are becoming increasingly interested in transferable skills and life experiences."

Flexible learning pathways would in turn lead to more **equality of access** and enhanced **inclusion**, "particularly young people with fewer opportunities, for whom recognition is crucial." The French study further argues that "Fair and effective recognition requires strengthening the legitimacy of recognition schemes, targeting the most vulnerable groups, linking recognition more closely to employability and fostering a profound cultural shift in how we view career paths, learning and the value of civic engagement. To support inclusion even further, it would be essential to **invest in support in the early stages of validation**, especially the identification phase.

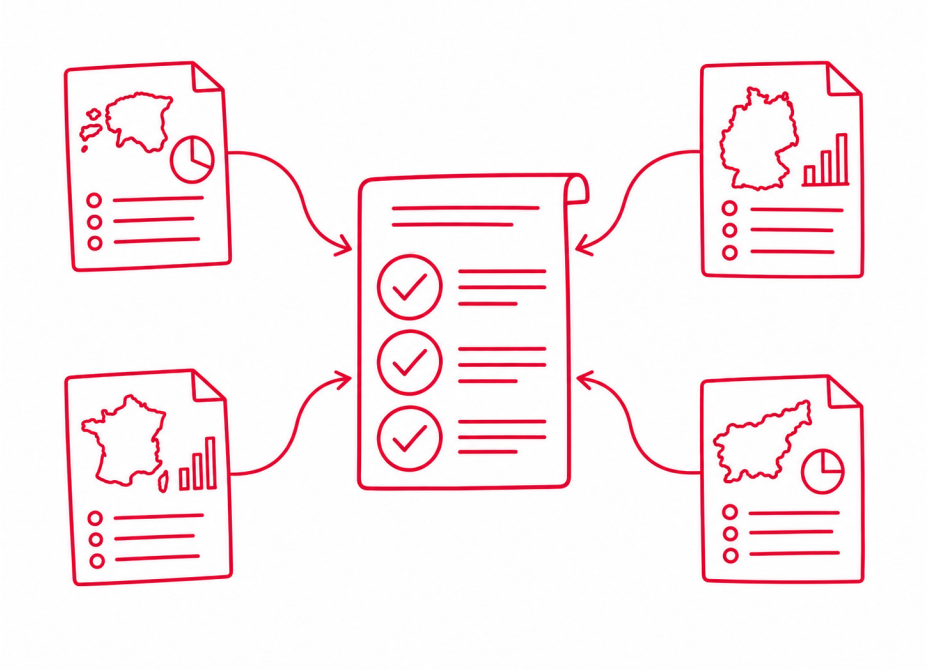
At the same time, competence-based approaches could be wider used in the youth work and non-formal education contexts. This would allow for easier bridges between non-formal and formal learning outcomes, in terms of both the language used and flexibility of learning pathways.

Expanding the use of digital tools and, more broadly, harnessing digitalisation are seen as ways to further improve validation and access to it. Online portfolios, databases, micro-credentials (open badges) and AI-supported competence mapping can streamline recognition (including Europass and Youthpass). For example, in Estonia: "according to interviewees and respondents, one of the reasons for not applying recognition of prior learning is the lack of evidence: documents are lost or not received in time." One of the ways to bypass this would be to have documentation stored online and easily transferable. Furthermore, in France "There is a growing interest in AI technologies to facilitate the identification, translation and automated valorisation of skills, based on reported experiences or digital traces of activity. They can facilitate the translation of experiences into skills and thus help the end user to better understand terminology and competency frameworks that are often not very digestible."

A lack of resources (both staff and funding) for validation is highlighted in each of the four countries. Therefore, **ensuring sustainable funding and resources for validation services** (especially for personalised validation approaches) is imperative. This would involve allocating dedicated validation units with trained staff, increasing funding for awareness campaigns and assessor training. In addition, in Germany, **"**Best practice examples from universities show that the conditions for individual validation procedures can also be improved by centralising the formal credit transfer process and providing appropriate advice and support from trained staff."

In order to ensure the sustainability of validation processes, **cross-sectoral cooperation** needs to be in place. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen cooperation between education providers, employers and state authorities. One aspect of this would be to encourage employer engagement to value the valida-

tion outcomes. As an illustration, in Slovenia, “[...] the Resolution on the National Programme for Adult Education 2022–2030 underscores lifelong learning as a tool for enhancing individual knowledge, skills and competences. It calls for the development of recognition systems for knowledge gained outside formal education and supports inclusive access to learning. Greater cooperation between education providers, employers, and NGOs is encouraged to develop effective validation mechanisms.”



ESTONIA

Kats Kivistik and Maarja Käger

This report presents an overview of the recognition of non-formal learning in Estonia. It begins with a description of the methodology used to understand what has been done and how. This is followed by an outline of the relevant legal framework. A separate chapter is dedicated to detailing the validation procedure. The report concludes with an analysis of experiences and practices in the recognition process and highlights some of the recognition experiences shared by students

METHODOLOGY

The research started with desk research that consisted of two parts. Firstly, a review of previous studies was conducted. This initial desk research provided the background information necessary to develop questions for interviews and questionnaires. At the end of data collection, additional desk research was then conducted to support the analysis of the results.

As the Institute of Baltic Studies was simultaneously conducting two related studies, one focusing on the recognition of prior learning and work experience in general[5] and the other (the current study) on recognising non-formal experiences from Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) within higher education[6] it was decided to cross-utilise the results of both studies. Due to the timelines of these projects, the research was started with more general interviews involving representatives of higher education institutions: study counsellors, APEL (Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning) counsellors and APEL committee members. If an interviewee was aware that non-formal learning had been recognised with APEL or non-formal APEL, the discussion was focused accordingly. In total, 11 interviews were conducted at the higher education level (six focus groups and five personal interviews), involving 21 participants representing five universities.

As recognition of prior non-formal learning was not widespread, it was also decided to interview representatives involved in youth work curricula at various universities, as it was known that they would have relevant experience. These interviews specifically concentrated on the recognition of non-formal experiences related to Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. Although three universities or colleges teach youth work, agreements to participate in interviews were only received from two persons.

Based on the desk research and interviews, and considering the projects´ timelines, two questionnaires were developed: one for the current project and another addressing APEL in general.

The questionnaire for the current project contained mainly open-ended questions and focused on mapping experiences related to the recognition of non-formal learning from Erasmus+ and the ESC. The questionnaire was distributed to organisations active in these programmes, as well as to persons involved in youth work curricula, with the request that they share the questionnaire with students, lecturers, etc. who might have experience of recognising non-formal learning through Erasmus+ or the ESC. The questionnaire was open for responses from 10 April to 29 April 2025. Eight responses were received.

The second questionnaire consisted mainly of multiple-choice questions. Respondents with experience of recognising non-formal learning were asked to specify whether this experience was connected to Erasmus+ or the ESC. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents had the option to leave their contact details for follow-up questions. This questionnaire was opened on 28 April 2025. By the morning of 30 April 2025, 189 responses had been received, of which only four were from higher education, and two of these reported experience of recognising their prior work experience (not related to Erasmus + or the ESC).

[5] https://www.ibs.ee/en/projects/problems-in-using-rpl-recognition-of-prior-learning-and-experience-from-the-perspective-of-learners-and-qualification-applicants/
[6] https://www.ibs.ee/en/projects/recognizing-the-experience-of-participants-in-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corps-programs-in-higher-education-studies/

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the 2024/2025 academic year, there were 18 higher education institutions in Estonia. According to data from 30 January 2025, there were 45,450 students, of which 30,873 were enrolled at the top three universities: the University of Tartu, Tallinn University of Technology and Tallinn University.[7] Youth work is taught at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University.

Studying on the Estonian-language curriculum is free of charge at the first and second levels of higher education, provided that it is the student's first higher education qualification or at least 10 years have passed since exmatriculation from the same level of higher education, and the student is studying full-time and completes the required amount of study in each semester.[8]

The higher education institution establishes and publishes the admission criteria for higher education studies, including the minimum language proficiency requirements for the language of instruction.[9] In general, admission is based on the results of national examinations and/or a university entrance test, with places being allocated to students based on their ranking.

RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

The Higher Education Standard Regulation sets out the possible conditions for taking into account prior learning and work experience (for meeting the conditions for admission, for credit points towards the curriculum, for continuing education towards the curriculum, for self-study and for knowledge and skills acquired through work experience) and stipulates that the higher education institution shall establish the procedure.

> "Chapter 4 Principles of recognition of prior learning and work experience
>
> § 13. Principles of recognition of prior learning and work experience
>
> (1) The higher education institution shall establish the conditions and procedures for taking into account students' previous studies and work experience.
>
> (2) Crediting of previous studies and work experience may be implemented

[7] https://haridussilm.ee/ee/tasemeharidus/oppetasemed/korgharidus/ylevaade
[8] https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/111032023054
[9] https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/111032023054

in accordance with the terms and procedures established pursuant to subsection (1):

1) for the purpose of fulfilling the admission requirements established by the higher education institution;

2) for the purpose of fulfilling the curriculum, for the purpose of counting credits acquired in the course of previous studies;

3) for the purpose of the completion of the curriculum in the framework of continuing education, for the purpose of counting the knowledge and skills acquired through independent study and work experience towards credit points, in the case of higher education institutions." [10]

Voluntary work is counted towards the undergraduate degree at Tallinn University of Education and is awarded extra points.

"In order to receive extra points, you must bring a completed application form with you to the entrance examination or submit it to the Institute (for more information on where and by when to send or submit the application form, see the specialisation page). The application must include the name of the organisation in which you participated and the contact details and signature of the representative of the organisation."[11]

At both universities offering youth work studies, Tallinn University and the University of Tartu, the study programme regulations allow for the transfer of voluntary activities within the framework of APEL (Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning). However, at Tallinn University, work and other life experience can only be counted towards compulsory subjects, while at the University of Tartu it can be counted towards all subjects available at the university.

"It is also possible to apply for credit for further education, work or other experience when completing a curriculum. This is the case if the previous experience is relevant to the subjects taught at the university. (...) Subjects, curriculum modules, continuing education, work experience and other professional experience that are relevant to the learning outcomes of the curriculum and that are relevant to the content of the curriculum may be taken into account for the completion of the curriculum to the extent specified in the curriculum version. Non-crediting of previous studies and work experience for the purposes of the curriculum may be based on the fact that the content of the subject is out of date due to the specific nature of the subject. Non-crediting is not based on lapse of time, the place of acquisition of knowledge and skills, minor differences in the volume of studies, the components of learning or the form of assessment of learning out-

[10] Higher Education Standard https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/113062024005
[11] https://www.tlu.ee/eritingimustel-vastuvott

comes. (...) Documentation of work experience and other activities (e.g., copies of employment contracts, job descriptions, certificates from institutions, copies of publications, documentation of events or other activities)."[12]

"The university may take into account, in full or in part, all or part of the education and training received in other institutions of higher education and other educational and training institutions, as well as work experience, daily activities and leisure time, as part of the conditions of admission and the fulfilment of the curriculum, with the exception of final examinations and theses. Continuing education and training, work experience, daily activities and leisure time can be counted as fulfilment of the curriculum with the corresponding learning outcomes if university subjects are available. (...) Depending on the learning outcomes, the Commission may require additional supporting evidence (e.g., portfolio, Europass documents, employer reference or reference letter) or use other assessment methods (e.g., work observation or mock examination, interview, etc.). The Commission will set a deadline for the completion of the additional requirements in agreement with the applicant. When examining the application, the Commission may request the opinion of experts in the field."[13]

The APEL Guide[14] points out that Europass is a good source for facilitating the recognition of previous experience. The Europass documents are good to use for APEL because

- They have a common, pan-European format.
- Comprehensive guidance materials and examples are available to support the CV and language passport.
- Europass documents emphasise non-formal learning.

Depending on the higher education institution, the process of APEL may or may not incur a fee. At some universities the fee must be paid before submitting the application, while at others, it is paid just after the process, once the number of recognised points is known. Some universities charge an application fee of 40–60 euros, as well as a fee based on the number of ECTS credits. The ECTS fee depends on the university and whether the recognition is for something acquired in the same or another institution, whether it is internal or external, and how many points are to be recognised. The ECTS fee is typically 10–15 euros. However, based on interviews, even though the fee is stated on the university's homepage, it may not be charged in practice, as the administrative costs of doing so are higher for the department or university than the value of the fee received.

[12] https://www.tlu.ee/sites/default/files/TUKO/veeb/OKE/OKE_terviktekst_kehtib_alates_26_08_2024.pdf
[13] Study regulation, Annex 3. Recognition of prior learning and professional experience https://sisu.ut.ee/ope/annex-3-recognition-prior-learning-and-professional-experience/?lang=en
[14] https://haldus.taltech.ee/sites/default/files/2019-09/Vota_HindajaJuhend%20I%20osa.pdf

To obtain a vocational qualification outside the educational system, i.e. a vocational certificate, students need to carry out a self-assessment, submit an application and undergo an assessment process which may include a portfolio analysis, a job interview or a vocational examination, for example. The content of this is largely based on what has been acquired through previous studies or work experience that is relevant to the occupational competence requirements.[15]

PROBLEMS IN RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

The "Education Sector Development Plan 2021-2035" highlights that formal education and vocational training do not take sufficient account of non-formal and informal learning and the knowledge and skills acquired through work experience. This is confirmed by the 2019 Praxis study "Vocational education and training for adults without upper secondary education – lack of opportunities and/or desire?" [16] and the APEL report prepared by the Council of the European Union.[17]

In addition, Jana Tomson highlighted one of the pervasive problems in her 2012 master's thesis on the example of Tallinn University: **APEL counsellors see APEL as a transfer of subjects rather than as the recognition of previous knowledge and skills**, which means that the individual development and self-reflection of the applicant is overlooked.[18] This is confirmed by statistics received from the Ministry of Education and Research: between 2020 and 2024, 72,627 students used APEL. Of these students, 14% used it for non-formal education, although, based on interviews, this figure also or mainly includes internships that should theoretically be part of the curriculum rather than APEL.

Related fact: 19% of all volunteers in 2018 volunteered in the youth work sector.[19]

[15] https://www.kutsekoda.ee/kutsetunnistus/
[16] Kirsti Melesk, Hanna-Stella Haaristo, Sandra Haugas, Keiu Telve. 2019. Kutsekeskharidusõpe keskhariduseta täiskasvanutele – võimaluste ja/või soovi puudus? Tallinn: Poliitikauuringute Keskus Praxis.
[17] Euroopa Liidu Nõukogu. 2023. Implementing the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. (https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2023-12/VNIL%20one%20off%20report%20Estonia%202023.pdf (accessed 22. September 2024).
[18] Jana Tomson. 2012. Varasemate õpingute ja töökogemuste arvestamise (VÕTA) nõustajate nõustamisepraktikad Tallinna Ülikooli näitel. Magistritöö, Tallinna Ülikool. https://www.etera.ee/zoom/2106/view?page=1&p=separate&search=Varasemate%20%C3%B5pingute%20ja&tool=search&view=0,582,2481,2926
[19] https://vabatahtlikud.ee/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Vabatahtlikus-tegevuses-osalemise-uuring-2018.pdf

VALIDATION PROCEDURES

As mentioned earlier, formal and non-formal learning can be validated in Estonia. However, since prior formal learning is easier to identify, document, assess and certify, it is more commonly recognised. This chapter describes the validation procedures in Estonia in general, not solely those related to recognising non-formal learning.

Although **identification** is considered an important phase of the validation process, it has received less attention than other phases. The research indicates that identification holds the highest potential for increasing recognition. Depending on the higher education institution, staff may or may not be proactive in supporting students in identifying learning experiences. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they try to identify recognition possibilities during the entrance interview, but this is not common practice. Generally, students are expected to determine for themselves whether they have experience suitable for recognition. Since self-analysis is not widely used, identifying learning outcomes can be challenging.

People who have attended some youth work activities are more successful in identifying non-formal learning, as self-evaluation and learning identification are part of the process. It also seemed to be helpful for APEL applications to include templates or guiding questions to assist with understanding whether learning has taken place and what has been learned. According to interviews, students widely use study counsellors to help them identify what can or should be validated. However, questionnaires suggest that counselling is not so widely used. Youth work programmes seem to offer more templates, instructions and flexibility to identify prior learning beyond predefined areas.

