



• VIORICA ANTONOV • CORNEL CIUREA • VALERIU FRUNZARU •

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Recognition of prior learning (RPL) for returning migrants in Moldova: realities and trends



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**RECOGNITION OF PRIOR
LEARNING (RPL) FOR RETURNING
MIGRANTS IN MOLDOVA:
REALITIES AND TRENDS**

*Viorica Antonov
Cornel Ciurea
Valeriu Frunzaru*

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Project Coordinator: Viorica Antonov

For more information on this publication, please contact the Department of Press and Public Communication of IDIS „Viitorul”. Contact person: Diana Lungu, tel: +373 22 221844, diana.lungu@viitorul.org

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

VIORICA ANTONOV – is an expert in social policy and development at the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) “Viitorul” in Moldova. She is the author of original theoretical and empirical papers and research-based articles dealing with subjects of migration issues, the labour market, inequality, education and democratization. She is a lecturer at the State University of Moldova, Chisinau, teaching public policy and important development issues, using a comparative approach, with a particular focus on inter-disciplinary research. Her main fields of interest are migration, social policies, federalization, decentralization and political reform. She holds an M.A. in social sciences and a Ph.D. in political sciences. She graduated the Erasmus Mundus Master in local comparative development from the Universities of Trento and Ljubljana. She also awarded the Postgraduate Diploma on Federalism, Decentralization and Conflict Resolution from University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

CORNELIU CIUREA – is an expert in education policies and governing institutions at the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) “Viitorul” in Moldova. He graduated from the National School of Administration and Political Science of Bucharest and the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. Mr. Ciurea worked for TeleRadio-Moldova (1994–1996). He served as the director of the weekly *Democrația* (2006–2009). Between 2010 and 2011, Mr. Ciurea was an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe expert on political party legislation and a coordinator of a project on the National Convention for European Integration.

VALERIU FRUNZARU – is senior lecturer at the State University of Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest, where he teaches European employment policies, Introduction to Sociology, and Research Methods. He has published books and articles in scientific journals on the topic of employment, education and social values.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- APL - Accreditation of Prior Learning
- CE – European Commission
- CEDEFOP – European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
- CNCFPFA - National Council of Qualifications and Vocational Training of Adults (Romania)
- CPL - Continuous Professional Learning
- ECTS - European Credit Transfer (and Accumulation) System
- ECVET – European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training
- EHEA – European Higher Education Area
- EQF – European Qualification Framework
- EU – European Union
- ICT – Information and Communication Technologies
- NAQ – National Authority for Qualifications (Romania)
- NARIC – National Academic Recognition Information Centres (UK)
- NEA - National Employment Agency
- NGO – Non-governmental Organization
- NQF-SSE – National Qualifications Framework for Secondary Specialized Education (Romania)
- NUFFIC – Netherlands organisation for international cooperation in higher education (Netherlands)
- OECD – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
- OS – Occupational Standard (Romania)
- QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK)
- RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning
- SWOT – Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses/Limitations, Opportunities, and Threats
- UECNCFPFA - Executive Unit of the National Council of Qualifications and Vocational Training of Adults (Romania)
- VET – Vocational Education and Training
- VNFIFL – Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning
- VTS – Vocational Training Standard (Romania)

INTRODUCTION

Having skilled and competitive human capital is the first and foremost step toward economic growth in a society. Over the past ten years, human capital reduced dramatically countrywide, due to a shortage of jobs and low wages. Consequently, a significant part of the population emigrated.

Migration engenders a number of challenges in the social and economic life of the migrants. Generally, one of the biggest challenges is the social integration of migrants, i.e. the assimilation of rules and habits of the country of residence. Another important challenge is finding a job and, finally, yet importantly, getting alternative qualifications if migrants have to take up new professional activities to meet their economic needs. The requalification of Moldovans who left the country in search of a job contributes to strengthening the national human capital. At the same time, this is a downside for the national economy, since there are gaps about the policies to attract qualified and highly-qualified migrants to work in their home country, there are no proper mechanisms to consolidate and maintain circular migration of highly qualified professionals and the professional experience exchange, which would have a positive impact on the national economy.

The main objective of this study was to look at the possibilities and mechanisms existing in Moldova for the recognition and validation of qualifications obtained by migrants abroad.

Migrants who returned home represent an outstanding segment of the labour market. Based on observations, these people often have qualifications and skills in modern labour methods, as well as knowledge matching modern technologies. However, upon their return to the home country, the qualifications acquired abroad, particularly

in the West European countries or Russia are not recognized by the current labour market system, including by local employers who lack the proper tools or guidelines to do this.

In that situation, migrants are those who suffer the most; they had to leave their country in search for a better-paid job and, although they have succeeded in learning a new profession abroad, upon their return, the qualifications acquired are not recognized and there are no employment opportunities for them. The main problem is the lack of sustainable mechanisms for recognition and validation of returning migrants' prior learning and qualifications. At the same time, employment of qualified migrants without degrees or attestations in Moldovan companies, particularly those with foreign capital, is cumbersome. Therefore, it is important to build a prior learning validation mechanism in Moldova and to consider ways to develop institutional capacities in order to ensure a qualitative process of prior learning validation.

In this context, EU's best practices may serve as a solid foundation. In this study, we have taken a look at the functional mechanisms for recognition and certification of (non-formal and informal) prior learning in a number of EU states, such as Sweden, England, France and Romania. EU's practices show that countries have individual approaches in recognizing and validating prior learning, however, the goal of all their mechanisms is to ensure dynamic labour mobility within the EU. Based on the experience of these states and taking into account the labour market peculiarities, the educational system and institutional development of Moldova, we will make proposals and recommendations for implementation of some forms of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in our country.

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE NATIONAL LABOUR MARKET AND MIGRATION TRENDS

In the early '90s, in the aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union, Moldova faced a deep economic crisis. Significant arrears in remuneration of employees in state-owned enterprises, the deficit of consumption goods, and the rising unemployment became the main reasons for mass migration of the population. Following the brain drain during the '90s, some economic sectors were restructured, which had a negative impact on the labour market. Migration also had negative effects on the breakdown of professions and trades in Moldova. For instance, there is no more demand for some professions in the industrial and agricultural sectors, such as agricultural engineers, technical managers for research and development studies, expert assessors, pilots for small aircrafts, biochemists, construction engineers, and automation engineers. Therefore, specialists in these areas tend to migrate increasingly to other European countries, while Moldova has been facing a shortage of highly qualified labour force for over a decade. There is a significant crisis of investment in human resources at national level. Hence, the Moldovan society is affected considerably by a brain drain, which has a negative impact on the development of economic, scientific and technical sectors. The brain drain and exodus

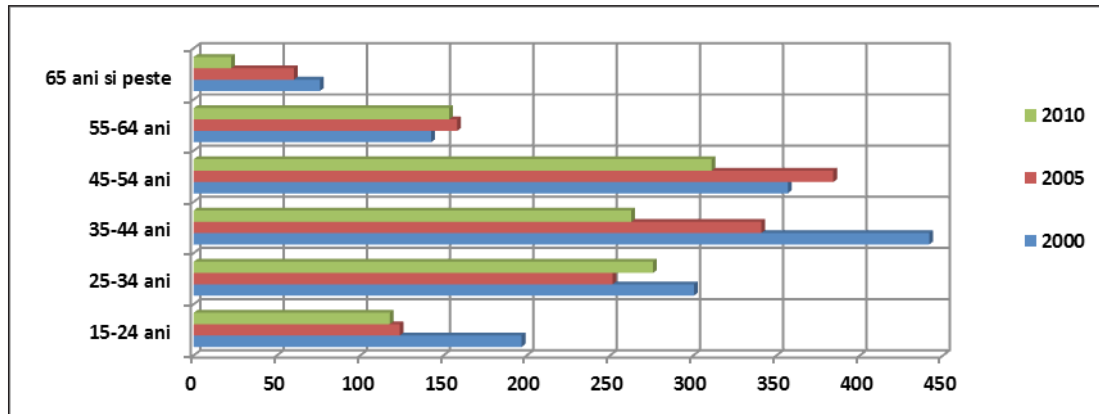
of qualified labour force seriously affects the economy's public and private sectors in terms of employment, which results in a significant social divide between the citizens' incomes. (Antonov, 2010, 36)

Brain drain

Brain drain is a process of human capital migration. In practice, both internal migration (i.e. depopulation of rural areas and agglomeration of urban areas) and external migration have a direct impact on employment at national level. Because of human capital migration, the labour market has undergone dramatic demographic, economic, and social changes.

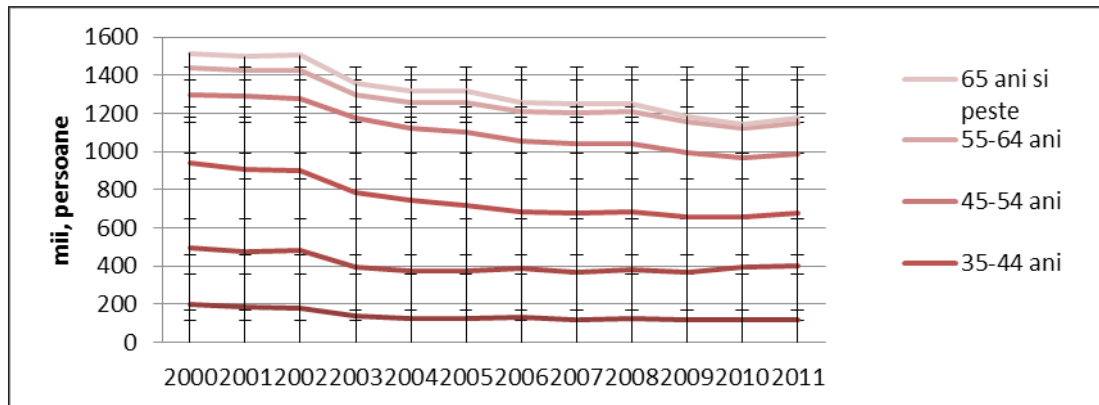
The employment statistics of the past 10 years (including a breakdown by age, profession, education level, and geographic areas) show that in the early 2000s, the employees in the age categories 25-34 and 35-44 was predominant over the other age groups. However, at the beginning of the 2010s, the employee age group 45-54 was the most numerous (27%), followed by the age group 25-34 (24%) and 35-44 (23%) (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Employed population by age categories and years (thousand persons)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics

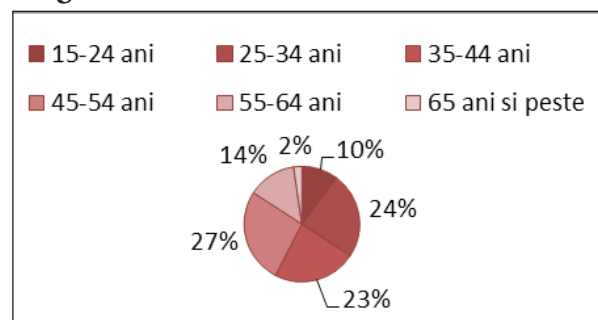
Figure 2. Employed population from 2000 to 2011 (thousand persons)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Admittedly, labour force migration has significantly changed the breakdown of the employed population by age. Thus, in 2011, the most numerous age group of employees was 45-54 years old. There is a number of factors, such as very low salaries, not too advantageous conditions for career growth, early dismissal due to bankruptcy, etc., which have a negative impact on the migration of young employees or their movement to the shadow economy.

Figure 3. Rate of employed population by age categories in 2011



Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Rural-urban migration

The rural-urban migration has an impact on the labour market as well. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of

collective farms (kolkhozes) and cooperatives, many jobs were liquidated and a part of the qualified workforce migrated to the urban areas, while another part has emigrated abroad. There is no sufficient data to allow estimating the rural-urban migration processes as a whole; however, we can conclude that this is an important source of urban population growth to the detriment of villages and communes. These processes persist even today. In addition to the massive domestic migration, there is also a growth of the Moldovan Diasporas abroad; at the same time, the retro-migration (return to rural areas) is virtually inexistent in both cases.

There are two general trends that need to be taken into account when analyzing the rural-urban migration – the economic reliance of the rural population on the urban areas of the country (i.e. jobs in towns, easy access to public services, infrastructure and amenities) and the urban population's rate of natural increase, which creates the impression of a rapid flow of the rural-urban migration.

Admittedly, the population who has migrated to urban areas and abroad may undergo professional changes (i.e. participate in trainings and requalification, employment). While rural migrants benefit from a number of re-qualification and vocational training services, migrants who returned to their home country are less privileged in this sense, as they are not able to get the professional qualifications have acquired abroad accredited, certified and recognized in Moldova. This is due to the lack of a legal-institutional framework that would facilitate the procedure of recognition of migrants' qualifications. The paradox is that returning migrants who have certain skills and techniques in various areas such as constructions, engineering, agriculture, irrigation, healthcare, social assistance, home care services etc., which they acquired abroad which are

relevant for the local labour market, are less likely to get a corresponding job in Moldova, due to the lack of alternative mechanisms to validate the knowledge and skills acquired abroad.

Development of the national policy to attract Moldovan migrants to the labour market

Given the socio-demographic trends, the development of a national policy to attract Moldovan migrants to the labour market by securing them proper economic and social conditions, constitutes a priority for our country. As a rule, the first step in opening the doors for Moldovan migrants who wish to return home is to recognize their prior learning, that is – to accredit the professional skill that they have developed abroad. This should be a major task for the Ministry of Education of Moldova.

Some progress has been made in terms of vocational education; however, this is still not in line with the EU policies on lifelong learning and continuous vocational learning (CPL). At the same time, there are a significant number of unskilled or low-skilled workers and a big number of graduates with less satisfactory results on the labour market annually. The re-qualification of these people could be an important undertaking for the line ministry; however, there are not sufficient direct or indirect actions at national level to facilitate their vocational orientation and employment. In addition, there is virtually no mobility of the young highly qualified labour force at national level. One of the reasons for this is the severe shortage of jobs that fit their specialties and the second reason – the insufficient level of education in their profession in order to be

able to get a job after graduation. We may conclude that there is no constructive and systemic dialogue between the educational sector and the labour market (i.e. businesses, employers' associations, international companies, etc.) Obviously, the national policy should aim at adjusting the higher and vocation education, as well as vocational training to the needs of the labour market and provide for concrete measures, including the conclusion of agreements and partnerships between the academic sector, business sector, employers' associations, etc., bringing the academic curriculum in line with the requirements on the national and regional labour market.

Further development of educational policies remains a major objective. Therefore, one of the main targets would be to develop proper mechanisms for prior learning recognition and validation at the level of higher education as well as secondary vocational education and specialized secondary education.

Labour force mobility

Labour force mobility among countries is wide spreading in the EU and may develop in Moldova in the future as well. For instance, according to the European Job Mobility Portal, about 2-3 million jobs are vacant in the EU, while the unemployment rate is approximately 10% overall and 25% among young people. About 60% of the migrating unemployed people can find a job within one year, compared to 35% of those who stay in their home country.

Labour force mobility could foster the economic growth in the country by making possible experience exchange and increasing the quality of education. International labour migration becomes increasingly transnational, with a strong circulatory movement and strong ties among migrants, both in their countries of origin and destination (Basch, 1994). Therefore, labour force mobility is fundamental for a circular migration based on choosing better options in terms of job and life; best practices may be analyzed, assimilated and then applied in the country of origin. For this purpose, legal instruments have been created to manage migration processes based on labour force mobility and experience exchange principles. Thus, in June 2008, the EU-Moldova Mobility Partnership was launched. As a result, the dialogue between EU and Moldova on visa liberalization started on June 15, 2010. These two events have defined a new framework for Moldova's migration process ensuring an efficient legal system that aims at increasing the transparency in migration processes management, strengthening and maintaining the cooperation between the countries of destination and those of origin.

Overall, education does not have a decisive role in defining the direction of labour force mobility; however, it may serve as a catalyst in determining the opportunities for professional and circular mobility. This phenomenon is very widespread in EU, being considered an efficient way of coping with the migration processes and reducing social exclusion and marginalization.

BARRIERS TO RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN MOLDOVA

The concept of lifelong learning in Moldova is defined in the Law on Education of 1995 and reiterated in the 2011-2015 Consolidated Strategy for Education Development.