The **documentation stage** is quite well described in various instructions. Validation procedures rely heavily on documentation, as confirmed by interviews: students must provide concrete evidence of their learning (and learning achievements). In the case of non-formal learning, this is typically done through self-analysis as part of the APEL application. For learning from youth work activities, self-analysis may be part of Youthpass. Some interviewees also mentioned the use of portfolios, which may include a CV and an overview of recent activities supported by various forms of evidence such as work samples and/or practical demonstrations. The main goal of collecting and presenting documents is to enable assessors and others to evaluate and verify the claimed learning outcomes. To achieve this, evidence must be credible and portable across education and employment systems. Effective documentation increasingly relies on digital tools for creating and managing digital evidence or online portfolios. According to interviewees and respondents, one of the reasons for not applying recognition of prior learning is the lack of evidence: documents are lost or not received in time.

The **assessment** stage involves comparing an individual's learning outcomes to established standards or benchmarks. Both studies indicate that it is easier to

assess formal learning outcomes, while assessing non-formal learning is considerably more time-consuming. In addition, several lecturers believe that gaining theoretical knowledge is a crucial part of higher education. This suggests a misunderstanding and confusion surrounding validation, particularly the assessment of non-formal learning, which also generates a lower level of interest in recognition compared to formal learning. It is important to note that, according to the documents, validation or assessment must be customised to reflect each person's unique learning journey, using a combination of tools. These tools may vary from written tests to practical demonstrations, depending on the context. However, interviews did not show the use of flexible methods.

The **certification** stage is the final step in the validation process, where the learning that has been recognised, documented and assessed is formally acknowledged. This often results in a qualification, partial qualification, or credential that confirms the individual's competencies. The value of any certification depends largely on the credibility of the issuing authority and therefore higher education institutions take the validation process rather seriously. The exception are youth work curricula where non-formal learning is officially part of some subjects and does not require extensive proof or assessment beyond self-evaluation (can be part of Youthpass). It is also important to highlight that in practice there is almost no partial qualification or rejection of the APEL application. Since the recognition process is not free of charge, it is common practice and highly recommended that applications are submitted only after receiving preliminary positive agreement to recognise certain learning outcomes. This means that, although the certification phase is or should be the final step of the validation process, in Estonia it may also be the first step, alongside the identification, documentation and assessment phases.

ANALYSIS

Analysis shows that, despite supportive legislation and the availability of guidance for both educational institutions and students, the recognition of non-formal education is rather uncommon. However, several interviewees noted that this is becoming more popular, with more students coming to counselling and submitting applications to recognise non-formal experience (usually official work experience). Recognising non-formal learning is more prevalent in youth work curricula, with youth work and volunteering being highlighted specifically by representatives of youth work curricula. In youth work curricula, there are even special time slots and subjects where part or all of the subject consists of non-formal educational experiences. In youth work studies, it seems to be quite common that in agreement with the lecturer, students can compensate for some of the coursework or parts of the subject with their previous experience. There may not even be a need for a special application or additional self-analysis: Youthpass is enough if it is filled in properly. However, according to the respondents, there are differences in practices across universities. Therefore, to avoid feelings of injustice and increase

recognition of non-formal learning, including from youth work activities, it is recommended that youth work values are better understood and that recognition practises are harmonised.

The main obstacles to recognition of non-formal experiences are as follows:

- Students have to find a subject that has corresponding learning outcomes. In smaller universities there may be a lack of such subjects, and in some departments, students have to find a subject within their own department rather than from across the whole university.
- In Estonian universities, lessons generally take place over a longer period of time, with contact lessons lasting just a few hours. Interviewees believed that students do not appreciate the free time they will have between lessons enough and therefore decide to take all the classes in the curriculum instead of compensating for some of these with prior experience.
- For some students, it is or it seems too difficult to explain and describe what they have learned from non-formal learning. Interviewees also mentioned that students who are also working and have a family tend to be on autopilot: it is easier to do what is said or what the curriculum says than to figure out what and how to describe the previous learning experience or how to compensate for some of the classes.
- Cost of the APEL.
- Lack of documents to confirm the experience.
- The possibility of recognising non-formal education is not widely known among students, especially compared to formal education. Although representatives of universities believed that APEL should be introduced when students start their studies or even during the entrance interview, and that information is easily accessible from the university's homepage or from the APEL contact person, not all students are aware of this possibility.

In summary, recognising non-formal learning is not widespread or well-known in Estonia, despite the existence of supportive legislation and state-level instructions. Youth work curricula are a positive exception.

EXPERIENCES IN RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING AND WORK EXPERIENCE

The researchers conducting the current study were unable to collect many stories about recognising prior non-formal learning. However, it emerged that there are several options for recognising such learning: compensating for a whole subject, part of a subject or some coursework. While all these options were highlighted

within youth work curricula, smaller compensations were rarely mentioned in other curricula, although interviewees agreed that it is possible to compensate for just part of a subject.

Interviews show that some of the reasons for the limited examples of non-formal learning recognition relate to the previously mentioned challenges regarding identification, documentation, assessment, certification and the overall prevalence of (non-)formal learning. Often, interviewees saw that students alone had a positive impact on recognition, purely because of the decrease in workload. At the same time, some members of staff and students recognise the value of combining formal and non-formal learning. To quote a few respondents:

“As I am studying youth work and this field is connected with non-formal learning, it is great that the university also offers non-formal education. This is exactly how we learn youth work.”

“Students really relate their experiences to what they have learned. The analysis is very useful, enabling them to analyse the topics they have studied themselves.”

Nevertheless, respondents have faced several challenges that should be addressed to increase the popularity of recognition. For example, there is a need to raise greater awareness of this possibility among staff and students. The Youthpass should be used more, given that it already includes an analysis of learning outcomes. Universities and students should think outside the box when analysing and recognising prior learning. Counsellors should provide increased support when necessary. The cost of APEL applications should be reviewed, and it should be made clear that there is potential for greater flexibility in “translating” the rules of APEL. Additionally, one respondent highlighted that prior experiences have been recognised for years, demonstrating the need to collect and share experiences of recognition to raise the profile of non-formal learning.



FRANCE

How formal education, *and higher education in particular*, validates skills developed in non-formal and informal learning contexts specific to youth work and voluntary activities.

Clément Dupuis

INTRODUCTION

The recognition and validation of skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts has gradually become part of the landscape of higher education institution practices in France.

At a time when transferable, interpersonal, civic and organisational skills are becoming increasingly valued in professional careers (integration, HR practices, etc.), it appears vital to consider experience acquired outside of the traditional academic framework, whether through associations, voluntary work, international mobility (Erasmus+) or civic engagement.

2017 was an important year in the recognition of non-formal/informal experiences and learning by universities in France, driven in particular by the Equality and Cit-

izenship Act. Enacted in January, this act requires higher education institutions to adapt their courses for students with responsibilities resulting from membership of an association or due to holding an elected position, and to recognise skills acquired through extracurricular activities as well as academic skills. This step forward reflects the desire to support diversity in students' academic careers, promote civic engagement and better prepare young people for the realities of the job market and their future duties as active citizens.

However, the transition from legal framework to widespread practice remains a work in progress.

Against this backdrop, and based on a desk research, interviews and an analysis of innovative systems in France, this report aims to answer the fundamental question of how formal education, and higher education in particular, validates/accredits skills developed in non-formal and informal learning contexts specific to youth work and voluntary activities.

The benefit of linking non-formal and informal education practices with the formal system has been well established. However, it needs to be better understood if its impact is to be further strengthened.

We will therefore analyse practices for validating and accrediting skills, the challenges and limitations associated with them, as well as possible future developments. We will also highlight recent innovations, the impact of European schemes and the specific characteristics of the affected groups, particularly young people with fewer opportunities, for whom recognition is crucial.

By combining an institutional perspective and field analysis, this report aims to provide an overview of a complex subject and its associated challenges. The aim is to understand how recognition of a specific learning context is currently considered in France.

FRAMEWORK

METHOD

By conducting an in-depth documentary study and a series of interviews with stakeholders from various institutions, associations and universities, we explored how formal education in France – and higher education in particular – validates or accredits skills developed in non-formal and informal learning contexts specific to youth work and voluntary activities.

As part of our qualitative approach, we conducted semi-guided interviews with a panel representing key stakeholders with an interest in the issue of skills accreditation/validation:

- A project manager for the Centre-Val de Loire regional authority
- The Continuing Education Director at Jean Monnet University: St Etienne
- The Vice-president of Jean Monnet University (St Etienne), Entrepreneurship and Continuing Education Representative, Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship at IUT de Roanne
- The head of the Lyon education authority's International Department: National Education
- The director of government start-up Diagoriente
- A digital project manager of an experiment dealing with the validation /recognition of personal experience acquired through training pathways (Aiden project, as part of the Definuum call for projects[20]),
- The head of Lyon education authority's academic learning accreditation scheme DAVA (*Dispositif Académique de Validation des Acquis*) The France VAE (recognition of prior learning) project manager at beta. gouv.fr, Prime Minister's Office
- A member of a working group on the standardisation of processes for the recognition and accreditation of prior learning (AFNOR), president of AFDEC, https://www.afdecparis.com
- A project manager within the local mission network (Centre-Val de Loire region).

These interviews allowed us to gather the views of those with an interest in this subject and to question certain practices.

The work began by defining and contextualising the subject with regard to France to allow us to obtain a precise understanding of the concepts of validation, accreditation, recognition and certification of skills acquired outside of academia within the French system.

TERMINOLOGY-RELATED ISSUES

The way in which a skill is 'recognised' is based on specific vocabulary in France, which sometimes differs substantially from European and international nomenclatures.

[20] https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/deffinum

- Recognition: the act of identifying and validating the existence of a skill, without necessarily certifying it.
- Accreditation: an official statement, often issued by an organisation, recognising a skill or experience. This statement has no academic value.
- Validation: a structured, criteria-based process that aims to give a skill institutional value. However, this institutional value is not part of a qualification process.
- Certification: in France, this corresponds to the award of a title or qualification, whereas at European level, the concept of certification may be broader and include micro-credentials or badges.

For example, while at European level the concept of certification is often integrated into flexible, electronic schemes or associated with micro- credentials, in France it refers to a more formalised system that usually awards a qualification and is registered with the RNCP[21] (National Directory of Professional Certifications). This difference is key with respect to the implementation of transferable practices and for ensuring that young people's experience can be clearly understood at an international level.

These are not mere semantic nuances: understanding them enables us to better analyse the challenges involved in implementing best practices and the complexity of building a coherent national strategy, particularly at the crossroads between academic expectations, employers, young people and the European context.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FRANCE

A HISTORICALLY DEGREE-FOCUSED SYSTEM

In France, the culture surrounding degree qualifications remains deeply rooted in society. Although the boundaries are gradually changing, the French education system continues to prioritise degrees and qualifications as key markers of professional and social legitimacy. Historically, an individual's recognition has been based primarily on having a nationally recognised title or degree.

The importance placed on degrees is reflected in the way in which university courses are organised, with these being firmly rooted in disciplinary frameworks and geared towards the imparting of academic, methodological, psychosocial and professional knowledge, while also developing students' critical thinking,

[21] Cf.: https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/R40438

independence and ability to adapt to an ever-changing professional and social environment. The organisation of courses around degrees – whether bachelor's, master's or doctorate – thus serves as the central pillar of the validation and recognition of acquired knowledge and skills.

AN EXCEPTIONALLY DIVERSE RANGE OF COURSES OF STUDY

The French higher education system reflects this culture of qualifications through the remarkable diversity of its offerings. The system welcomes 2.5 million students, 12% of whom are foreign students, who undertake courses of study in all fields and at all levels.

This diversity can be seen in the dense, nationwide network of more than 3,500 public and private institutions:

- 72 universities and 25 communities of universities and institutions
- 271 doctoral schools
- 227 engineering schools authorised to award the title of 'Engineer'
- 220 business and management schools
- 45 public art schools
- 22 architecture schools
- 3,000 private schools and institutes

There are also courses taught at secondary schools: preparatory classes for the *grandes écoles* (*classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles*; CPGE), technical college departments (*sections de techniciens supérieurs*; STS) and preparatory courses for the Advanced Vocational Training Certificate (*Brevet de Technicien Supérieur*; BTS).

INTEGRATION AT EUROPEAN LEVEL: THE BMD SYSTEM

Since signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999, France has integrated the European higher education system. The French system is now structured around three levels: Bachelor's, master's and doctorate (BMD), using the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). A bachelor's degree corresponds to 180 credits over 6 semesters (or more), and a master's degree to 120 credits over 4 semesters (or more).

The aim of this standardisation is to promote student mobility within Europe, allowing semesters completed in France to be recognised in any other European Union country.

A detailed scheme of the French system is presented here: https://www.campus-france.org/fr/diplomes-francais-LMD-equivalences

THE NATIONAL CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORK: A CENTRALISED QUALIFICATION ORGANISATION

Outside of academic organisation, the **national certification framework (*cadre national de certification*; CNC)** serves as the structure for all professional degrees and titles in France. This system is managed by the **National Professional Certification Commission (*Commission nationale des certifications professionnelles*; CNCP)**, now known as France Compétences, which ensures the consistency and national recognition of certifications.

THE SYSTEM IS BASED ON TWO COMPLEMENTARY DIRECTORIES:

The National Professional Certification Directory (*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*; RNCP) provides the basis for official recognition. Any professional certification that wishes to achieve national recognition has to be registered in this directory. This registration guarantees the qualifications' official value and ensures the certification's portability on the job market, thereby further reinforcing France's degree-focused system.

The Specific Directory (*Répertoire Spécifique*; RS) complements this system by providing a list of certifications or qualifications relating to transferable or complementary skills. These certifications, which are often more targeted than traditional degree qualifications, allow for more specific, specialised recognition of professional skills.

A COMPLEX ARCHITECTURE: THE DUAL SEGMENTATION OF THE FRENCH SYSTEM

The structure of the French system is characterised by its dual segmentation:

First level of segmentation: The way in which higher education is structured is based on a division between public and private institutions, which differ in terms of funding, governance and access.

- The public sector and certain private non-profit institutions (EESPIG), which are funded by the state and assessed by an independent body, aim to provide a public service based on equal opportunities and high-quality, research-based education.

- The private sector, which is more heterogeneous, is more strongly influenced by market dynamics and is generally geared towards professionalisation.

The coexistence of these two sectors leads to both competition and complementarity within the system. This results in major issues in terms of equity, quality of provision and the recognition of degree qualifications.

Second level of segmentation: Research is carried out by two types of institutions: specialist public scientific and technological establishments (*établissements publics à caractère scientifique et technologique*; EPSTs) and universities, which provide teaching in addition to undertaking research. Support is required throughout the course selection process to navigate this complex form of organisation.

INSTITUTIONS' AUTONOMY: A DIVERSITY FACTOR

The French public higher education system is based on national public scientific, cultural and professional institutions, or EPSCPs (*Établissements publics à caractère scientifique, culturel et professionnel*), which report directly to the government. They are organised around three fundamental principles: autonomy, participation and multidisciplinarity.

Institutions' autonomy is a determining factor in the implementation of educational policies. At the pedagogical level, universities are free to choose their own teaching and assessment methods, which explains why practices are so varied, particularly with regard to the validation of skills acquired in non-formal or informal settings.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS DRIVEN BY REGULATIONS

The 2017 Equality and Citizenship Act marked a turning point by encouraging institutions to change their practices to ensure a more open approach. Under this legislation:

- Courses are to be adapted for students with responsibilities resulting from membership of an association or due to holding an elected position
- Skills acquired in non-academic settings are to be recognised in the form of credits or course units
- These experiences may be integrated into the process for awarding degrees in the same way as professional experience or internships

Institutions are implementing the flexibility prescribed by these regulations, however, due to their high level of autonomy, its application remains inconsistent.

PRACTICES FOR THE VALIDATION AND ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS DEVELOPED IN NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING CONTEXTS IN FRANCE

The French landscape for recognising skills acquired outside of a traditional academic setting has undergone major developments in recent years. Between learning through involvement in associations, volunteer work, civic engagement and informal professional activities, many skills are developed without being formally recognised. In view of this, a complex ecosystem of validation and accreditation has gradually emerged, supported by legislative changes and digital innovation.

THE LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Regulatory changes

The 2017 Equality and Citizenship Act marks a turning point in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. To date, it remains the most significant advancement in recognising experiences acquired outside formal academic settings.

This change is part of a wider movement, strengthened by calls for projects on skills recognition and the influence of European programmes, to which many French stakeholders have subscribed.