Concept of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Validation System

The draft Concept of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Validation System was developed in accordance with the guidelines of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the EU guidelines on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and based on the Law on Education (1995), Art. 35, p.6, and should be approved by December 2012. The concept provides for the following priority actions:

- *Development and approval of the draft Methodology for Non-Formal and Informal Learning Validation and Certification in Moldova by December inst., in accordance with the Ministry of Education's 2012 Activity Plan.*
- *Development and approval of the Methodology or Regulation for Autho-*

rization of Centres for Assessment of Professional Competences Acquired in non-formal and informal education (by 1 June 2012).

- *Development and approval of the National Qualifications Framework for the secondary vocational and specialized secondary education (from 2012 to 2014), the objective of which is to promote lifelong learning and academic mobility.*

In the framework of Moldova-EU Mobility Partnership (June 2008), the project “*Strengthening the Moldova Capacity to Manage Labour and Return Migration*” was launched. The project provides support in a number of areas to Moldovan citizens living abroad. The methodology for non-formal and informal learning identification, validation and certification developed within this project will be edited. The document will describe specific activities to be conducted gradually within the process of certification of competences acquired by means of education other than the formal ones:

1. Identifying learning outcomes
2. Assessing learning outcomes
3. Validating learning outcomes
4. Certifying learning outcomes

The document represents a concept and shall be approved by the Board of the Ministry of Education. One of the issues related to this concept is

the position of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which would prefer to have under its control the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIFL).

Factors urging VNFIFL development

An analysis of the current situation in the secondary vocational education and the labour market shows a series of factors that determine and stress the need to develop the formal and informal learning validation within the educational system.

Regulatory factors:

- a) lack of a proper regulatory and conceptual framework for the general secondary education;
- b) lack of mechanisms to assess the needs of the national economy in terms of labour force, which could help establishing student intake shares at the general secondary education institutions by individual specialties, on a medium and long term.

Socio-economic factors:

- a) the divide in terms of access to and quality of vocational education services;
- b) underestimation of the importance of expenditures for education within households' overall consumption

budgets;

Educational factors:

- a) lack of models for non-formal and informal learning validation in the educational system;
- b) shortage/lack of cooperation among the education institutions at different levels and stages;
- c) shortage of proper methodological and teaching materials for the general secondary education;

Institutional factors:

- a) lack of specialized institutions to validate non-formal and informal education;
- b) shortage of proper teaching materials: handbooks, equipment, etc.;
- c) inconsistency of the technical and material base of vocational institutions with the market requirements;
- d) inefficient and unreasonable management of material, human and time resources of the vocational institutions reported to the real needs;
- e) lack of financial autonomy of vocational institutions in managing financial resources;

Taking into account all these factors, a SWOT analysis can be made of the current status in the secondary vocational education system (Table 1).

Table. 1. SWOT Analysis of the current a secondary vocational education system

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a regulatory framework for the organization of secondary vocational education; - There are many secondary vocational institutions; - There is teaching staff; - There are vocational training traditions within the educational system; - There is a technical-material base for teaching; - There are extra-budgetary resources which may be allotted for education; - There is experience in attracting funds for the vocational education through various international projects; - There is experience in developing occupational standards, standards and curricula for vocational education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The legal framework is inadequate; - The system stops direct access of graduates to higher education; - Lack of a system to train instructor foremen; - Lack of a system to provide continuous training to specialty teachers; - The technical-material base is insufficient, outdated and does not meet the requirements on the labour market; - The requirements on the labour market are not clearly defined and publicized; - The mechanisms of funding education and vocational training is inefficient; - The professional certification system is not in line with the current requirements.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restructure and rebound the secondary vocational education system; - Implement a proper vocational orientation system; - Secure a partnership between secondary vocational institutions and businesses; - Get businesses involved in funding vocational education; - Demand on the labour market; - Rebound economic sectors; - Develop and implement a national system for non-formal and informal education validation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The structure of secondary vocational education is inconsistent with the permanently changing requirements on the labour market; - Shortage of specialized teachers to meet the vocational education standards; - Unwillingness of some economic entities to contribute to the vocational education; - Inadequate finance of the secondary vocational education; - Excessive migration of labour force; - No sustainability of projects after they end - Lack of teaching staff trained to develop and implement vocational education standards and curricula.

There is a series of other factors, which hinder the development of a proper system prior learning recognition and certification. An important factor relates to the demographic decline: there is a significant drop in the number of students, graduates and people who are fit for work. The findings of the latest census in Moldova (in 2004) and the current demographics show a trend of depopulation caused by the decline of birth rate, population ageing, decrease of fertility rate, and increase of the death rate, etc.

The number of the stable population of Moldova has reduced to 3559.5 thousand inhabitants by 2012 (without the population of Transnistria and Bender municipality), because of a decreasing trend, which started in 1990. One reason for this is the negative rate of natural increase, which further affects the population-ageing index (the latter increased from 12.8 in 1990 to 14.4 in 2011). Thus, Moldova follows

the overall population ageing trends experienced by many other countries, with all its implications on the educational sector.

Below is presented the population breakdown by area of residence, sex, and age group:

1) Since 1990, there has been a trend of decrease in the number of urban population and increase of the rural population share. Thus, according to the 2004 census, 41% of the total Moldovan population lives in urban areas and 59% - in rural areas compared to 1990, when 41% resided in urban areas and 52.9% - in rural areas. About 60% of the urban population lives in Chisinau. At the beginning of 2012, the share of urban inhabitants was 41.7% and that of rural inhabitants – 58.3%.

2) According to statistics, there have been no significant changes in terms of population breakdown by sex. Thus, in 1990 men represented about 47.6 % of the overall population, and in 2012 – 48.1%, while the share of female

population has decreased from 52.4% in 1990 to 51.9% in 2012.

3) From 1990 to 2011, the number of population in the age groups 5-14 and 15-19 decreased, while that in the age group 20-29 increased slightly. Starting with 2005, there has been an increase of the population in the age group 0-4 years; this requires new approaches in designing the infrastructure of institutions and services providing education and early development.

At the same time, the demographic decline represents an opportunity for non-formal and informal learning recognition and validation. The drop down of the intake at educational institutions, which occurred in this year as well, will force institutions to use progressively the recognition of prior learning. Massive emigration will also urge adopting this system in order to compensate the drain of human capital by older people who want to certify their competences.

Another serious issue relates to unemployment. Moldova's transition to market economy has produced qualitative and quantitative changes in terms of employment, as follows:

- (i) the population employed in the national economy reduced by approximately 22.5% (2000-2011);
- (ii) the share of employees in the private sector increased (from 37% in 1990 to approximately 66.4% of the population employed in 2011);
- (iii) the number of part-time employees dropped down;
- (iv) the number of persons employed in the informal sector increased;
- (v) labour force migration increased;
- (vi) the intellectual potential is insufficiently used.

An analysis of unemployment by age structure and level of education shows the following:

- (i) the age groups 15-24 and 25-34 account for the biggest share of unemployed (25% and 33.4% respectively) in both urban and rural areas and for both sexes;
- (ii) in 2011, in the age category 15-34, the share unemployed with secondary vocational education was 20%, with specialized secondary education – 7.3%, and with higher education – 27.9%;
- (iii) the high unemployment rate among young people graduates of vocational institutions at all levels show, along with other factors, the inefficient interaction between the educational system, the real economy and the labour market.

An analysis of demographics by age and level of education shows that about 34.5% of the employed people in the age group 25-34 have only primary or general secondary education and are employed without having an institutional vocational education. Since people in this age group graduated school within the past 5-10 years, it may be concluded that there are significant inconsistencies between the general education and the vocational one, and that vocational orientation and guiding process is inefficient.

The relationship between education and labour market is a priority for the modern world and there are discussions on the complementary education forms. Formal pre-university and university education has developed; however, this education form presents some limits particularly in relation to the pace of change. This is why non-formal and informal education is so important.

How VNFIFL system works

The system of non-formal and informal learning validation consists of 4 sub-processes which include activities aimed at ensuring the system functionality.

- a. Sub-process I: Identification of learning outcomes. This includes defining and selecting relevant learning experiences and the outcomes thereof. The quality and relevance are assessed based on a selected occupational standard and a set of criteria, such as variety, relevance, authenticity, quantity and proofs. This part of the process is carried out by the applicant together with the expert adviser during the development of the portfolio and is assessed by an assessor.
- b. Sub-process II: Assessment of learning outcomes. The assessor establishes the quality of learning results in relation to the selected occupational standard, using a series of standardized criteria. This includes measuring the value of learning outcomes by an assessment procedure, which consists of several stages and methodologies (interview, practical assessment, observation).
- c. Sub-process III: Validation of learning outcomes. Confirmation by the competent body of the learning outcomes (competences) acquired by a person through formal, non-formal or informal education. This is done through an assessment based on set criteria, in accordance with the requirements of the validation standard. Validation leads to certification.
- d. Sub-process IV: Recognition of learning results, which includes formal recognition and social recognition.

In this context, it is proposed to establish the National Centre for Coordination of Validation, which would be subordinated to the Ministry of Education. The activity of the Centre shall be based on the Regulation approved by the Ministry of Education. The Centre will coordinate and support decentralized regional and local providers. The assistance will be primarily technical: establish the national agenda (jointly with the stakeholders), share knowledge, develop national standards for procedures, templates, ensure the quality, provide training, etc.

The operational services of the non-formal and informal learning validation system will be provided by the assessment centres, which will be available and accessible to potential customers. The centres may be public or private, specialized offices or mixed organizations.

The institutions authorized to provide services of non-formal and informal learning validation will have the following obligations:

- a) provide assessment services based on set criteria;
- b) advise applicants;
- c) treat all applicants fairly without any discrimination based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, political affiliation or religion, and nationality;
- d) adjust the assessment methods to people with special needs;
- e) ensure the confidentiality of the assessment data;
- f) allow applicants' access to their own data.

The beneficiaries and the stakeholders of the non-formal and informal learning validation system will be involved in the gov-

ernance process, in order to ensure good operation of the system. The social partners, the institutions involved in the operations (the National Employment Agency (NEA), the National Centre for Vocational Education Development, the secondary vocational education institutions) will be employed directly in the non-formal and informal learning validation system, in accordance with the EU guidelines and standards.

Social partners are the most important factors for the labour market functionality and flexibility. They have also a key responsibility in the process of workers' training and lifelong

learning, not only at national policymaking level, but also at regional, sector and local level.

The recognition of competences acquired in non-formal and informal ways has beneficent, but also implies some costs. Within the funding system, a balance should be established between the financial support provided by the government and the costs incurred by users. Most countries use a model where government pays for the additional processes and supports some operational services fully or in part, while the costs for the inception of validation, advising and assessment are paid – sometimes only partly – by users.



BENEFITS OF ACCREDITATION AND RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is a priority for policy agendas both for developed and developing countries. Although learning usually takes place in a formal context, an important part of this process is achieved either non-formally or informally, in the daily life. The experience and skills required for a trade, which have been acquired in this way, may not be used for employment, as there are no possibilities to certify them.

In the current EU context, education is considered a key element for sustainable development. Discussions on economic growth and competitiveness highlight the central role of both formal and informal education in assuring a sustainable economic development and social cohesion.

The Lisbon Strategy presents a pragmatic perspective on the EU development objectives. Some of the Lisbon Declaration components are crucial for progress in education and economy. Among such components are: motivate labour force to undertake lifelong learning, develop qualifications, improve quality, ensure access to information technologies and communications (ITC) for everyone, increase the number of persons involved in scientific and technical research, maintain highly-qualified researchers within EU, develop a real partnership between businesses and public education and use available resources in the best possible way. All these may be opti-

mized through an important component related to non-formal and informal education.

In the context of Lisbon Strategy re-launch in 2005, the Council of Europe stressed that human capital is the most important factor for EU and invited the member states to double their efforts to grow the general level of training and reduce the number of early school leavers, particularly through the work program “Education and training 2010”, which was developed in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy.

For lifelong learning, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), takes into account a series of principles, many of which are directly or indirectly relevant for the non-formal and/or informal education. It states expressly that ECTS should be underlain by the learning outcomes achieved in formal, non-formal and informal environments. It should also be flexible enough to cover the diversity of education and training offers in the perspective of lifelong learning (initial and continuous education and training in formal systems and the learning process in non-formal and informal contexts). Therefore, in the context of non-formal and informal education ECTS should meet a number of characteristics:

- - it should be simple enough and operational in order to be practically relevant for individuals, providers of education and vocational training offers, and authorities responsible for

qualifications, as well as for other relevant bodies;

- - it should be based on a transparent set of principles, conventions and procedures that promote confidence among stakeholders;
- - it should facilitate the assessment and recognition of individuals' knowledge, habits and skills when needed, including those specific for an educational unit, based on proper assessment;
- - it should facilitate the use of various methods of learning outcomes assessment (Octavia Costea, 2009).

The importance of non-formal and informal education becomes significant when a development strategy coherently implemented leads to supporting innovation projects initiated by the business sector and to strengthening the capacities of public research institutions to respond to such initiatives. The proposed actions aim at creating a national innovation system as part of the process of building a competitive economy based on knowledge.

Focus on the quality of education in Moldova shows a clear orientation of policies towards a constructive interference between the formal and informal systems. However, this approach is a complex one and has to be tackled with responsibility and in a systemic way.

The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes contributes to increasing the visibility of human capital, and to leveraging it in various perspectives:

For formal education

Foreign experience shows that recognition of competences acquired in a non-formal and informal way facilitates the advancement through formal education, since it implies the exemption from certain parts of the formal curriculum, the content of which has already been studied. This approach allows finishing formal education in a shorter time, more efficient and cheaper way. The rapid advancement through formal education by fully leveraging non-formal and informal learning makes self-education and lifelong learning more attractive.

For labour market

The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes provides a higher level of visibility and thus a potential value to learning results and competences of people on the labour market. This makes the matching of peoples' competences with their jobs more efficient and cheaper for both the employees and the employers. At the same time, the recognition of competences acquired in non-formal and informal ways makes investments in on-job training more attractive for employees and employers, knowing that learning outcomes may be recorded and developed. The recognition of the outcomes of such learning makes it easier for those dismissed to find a job in a shorter time and more efficiently in other market areas. Recognition also plays an important role in proving the conformity with the regulations or in the quality assurance systems, within companies.

The policies for recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes play a significant role for the lifelong-learning framework.

Within the non-formal and informal learning validation system, the social, professional and personal goals focus on servicing beneficiaries by providing a variety of services, standards, methodologies, etc., as well as fully customized services.

The idea behind the establishment of the non-formal and informal learning validation system was to identify and certify the competences and experiences of workers, primarily the unskilled ones, who have worked abroad (particularly in the EU and the Russian Federation), as well as in the country. Such validation would strengthen the labour force value on the domestic market and abroad. This could increase peoples' chances and possibilities to be employed and contribute to the economic growth and grow Moldova's national revenues.

Taking into account the abovementioned facts, it is necessary to focus on validating professional competences in relation to occupational standards. Thus, validation of non-formal and informal learning should meet the following conditions:

- a. not be conducted in all sectors simultaneously;
- b. be initiated for those trades where there are currently sector committees and occupational standards;
- c. be consistent with other projects related to the development of education and labour force migration;
- d. be implemented based on the relevant legal and regulatory framework;
- e. the most relevant and interesting sectors shall be identified for the following period, based on studies.

The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning have a number of *benefits*.

Economic Benefits. Recognition and validation reduce the costs related to formal learning by reducing from the time necessary to master these qualifications. Thus, the human capital will be more productively distributed throughout the economy offering people access to jobs that best fit their competences.

Educational Benefits. Recognition allows supporting lifelong learning, assisting individuals to get to know themselves and to build their career.

Social Benefits. Recognition allows improving social equality and facilitates access to further education and to labour market for disadvantaged minority groups (indigenous population, migrants, youth and adults who have not had an opportunity to obtain a qualification within the formal education system). Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning simplifies the return of students who have abandoned school to formal education giving them a second chance and contributes to re-balancing the equality between generations, given that there are much fewer old-aged workers who have had access to formal learning (and corresponding qualifications) than their younger colleagues.

Moral Benefits. Recognition has a significant psychological impact on individuals sensitizing them to build their own capacity and challenging them to formally attest their competences.