The stakeholder ecosystem

The institutional landscape involves several categories of stakeholders:

Public institutional stakeholders:

- Dedicated university departments (SVE, SUIO-IP, Continuing Education departments)
- Ministry of Higher Education and its operators, higher education institutions in particular
- National agencies (Erasmus+, CES)
- Regional authorities, particularly regions that coordinate the Regional Public Guidance Services (*Services Publics Régionaux d'Orientation*; SPRO)

- Other relevant ministries (Education, Labour [for RNCP qualifications], Youth and Sports)

Association stakeholders and organisations:

- Student associations and national organisations (Animafac, FAGE, France Volontaires, OFAJ)
- Organisations that manage specific projects (associations, companies)

This diversity of stakeholders results in substantial variability in resources and approaches depending on the region and institution. This makes the issue as a whole complex and difficult to understand.

RECOGNITION PROCEDURES: INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL

INTERNAL RECOGNITION

Internal recognition mainly benefits the learner themselves. It aims to promote:

- Greater awareness of their strengths and skills
- Optimised preparation of CVs and applications
- Better recognition of the student's academic journey
- The development of a reflective attitude towards their experiences

This approach focuses on individual support and personal appreciation of achievements.

EXTERNAL RECOGNITION

External recognition depends on the degree of legitimacy that employers, establishments or institutions accord to existing systems. Although their importance in the labour market is growing, they remain unequally recognised by recruiters and institutions.

Normative issues become central: skills frameworks are attempting to create a common language, but their adoption remains inconsistent across society, raising questions of social justice in the context of access to professional opportunities.

THE GRADUATED SCALE OF VALIDATION PRACTICES

The document analysis and interviews conducted provided a more accurate overview of the wide range of different recognition practices, illustrating the significant challenges associated with recognising skills developed outside the traditional academic setting. These practices can be summarised as follows:

- As part of national qualifications or within institutions: validation via the ECTS or a supplement to the student engagement qualification
- VAE (validation of prior learning)
- Micro-credentialcredentials
- Student engagement: validation as part of a qualification via the ECTS or a supplement to the degree
- Certification of skills – without a national qualification, but internal recognition
- Recognition of skills – declarative with the involvement of a third party (open badges)
- Identification of skills – declarative and involving a number of parties

These practices relate to non-formal and informal learning experiences, particularly in youth work and volunteering.

Key challenge: capturing and recording these experiences so they can be recognised during the student's academic career

IDENTIFYING SKILLS

Principle and challenges

Identification is the very first step in any recognition process. This field, which is particularly dynamic thanks to digital innovation, attracts substantial investment from actors involved in higher education guidance.

Tools and schemes

- **Skills portfolios:** Offered by a number of universities and *grandes écoles*,

these enable students to document their experiences – whether academic, professional or gained through involvement with associations and volunteering – as well as the skills they have acquired.

- **Skills passport:** Overseen by the Ministry of Labour and developed digitally by the Caisse des Dépôts, the tool allows skills acquired through study, employment or personal experience to be recorded, highlighted and formally recognised throughout an individual's life with the aim of ensuring their long-term employability.
- **Student support:** Some institutions provide guidance to help students identify and formally recognise the skills they have acquired.

Identified limitations

The ways in which skills are identified vary greatly from one institution to another and often depend on individual or local initiatives. Institutional recognition of these tools remains variable.

Practical example: the government start-up Diagoriente[22]

Excerpt from an interview with Pascal Chaumette, its director

'Diagoriente is a government start-up that supports people in their careers and in changing careers.

Our goal is to help people recognise their experience and skills to get ahead in the world of work.

Using our tools, we want to make this stage smooth and engaging for users, whatever their situation: guidance, integration, training, retraining or development.

Users learn to highlight all their professional, personal, voluntary and amateur sports experience. The scheme helps the most vulnerable to broaden their horizons, particularly through work experience, training and even job offers.

The support we provide helps people discover their skills; we aim to link experiences with means of describing skills. The preferred framework is currently ROME 4.0, as this allows connections to be made with institutions. Because they're the ones that need to get on board.'

[22] Cf.: https://diagoriente.fr

RECOGNISING SKILLS

The innovation **Open Badges** are digital credentials issued by a third party to provide evidence of a skill. They are currently being trialled by certain universities (Clermont-Auvergne, Grenoble, Bordeaux) and local authorities ('Badgeons la Normandie', 'Badgeons le Centre-Loire'). However, the scheme is still struggling to gain traction on a wider scale.

A large-scale experiment: the 2024 Paris Olympic Games.

'An "open badge" has been created to recognise volunteers' skills[23].

45,000 volunteers took part in organising the competition. The "open badge" enabled all those involved to automatically acquire 15 of these 30 fundamental skills. Including these skills in the skills passport clearly contributed to the event's economic and social legacy and marked the beginning of a new phase in institutional recognition of volunteering in all its forms. It provides the volunteers with a way to have their unique experience at the heart of the Games formally recognised throughout their career. This volunteering experience during the Games has thus served as a springboard, particularly for the development of soft skills: communication, teamwork and problem-solving in the context of their duties.

This badge has been added to the skills passport[24] created by the Ministry of Labour. This is a new step in the process of recognising

skills acquired in the context of extracurricular or extra-professional activities, even if it does not currently constitute validation of the process for all forms of open recognition.

In any case, this experience with the Olympics is certainly proof that things are moving in the right direction. It will take time, but we have to accept that moving from a knowledge-based qualifications system to recognising all experience, interpersonal skills and expertise is a fundamental cultural change.'

Excerpt from an interview with Hubert Grandjean, AFDEC Chairman

[23] https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/jeux-2024-un-open-badge-pour-reconnaitre-les-competences-des-volontaires An excellent presentation can be found in the e-Pic 2024 report.2024 - ePIC 2025, Reconnaître Les Sportifs De Haut-Niveau : Sécuriser Les Parcours Par Un Formel Inversé (French language).

[24] https://competences.moncompteformation.gouv.fr/actualites/bienvenue-sur-votre-passeport-de-competences; The purpose of this passport is to ensure secure access to information about passport holders' career, training and qualifications.

Preferred European tools

- **Diploma supplement**: European document annexed to the main diploma and provides details of extracurricular activities

- **Europass, Youthpass, European Language Passport**: These documents provide a common basis for recognition across Europe and promote skill transferability

Digital experiments

Innovative projects like 'Aiden' aim to accelerate the recognition of skills in digital formats, particularly in the context of micro-recognition.

> **Translating experience into skills**
>
> 'One of the AIDEN project's innovations is based on AI building blocks,like the skills positioning solution, for instance. It analyses the information conveyed in natural language to understand it and provide future learners with recommendations on their career and ways to personalise their training.
>
> We are working with the French start-up QAnswer, and the results are becoming increasingly accurate and convincing. You can 'feed' the AI with the reference information you want. We know that Open IA can also perform this function, but we have doubts about its compliance with GDPR rules.
>
> It's useful for learners in that they are taught to think about things that at first seem technical in terms of 'skills'. This makes it easier for them to understand and describe what they are learning.'
>
> *Romain Guyot, Digital Project Manager, Aiden project*

CERTIFYING SKILLS

Principle

Certification does not lead to a nationally recognised qualification, but is a form of formal recognition internally validated by an educational institution.

Identified schemes

- **'Youth and Sport' qualifications**: Incorporating recognition of experience obtained through involvement with associations or volunteering

- **University diplomas (*Diplômes Universitaires*; DU) for student engagement**: Modules that recognise experience obtained through involvement with associations, allowing students to obtain a university diploma and ECTS credits.

PARTIAL VALIDATION OF SKILLS

Development context

This practice directly echoes the 2017 act and is being rolled out at a growing number of universities: adaptation of courses, ECTS credits for active members of associations, 'student engagement pathway' schemes.

Main schemes

- **Certif'asso**, the certificate in association management training: Enables the certification of charitable organisations management. A recognised sector-specific scheme, mainly aimed at those involved in non-profits or charities, which provides evidence of a basic level of competence in managing such organisations.

- Micro-credentials (short modules, certified skills sets): According to the European Commission, micro-credentials are 'small training units' that lead to the recognition of skills by academic institutions as well as companies and other public or private organisations.

OBTAINING A FULL QUALIFICATION

Recognition of prior learning (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*; VAE): an underutilised pillar

VAE (recognition of prior learning), which originates in the French Social Modernisation Act of 17 January 2002, allows individuals to obtain professional certification through the recognition of skills acquired throughout their lives. In other words, VAE allows people to have their experience recognised through professional certification (degree, professional title, certificate of professional qualification, etc.), regardless of age, nationality, status or level of education.

The certifying jury can award a full qualification or part of a qualification by validating skill sets.

VAE remains the benchmark scheme:

- All certifications listed in the RNCP must be accessible via VAE
- Enables experience (voluntary, paid, activist) to be officially recognised, allowing to obtain a full or partial qualification

Despite its innovative potential, VAE remains underutilised due to its administrative complexity. The 2018 reform, which introduced the national platform, France VAE, aims to centralise support, safeguard career paths and facilitate lifelong certification through the recognition of both professional and voluntary experience.

In addition, non-formal or informal experiences cannot replace professional experience; they must complement it. The focus is on the logic of the career trajectory and how different life experiences are interconnected.

The reverse VAE experiment

'An interesting experiment mentioned during the interview is reverse VAE. Unlike classic VAE, which is based on the candidate's past experience, reverse VAE is aimed at people with little or no experience. The idea is to build an in-house learning pathway, through which the person gradually gains experience while benefitting from educational support.

This approach is particularly relevant to young people or those who are retraining. It's based on a work-study model, with individuals receiving personal supervision so that their acquired skills can be gradually recognised.'

Excerpt from an interview with Yassine Boucherit, Head of Lyon education authority's academic learning validation scheme DAVA (Dispositif Académique de Validation des Acquis)

PARCOURSUP

The work carried out as part of the Parcoursup system deserves to be highlighted. The national higher education application platform now recognises extracurricular commitments, encouraging secondary school pupils to document and promote their non-formal experience. These have a real impact on the student selection process.

In addition to the grades achieved at secondary school, some courses of study pay particular attention to the extracurricular activities listed in Parcoursup applications. Whether it's civic, school-related or even sporting commitments, mentioning these can really make a difference and increase your chances of being accepted onto a course of study.

This is why some young people choose to participate in such activities before sitting their baccalaureate.

ANALYSIS OF PRACTICES FOR THE VALIDATION/ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS DEVELOPED IN NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING CONTEXTS IN FRANCE

Several key findings emerged from the analysis of practices, which was carried out based on the literature, studies (CEDEFOP, National Assembly, OECD, etc.), specific schemes and interviews.

Progress is being made with regard to the integration of skills acquired through non-formal or informal activities. However, despite the momentum being generated by innovation, the voluntary sector and pressure at a European level, these skills are not yet consistently recognised in France. Recognition remains largely limited to local initiatives, pilot programmes or sector-specific schemes, which are insufficiently integrated into a national framework leading to fully recognised qualifications, even though advances are ongoing.

In practice, implementation of these schemes varies across institutions and sectors as universities retain considerable autonomy in how they apply them. The diversity of contexts, terminology and tools complicates efforts to ensure the visibility and transferability of best practices at national and European level.

Despite the progress made, integration into degree programmes remains limited. Most institutions favour recognition 'alongside' the degree – through supplements, certificates issued during professional integration, professionalisation course units or recognition in Parcoursup – rather than accreditation that confers ECTS credits or full academic recognition. However, some institutions have introduced open, optional or professionalisation course units that allow volunteering experiences to be formally recognised through ECTS credits.

CHARACTERISTICS

A highly dynamic subject with a wealth of initiatives

Extensive literature has been written about this field and since the early 2000s it has been the focus of a growing number of initiatives, which have accelerated since 2017 as a result of national and European policies.

This momentum reflects institutions' and practitioners' growing interest in recognising the skills acquired through youth work and volunteering.

The diversity and multiplicity of schemes reflect the wide range of ongoing experiments; however consistent implementation at national and institutional levels (universities, companies, public services) remains elusive.

A complex, multilayered system of measures

The French ecosystem for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is rich, but can be difficult for users and employers to navigate, making it challenging to assess the scope and value of each scheme. A harmonised framework for the recognition of non-formal learning would improve visibility.

It is a complex subject, as there is a wide range of systems for recognising and accrediting skills. Practices employed in higher education and full-time education differ markedly from those in continuing education, while specific industries and chambers of commerce often operate their own schemes. To identify which professional certifications are recognised by the state, France compétences manages two directories: the RNCP (National Directory of Professional Certifications) and the RS (Specific Directory), which certifies targeted skills or accreditations, often interdisciplinary or regulatory in nature. The RNCP allows users to identify stage-recognised professional certifications and guarantees their quality, alignment with labour market needs and level of qualification.

A key challenge today regarding learning acquired through student voluntary work is therefore improving the implementation of a common recognition framework.

A COMPLEX SUBJECT

‘There are numerous different ways to recognise and validate skills. The practices employed in higher and full-time education are very different to those found in continuing education. Professional industries also have their own practices, as do chambers of commerce and industry. The National Professional Certification Directory (RNCP) is managed by France Compétence, but its main mission is to record titles and qualifications. It does not coordinate or monitor the practices for validating ‘de jure’ qualifications (National Education and higher education diplomas).

What is now happening is that a common recognition framework, or, to put it briefly, a form of standardising recognition processes, is being defined. A working group has also been set up at AFNOR to look at this issue.’

Excerpt from an interview with Olivier Gérard,
Preliminary Director of the VAE public service.
France VAE (recognition of prior learning) project manager
at beta.gouv.fr, Prime Minister’s Office.

A proliferation of schemes and initiatives, but little formal recognition

A working group on this subject has been set up within AFNOR and DGESIP (MESRE). Although numerous assessment and accreditation schemes have emerged – led by associations, public institutions or European initiatives – they remain largely isolated and are often local, sector-specific or experimental in scope. Recognition typically takes the form of a competency certificate, a certificate of proof of service or a supplement to the degree, but is not necessarily linked to ECTS credits and does not always support the genuine modularisation of courses.

France’s education system allows students to obtain a diploma or professional certification. Experience gained through charitable/voluntary work can be formally recognised in several ways: as part of a supplement to a national diploma, through VAE (recognition of prior learning), which allows individuals to obtain a nationally recognised diploma or professional certification, or through VAP (recognition of professional experience), which offers individuals who do not have the required diploma access to a study programme.

Innovation, support and public funding

The state has provided substantial financial support for the formal recognition of voluntary experience, mainly through calls for projects in educational innovation. This has led to a proliferation of trial projects (Open Badges, digital portfolios, Definuum, ECTS engagement modules, etc.), but few have been successfully rolled out at national level or integrated into qualification frameworks. As a result, investments remain fragmented, with limited visible capitalisation. European programmes continue to have a significant structural impact.

How can we strike a balance between supporting grassroots initiatives and the necessary consolidation of resources?

'The work involved in recognising and validating learning in France is a constant juggling act between different issues and visions that vary depending on who you're talking to, most of whom are dependent on the government. I feel as though it's always a work in progress!

Doesn't this call into question the efficiency of public services? If we accept a high degree of fragmentation, with multiple initiatives and strategies that overlap, aren't we losing out on efficiency?

Yes, but it may be a matter of multiplying experiments in different regions so that all stakeholders become familiarised. Increasing the number of initiatives allows people to familiarise themselves with the issues. But it's true that there are many similar projects. How can we strike a balance between supporting grassroots initiatives and the necessary consolidation of resources?'

Excerpt from an interview with Pascal Chaumette, Director of government start-up Diagoriente

Impact of European schemes

France is fully integrated into the European skills recognition movement, and these programmes strongly encourage the practical implementation of political intentions to recognise transferable skills.

- **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**

Facilitates comparability of qualification levels between all EU countries, thereby facilitating mobility and the recognition of diplomas/certifications.

- **ECVET and ECTS**

Credit systems enabling the recognition of learning outcomes achieved in vocational training (ECVET) and higher education (ECTS).

- **Europass**

Standardised portfolio for documenting learning and career pathways at the European level.

- **Youthpass**

A tool that enables the documentation of the competences developed through voluntary activities or youth projects implemented within the European Union youth programmes.

- **Language European Portfolio**

A schemes that enables documentation of linguistic skills. This is also the case for portfolios developed by French institutions (using tools such as PEC, Mahara, co-folios, Moodle, etc.).

- **Micro-credentials**

Recognised evidence of learning outcomes achieved in short courses. They have been rolled out in Europe as well as in France. Micro-credentials could be included in the Specific Directory for official recognition by the Ministry of Labour as part of coherent training courses directly linked to employers' needs.

Cultural and institutional obstacles remain

Interdisciplinary, social, interpersonal and organisational skills are more difficult to assess than academic knowledge, which presents challenges for measuring and integrating them into qualifications. This can, in turn, undermine institutional confidence and the transferability of schemes.