In order to organize the process, as well as with a view to the financial arrangements of the system, it is important to take into account the **beneficiaries** of the non-formal and informal learning validation system (Table 2):

- a) *Society (public sector);*
- b) *Industry;*
- c) *Social partners;*
- d) *Workers as individuals;*

Identification, assessment and validation of learning outcomes obtained within the non-formal and informal context are guided by a number of **fundamental principles**:

and the main stakeholders:

- e) *Government (ministries, local public administration, public services);*
- f) *Employers;*
- g) *Professional associations;*
- h) *Workers as individuals.*

a) Validation: the quality of each stage of the process, experts involved and methodology applied should comply with the requirements, while the outcomes should be credible. Assessment is based on competence evidence arising from the activities described in the Occupational

Table 2. Stakeholders' Role in VNFIFL System (According to the European Guidelines)

	WHO INTERVENES	WHAT OUTCOMES	WHY INTERVENTION	HOW INTERVENES
NATIONAL LEVEL	Ministries Qualification Authorities Social Partners NGOs	Qualifications National Curriculum	Mobility Innovation Competence Offer	System Projects Networks Financing Legal Framework
EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM	Local Authorities Private Institutions Assessment Centres VET Schools Universities	Standards Certificates Diplomas	Access for All Individualized Training Shorter Study Period	Design of Assessment and Validation Methods
ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT	Managers Human Resource Managers Union Representatives	Occupational Standards Competence Profiles Description of the Labour Process	Modernization Competitive Advantage Resources Professional Career Planning	Mapping Counselling Assessment Validation
VOLUNTARY SECTOR	Communities NGOs Projects	Competence Profiles	Social and Personal Motivation Employees	Mapping Youthpass CV Europass CV
INDIVIDUALS	Candidates Employees	Learning Motivation Self-Confidence Competence Evidence Personal Motivation	Personal Motivation Employability Mobility Career Development Continuing Learning	Additional Learning Documentation Participation in Assessment

Standard (OS)/Vocational Training Standard (VTS).

b) Fairness: the system as a whole and in parts should be correct towards the candidates, as well as correspond to traditional qualification methods. It has to ensure equal access. Candidates should be informed and have the right to object and appeal within the bounds of the law. Assessment allows for involvement of all the stakeholders with no particular interest dominating.

c) Flexibility: candidates should have a possibility to leave the process after each major stage and/or pursue additional training and/or experience to improve or add to their competences. Assessment is adjusted to the candidate's needs and peculiarities of the workplace.

d) Transparency: beneficiaries and stakeholders should have access to all the infor-

mation necessary to understand the system, rulings and decisions, taking into consideration a certain extent of the confidentiality issue.

e) Simplicity: the system should be simple, easy to understand and accessible. The assessment process should be easy to understand and apply by all the participants.

f) Credibility: assessment should apply consistent methods leading to the same outcome.

g) Confidentiality: the data on the process and outcome belong to the beneficiary.

The application of these principles in a well-developed quality assurance system will generate the credibility necessary for the system sustainability to be accepted and appreciated by beneficiaries and stakeholders, providers of educational services, as well as by the national and international labour market.

PROBLEMS AND TRENDS OF THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN MOLDOVA

As a result of optimizing the network of secondary vocational education institutions, the number of these institutions has reduced by 8 units comparing with the years of 2007-2010 and makes up 66 units. There was a decrease in the number of students making up 20.3 thousand at the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year compared to 24.5 thousand in 2007-2008. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, the share of students on scholarship in the total number of students made up 96.3% or by 2.9 percentage points more than in 2007-2008.

Secondary vocational education is more popular among young men, the share of which in 2011-2012 made up 68.7%. Within the last 5 years, the number of admitted students has been decreasing, thus, 13.0 thousand were admitted in 2011, that is, by 19.9% less than in 2007. The number of graduates in 2011 went down to 12.0 thousand compared to approx. 13 thousand graduates in 2007 through 2010. Out of the total number of students who graduated in 2011, 11.7% obtained the qualification of locksmith in auto repair, 10.9% – cook, 8.2% – plasterer, 6.4% – computer operator, 6.1% – electric and gas welder/fitter, 5.1% – sewer (manufacturing), 4.3% – carpenter, etc.

At the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, there were on average 57 students

and 34 graduates of secondary vocational education per 10 thousand population compared to 69 students and 36 graduates in 2007-2008 (Draft Sector Development Strategy, Education 2020). At the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic year, the number of students in the 46 colleges made up 31.4 thousand, almost at the level of 2007-2008. At the same time, there was a steady increase in the share of students on scholarship at public colleges, from 53.5% in 2007-2008 to 64.9% in 2011-2012. Specialized secondary education is more popular among young ladies (over 55% of the total number of students).

The main challenges faced by secondary vocational and specialized secondary education are:

- (i) lack of a mechanism to ensure quality in the secondary vocational and specialized secondary education system;
- (ii) lack of a National Qualifications Framework for trades/professions in secondary vocational and specialized secondary education;
- (iii) lack of a system for developing and publishing teaching materials for secondary vocational education;
- (iv) insufficient field-specific training of teaching staff, 42% of staff has secondary vocational and specialized secondary education;
- (v) inefficient use of the infrastructure and available resource base and allocated funds;

(vi) the resource base at some institutions is outdated;

(vii) lack of a continuing education system for teaching staff in technical disciplines for secondary vocational and specialized secondary education;

(viii) inefficient mechanisms for interaction of secondary vocational and specialized secondary education with business, local communities and labour market;

(ix) insufficient financing of secondary vocational and specialized secondary education.

The Draft Sector Development Strategy stipulates the following strategic objectives for technical and vocational education:

- Matching training of professionals in technical and vocational education with peculiarities and prospects of the national economy development;
- Updating the Classification of Trades and the Classification of Professions in conformity with the economic needs of the country by including new trades, modernizing the existing trades and aligning them with the European standards (Eurostat);
- Developing occupational and educational standards and the National Qualifications Framework for technical and vocational education;
- Organizing training in joint (related) professions: cook/confectioner, waiter/barman, sewer/tailor, bricklayer/mason/plasterer, plasterer/painter, electric/gas welder, tractor/machine operator in agriculture etc.;
- Creating efficient educational marketing based on forecasts and labour market development indicators;
- Establishing mechanisms and tools for cer-

tification of professional skills in career development from qualified worker to master, technician etc.;

- Completing the Classification of Trades and developing occupational standards for secondary and post-secondary technical and vocational education from the viewpoint of continuing studies and lifelong professional development;
- Validating and recognizing competences obtained within non-formal and informal learning.

Vocational education is quite strongly phased at the moment compared to university education, especially due to the delay in adopting the National Qualifications Framework for specialized secondary and secondary vocational education. It is ascertained that the National Qualifications Framework has already been developed for higher education, which is a significant progress in itself, although the requirements stipulated in educational standards and the curriculum still have to be translated in action. At the level of technical and vocational education, there is no National Qualifications Framework, which has a negative impact on the professional development of students.

At the same time, as a preliminary finding, it is said that adoption of a Unified National Qualifications Framework that would cover both higher and vocational education in a complex and integrated way has already failed, because higher education has advanced more rapidly in this sense leaving vocational education behind. Thus, delay in adoption of the National Qualifications Framework for technical and vocational education could lead to certain discrepancies and inconsistencies between various types of qualifications – secondary vocational, college, higher. These risks could be eliminated

by a rapid adjustment of qualifications and by a systemic approach covering all levels of training.

This delay is explained by the fact that higher education was more rapid in joining the educational processes currently taking place in Europe. Introduction of the credit transfer system has contributed to launching the process of developing this framework. By combining the taxonomy of competences resulted from the Tuning Project and Dublin Descriptors, the European Qualifications Framework has determined the following classification of general competences:

- Knowledge;
- Skills;
- Personal and Professional Competences:
 - *Autonomy and responsibility,*
 - *Learning ability,*
 - *Social and communication competences,*
 - *Professional competences.*

Along with the general competences, each field of studies pursues development of specific competences. Specific competences are acquired within field-specific disciplines. Formulation of specific competences is based on Dublin descriptors.

As for vocational education, the process of joining the integration processes in Europe was delayed for an inexcusably long time. Thus, Moldova has not yet become part of the Copenhagen Process of 30 November 2002 stipulating, among others, the Credit Transfer System and the National Framework of Credits. This Declaration stipulated several critical aspects for vocational education in the Republic of Moldova, still lagging behind on their implementation:

- Exploring the ways, in which trans-

parency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competences and/or qualifications between all the countries and at different levels could be promoted by development of reference levels and general principles for certification and by joint measures, including by the credit transfer system in the field of education and vocational training.

- Increasing the support to development of competences and qualifications at the sector level by revitalizing cooperation and coordination, especially by involving social partners.

The above-mentioned delay outlines the pressing problem of aligning the national qualifications system of vocational education with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). EQF is a framework for voluntary alignment of national systems to European requirements, which offers education and training institutions, as well as employers a possibility to better understand the qualifications obtained in another European country and to translate them in their own qualifications system. Thus, EQF aims at facilitating lifelong mobility and learning – the objectives stipulated in a number of documents of the Republic of Moldova. Even though EQF is a voluntary framework that does not suppose any formal commitments, we can draw a conclusion that the Republic of Moldova has failed to fulfil the major objective of relating its own qualifications system to EQF until 2010 already. Thus, the Republic of Moldova is not yet part of the European network of national qualifications systems allowing for comparison of the qualification levels in different countries based on an EQF description scale of learning

outcomes. EQF is also important for the Republic of Moldova because according to another objective undertaken by this European framework, starting from 2012 all the newly issued qualification certificates should bear reference to EQF for the employers to be able to identify the abilities, knowledge and competences of foreign candidates. For instance, it will allow an employer from the UK to employ a worker from the Republic of Moldova because based on the EQF they will be able to easier read the qualifications obtained by the candidate within the Moldovan education system.

Because of this delay in the processes of system reform, vocational education has become dependent on the requirements and priorities that the university education has started to define. Further, colleges and vocational schools will have to adjust to the National Qualifications Framework already developed by higher education institutions and adjust the curricula to the already established requirements.

Nevertheless, vocational education in the Republic of Moldova has launched the reform process, even though the speed of its implementation leaves much to be desired. In 2009, by the decision of the Board of the Ministry of Education the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova for life-long learning was adopted. This document establishes the goal and structure of the National Qualifications Framework. Thus, the document stipulates, among others, that the National Qualifications Framework has the goal of establishing a unified, opened and flexible national qualifications system covering all levels and forms of vocational training and aiming at satisfying certain specific needs in qualified labour force and in targeting vocational education at the economic development of the country.

Among the objectives listed in the document, the following are worth mentioning:

- To ensure cooperation between the market of vocational training (education) services and the labour market;
- To ensure transparency of the qualifications planning, assessment and recognition processes;
- To select the optimal learning route (vocational training) to obtain the required qualification;
- To facilitate mobility of the labour force and increase its competitiveness;
- To ensure planning, obtaining, assessment and application of qualifications based on social partnership;
- To harmonize/relate national qualifications with qualifications of other countries.

Also, the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Moldova is structured in eight qualification levels in compliance with the levels of the national education and vocational training system defined in the Law on Education of the Republic of Moldova. Levels 6, 7 and 8 were reserved for higher education, while levels 3, 4 and 5 for vocational training. Nevertheless, these levels are quite broadly defined and specific competences are to be developed further for each level of vocational training. In fact, development of competences could be considered the first step in developing the National Qualifications Framework.

This first step was made by the Order 422 dated 1 June 2011 of the Ministry of Education regarding development of draft National Qualifications Framework for specialized secondary education. This order appointed specialized sec-

ondary education institutions responsible for development of draft NQF-SSE. These institutions were to establish working groups of professionals who train staff in the field to develop the draft NQF-SSE. It has to be mentioned that the institutions responsible for developing the draft NQF-SSE by areas (e.g. chemical engineering, social assistance, music, medicine, economy, etc.) were to ensure partnership in the process of developing the drafts will all the stakeholders (mandatory coordination with line Central Public Administration Authorities, employers' association, sector trade unions, economic entities, education institutions) providing staff training in the corresponding field. For the moment, it is difficult to attain this imperative because only two sector committees have been established – in constructions and agriculture.

Another important document was adopted within the same decision – The Standard Structure of the National Qualifications Framework for specialized secondary education. This standard structure enumerates the key features of the vocational training field, as well as the duration of studies, study credits (ECTS), organizational form, access conditions, examination and assessment rules, approach to final assessment, certification, awarded qualification, etc. Also, this document will specify typical occupations for the given field (classification of fields, professions and qualifications) and describe the main learning outcomes expressed in specific and general competences relevant for the discipline, taking into consideration the level of competences to be attained.

These steps represent just the first attempt to be strengthened by other important actions. The following step would be to develop the Guidelines for Implementation of the National Study Credit System. The Guidelines are

necessary for launching the assessment process in vocational education not only by the assessment system currently practiced in the Republic of Moldova, but also by the credit system representing a European requirement ensuring student mobility and recognition of documents and certificates issued in our country. The second critically important document that will operationalize the National Qualifications Framework will be the Framework Plan for Vocational Education based on the credit system that will establish exactly how many credits will be awarded for each discipline. At the moment, we can state that there are draft versions of these documents at the Ministry of Education, but the progress in their adoption will depend on the speed of adopting the Education Code. We have to mention in this context that delay in adoption of the Education Code and existing confusions with regard to the future of vocational training hinder the implementation process of the National Qualifications Framework. Obviously, uncertainty with regard to duration of studies at vocational schools and colleges does not allow for an accurate establishment and distribution of credits applicable within vocational education. At the same time, we can make a conclusion that protraction in adoption of the Education Code causes certain inertia that does not motivate directors of vocational schools to take decisive actions in urging the adoption of the necessary documents.

At the moment, the speed of colleges is net superior to that of vocational schools in terms of developing the Framework Plan and the National Qualification Framework by professions. The Government Decision stipulated that these documents were to be finalized in October 2011, but the deadline was extended. There is an intention to organize a republican

conference in the nearest future on the stage of developing draft curricula for colleges in the republic. At the same time, vocational schools will require additional stimuli, which they will probably get very soon in the form of special orders issued by the Ministry of Education. In order to solve the problem, it is proposed to develop a Unified Classification of Vocational Training Fields for vocational education in the Republic of Moldova. This is determined by the fact that the current Classification is already outdated dating back to 2000 and contains certain professions that do not correspond to the current requirements anymore (e.g. artist instead of design technician).

In the field of validation of non-for-

mal and informal learning within the project “*Skills’ Transparency under the EU-Republic of Moldova Mobility Partnership*” carried out in May 2011 – February 2012, 4 occupational profiles were developed and updated (construction, agriculture and food industry), three data bases were compiled (potential counsellors and assessors; companies ready to host practical assessments, VNFIFL candidates), as well as training courses for Counsellors and Assessors were developed and piloted. In the construction sector, occupational profiles were developed for painter and locksmith/plumber. In the agricultural and industrial sectors, profiles for confectioner and winegrower were developed.

TOWARDS A CONCEPT OF VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING THROUGH EUROPEAN PRISM

Recognition of Prior Learning in the European Union

EU 2020 Strategy and Recognition of Prior Learning

Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission and the Italian Prime Minister said that “Europe must regain that leadership that brought its fame throughout so many centuries of –productive and technological, intellectual and cultural *leadership*” (Prodi, 1999/2001, 36).

This recognition can be achieved only by increasing the competitiveness of the knowledge-based economy in the context of very rapid global technology development of South-East Asian countries, especially that of China.

The main objective of the EU 2010 Strategy was that Europe becomes the most developed knowledge-based economy, which would generate more and better jobs. The 2020 Strategy pursues this goal, which can be achieved by focusing on three priorities: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. These inter-related priorities include the development of an economy based on knowledge and innova-

tion that takes into account the environmental protection, economic development with positive effect in terms of higher employment rate, social and territorial cohesion.

Consequently, the main objectives of the EU 2020 Strategy bring together knowledge and/or education, on the one hand, and labour market, on the other hand. The first target is to raise the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 to at least 75%. The second target is to increase investment in research and development to 3% of the EU’s GDP and the fourth target is to reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% and increase the share of the population aged 30–34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40%. There is also another target (“20/20/20”) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and increase the share of renewable energy and energy efficiency. The last target should be the result of the other targets, namely the reduction in the number of people living below national poverty lines by 20 million.

Also, the EU 2020 Strategy outlines the flagship initiative “Youth on the Move”, which aims primarily at improving young people’s education and employability. In this respect, the European Commission will make efforts, inter alia, to „*promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning*”.