Even within the most committed institutions, recognition of experience gained through involvement within associations is often regarded as a supplementary asset rather than a genuine means of obtaining a qualification.

Recognition of experience often just a bonus

'Even within the most committed institutions, recognition of experience obtained through involvement in associations is often just a bonus, and rarely a real means of obtaining a degree. More needs to be done to translate the law into practice, and a shared culture of validating learning from outside the university's walls has yet to be developed.'

(Comments gathered during an interview at Jean Monnet University, Saint-Étienne)

MAIN IDENTIFIED OBSTACLES AND LEVERS

Obstacles	Levers
• Administrative complexity and a lack of harmonisation between institutions in the recognition of non-formal/informal learning. • Difficulty in objectively assessing and evaluating skills acquired in disparate contexts (mobility, student engagement, volunteering). • Lack of clarity for employers and sometimes students themselves due to a lack of clear standards. • Predominance of qualification culture: institutional recognition still plays a major role in the collective French imagination.	• Experimenting with micro-credentials: several universities participate in pilot projects that allow 'badges' to be awarded for specific skills, promoting their portability in the job market. • Growing support from Europe (Erasmus+, CES, Youthpass programmes) to encourage both mobility and institutional recognition of skills acquired outside the classroom. • Coordination with Parcoursup/ national platforms, which create new spaces to highlight non-academic criteria during the admission processes. • Ongoing 'standardisation' process[25]

[25] The ROME/France Travail Directory: provides a reference framework for qualifying skills, including those acquired through volunteering, with a common language that can be used by employers. In development for the past three years, the Afnor (French Standardisation Association) standard on soft skills (behavioural skills) has just been made public. It will now be a further three years before this experimental standard evolves into an NF standard.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE VALIDATION/ACCREDITATION OF SKILLS DEVELOPED IN NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING CONTEXTS SPECIFIC TO YOUTH WORK AND VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES.

INTEREST

In response to societal changes, the innovation economy, new forms of work, international mobility and social expectations, professionals are becoming increasingly interested in transferable skills and life experiences.

Experiences of engagement, volunteering and European mobility appear to be key avenues for developing in-demand skills such as agility, collaborative working and intercultural skills.

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

BETTER TARGETING OF GROUPS

- Measures must be primarily geared towards those who have the most to gain from the recognition of informally acquired skills: young people who are far from the job market, who have dropped out of school or who are changing careers.

- Recognising these skills in order to improve equity in people's academic journeys, particularly in the context of Parcoursup or access to continuing education.

Adopting a human resources and employability-based approach

- To be persuasive, recognition and employability need to be linked: how, specifically, can these skills promote professional integration or career progression?

- Encouraging employers to revisit their recruitment methods, taking into

account portfolios, open badges or association-based experience, as is the case in certain innovative human resources approaches.The AFNOR standardisation process for transferable skills, including in methods for identifying skills, could ultimately strengthen the link between HR practices and those of stakeholders in the recognition of non-formal education.

PROMOTING MICRO-CREDENTIALS

- Offering partial certifications (‘skill sets’, micro-credentials/‘nano-degrees’) that can be accessed through life experience, facilitating progressive access to full certification.

- Modelling these approaches on the European ECTS/ECVET standards or on the example of language certifications (TOEIC, European Language Portfolio).

STRENGTHENING THE ‘TRUSTED THIRD PARTY’ APPROACH

- Centring the awarding of recognition around legitimate structures or stakeholders (universities, accredited association networks, independent certifying bodies).

- Promoting links between databases and tools (Skills Portfolio, Europass, Youthpass, etc.) for greater traceability and interoperability.

CONTINUING EDUCATION: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

Using continuing education as a lever to integrate skills acquired outside of a school-based context: validation in skills assessments, in VAE (recognition of prior learning), or as part of professional mobility.

PRIVATE INITIATIVES IN ADDITION TO INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

Institutional measures are also complemented by private and community initiatives such as language certifications, which have become international benchmarks integrated into academic pathways. The success of the TOEIC and Cambridge Certificate qualifications in the area of languages demonstrates the ability of those working in the field to produce internationally recognised standards integrated into university courses.

CONSOLIDATING A POSITIVE CYCLE

Consolidating a virtuous dynamic requires action at all levels that combines political initiatives, sector-based support, improved information and pressure on institutions.

POLICY (VISION)
A choice made by decision-makers

AREAS OF STUDY (OFFER)
Integration into courses and skills frameworks

FIELD (DEMANDS)
Demands/pressure from the field

MOVING TOWARDS NEW TOOLS: IS AI A SOLUTION?

There is growing interest in the use of artificial intelligence technologies to facilitate the automated identification, translation and recognition of skills based on reported experiences or digital records of activity. These technologies can help to translate experiences into skills, thereby providing end users with a better understanding of terminology and skills frameworks, which are often difficult to grasp.

CONCLUSION

A CHANGING ECOSYSTEM CONFRONTED WITH STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

In conclusion, the French ecosystem for the recognition and accreditation of skills acquired in non-formal and informal contexts is evolving rapidly, driven by educational innovation, digitalisation, demand from businesses and students and European-level initiatives.

These technological and institutional levers are creating new prospects for the recognition of skills acquired outside of the traditional school setting.

PERSISTENT OBSTACLES TO BE OVERCOME

Despite this promising momentum, the current ecosystem remains constrained by the heterogeneity of the systems and the complexity of the subject.

The lack of clarity surrounding the numerous schemes makes it more difficult for beneficiaries and employers to access the recognition process. Consequently, the system as a whole is harder to understand, which slows its adoption.

MOVING TOWARDS FAIR AND EFFECTIVE RECOGNITION

Several complementary strategic developments are required to ensure that skills acquired in non-formal and informal contexts become more widely recognised.

Fair and effective recognition requires strengthening the legitimacy of recognition schemes, targeting the most vulnerable groups, linking recognition more closely to employability and fostering a profound cultural shift in how we view career paths, learning and the value of civic engagement.

Finally, it is crucial to **create better links between the recognition of skills and employability** by ensuring that they are really taken into consideration by employers, higher education institutions and guidance platforms. This connection with the job market determines how useful the schemes actually are in practice.

AN ISSUE OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Beyond the technical and organisational aspects, recognising skills acquired in non-formal and informal settings requires a fundamental cultural transformation in the attitudes towards training, experience and the value given to civic engagement.

This change requires consolidated coordination between local initiatives and national policies, improved confidence in the diversity of academic and professional pathways, and support to the development of recruitment and guidance practices.

The success of this transformation will ultimately depend on the stakeholders' ability to collectively develop legitimate tools and practices, combining innovation and equity so that the recognition of different pathways can become truly democratised. The issue goes beyond the simple matter of employability, challenging the foundations of how we perceive training and recognise talent.

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https://www.sports.gouv.fr/desjeps-482

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Certificate in Association Management:
https://www.associations.gouv.fr/cfga.html

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Civic service: https://www.service-civique.gouv.fr/agence

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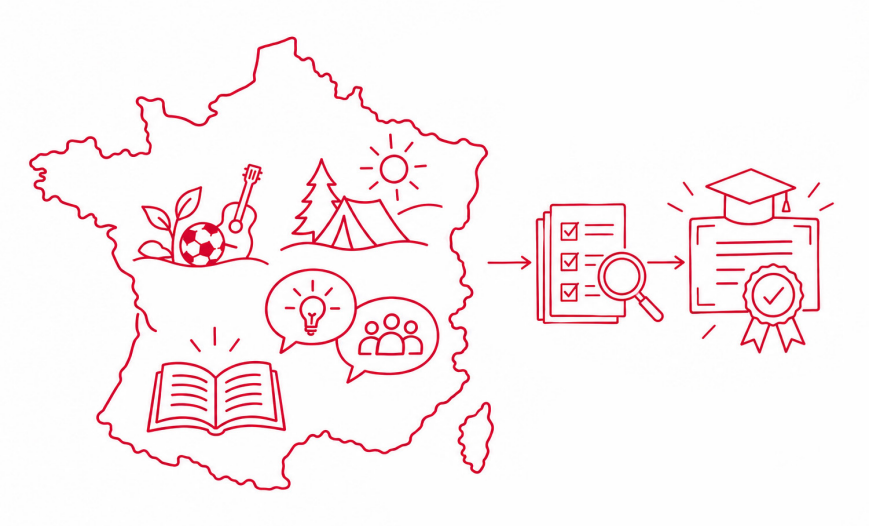
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GERMANY

Prof. Dr. Ingo Blaich

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of credit transfer and recognition procedures at universities and universities of applied sciences is embedded in the EU strategy for the promotion of lifelong learning and the creation of a European Education Area. It thus extends both to the consideration of competences/learning outcomes acquired outside higher education (prior learning and recognition) in general and to (study) achievements at other, particularly foreign, academic educational institutions. The latter aims to make learning outcomes comparable and promote student mobility, and is itself embedded in the strategy of lifelong learning, as there are now also exchange programmes for students and trainees under the umbrella of Erasmus+.

In Germany, in addition to promoting mobility, the focus of this process was on increasing the permeability between vocational and academic education and thus on recognition and credit transfer issues for vocational qualifications and skills in the higher education sector. Traditionally, vocational and academic qualifications represent two separate educational pathways. Access to higher education was

(almost) exclusively possible via a school-based higher education entrance qualification (Abitur). Those who left school with a simple secondary school leaving certificate had to catch up on their Abitur at evening classes in order to be able to start a degree course afterwards. This “education gap” was seen as a risk factor for securing future skilled workers in a high-tech knowledge economy. At the same time, overcoming it was also seen as a contribution to greater educational equality, as formal barriers to access to academic education were largely removed, which is more in line with the diversity of individual educational pathways (Hemkes and Wilbers 2019, 12f.)

The decision by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) in 2009 was a significant step towards upgrading vocational qualifications. Graduates of master craftsman examinations, technical colleges and any employed person who had completed vocational training and professional experience were granted access to higher education (in some cases subject-specific) without having to obtain a school-based higher education entrance qualification (Abitur) (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) 2009). In addition to admission to higher education, the recognition of vocational knowledge and skills at module level, i.e. for course content, also became relevant (cf. Gutschow 2020). The aim here is to better integrate vocational and academic education, potentially shorten study periods and thus adapt higher education to the new target group of vocationally qualified individuals. This focus explains why, in German-language specialist literature but also in handouts, vocational skills are generally meant when credit transfer and recognition procedures are discussed (cf. HRK Nexus 2017).

The certification or validation of informally acquired skills outside of professional contexts, e.g., from voluntary work, continues to play a subordinate role in Germany. Only recently have competence-oriented validation procedures been developed for this purpose; at the same time, labour market-related competence assessment is also gaining in importance here (cf. Kromrei-Suwareh et al. n.d.). Nevertheless, there are federal state-specific validation procedures / proof of competence for voluntary work in the youth sector or in voluntary work (Blaich 2024, p. 8). The Europass and ProfilPASS validation instruments are also used in Germany, for example in career guidance (Annen and Bretschneider 2009). When the report describes the current status of the recognition and crediting of competences acquired outside of higher education, the statements often refer to this area of competence in general. Specific reference is made to personal or social skills.

Finally, the terminology needs to be defined in more detail. The direct translation of the term established in the English-speaking world as “prior learning” (Cendon 2022, p. 119) has not become established in the German-speaking context. Instead, a distinction is made between formally, non-formally and informally acquired skills or parallelised with corresponding learning processes (Dehnbostel 2011, p. 101).

- *Formal learning processes* take place in organised learning settings such as school or university and end with a certified qualification (e.g., school-leaving certificate, vocational training qualification or university degree). From the learner's perspective, formal learning is goal-oriented and strongly curricular in structure. The skills acquired result from the curricular learning content.
- *Non-formal learning processes* take place within the framework of planned activities that include a distinct learning object, e.g., learning organisational activities or handling machines. However, there is no curricular structure or certification of the skills acquired. This form is typical of in-company training.
- *Informal learning* is a process that accompanies all activities, not just those in a professional context. Informally acquired skills result from practical experience and are generally not intended, organised or planned and are not documented in detail.

Furthermore, the use of the terms *recognition* and *accreditation* is not always consistent. The handout from the German Rectors' Conference refers to the importance of using language as uniformly as possible and understands *recognition* to mean the assessment of higher education skills acquired in a given course of study, as defined in the Lisbon Convention, which the applicant wishes to continue. This can refer to entire modules, parts of a module or complete courses of study (such as the consideration of a foreign bachelor's degree course for an application for a master's degree course at a German university).

Recognition means taking into account knowledge and skills acquired outside the higher education system. These are checked for equivalence in terms of content and level (HRK Nexus 2017, p. 6). In this sense, the following section deals with credit transfer procedures that aim to make prior learning outcomes or skills acquired outside of higher education visible in the higher education system.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN GERMANY

Before the legal framework for the recognition of informally acquired skills can be described, the federal structure of the German education system should be briefly explained. This forms the framework within which legislative processes take place.

Germany does not have a uniform national education system. The organisationof the school and higher education system is the responsibility of the 16 fed-

eral states. Although there is a very similar structure of educational institutions throughout Germany (multi-tier school system, tiered system of universities and universities of applied sciences), there are recognisable differences in detail. One example of this is the designation and content of the secondary school below the grammar school. In the higher education sector, both universities and universities of applied sciences can be found in all federal states. Differences can be seen here, for example, in the introduction of new, innovative types of higher education institutions such as independent dual universities (initially only in Baden-Württemberg) and vocational universities (Hanseatic City of Hamburg).

In order to ensure the comparability of educational offers, educational standards and educational qualifications as well as the mobility of pupils and students within Germany, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) acts as a cross-state coordination body. This is where all ministers of education and cultural affairs of the federal states agree on reform projects in the education sector. The joint resolutions or recommendations are then transposed into state law. These KMK resolutions form the basis for the inclusion of corresponding regulations in the higher education laws of the federal states for the recognition and accreditation of informally acquired skills, although these differ from one another. For this reason, Germany can only be made the subject of a case study to a limited extent. On the whole, the framework conditions and legal requirements are similar across the federal states; however, there are relevant differences in detail that cannot be systematically addressed for capacity reasons. There is also hardly any current research on the development process of credit transfer and recognition procedures; the few existing studies shed light on the initial implementation process 10–15 years ago primarily from the perspective of university lecturers (Rheinländer et al. 2020, p. 34).

LEGAL AND ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

The relevant resolutions of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) for the crediting/recognition of competences acquired outside higher education date from 2002 and 2008. In their provisions, they do not differentiate between formally and informally acquired competences or learning outcomes outside higher education, but regulate their consideration in general. The central criterion for crediting/recognition was therefore the equivalence “in terms of content and level” of the competences/learning outcomes with the curricular requirements of the degree courses (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) 2002, 2008). In addition, it was stipulated that a maximum of 50% of the ECTS may be acquired via crediting procedures. This is a limitation that has not, however, been adopted in all state higher education laws.

In the state higher education laws and the regulations for the accreditation of study programmes, the universities are obliged to set up appropriate credit transfer and recognition procedures (Jung and Roland 2021, p. 45). The validation

procedures used for this are not specified by law. The universities themselves decide on the scope and design of credit transfer/recognition procedures. As a result, these are sometimes university-specific and sometimes course-specific, particularly with regard to whether flat-rate, individual or combined transfer/recognition procedures are used. For some degree courses with restricted admissions (e.g., human medicine), there are legal requirements to take non-formal and informal skills into account when allocating study places (see below). The accreditation regulations for quality management at universities stipulate that personal, social and other socially relevant skills must be taken into account in the curricular definition of learning objectives in degree programmes. There are credit transfer options for non-formal or informal skills acquired outside of higher education (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) 2017a, 9f.).

REFERENCE SYSTEMS

Recognition and crediting decisions are made – regardless of the specific procedure – by experts, usually by academic university lecturers who are entrusted with this task. The equivalence check is at the heart of the validation process. In order to be able to assess the equivalence of the achievements or competences to be credited, the decision-makers must "generate [and] assess relevant information originating in two different (educational) systems" (HRK Nexus 2017, p. 5) if not all competences are to be re-examined. The challenge is to be able to compare the competence-oriented learning objectives in the study regulations and module descriptions with the certificates or competence descriptions to be credited.

For this purpose, general reference frameworks such as the German or European Qualifications Framework were developed to ensure national and international comparability of formal educational certificates (and their hierarchisation according to competence levels). For Germany, the Quality Framework for German Higher Education Qualifications (HQR) was also developed. This defines formal, subject-independent competence levels for bachelor's and master's degrees as well as doctorates. Higher education institutions should use this as a guide when designing the curricula of their degree courses (Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) 2017b).