We may conclude that the 2020 Strategy underlines the need for investment in

knowledge and education, which will lead to a higher social and economic cohesion, and fewer socially excluded people in a Europe facing fierce global competition to regain, as we say, that „productive and technological, intellectual and cultural *leadership*”. Promoting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is part of the strategy to increase general education at all levels, which would lead to higher employability.

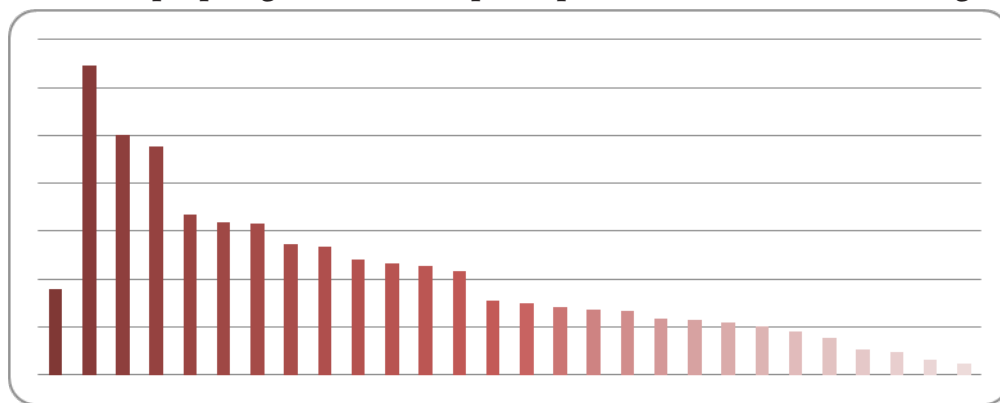
Lifelong Learning and Recognition of Prior Learning

Lifelong learning, as a process where the non-formal and informal learning is recognised along with the formal learning is encouraged by the Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning. According to Article 2 of the Decision, lifelong learning means „all general education, vocational education and training, non-formal education and informal learning undertaken throughout life, resulting in an improvement in knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.” It also includes the provision of counselling and guidance services, which result in social inclusion. In this sense, lifelong learning involves accepting non-formal and informal learning, including the knowledge acquired as an employee on the labour market. Therefore, aside

from ordinary students, lifelong learning targets adults and educational institutions or other institutions providing lifelong learning services, and employed people, as well as businesses and social partners.

Of the eight guidelines established in the Council Decision 2006/600/EC on Guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, five are related, at least partly, to education, while one advises that the average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 12.5 % of the adult working-age population (25 to 64 age group). According to Eurostat, in 2011, only 8.9% of the EU population aged 25-64 participated in education and training, the shares being significantly different among the Member States (Figure 4). The number of participants in education and training in this age group was much higher than the recommended standard in the in North European countries, while in some of the ex-communist countries and Greece, the share of lifelong learning attendants was under 5%. A possible explanation for the high interest in lifelong learning could be the one provided by the German sociologist Max Weber, who associated the protestant ethic with the spirit of capitalism (Weber, 1904-1905/1993). Protestant ethics implies, on the one hand the search for a professional vocation, hard work and a generally ascetic behaviour and on the other hand - a concern for cognition, particularly technical cognition. This might explain the higher employment rates in the northern countries.

Figure 4. Share of people aged 25-64, who participated in education and training in 2011



Source: Eurostat

A gender breakdown shows that the share of women participating in lifelong learning in the EU is higher than that of men – 9.6% compared to 8.2%. For instance, the ratio of women aged 25-64 who participate in lifelong learning is 39% in Denmark, 31.9% in Sweden, and 27.7% in Finland. In countries with low shares of general participation (i.e. Hungary, Romania, Greece, Poland, and Bulgaria) the difference between the rates of men and women participation is insignificant.

Vocational education and training in EU

In 2002, EU launched a Strategy on Vocational Education and Training (VET) by the Copenhagen Declaration, and in 2010, the Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 was adopted. According to the latter document, VET is a tool to empower EU citizens to respond to the changing requirements on the

labour market, also by work-based learning: “Work-based learning is a way for people to develop their potential. The work-based component contributes substantially to developing a professional identity and can boost the self-esteem of those who might otherwise see themselves as failures. Learning on the job enables those in employment to develop their potential while maintaining their earnings. A well performing VET, which enables learning on and off-the-job on a part-time or full-time basis, can thereby also strongly contribute to social cohesion in our societies.” Therefore, the recognition of the learning acquired while performing a job has not only an economic, but also a psychological and social impact by developing the self-confidence and social integrity.

The importance assigned to VET stems from the fact that the vocational skills and competences are considered as important as the academic ones. According to Bruges Communiqué, if Europe is to maintain its position as the strongest exporter of industrial products in the world, it must have world class VET.

Bologna Process and RPL

EU assigns a high importance to RPL, particularly following the Bologna process. RPL was officially included as an important part of the Bologna process in 2005, within the Bergen Summit, in the context of EU's concern for flexible/lifelong learning. However, according to the conclusions of the seminar "Recognition of Prior Learning: Sharing European principles and practices" of 2010, organised by the *Recognition of Prior Learning European Network*¹, there is no common definition of RPL in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). There are three large acceptations of the RPL's functions: it helps students enter the higher educational system, exempts them from a qualification (i.e. they do not have to take a course, as the skills acquired before are recognised) or offers credits for a qualification.

Another conclusion of the RPL conference is that EHEA should go beyond its geographic, cultural, financial and other limits. RPL would not be possible at universities without financial resources, and some of the higher educational institutions are not flexible enough to accept flexible ways, as the recognition of prior learning is. In addition, a lot of cultures and contexts lack the will to accept RPL validation. Hence, there is a need to prove that RPL may be a form of assessing competences, similar to the classic one, which ensures the same level of academic performance.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there is also an acceptance that RPL may "bring to-

1 Recognition of Prior Learning European Network is a network of European Higher Education Area.

gether competences, higher employment opportunities, lifelong learning and the equality agenda". According to the participants in the conference, these are the advantages that RPL may provide.

However, although the higher educational system in EU already has an RPL network and conferences and seminars are conducted and studies are published in specialised magazines on this subject, RPL is still at its beginning within EHEA. There is still no common definition of PL and many universities do not accept RPL, sometimes from cultural and some other times from financial reasons.

EU Guidelines on RPL

In 2009, the *European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)*² has developed the "European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning". As mentioned in its *Foreword*, the publication is the result of more than two years of exchange of experiences involving representatives from more than 20 European countries and aims at providing guidelines on validating non-formal and informal learning. It also reminds that, in 2004, the European Council developed the common European principles on identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning. It underlines that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is part of a wider lifelong learning context and may be an alternative for formal learning at the workplace and in civil society: "In the context of the principle of learning throughout life,

2 The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) was founded by the European Council through the EEC Regulation No 337/75 of February 10, 1975. Its mission is to develop and implement policies to support vocational education and training in the EU.

the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning aim to make visible and to value the full range of knowledge and competences held by an individual, irrespective of where or how these have been acquired. The identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning take place inside and outside formal education and training, in the workplace and in civil society” (Council of the European Union, 2004).

In the European context, RPL stakeholders are not only educational, business, and voluntary sector, respectively the individual, but also the national and regional levels, respectively the EU level (Table 3).