Other reference systems include competence taxonomies and activity-analytical systems, in which the competences required for successful action in this field are described in terms of activities. Both formally and informally acquired skills can be taken into account. This results in standardised qualification expectations for employees in these areas (Stamm-Riemer et al. 2011, 18ff.).

In the higher education sector, subject qualification frameworks (FQR) have been developed for this purpose, which "help the subjects – within the framework of

consistent degree programme design – to define the central content and requirements of the degree programme and to formulate expectations of the competences to be acquired by graduates" (HRK Nexus 2017, p. 5). The example of the "Quality Framework for Social Work" sheds light on the challenges that arise for universities when using such systems. Originally developed as a competency-oriented assessment of the complex field of action in which social workers work, it proved to be unsuitable for recognition or crediting in university studies due to its high practical relevance (Stamm-Riemer et al. 2011, p. 22). The current version now describes competencies in a differentiated manner for the bachelor's/master's level and social workers with a doctorate, taking greater account of this. This provides a differentiated specification of academic and practical skills for the content design of degree programmes. However, interdisciplinary personal and social skills are recorded without level gradations.

Qualifications frameworks are not suitable for the concrete subject- or occupation-specific equivalence assessment of competences or the recognition of social or personal competences, and the FQFs are also too general in some cases. They cannot reflect the high degree of specialisation of specific work activities and further training courses. Credit databases have been developed as a new reference system that can reflect this small-scale nature (Benning et al. 2023). These are special databases that contain all certificates of non-formal learning processes, work certificates, etc. that have been recognised as equivalent by the universities. This means that those who carry out validation processes document them in such a database and thus facilitate future credit transfer processes, in which the equivalence check can then be shortened by retrieving the database.

CREDITING PROCEDURE

Validation processes are based on the guidelines issued by CEDEFOP and consist of the sub-steps of determining or recognising existing competences, documenting them through certificates or tests, assessing their equivalence by the accrediting educational institution and the corresponding certification of the credit or recognition through a corresponding notice (Jung and Roland 2021, p. 37). In principle, a distinction can be made between flat-rate and individual credit transfer procedures.

"The *blanket credit transfer* to a university degree course is a procedure that makes it possible to generally credit competences acquired in the context of formal education, further education and training to a degree course, regardless of the person making the application" (Müskens and Lübben 2018, p. 115). The equivalence check has already been carried out in advance of validation processes, either through formal comparison of curricula or corresponding cooperation agreements between educational institutions. General recognition procedures are suitable for homogeneous target groups that have the same or very similar previous experience or educational certificates. An example of this is the

AnKE recognition procedure of the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences. State-recognised educators and curative education nurses can have training content of up to 30 CP credited towards the bachelor's degree in Social Work and shorten the duration of their studies. The equivalence check is based on the restriction that the training must have been completed at a Hessian vocational school for social work, specialising in social pedagogy.[25]

On the other hand, there are individual crediting procedures, which amount to an individual case-by-case assessment. Decisions are made here on the basis of the documents submitted by the applicant (educational certificates, work references, skills assessments, etc.). The qualifications framework or databases can be used for the equivalence check. Furthermore, more detailed information on the competences/achievements to be recognised can be obtained in personal discussions, or competence/achievement tests can be carried out (see below). Individual credit transfer procedures are generally used for the transfer of non-formally and informally acquired competences (Müskens and Lübben 2018, p. 116). In addition, combined credit transfer procedures can be observed, which combine flat-rate and individual elements. "The advantage of the combined credit transfer procedure is that credits acquired outside the university which were not, or were not fully, credited to a study module as part of the equivalence assessment in the flat-rate procedure can be checked and, if necessary, credited through an individual procedure, which may increase the scope of the creditable parts" (ibid.).

One of the most common methods for validating non-formally and informally acquired skills is the portfolio method. All evidence of educational activities, work experience, skills assessments, job references, voluntary work, etc. are summarised and, if necessary, supplemented by individually written descriptions of relevant experiences or skills. Some universities also provide forms for this purpose (Stamm-Riemer et al. 2011, 48f.).

In the interests of promoting student mobility and facilitating access to academic education, the German Rectors' Conference determined in 2013 that the equivalence check in credit transfer and recognition procedures should be designed to benefit students. Only if there is a "significant difference" between the performance or competence to be recognised and the requirements profile in the module descriptions should recognition be refused. The background to this is that students should not be put at a disadvantage by credit transfer procedures if, for example, certain knowledge or skills are not available at the required level and this jeopardises their academic success (Hanft and Müskens 2019, p. 185).

[25] See: https://www.frankfurt-university.de/de/hochschule/fachbereich-4-soziale-arbeit-gesundheit/anrechnungsverfahren/anke-anrechnungsverfahren/

RECOGNITION AND ACCREDITATION IN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

In the higher education sector, validation processes are used for two purposes: to grant access to higher education (admission) and to facilitate credit transfer at module level within degree programmes. These recognition procedures exist for every degree programme, although the form of organisation varies greatly within and between universities. The same applies to recognition procedures in the admissions process. Whether and in what form these are available depends on the higher education institution and degree course, as the state higher education acts give the higher education institutions a certain amount of leeway with regard to the selection criteria for higher education courses. It is therefore not possible to make general statements for the German higher education landscape. As examples, study courses from the social and medical fields are repeatedly cited below, as credit transfer procedures in university admissions can be observed very frequently here and give an impression of how they are structured.

CREDITING/RECOGNITION FOR ADMISSION TO STUDIES

The requirements that prospective students must meet for admission to higher education are regulated in the respective state higher education laws. In general, applicants must have a school-based higher education entrance qualification (Abitur/Fachabitur, Fachhochschulreife) or comparable qualification (advanced vocational training qualification, e.g., at master craftsman level). Further requirements must be met for certain degree courses. For example, practical work samples or auditions are obligatory for artistic degree courses.

There is no general answer as to whether other criteria are used for admission to degree programmes that are not restricted by numerus clausus regulations.[26] Systematic representations at degree course level are still lacking. In an exploratory study of bachelor's degree courses in childhood education, Müller et al. showed that the general recognition of formal qualifications is common; however, informally acquired skills are rarely the subject of individual recognition procedures (Müller et al. 2020). The former applies in particular to pre-study internships, which are mandatory for childhood education (B.A.) but also frequently for bachelor's degree courses in social work. Professional experience and voluntary work can also be recognised here if they are relevant to the degree courses.

[26] Numerus Clausus regulation: Restriction of study admission depending on the Abitur grade. If there are significantly more applicants than places available, places are allocated according to the level of the Abitur grade. The better the average grade in the Abitur, the higher the probability of obtaining a study place, even in degree courses with restricted admission.

Random research shows that some universities attach less importance to the grade of the university entrance qualification. For social work studies at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Dresden, for example, the letter of motivation is at the heart of the application process. As well as explaining personal motives for choosing a course and career, this should also describe practical experience and voluntary work in the social sector. Non-formally and informally acquired skills are documented here using the portfolio method. In addition to the letter of motivation, all other evidence of training and further education activities, professional experience and voluntary work should be attached to the application.[27]

In study programmes that are in high demand and therefore subject to admission restrictions, additional criteria are often used to select students. If the admission restriction applies to specific degree programmes at individual universities (local NC), these universities are free to take other criteria into account in the selection process in addition to the higher education entrance qualification, e.g., voluntary work, letters of motivation, selection interviews, etc. Non-formally and informally acquired skills can also be taken into account and become relevant for admission to studies.[28]

As a rule, admission to the bachelor's degree courses in Social Work and Childhood Education as well as Nursing/Nursing Management/Nursing Education at state universities of applied sciences is also restricted. The decisive factor for admission here is also the Abitur grade, so those with very good grades are given priority for a place. Many universities have developed procedures in which professional experience in the social sector, voluntary services or volunteer work or even periods spent bringing up own children or foster children are taken into account in such a way that the applicant's Abitur grade improves and the chances of admission increase (Hochschule Esslingen 2022, p. 2).

The Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences in Berlin uses the portfolio method for its degree courses in the social and health sector in addition to general credit transfer procedures. It provides its own skills assessment forms in which students can describe their skills and how they were acquired. The portfolios are checked individually and can be supplemented by personal interviews for validation purposes.[29]

Degree courses in human medicine and dentistry, veterinary medicine and pharmacy are a special case in terms of university admission. A centralised appli-

[27] Protestant University of Applied Sciences Dresden, https://ehs-dresden.de/studium/studiengaenge/soziale-arbeit/soziale-arbeit-bachelor/studienvoraussetzungen

[28] One example is the bachelor's degree programme in "International Relations" at TU Dresden: https://tu-dresden.de/studium/vor-dem-studium/bewerbung/studienvoraussetzungen/auswahlverfahren

[29] https://www.ash-berlin.eu/studium/studierendenverwaltung/anrechnung-und-anerkennung/#c924

cation procedure was developed in 2004 by agreement between the federal states, to which all prospective students in Germany must apply regardless of their place of residence. It is based on a quota system whereby only a portion of the study places (30%) are allocated directly to the applicants with the best Abitur grades (Abitur best quota). The remaining places are allocated to the Additional Entrance Quota (ZEQ, 10%) and university selection procedures (AdH quota, 60%). In addition to the Abitur grade, these two quotas also take into account aptitude criteria that are independent of grades. This makes access to sought-after degree courses fairer and takes more complex aptitude profiles into account. These criteria include relevant professional training and further education and professional experience, voluntary services and voluntary work, provided they are included in the corresponding list for the flat-rate credit transfer procedure.30 It is also mandatory to take a subject-specific aptitude test, such as the TMS test for medical degree courses.31 This results in an overall score which is used in addition to the Abitur grade for the allocation of study places (Hochschulstart.de – Stiftung für Hochschulzulassung 2025).

Non-formally acquired skills can be taken into account by providing evidence of professional experience or voluntary work. Informally acquired skills can only be considered if the selection procedure at the universities also includes selection interviews. Universities can stipulate this accordingly for the 60% of study places in the AdH quota. These interviews usually include multiple mini-interviews in which various facets of social and communication skills are tested using fictitious scenarios from everyday clinical and medical practice (Simmenroth-Nayda et al. 2015, p. 325).

The reason for this strong weighting of grade-independent criteria in university admissions is the growing understanding among political decision-makers that doctors working in practice in particular must not only be very well trained professionally, but should also have particular social and communication skills. The grade-independent criteria, and in particular the selection interviews, are intended to ensure that these areas of competence are given appropriate consideration. However, selection interviews require considerable time resources and only some of the prospective students are actually invited to attend. There is also some methodological criticism of the validity of multiple mini-interviews. Therefore, there is great interest in more valid test procedures for measuring social skills, such as those that have been used internationally for some time in the form of “situational judgment tests” (Hampe et al. 2017, 1478). Heidelberg University has developed its own German-language test for its selection procedure for medical degree courses: “Interaktionelle Kompetenzen Medizin” (IKM). This summarises the relevant interaction skills in the key concept of emotional availability, which is considered crucial for trusting relationships between doctor and patient as well as the sensitive response to patients’ concerns (Fleck et al. 2025). This

[30] Cf. downloads: Hochschulstart
[31] What is the TMS or medical test? | mediziner-test.de

means that social and personal skills can be assessed completely independently of the context in which they were acquired, which removes the need to provide evidence of volunteering or professional experience. However, this test is currently only used for voluntary self-assessment by prospective students. Its result has no effect on the admission procedure.[32]

RECOGNITION PROCEDURE FOR MODULES AND COURSEWORK

As a rule, bachelor's and master's degree courses offer the possibility of having competencies acquired outside of higher education credited towards module achievements, although the scope varies greatly between degree courses. The more professional, practice-related subject content is included in the degree course, the more extensively prior experience – for example from a professional activity or voluntary work – can be credited. Special learning objectives in the degree programme include personal development and the ability to "help shape social processes critically, reflectively and with a sense of responsibility and democratic community spirit [...]" (Saxon State Government 2019, p. 5 (§11)). However, these skills must be demonstrated in conjunction with the subject content in the respective examinations and can therefore rarely be replaced by the recognition of skills acquired outside of higher education. In addition, degree programmes usually also include modules for the acquisition of interdisciplinary skills (foreign languages, key qualifications).

Universities are obliged to set up credit transfer procedures. In the accreditation process, degree programmes are checked for this (Jung and Roland 2021, p. 45). However, the exact structure of recognition and credit transfer procedures is not prescribed. As a rule, individual recognition procedures are used here. Upon application, the relevant documents are reviewed by the Office of Student Affairs and the Examination Board. If necessary, the equivalence check is delegated to competent persons in the degree programmes (e.g., in the subject-specific student advisory service) (Egerer/Blaich 2021). The way in which the level and acquisition process of non-formal and informal competences are checked in individual cases can vary greatly between universities, and even within them. The guidelines for recognising competences acquired outside of higher education for the degree programme of the Berlin School of Economics and Law explain in detail how these competences were acquired and to what extent the evidence provided documents this for each learning objective for which recognition is sought (Berlin School of Economics and Law n.d., p. 2).

Hanft & Müskens point out the lack of transparency in the forms of procedure. Particularly in the case of learning outcomes from non-formal further training,

[32]_https://www.medizinische-fakultaet-hd.uni-heidelberg.de/studium-lehre/studium/medizin/studienbewerber

the evidence is very heterogeneous, as these are not standardised nationwide. These often do not include any examinations, meaning that successful participation in further training can only be inferred inadequately from the evidence alone. In the case of informally acquired skills, evidence is sometimes missing entirely or – as is the case with descriptions of work content or certificates of voluntary service – it does not provide meaningful information about the existing level of competence (Hanft and Müskens 2019, p. 188). In practice, this has led to a strong focus on verification documents and a blanket recognition practice in which the level of competence and equivalence is not checked directly. Due to a lack of standards regarding which non-university competences or certificates can be credited, these are sometimes credited or recognised in "degree programmes at different universities with a widely differing number of credit points" (ibid. p. 192). Universities would have to provide resources to enable standardised equivalence assessment procedures in the individual departments. The credit transfer databases mentioned above are considered very useful for this purpose; however, these cannot be implemented and used without additional personnel resources and support (Seger 2023).

In recent years, universities have developed innovative procedures in mostly externally funded projects in order to standardise credit transfer procedures within a university and to make the processes simpler, more transparent and more valid for students and those responsible. The PLAR Service ("Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition") at the University of Oldenburg emerged from one of these projects in 2017 as a standardised assessment procedure for informally or non-formally acquired skills based on a portfolio. The PLAR service advises and supports students in recognising creditable skills and in submitting applications. "In addition to formal reports and certificates", "authentic evidence [of] learning or work samples" or other documents and materials can also be part of the portfolio (Müskens and Lübben 2018, p. 119). The PLAR service is the central point of contact for all students; applications are accepted there and forwarded to the respective subject representatives for equivalence assessment. Their task is to assess the equivalence of the competences to be recognised on the basis of the EQF. If this is not possible on the basis of the available documents or if there is a non-equivalence, there is the possibility of a direct validation of competences if there are valid procedures for this.[33] This enables a very individual case-by-case assessment, which can lead to very different crediting decisions even if the requirements of different students are very similar (ibid). The PLAR service poses new challenges for everyone involved. Students need support to be able to assign their own competencies to the various learning objectives and to create the necessary evidence for the portfolio. Teachers need pedagogical skills and training for a valid equivalence check of the portfolios based on the module descriptions and the EQF. Valid and university-wide standardised credit transfer procedures require permanent institutionalisation through the creation of new structures or the bundling or reorganisation of responsibilities, which cannot be

[33] PLAR-Service University of Oldenburg: https://uol.de/plar

achieved without additional human and financial resources and specialist training for staff (Cendon 2022, p. 121).

RECOGNITION IN CONTINUING ACADEMIC EDUCATION

German universities not only offer bachelor's and master's degree courses, they are also increasingly offering continuing academic education (Kamm et al. 2016). The range of courses on offer is very diverse; on the one hand, (part-time) bachelor's or master's degree courses can themselves function as continuing professional development. In this case, the same admission and credit transfer conditions apply as for students in initial vocational training. In addition, universities have developed a wide range of continuing education courses and certificates, some of which are short programmes (micro-credentials), one-semester certificate programmes and multi-semester Certificates of Basic or Advanced Studies (CHE – Centre for Higher Education 2021, p. 10). These are of interest to those with professional qualifications who wish to expand their knowledge in certain areas without obtaining a further academic degree. The short certificate programmes in particular are also in high demand (ibid. p. 11). Due to this wide range of university-specific continuing education courses, no general statements can be made about forms of credit transfer. Since certificate courses in particular are individual forms of learning that are not tied to a fixed timeframe and enable the development of specific skills, it is important to have credit transfer options for existing skills, especially those acquired in the workplace. This would significantly improve the integration of vocational and higher education as set out in the National Continuing Education Strategy (Wolf et al. 2020). Taking individual educational and professional histories into account in this way also facilitates access to academic continuing education for heterogeneous target groups and in turn strengthens their motivation to study and likelihood of success (Engenhorst 2020, 150f.).

RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Interview 1: Programme manager for human medicine at a Saxon university

The interview was conducted with the intention of gaining in-depth insights into the selection process for admission to the human medicine degree programme. As described above, skills acquired outside of higher education play an important role in the quota-based admission procedure. It is also interesting to see how those students who were not among the best school-leavers, but who were offered a place to study human medicine due to previous vocational training in the healthcare sector or voluntary service, for example, cope with their studies.

First, the interviewee explained the admissions procedure as described above: the quota distribution, the obligatory consideration of an aptitude test, other aspects such as the rural doctor quota, whereby students commit to working as a doctor in rural regions of Saxony for several years after completing their studies.

For the university's selection quota (AdH), multiple mini-interviews were also used as part of the selection interviews, whereby prospective students were presented with various situations in professional medical practice and had to demonstrate their ability to handle them. However, the university has recently decided to dispense with detailed selection interviews in future. This is because the social composition of the student body will not change significantly as a result. This means that the selection interviews have not succeeded in attracting more high school graduates with a final grade outside the "very good" range who have already gained experience in the medical field, to study medicine. Once again, it was the applicants with "very good" Abitur grades who ultimately prevailed. This means that the enormous amount of time required for the selection interviews is no longer considered justified. At present, voluntary services and volunteer work in the health sector are only taken into account via the corresponding written evidence. Validation or recognition of non-academic competencies through simulations or interviews with the applicants no longer takes place.

The interviewee did not perceive any differences between the various groups admitted to medical school in terms of how they coped with their studies. This is not surprising, given that the vast majority of students have very good Abitur grades, and the Abitur grade is the most meaningful predictor of academic success. The interviewee attributes the particular difficulties that have been observed in the course of studies in recent years more to the coronavirus pandemic. In her opinion, the periods of homeschooling, online study and contact restrictions have made current students more insecure. Consequently, compared to the pre-coronavirus period, exams are currently being postponed more frequently and students are therefore taking longer to complete their studies overall. This seems to be more of a cohort effect than anything to do with the different study requirements that students bring with them to their studies.

Interview 2: Employees of the head office of the Accreditation Council

The interviewees for the second interview were selected to gain an overview of the various forms of credit transfer procedures at universities in Germany. Since universities have a great deal of creative freedom in this area, it is very difficult to obtain a complete overview. The Accreditation Council Foundation is responsible for the accreditation (certification) of all state-recognised study programmes in Germany. In other words, it monitors quality management at universities. The idea was that this would also provide an overview of the accreditation procedures. Unfortunately, this hope has not been fulfilled. Credit transfer procedures

for degree programmes are not themselves the subject of quality management. While it is checked whether credit transfer procedures exist, how these are structured is not subject to review. Therefore, the practice of credit transfer remains highly specific to individual universities and degree programmes. Experience has shown that existing certificates, degrees, etc. are taken into account in credit transfer procedures in order to simplify the process. However, it is not possible to assess how appropriate the individual examinations actually are. Deficits in credit transfer procedures only become apparent when students complain; otherwise the credit transfer procedures themselves remain opaque and the prescribed guidelines can be easily circumvented. The decisive factor here is the quality culture within the university or the degree programmes. This can also be expressed in the course design by creating appropriate credit transfer options within modules, e.g., for key qualifications or for forms of service learning, i.e. the transfer of academic knowledge into practical application.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In Germany, the legal basis for having competences acquired outside of higher education comprehensively recognised in higher education is in place. Although the further development of credit transfer procedures is ongoing, it is not possible to provide an overall overview. Developments in Germany's differentiated higher education system are too varied for this; universities of applied sciences are much more active here than universities (Cendon 2022, p. 129) due to their proximity to professional practice. Overall, however, vocational qualifications and skills dominate the subject-specific discussion and recognition practice. Informally acquired skills, for example from volunteer work, are particularly relevant for admission to and credit transfer in social and health-related degree courses.

A number of specific challenges need to be identified for further development.

1. **Lack of standardisation:** the evidence of extracurricular competencies is very heterogeneous, and "not readily compatible with the disciplinary-oriented degree programmes with their curricular content" (Hanft and Müskens 2019, p. 188). Credit transfer officers must carry out independent translation and comparison work here, but credit transfer databases could significantly simplify the procedure in the future and ensure greater standardisation. There is also little uniformity in the methods used to demonstrate competence. Although many universities use the portfolio procedure, they do not necessarily use existing portfolio instruments – such as the ProfilPass – but rather develop their own solutions. The extent to which competencies must then be described or proven ultimately remains opaque. Universities and universities of applied sciences share this problem with companies. Here, too, the transferability of internally acquired skills to other companies is a central problem,

as there is a lack of objective reference systems (Gutschow 2020, p. 466).

2. **Lack of resources:** even if higher education institutions are obliged to provide individual, direct proof of competence and its equivalence assessment, a more or less certificate-oriented crediting practice may prevail without directly validating competences gained outside of higher education or assessing their characteristics. This may also be due to the lack of valid competence assessment procedures or the fact that these are not known in the universities or would be too time-consuming to use. Where credit transfer tasks are assigned to academic staff as a "secondary activity", for example, there is generally a lack of time for individual skills validation. Best practice examples from universities show that the conditions for individual validation procedures can also be improved by centralising the formal credit transfer process and providing appropriate advice and support from trained staff.

3. **Lack of information:** students are generally not proactively informed about the possibility of having skills acquired outside of higher education recognised (Hanft and Müskens 2019, p. 194). Based on the available literature, it is also not possible to assess the quantitative extent to which skills are assessed after completing voluntary service or volunteering. This does not appear to be obligatory. Young people and adults should therefore also see their educational journey as a development of skills and have the skills they have acquired certified or validated.

4. **Equivalence but not equal:** a fundamental problem in the German higher education sector is that non-university qualifications and skills are not recognised as equivalent to academic education per se. This applies in particular to vocational qualifications. For example, in the German Qualifications Framework, a master craftsman's certificate is considered equivalent to a bachelor's degree, but it generally does not directly entitle the holder to a master's degree, only to a bachelor's degree. Differences in level between academic and vocational education continue to have an effect here and are reflected at module level in the examination results. These primarily serve to verify academic skills and specialist knowledge, which can only be replaced to a very limited extent by qualifications and skills acquired outside of higher education.

5. **Reservations:** at universities in particular, it can still be assumed that teaching staff have reservations regarding overly extensive credit transfer practices, as well as about students with vocational qualifications in general. These reservations stem from the aforementioned belief that vocational and academic education are not equivalent, and from concerns about a loss of standards in higher education (Hanft and Müskens 2019, p. 194; Rheinländer et al. 2020).

This creates a wealth of opportunities to improve crediting procedures. First and foremost, there is potential for standardisation of procedures and methods. Universities are on the way to setting up standardised procedures internally across all study programmes, and the credit transfer databases are a step towards making credit transfer procedures comparable across regions. Standardisation can also be promoted, particularly in individual credit transfer procedures. This can be achieved on the one hand through the establishment of standardised portfolio instruments, and on the other through the availability of or commitment to direct validation procedures for competencies such as Youthpass or the ProfilPASS. The challenge here is to provide evidence of effectiveness for instruments that are already available or to select suitable procedures for the university context. Existing validation procedures could also be further developed so that they can be used more effectively in the university context.

Here, the individual federal states' responsibility for the universities has a strong inhibitory effect, despite the impression that the state governments deliberately only set weak legal requirements for the universities. The unresolved question of resources is probably also a factor. Any further development towards standardisation, greater validity and expansion of credit transfer procedures requires additional financial and human resources. At the moment, the state governments do not seem willing to increase university budgets for this purpose or to provide targeted long-term financial support for recognition and credit transfer procedures. A monitoring process could systematise the experience gained in best practice solutions in order to make the necessary organisational changes and their consequences transparent and easier to adapt.

There is potential to expand credit transfer options through "competence-sensitive course design." Until now, curricula have followed disciplinary, subject-specific structural principles according to basic and in-depth or specific content. This is a structure that is not very compatible with non-university areas of application and places of learning. "Competence-sensitive degree course design" only means that degree courses are understood as learning paths that are formulated in a problem-oriented way and can therefore be more easily linked to practical activities and problems in application practice. This would also increase the potential for credit transfer (Elsholz et al. 2022). This curricular approach, which focuses on the structure of work tasks, is particularly interesting for application-oriented degree courses at universities of applied sciences and dual universities and would expand the scope for the recognition of skills acquired outside of higher education.

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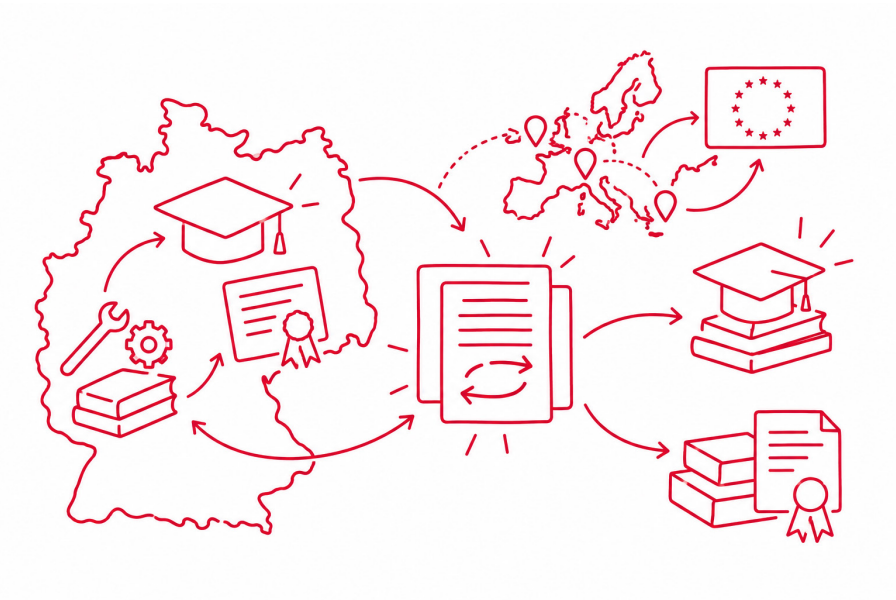
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SLOVENIA

Final report of the project presenting the systemic arrangements for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in Slovenia and a survey on the arrangements for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge, especially in the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes, at public universities in Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

Meta Brečić-Ločičnik

The recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge is a topical issue in all European countries, particularly in light of the constant social and technological changes that necessitate lifelong education and learning. The significance of this recognition is also underlined by the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, drawn up in 2012, which highlights the need to validate relevant knowledge, skills and competences as a means of enhancing employability, mobility and motivation to engage in lifelong learning.

Non-formal education, which is at the heart of the Validation project, primarily takes place in the context of youth work activities, with a focus on learning outcomes from the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. The project seeks to explore the recognition of learning outcomes from non-formal learning in higher education in the participating countries, with a particular emphasis on exploring the recognition of learning outcomes from Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

This report combines an overview of the systemic arrangements for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in Slovenia and an analysis of its recognition within public higher education institutions in Slovenia, with particular emphasis on learning outcomes from the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. The report consists of four chapters. Chapter one presents the purpose and objectives of the Validation project. Chapter two introduces the systemic framework together with the legislation and the position of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation regarding the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge. The third chapter presents the results of a comparative analysis of three institutional rules on the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills at three Slovenian public universities. Chapter four discusses the results of a survey examining how informally acquired skills are recognised in practice, with particular attention given to the learning outcomes acquired through youth work under the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, in which individual members of the three Slovenian public universities were included.

The conclusion summarises key findings and proposals for further steps to increase the recognition of learning outcomes of youth work and the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT AND DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Validation project aims to explore how competences acquired through youth work and voluntary activities are validated in formal education, particularly at universities.

The objectives of the project are to:

- Gain an insight into the current state of play and gather diverse perspectives on competences developed in youth work and volunteering

within the university assessment process.

- Raise awareness of youth work and its educational value in the context of validation, and of Youthpass as a tool for recording competences.
- Identify the conditions necessary to build trust in and promote youth work, volunteering and Youthpass in the context of validation.
- Facilitate the exchange of insights, experiences, successes and challenges with partners and stakeholders.
- Develop concrete recommendations to support the promotion of youth work and volunteering in the context of validation, and vice versa.

THE SYSTEMIC RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE IN SLOVENIA

Nejc Tacer, Miha Kosec and Oskar Škulj

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND THE BROADER SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE IN SLOVENIA

Perhaps one of the first steps towards recognition of non-formal learning was taken with **the National Vocational Qualifications Act** (2000). For the first time, this legislation established a legal framework for the recognition of competences acquired outside formal education. It enabled individual candidates to obtain specific professional qualifications based on documented evidence of skills and experience acquired outside the school system. The resulting National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) certificates are by no means a substitute for formal education certificates, such as diplomas, but they do enable the holder to perform certain work tasks and occupations. These certificates are nationally recognised and are an important criterion for employers in the recruitment process. NVQ certificates enhance the employability of individuals and give them recognition for the experience and knowledge they have already acquired. For the first time, NVQ certificates offer a wide range of certifications that can be easily adapted to the needs of the labour market.

The Resolution on the National Programme for Higher Education 2011–2020 (2011) further emphasised the importance of lifelong learning. It also allows providers of postgraduate programmes to take into account non-formal and informal learning, known as recognition of prior learning (RPL), to test entry competences.

The most important milestone in the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge is the **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** (2012/C 398/01) (2012). This Recommendation underscores the importance of validating non-formally acquired competences as a key measure to strengthen the quality of higher education. Validation should not only support career and personal development, but also foster active citizenship. The Recommendation also points out the importance of accessibility of the proposed procedures to the general public and outlines specific actions for both Member States and the EU Council. It also provides clear definitions of key terms that serve as a basis for national resolutions and regulations. The Recommendation also calls for a standardised recognition process to ensure consistent application of procedures. Another important focus of the document is its alignment with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which enhances international visibility and comparability.

The adoption of the **Rules on the Procedure and Criteria for the Recognition of Informally Acquired Knowledge and Skills** by the University of Ljubljana in 2007 marked an important step towards integrating informally acquired knowledge in the Slovenian higher education landscape. These Rules allow individuals to use knowledge and skills they have acquired outside the formal education system to meet specific study obligations. The procedure is designed to require the submission of evidence such as certificates of attendance at seminars, certificates from non-formal training courses, or references from employers. Recognition is possible if the competences align with the learning outcomes of a specific programme. This is a step towards greater flexibility in higher education, allowing individuals to enter programmes from different starting points.

The Higher Education Development Strategy 2021–2030 builds on the previous Resolution and places greater emphasis on lifelong learning and the recognition of non-formally acquired competences. It calls on higher education institutions to promote broad accessibility of educational programmes and to recognise non-formally acquired knowledge in a way that holds equivalent value to formally acquired knowledge. The strategy highlights the importance of adapting programmes to the needs of the labour market and encourages the digitalisation of educational processes, making them more accessible to employed persons and those from less privileged backgrounds. It also introduces additional quality assurance measures for the recognition of knowledge.

Since 2000, the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (VET) has been a major player in the field of recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in Slovenia. With publications such as “Recognition and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal learning”, the Institute provides systemic solutions and guidelines for implementing validation practices. The VET Institute’s documents allow standardisation of processes and lay the foundations for establishing transparent and efficient systems that comply with European

guidelines. Particular emphasis is placed on working with employers to develop competency standards and the exchange of best practices with other European countries.

The Resolution on the National Adult Education Programme 2022–2030 highlights the importance of lifelong learning as a key tool for enhancing individuals' knowledge, skills and competences. It calls for the development of systems for the recognition of knowledge acquired outside formal educational frameworks and encourages the implementation of measures to ensure equal access to education for all. The resolution also envisions closer collaboration between educational institutions, employers and NGOs to develop effective mechanisms for validating knowledge.

THE MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION'S POSITION ON THE RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation's position on the recognition of non-formally acquired competences is aimed at widening access to education, promoting lifelong learning and strengthening the link between educational institutions and the labour market. It acknowledges the importance of non-formally acquired competences, especially in the context of employability, social inclusion, and responding to rapid changes in society. However, specific measures in this area are still under development.

FOCUS ON LIFELONG LEARNING AND FLEXIBILITY

The Ministry emphasises the importance of lifelong learning, which is also enshrined in the Resolution on the National Programme for Higher Education 2011–2020 and the Higher Education Development Strategy 2021–2030. The two documents promote flexible study pathways and the recognition of skills acquired outside formal education frameworks. The Resolution states, among other things, that providers of postgraduate programmes should also take into account non-formal and informal learning when assessing entry competences.

MICRO-CREDENTIALS AS THE CURRENT FOCUS

The Ministry is currently working intensively on the development of a system of micro-credentials, which represent an important step towards the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge. Micro-credentials are short, certified programmes or training courses that document specific competences and skills acquired in either formal or informal settings. Micro-credentials aim to make education more adaptable to the needs of the labour market, especially in fast-growing sectors such as digital technologies and green industries. The Ministry sees micro-credentials as a tool for recognising specific knowledge acquired through volunteering, casual work or short informal programmes.

CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

Despite formal support for the recognition of non-formally acquired competences, the Ministry faces the following challenges:

- Uneven implementation: Faculties and universities are autonomous in setting rules for the recognition of competences, which leads to uneven application of those practices.
- Lack of standardisation: There are differences between different sectors and institutions, making it difficult to establish a single national system.
- Financial and staff constraints: Developing and maintaining systems for the recognition of non-formal learning requires additional resources, which is a barrier to faster progress.

CONNECTION WITH EUROPEAN GUIDELINES

The Ministry's efforts draw heavily on European guidelines such as the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The development of micro-credentials is aligned with European initiatives to standardise and facilitate international comparability of acquired competences. At the same time, the Ministry participates in projects such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, which provide opportunities to acquire non-formal competences in an international environment.

EFFORTS TO INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY

The Ministry also recognises the importance of the recognition of non-formally acquired competences for the inclusion of vulnerable groups. Recognition of these skills can give individuals from less privileged backgrounds better opportunities to enter the labour market and for further education.

CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation sees the recognition of non-formally acquired competences as an important opportunity to modernise the education system, but is currently focusing most on the development of micro-credentials as a key tool for formalising and validating these skills. While there are challenges in standardisation and implementation, the Ministry's clear aim is to promote flexibility and accessibility of higher education, which includes recognising the diverse learning pathways of individuals.

RESULTS OF A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE RULES GOVERNING THE RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE AT SLOVENIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Meta Brečić-Ločičnik

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHODOLOGY USED

The aim of the survey was to find out how the process of recognition of non-formally acquired skills is implemented at the three Slovenian public universities. To this end, we analysed and compared their Rules governing this area using the document content analysis method. The analysis of all three Rules provided information on the formal procedures and criteria for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge at the three Slovenian public universities.

SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTS ANALYSED

Understanding the procedures for recognising non-formally acquired knowledge in higher education requires a more detailed review and analysis of the Rules governing this area. Article 35 of the Higher Education Act stipulates the criteria for the recognition of skills acquired prior to enrolment in a programme as a compulsory component of first- and second-cycle study programmes. Recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge is defined in the Rules of each public university. Due to the fragmentation of the field and its division between public and private higher education institutions, we decided to analyse how this field is organised at all three public universities, which are the main providers of higher education in Slovenia. They play a key role in shaping practices and standards, thus providing a representative insight into the systemic regulation and implementation of the area in question.

We therefore present below the results of our analysis of the following three Rules:

- Rules of the University of Ljubljana on the Procedure and Criteria for the Recognition of Non-Formally Acquired Skills, adopted in 2007.
- Rules on the Recognition of Skills in Study Programmes of the University

of Maribor No.012/2019/2, adopted in 2019.

- Rules on the Procedure and Criteria for the Recognition of Formally and Non-Formally Acquired Knowledge and Skills of the University of Primorska, adopted in 2012.

For the sake of clarity, the following abbreviations are used: UL for the University of Ljubljana, UM for the University of Maribor, and UP for the University of Primorska.

KEY SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE RULES

Content of the Rules

All three documents deal with the identification, verification and recognition of knowledge, as well as the criteria for the recognition of skills acquired by candidates through non-formal education prior to enrolment and during their studies at the university. The UL and UP Rules also include the validation of skills. The UM Rules define the recognition of formally acquired knowledge, while the UP Rules define that of informal and aformal learning. The three Rules define different types of education and learning. The UL and UM Rules classify knowledge acquired through informal learning as non-formal education. All three documents thus allow for the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and thereby define a formal basis for the possibility of recognising learning outcomes acquired outside higher education.

Recognition of Acquired Skills

In accordance with all three Rules, the procedures apply to both current and prospective students. Candidates can apply to have their non-formally acquired knowledge taken into account as a condition for entry or as part of the obligations of their study programme.

All three Rules state the principle of recognition of knowledge and skills that correspond in content, scope, and complexity, in whole or in part, to the general or subject-specific competences laid down in the study programme.

BASIS FOR THE RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

Table 1: Overview of the required certificates and other bases for the recognition of non-formally acquired skills by university

University of Ljubljana	University of Maribor	University of Primorska
Certificates or other documents that can be used to prove the knowledge acquired in non-formal education programmes include: • A certificate from education and training providers confirming successful completion of education • A certificate of non-formal education • A certificate from the company confirming practical training, project completion, etc. • Submission of articles, publications and other works of authorship by candidates	Recognition of skills is based on certificates or other documents, such as: • Publicly valid documents (certificates, diplomas) • Certificates of completion of a part of the study programme or of the obligations in the study programme • Certificates from education and training providers confirming successful completion of education certificates and other documents • Products, services, projects, publications and other works of authorship by candidates • Proof of registered patents • Relevant references on practical training and work experience • Knowledge acquired through self-learning and informal learning • Other evidence / knowledge at the discretion of the University Member's competent authorities	The basis for recognising skills acquired through non-formal, informal and/or aformal learning can be: • A certificate or other document confirming completion of the programme, stating the date and the institution, and the programme with the content that the candidate attended • A certificate of non-formal education • A certificate from the company confirming practical training, project completion, etc. • Knowledge acquired through work, self-education and informal learning • Written recommendations from an employer

As can be seen from Table 1, all three Rules cite different certificates and other bases for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills. All three cite a certificate from the education and training providers confirming completion of the education, as well as a certificate from a company or relevant references on practical training. The UL and UP Rules also refer to a certificate of non-formal education. While the UL and UM Rules also allow the submission of articles, publications and other works of authorship by candidates, the UM Rules, which also define the recognition of formally acquired knowledge, list publicly valid documents among the possible certificates. In addition, the list of relevant bases in the latter includes evidence of registered patents. It is the only one of the three Rules that also defines other evidence/knowledge to be considered by the competent authorities of the University Member. The UM and UP Rules also specifically define knowledge acquired through self-study and informal learning. Among the certificates, the UP also allows the submission of a written recommendation from the employer as a suitable basis for the recognition of skills acquired through non-formal, informal and/or aformal learning.

CRITERIA FOR THE RECOGNITION OF SKILLS

All three Rules define two criteria to be taken into account in the recognition process:

- The assessment of the competences achieved must be based on educational objectives (the UM Rules refer to competences) or the entry requirements of the study programme in which the candidate wishes to enrol.
- Competences that have been acquired and are duly documented (according to the UL and UP Rules also relevant) are recognised, regardless of where and how the candidate acquired them.

All three regulations also define specific cases of demonstrating informally acquired knowledge, which include the following three instances:

- The candidate presents a certificate or other document which only shows that the candidate has attended the course, but not that their knowledge has been tested.
- The candidate cannot produce the certificate or other document because the education provider has not issued one.
- The candidate is unable to provide the text of the training programme, or the text is so incomplete as to make comparisons impossible.

The three Rules also define the assessment of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills, which is decided by the competent authority of the member institution in the way that is most appropriate to the objectives and standards of the knowledge and skills being assessed.

RECOGNITION PROCEDURE

At all three universities, the recognition procedure begins at the request of the candidate, who submits an application for recognition using the form that is an integral part of the Rules. The UL and UM Rules specify the submission of the application to the Student Affairs Office, whereas the UP regulations only include a general definition of the submission of the application to the competent UP member office. The application for recognition of informally acquired knowledge is specified in all three Rules and is included in the appendix.

All three Rules state that the competent authority of a member institution may, on the basis of the evidence provided, determine that the knowledge and skills correspond in content, scope and complexity, in whole or in part, to the competences based on the educational objectives of the study programme and recognise such knowledge.

If the competent authority of a University Member is not in a position to decide itself on the recognition of a candidate's non-formally acquired skills, it may ask the relevant higher education teacher for an opinion or appoint an evaluation committee to give its opinion.

If the application is approved, the competent authority of the University Member shall specify in its decision which knowledge and skills or competences are to be recognised. If this entails the recognition of a study obligation, it must be evaluated in the decision in accordance with the criteria for credit evaluation of study programmes under ECTS. In the UL and UP Rules, the latter provision is set out in the Article *Issuance of the Decision* (*Izdaja sklepa* and *Izdaja odločbe* respectively), while the UM Rules already provide for credit evaluation in the Article *Principles for Recognition* (Načela za priznavanje).

RECORDING A RECOGNISED STUDY REQUIREMENT

All three Rules stipulate the recording of recognised study obligations, but the definitions of the body responsible for this and the records of registration vary between universities.

At the UL, the Student Affairs Office takes care of the registration of recognised study obligations (number of credits) on the basis of an issued decision. The recognised study obligation is entered in the register (which is not specified) and, on completion of the studies, in an annexe to the diploma.

At the UM, registration is also handled by the Student Affairs Office of the member institution, which enters the study obligation in the appropriate records based on an issued decision. The Rules do not define this register in detail, but define the content of the entry in more detail than the UL Rules, namely the name of the study unit of the study programme in which the candidate is enrolled or is enrolling, and the number of credit points.

At the UP, the Rules specify that the registration is handled by the competent office of the member institution on the basis of a decision issued by the competent committee. The recognised study obligation with the number of ECTS credits is entered in the student's transcript.

COST OF THE PROCEDURE

The costs of the procedure are payable by the candidate on the basis of the university's fee schedule, which is set out in all three regulations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

A comparative analysis of the three Rules governing the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge at the public universities in Slovenia shows that there is considerable uniformity in the recognition procedures. The content of the Rules varies, with some defining only the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge, while others also include formal education and informal and aformal learning. At all three universities, prospective students and those already enrolled can apply for the recognition process. All three Rules allow for the recognition of knowledge and skills that correspond in content, scope and complexity, in whole or in part, to the general or subject-specific competences laid down in the study programme.

All three Rules cite certificates issued by education and training providers confirming completion of education and training, as well as certificates from companies or relevant references confirming practical training, as appropriate evidence and a basis for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge. Each of the universities also defines other types of certificates, depending on the specifics of their Rules and the field they cover.

All three Rules define two criteria for the recognition process: that the assessment of the competences achieved must be based on the educational objectives or entry requirements of the study programme in which the candidate is enrolled; and that competences, duly documented and proven, may be recognised regardless of the circumstances in which the candidate acquired them.

All three regulations also define specific cases of demonstrating informally acquired knowledge: where the candidate presents a certificate that does not certify the examination but only the attendance, where the candidate does not have a certificate or where the text of the training programme does not allow comparison with study programmes. The verification of informally acquired knowledge is specified in all three Rules, when decided by the competent body of an individual member of the university.

At all three universities, the recognition process is initiated by an application from the candidate, who is also responsible for covering the costs of the process. The procedure may establish that the knowledge and skills correspond in content, scope and complexity, in whole or in part, to the competences based on the educational objectives of the study programme, but where the competent authority is not in a position to decide itself on the recognition of the knowledge and skills acquired, it may seek the opinion of the relevant higher education teacher or appoint an assessment committee to give its opinion. If the application is approved, the competent authority of the member institution shall specify in its decision which knowledge and skills or competences are to be recognised. If this entails the recognition of a study obligation, it must be evaluated in the decision in accordance with the criteria for credit evaluation of study programmes under ECTS.

In all three universities, the recognised study obligation is entered in the relevant register, which varies from university to university.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF A SURVEY ON THE RECOGNITION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM THE ERASMUS+ YOUTH AND EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PROGRAMMES BY INDIVIDUAL MEMBER INSTITUTIONS OF THE THREE SLOVENIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Meta Brečić-Ločičnik

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHODOLOGY USED

This study used a descriptive non-experimental method with an online questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to obtain information on the implementation of procedures for the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in higher education in everyday practice and to explore the practice of recognition of learning outcomes of youth work, especially in the context of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, at all three public universities in Slovenia. The online questionnaire was sent to 166 e-mail addresses of contact persons or general addresses of the secretariats, dean's offices and study affairs offices of all faculties and academies that are members of the three public Slovenian universities, i.e. the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor, and the University of Primorska. In addition to the invitation to complete the questionnaire, two subsequent reminders were sent out. We received seven responses, six of them valid. Two member institutions contributed two responses each, but they came from different organisational units within those institutions. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics. Due to the low number of responses received, the sample is not representative and the findings cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, the data obtained provide insights into the current practice of recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in youth work at specific higher education institutions, which can serve as a basis for further research and advocacy in the field of recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge. The low level of response to the invitation to participate in the survey may also indicate a low level of interest in the field of recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in youth work. Due to the non-representative sample, the analysis of the results focuses on descriptive statistical methods and the results are presented by thematic areas of the questionnaire.

The objectives of the research were:

1. To find out how the process of recognition of non-formally acquired skills is carried out in each member institution.
2. To find out whether individual members are addressing requests for recognition of non-formally acquired skills in the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, how often, and which study requirements
   are recognised in cases of approved applications.
3. To find out about the awareness and acceptance of Youthpass in the three Slovenian public universities.
4. To determine whether students at the three Slovenian public universities use the Youthpass certificate in procedures for the recognition of non-formally acquired skills and to what extent the certificate is accepted as valid in these procedures.
5. To understand the challenges universities face in recognising non-formally acquired skills.

SURVEY RESULTS BY THEMATIC AREAS

Among the six valid responses to the questionnaire, two member institutions contributed two responses each, but they came from different departments within those institutions. The structure of the respondents who answered the questionnaire was as follows:

- Two respondents from the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, one from the Student Affairs Office and one from the Dean's Office.
- Two respondents from the Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, University of Primorska, one from the Student Affairs Office and one from the International Office.
- One respondent from the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, working within the body responsible for the identification, verification and recognition of non-formally acquired skills.
- One respondent from the Faculty of Management, University of Primorska, who works within the body responsible for the identification, verification and recognition of non-formally acquired skills.

As the responses of individual participants from the same institutions varied, and there are members running several different study programmes, we present the responses of all participants below, focusing on the experiences of individuals.

The data show that experiences with the recognition of informally acquired knowledge and familiarity with European programmes in the field of youth vary even within the same institution, which indicates a diversity of recognition practices.

For the sake of clarity, we use the abbreviations UL for the University of Ljubljana, UM for the University of Maribor, and UP for the University of Primorska.

RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE

To better understand the procedures and to obtain additional information that could not be obtained from the Rules adopted by the universities, we checked whether individual member institutions also have their own rules on the recognition of non-formally acquired skills.

When asked whether their member institutions have their own Rules, in addition to the Rules governing the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge and skills at the university level, all three respondents from UL answered no, and all three respondents from UP answered yes.

We also wanted to know which member institution's body is responsible for identifying, verifying, and recognising candidates' non-formally acquired skills.

At the Faculty of Arts, UL, the competent body is the Committee for Student Issues and Guidance – a body of the Commission for Bachelor's and Master's Studies. At the Faculty of Education, UL, the competent authority is the Commission for the Recognition of Non-Formally Acquired Skills. At the Faculty of Management, UP, the Commission for the Recognition of Skills is responsible for the recognition. At the Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, UP, the Commission for Academic and Student Affairs is the competent body.

PROCESSING OF APPLICATIONS FOR RECOGNITION OF SKILLS ACQUIRED UNDER THE ERASMUS+ YOUTH AND EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS PROGRAMMES

The survey aimed to find out whether individual institutions deal with requests for recognition of non-formally acquired skills in the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, how often, and which study requirements are recognised in cases of approved applications. None of the respondents reported any such cases. Four respondents reported that they had not yet received such requests, while two did not know if they had.

Table 2: Answers to the survey question *Have you, in the context of the procedures for the recognition of non-formally acquired skills, considered any requests for recognition of skills acquired in the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes?*

Answer	Frequency (f)
Yes	0
No	4
I don't know	2
Total	6

Since none of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question about the consideration of applications for the recognition of skills acquired in European programmes, no one was asked about the frequency of processing of such applications and the study commitments recognised, so we do not have data on these areas.

FAMILIARITY WITH YOUTHPASS

The survey aimed to find out about the familiarity with and acceptance of Youthpass at the three Slovenian public universities. One of the respondents answered that they were familiar with the Youthpass certificate, namely the respondent from the Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, UP, who works in the International Office. We can assume that this person is familiar with the Youthpass certificate because, given their field of work, they often come into contact with international programmes and may have come across the Youthpass certificate in this way. The remaining five respondents replied that they were not familiar with Youthpass.

Table 3: Answers to the survey question *Are you familiar with Youthpass?*

Answer	Frequency (f)
Yes	1
No	5
Total	6

Similarly, when asked whether any student had tried to use the Youthpass certificate to claim non-formally acquired knowledge, one respondent, the one who is familiar with the certificate, answered affirmatively. Four persons responded negatively, while one person responded that they did not know whether anyone had already tried to use Youthpass in the recognition process. At this point, we would like to draw attention to the discrepancy between the answers to this question and the question on applications for the recognition of skills acquired under the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes, where no one answered affirmatively. A possible explanation is that the Youthpass certificate used in the recognition procedures was linked to participation in previous European youth programmes, or that the respondent reporting the use of Youthpass in the recognition procedure does not know which programmes it is used in. The latter is somewhat less likely, as this was clearly explained in the questionnaire.

Table 4: Answers to the survey question: *Have (prospective) students already tried to use the Youthpass certificate to validate their non-formally acquired skills?*

Answer	Frequency (f)
Yes	1
No	4
I don't know	1
Total	6

Although one respondent reported that the Youthpass certificate had been used in the recognition of non-formally acquired skills, we received no responses to the question *"To what extent is the Youthpass certificate accepted as a valid certificate in the recognition of non-formally acquired skills?"*.

CHALLENGES IN THE RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMALLY ACQUIRED KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The survey also aimed to identify the challenges faced by universities in recognising informally acquired skills, which is why we included this topic in the questionnaire.

We received two responses, both from people working at the Faculty of Arts, UL, which are very similar in content:

"We do not consider the recognition of credit-rated content to be problematic; it is the rest that we find problematic."

"It is a question of credit evaluation of acquired knowledge, recognition of these non-formal skills within the framework of regular studies, etc."

The answers point to a problem with the credit evaluation of non-formally acquired knowledge. As we have noted in our content analysis of the regulations, the study requirement to be recognised must be evaluated in the recognition decision according to the ECTS criteria for the credit evaluation of study programmes. These criteria (2019) stipulate that 1 credit point represents 25 to 30 hours of student workload in the form of lectures, seminars, tutorials and other forms of organised study work (practical training, placements, performances, fieldwork, etc.) and independent work. Based on the responses received, it can be concluded that the process of evaluating non-formally acquired knowledge using the ECTS is not straightforward and unambiguous, and that this may constitute a barrier to the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge.

A DESIRE TO LEARN ABOUT PROGRAMMES

In the final part of the survey, we asked respondents if they would like to find out more about youth work and the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. Three respondents answered affirmatively and three negatively. Those who would like to get more information come from three different faculties and have also left contact details in the questionnaire for that purpose. The interest in additional information on European youth programmes is certainly positive and may also lead to more interest in the recognition of learning outcomes from these programmes.

DISCUSSION

Meta Brečić-Ločičnik

The research we carried out was aimed at learning more about the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge through youth work, in particular through participation in the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. We found that in Slovenia, the area of recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge in public higher education institutions is defined by rules at the level of individual universities, which are quite similar in terms of content in the part relating to the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge. The Rules clearly set out the procedures for handling requests and the possible outcomes of such procedures. They stipulate that students can be awarded credit for any skills, regardless of

the environment in which they acquired them. With this, public higher education also addresses the Council of the European Union Recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The aforementioned Rules allow for the recognition of skills acquired in the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. It is also possible to submit a Youthpass certificate, although further research is needed to determine whether the certificate includes all the necessary elements required and would be recognised in procedures as a sufficient basis for the recognition of skills, or whether additional information would be needed or the candidate's skills would need to be further verified.

Unfortunately, the survey on the recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge by individual member institutions of the universities did not receive a sufficiently high number of responses to the questionnaire to allow any generalisations. Furthermore, the sample was so small that we were only able to get a glimpse into the practices of four faculties. In all four cases of practices, there is a clear lack of awareness of the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. However, there is some interest in obtaining new information on the programmes. In all four cases, we also identified poor knowledge of the Youthpass certificate and its use in the recognition procedures. Nevertheless, we also addressed the objective of the entire Validation project with the questionnaire, namely to raise awareness of youth work and its educational value in the context of evaluation, as well as of Youthpass, as we briefly presented both in the questionnaire.

The examples of practices received through the questionnaires did not provide specific information on whether students request recognition of non-formal learning acquired through the Erasmus+ Youth and European Solidarity Corps programmes. In the future, it would be useful to investigate programme participants' awareness of recognition opportunities and what their interest in such procedures is.

Given that the survey questionnaire revealed reservations about the credit assessment of non-formally acquired knowledge, it would be useful to explore this challenge in more detail in the future and identify possible ways of overcoming it.

A limitation of the survey is certainly the low response rate of higher education institutions to the questionnaire. Possible reasons are lack of interest in the field of recognition or specifically recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge through international youth work, overload, or the selection of contacts to whom the questionnaire was sent. Perhaps a greater impact could be achieved by sending the questionnaire to members of the competent authorities responsible for identifying, verifying and recognising informally acquired skills of candidates. Unfortunately, this information is not publicly available on the websites of all member universities, so we would first need to obtain it by other means. For

further research, it would be useful to conduct interviews at individual member institutions to deepen the understanding of the procedures and possibilities for greater recognition of the youth sector within higher education institutions. In the survey questionnaire, we wanted to invite respondents to participate in interviews of this kind, but unfortunately no one expressed a willingness to participate.

CONCLUSION

Meta Brečić-Ločičnik

In the Validation project, we found the following:

- **Recognition of non-formally acquired knowledge is gradually developing in Slovenia**.
- **Systemic frameworks** to enable the recognition of competences acquired through non-formal learning, including in the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes, in the higher education area **are in place**.
- **The question of recognition in practice remains open**, as the low response rate to the survey did not provide us with any tangible answers that could be generalised.
- The results of the survey point to the **need for further research in this area**, from different perspectives, both **systemic**, at the level of the relevant ministry, universities and university members, and from the perspective of (prospective) **students,** their **recognition of the value of** acquired competences, and their **interest in the recognition of** acquired competences in higher education. In this context, it would also be good to focus on part-time students or adults active in youth work who study while working.

In the future, it would be useful to:

- **Develop support measures and communication strategies to raise awareness among** (prospective) students of the competences acquired and the possibilities for their recognition in higher education.
- **Inform higher education institutions about European youth programmes and their learning outcomes**, for which some institutions have expressed interest.
- **Explore in more depth the challenges in the processes of recognition**

of non-formal learning acquired in European programmes in the higher education environment, and find **ways to overcome them**.

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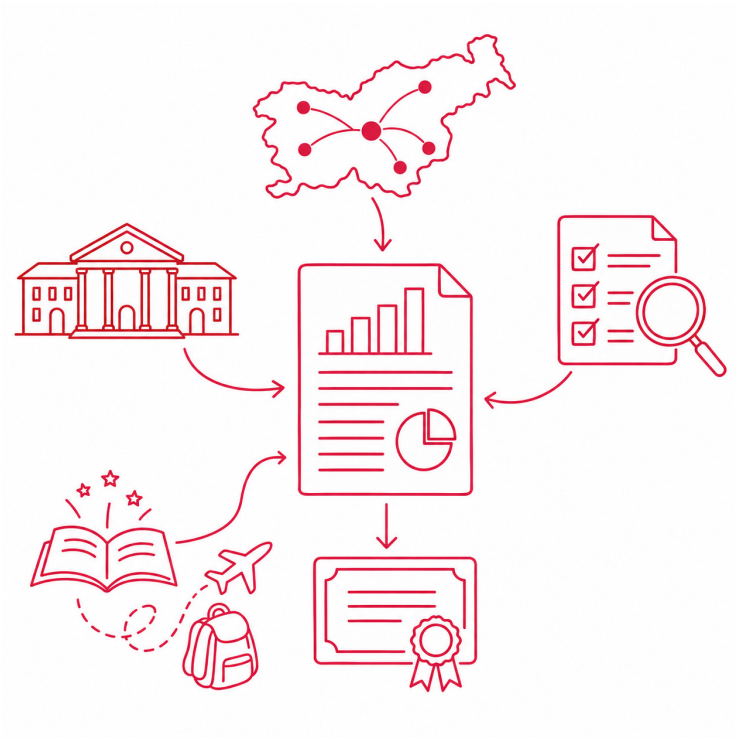
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GLOSSARY

COMPETENCE

Key competences for lifelong learning, the EU framework that has been used as the basis for the Youthpass process, defines key competences as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. **Knowledge** encompasses concepts, facts and figures, ideas and theories; **skills** put existing knowledge into practice and demonstrate an ability to carry out a process, while **attitudes** describe the disposition and mindset to act or react to ideas, persons or situations. Key competences are developed throughout life, through formal, non-formal and informal learning in different environments, including family, school, workplace, neighbourhood and other communities.

The European Qualification Framework (EQF) (common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems to a common framework), as an instrument for the promotion of lifelong learning, encompasses all levels of qualifications acquired in general, vocational as well as academic education and training. The framework has eight reference levels, which are described as **learning outcomes**. Those learning outcomes are defined in terms of: **knowledge** (theoretical and/or factual); **skills**: **cognitive** (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and **practical** (involving manual dexterity and the use of

methods, materials, tools and instruments) and (social) **competence**, where the ability to work with others is crucial.

Finally, the **ETS competence framework for youth workers to work internationally**, which is used for the Youthpass process of youth workers, defines four dimensions of competence: **attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviours**. Attitudes (the youth worker's willingness) are the foundation for competence development. They lead to knowledge and skills, which will then lead to appropriate and contextual behaviour.

VALIDATION

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is defined as a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired knowledge, know-how, information, values, skills and competences measured against a predefined standard. **The 2012 European Union Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning** identifies four distinct phases:

- **Identification:** The learner becomes aware of what they have learned: the skills, knowledge and attitudes acquired through experience, as well as potential changes in their behaviours.
- **Documentation:** The learning outcomes are recorded or described in a recognisable format.
- **Assessment:** The documented learning is assessed and judged against predefined standards or criteria.
- **Recognition:** The final stage, where the learning is formally acknowledged, certified or given official status.

Further relevance is given to the **European guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning** that seek to clarify the conditions for developing and implementing validation, as well as the **European inventory of validation of informal and non-formal learning 2023**, which provides a comprehensive overview of validation practices across Europe, covering 32 systems in EU-27 Member States and EFTA countries.

RECOGNITION

From the Youthpass perspective, we are considering **recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the youth field**, both as a learning process and in terms of the learning outcomes: the competences developed in youth work and youth volunteering.

Recognition is most often seen through the **four dimensions** that define the various purposes and actors of recognition. They were first identified in the 2004 "Pathways towards validation and recognition of education, training and learning in the youth field", and in the Youthpass context they are defined in the following way:

- **Self-recognition or individual recognition** includes personal awareness and assessment of learning outcomes, and the ability to use these learning outcomes in other fields. Self-recognition is an important basis for the other forms of recognition and for developing the quality of our work.

- **Social recognition** means that various actors in society – for example parents, schools, employers – understand and acknowledge the value of youth work and of the competences acquired in non-formal learning settings.

- **Formal recognition** is often associated with the validation of learning outcomes and with the certification of a learning process and/or its outcomes. Through this process, the learning achievements are mostly compared to the qualifications acquired in formal education, or mean acquiring other types or aspects of an official status.

- **Political recognition** is for instance manifested through the policies and legislations concerned with youth work or non-formal education. It could mean the extent to which non-formal learning and its providers are included in political strategies on various levels.

QUALIFICATIONS

According to **CEDEFOP**, qualifications are the certificates and diplomas awarded following education, training and learning. For education and training, they confirm that a learner has successfully achieved a set of learning outcomes. A broad range of qualifications are now included in national qualification frameworks linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF). These frameworks

make understanding, comparing and recognising qualifications easier within and between countries.

CREDENTIALS

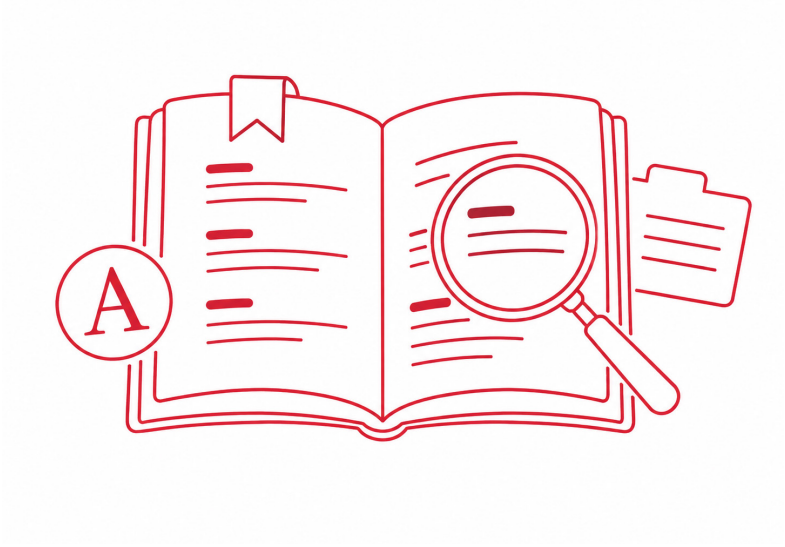
Credentials are a form of proof of an individual's qualifications, issued by a third party. They can be documents like degrees or certificates, or digital items like badges, which are used to verify one's competences. New types of credentials (including digital badges, micro-credentials, nano-credentials and others) are increasingly promoted as a complementary way of valuing learning, allowing individuals to collect and "stack" learning experiences in a flexible way, at their own pace and throughout their life.

ACCREDITATION/VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

APEL/VPL are acronyms that refer to the process of recognising competences acquired outside formal education and training systems.

- **APEL stands for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning**
- **VPL stands for Validation of Prior Learning**

These terms are sometimes used interchangeably with others, such as RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) or APL (Assessment of Prior Learning), to refer to the same general process or to specific parts of it.



LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Country	Name of the organisation	Function/position of the person
Estonia	University of Tartu	Narva College, programme director of youth work
	Tallinn University	Associate Professor of youth work
France	University of Saint-Étienne	Director of Training and Professional Integration
	University of Saint-Étienne	Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship
	University of Saint-Étienne	Head of Continuing Education Department
	Academic School for Continuing Education (EAFC)	Head of the International Department
	Regional Public Orientation Service Centre Val de Loire	Orientation and school dropout prevention officer
	Office of the Prime Minister	Pioneer of the Public Service for the Validation of Prior Learning

Country	Name of the organisation	Function/position of the person
	DIAGORIENTE	Director of Diagoriente
	Academy of Lyon	Head of the Academic Prior Learning Assessment System
	AFDEC	President of AFDEC
Germany	Technical University of Dresden	Study Programme Manager Medicine
	Foundation Akkreditierungsrat	Management Staff
Slovenia	University of Ljubljana	Vice-Rector for Academic and Student Affairs of the University of Ljubljana in the 2021–2025 term
	UL Biotechnical faculty	Vice-Dean for Academic Affair
	UL Biotechnical faculty	Assistant Secretary of the Faculty
	UL Faculty of Health	Head of the Academic Affairs Department
	UL Faculty of Arts	Associate Professor of Andragogy at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy
	UL Faculty of Education	Assistant Secretary of the Faculty
	NEFIKS	Director of the Institute
	Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS)	General Secretary
	Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS)	Expert associate or youth policies
	Student Organisation of Slovenia (ŠOS)	President

Country	Name of the organisation	Function/position of the person
	Student Organisation of Slovenia (ŠOS)	Student Work Associate
	Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (MVZI)	Head of the Higher Education Sector
	University of Maribor	Head of the Education and Studies Department for 1st and 2nd cycle study programs



EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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The aim of the SALTO Training & Cooperation Resource Centre is to support the quality and recognition of youth work and of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. It is hosted by JUGEND für Europa, which works on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the European Commission. One of the main tasks of the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre is to coordinate the development and implementation of the Youthpass Strategy on behalf of the European Commission.

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