There are obvious qualitative differences among the involved stakeholders: the higher their level, the more abstract are the results, reasons and methods. It is worth mentioning that each stakeholder might have various motivations to accept the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The education and training sector may create, through RPL, premises for providing education for all; shortened study periods or increased admission opportunities in formal education. The business sector might have more competitive human resources; possibilities to plan their employees’ careers or to provide them training. However, the main stakeholder is the

Table 3. An integrated view of validation of non-formal and informal learning

	<i>Who is involved?</i>	<i>What are the results?</i>	<i>Why are they doing it?</i>	<i>How is this done?</i>
Nivelul Uniunii Europene	EU Commission and Council EU agencies, CEDEFOP and European Training Foundation (ETF) Social partner organisations Ministers of education and training Employment ministers	European qualifications framework (EQF) Europass, Common European principles for validation Draft European guidelines for validation European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) and European credit transfer system (ECTS)	Comparability and transparency Increased mobility Competitiveness Lifelong learning	Open method of coordination (OMC) Technical cooperation Experimental and research programmes
National level (including local stakeholders such as local government)	Ministries Qualification authorities Social partners NGOs	National curricula Qualifications	Knowledge society Mobility Innovation Skills supply	Systems Projects Networks Financing Legal framework
Education and training sector	Local government institutions Private institutions Assessment centres Vocational schools Universities Specialist recognition centres	Education programmes (standards) Certificates recognising participation Diplomas	Education for all Tailored training Shortened study period Increased admission	Defining assessment and validation methods
Business sector	Business managers Human resource managers Trade union representatives	Occupational standards Competence profile Work descriptions	Modernisation Competitive advantage Resourcing Career planning Training	Mapping Counselling Assessment Validation
Voluntary sector	Communities NGOs Projects	Skills profile	Social and personal reasons Employability	Mapping Youthpass Europass CV
Individual	Candidate Employee	Motivation to learn Self esteem Proof of knowledge and skills Personal reasons	Personal reasons Employability Mobility Career advancement Entrance to education	Supplementary learning Documentation Taking part in assessment

Source: CEDEFOP, European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, 2009, p. 19.

individual to whom, aside from various personal motivations, RPL may offer increased employment opportunities or career growth, a higher self-confidence, and increased opportunities to enrol at a higher educational institution (or another formal education system). The five existing stakeholders are tightly interdependent.

These guidelines are subsidiary, since they represent some guiding rules, rather than concrete actions, which the member states or the national governments have to follow. The adoption implies the adjustment of guidelines, which corresponds to the open method of coordination.

The validation process itself is strongly related to the general elements of the methodology, namely the loyalty and validation of knowledge and competence measurements. Measurement should give similar results if repeated in the same conditions. And, very important, the learning that is being measured should be the learning that was intended to be measured. Aside from these general challenges of non-formal and informal learning validation, CEDEFOP also draws the attention on other issues that might be faced (CEDEFOP, 2009, 56):

- security and confidentiality (the candidate should be protected from any type of abuse)
- learning standards should be well defined
- sustainability (the system should resist over time within the planned resources)
- visibility (the process of validation should be generally understood)
- it should fit candidates' needs
- cost-efficiency (benefits higher than the costs)

After these conditions are ensured, in order to observe the visibility and transparency

of the validation process, candidates should be informed about the whole process of validation of the knowledge and abilities acquired by non-formal or informal ways. Following the assessment of knowledge and/or competences, individuals may have several possibilities, i.e. to obtain a degree for the corresponding level or to participate in additional trainings to increase his/her knowledge as needed in order to get a degree which would certify a higher level of knowledge. Guiding individuals may increase the efficiency of this process for all stakeholders. Guidance and information may be provided to candidates in terms of time, costs, assessment, preparation for assessment, level of exigency and the benefits they can have.

Assessment may be conducted by debate, declarative methods, interviews, observation, portfolio method, presentation, simulation, as well as tests and examinations.

1. *Debate* - is a method which offers the candidate an opportunity to bring arguments to convince assessors about their competences in a specific subject, as well as their communication and social skills.

2. *Declarative method* – implies a written answer to prove the knowledge and abilities the candidate tries to prove.

3. *Interview* - interviews may be particularly useful in areas where judgment and values are important. They usually accompany other forms of assessment.

4. *Observation* – may be conducted in order to assess the candidate's behaviour in a particular setting, for practical activities, possibly during daily job activities. Therefore, this method can be time consuming and costly.

5. *Portfolio* - o is an organised collection of materials supporting the skills and knowledge of a candidate. A portfolio is created

by the candidate and works as a mirror which he/she takes to the assessment. Here guidance could play an important role, by helping candidates to better “sell their commodity” and get the best possible results after the submission of their portfolio. CEDEFOP (2009, 61) presents the advantages and disadvantages of using digital portfolios. Such portfolios may include photos, videos, texts and graphics that may say a lot about the candidate, about his/her knowledge and skills in the assessed subject. The disadvantage of such portfolio may be that not everyone has the necessary knowledge to present it and it also risks including information that is redundant and unnecessary for the assessment (i.e. too many photos).

6. *Presentation* – here a candidate makes a formal presentation in front of a panel of experts. As in the case of debate, this is an opportunity for the candidate to present his/her communication and social skills.

7. *Simulation* - implies candidates' performance of situations modelled on real life.

8. *Tests and examinations* are conducted by assessing the knowledge and abilities within a formal system.

One can see that some assessment methods have common elements, for instance the

debate, interview and presentation imply the communication between the candidate and the assessor(s), the only difference being the type of relation within the communication. Debates imply a two-ways relationship, where the two sides get involved in the discussion to the same extent. The relation within the interview is unequal – assessors ask questions while candidates answer them. Presentations focus mostly on the way in which the candidate tries to convince the panel, by verbal communication, that he/she has the necessary knowledge and skills.

In fact, several assessment methods may be and sometimes should be used. Observation is necessary in order to prove certain practical skills which may be presented on the spot, before the assessors. Portfolios are often a proper evidence of the knowledge and skills as they show what a candidate has already done, which makes the assessment less time consuming.

These recommendations made by CEDEFOP, as mentioned in the document itself, are formulated at a high level of abstraction in order to leave more freedom to national or local stakeholders in the educational or business sector to enforce the validation of knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal education.

BEST PRACTICES ON RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

RPL in EU Member States

In 2008, the Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) in cooperation with the UK National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) prepared a Study on formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This study elaborates on how RPL operates in Sweden, Denmark, England, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands, France, and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia). Analysis of these cases was based on several questions that can be used as a model in the analysis of other cases or questions to be addressed when we trying to develop a policy aimed at developing the RPL:

1. What kind of certificates/reports are issued by what kind of institution?
2. For what purpose are the certificates/reports? (e.g. labour market, access/exemption in higher education, other)
3. Are certificates/reports accepted by other similar institutions in the country?
4. Does a certificate/report provide economic advantage on an individual or national level?

These questions along with the review of documents (primarily legal regulations) and specific cases of recognition of prior learning served as a basis for this study. Below is an overview of

several facts that are relevant for three countries of those that were reviewed – Sweden, England and France, supplemented with an outline of the state of play in Romania. We selected those three countries based on the ranking made by Gosta Espig-Andersen (1990/1997) on welfare state regimes. The author states that there are three types of welfare regimes: socialist, liberal and conservative, and Sweden, England and France match those three types. We selected Romania, as it is a new EU Member State having cultural similarities with Moldova.

Sweden

Although there are no national guidelines on the recognition of prior learning, Swedish authorities have had a positive attitude to recognition of prior learning since the early 1990s. In 1997 Sweden developed the Bill “Sweden the future and diversity – from immigration policy to integration policy” which, as shown in its title, was intended primarily to support immigrants. This bill provided for assessment of competencies without proof of completion of any formal education. Later, this initiative was extended to the assessment and recognition of knowledge for any adult, not just for immigrants.

In the mid 1990s, the Swedish govern-

ment established a committee to help increase the number of people who complete at least secondary education. Validation of prior non-formal and informal learning was in the interests of both the individual and the state. The so-called “25:4 rule”, introduced by a 1977 regulation, anticipated the recognition of prior learning in Sweden and provided access to higher education to 25-year-old people, who had at least a 4-year work experience in a particular field, based only on a *Scholastic Aptitude Test*. After being admitted to a higher education institution, students may receive credits for knowledge and skills acquired on the labour market, if they match the student’s field of education. Under a law adopted in 2001, the method for assessment of such knowledge should be developed by each higher education institution. With all these advantages, the number of persons admitted to higher education based on validation of skills is small compared to the total number of students admitted (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 21).

The National Commission on Validation was set up for the period 2003-2007 to promote and inform about validation, as well as to enhance regional cooperation, especially to develop a methodology for validation. In 2008, the Commission published a report, which proposes, among other things, that (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 22-23):

- the Ministry of Education and Research should be given overall responsibility for a national strategy and development of validation matters;
- one government agency under the Ministry of Education and Research should be given overall responsibility for continued development of the work with validation;
- regional cooperation should be encouraged;
- validation should have an individual approach;
- each validation action should result in some form of documentation;
- the individual should be given the possibility of receiving financial support, during the validation process;
- a professorship should be established to carry on continuing research and assessment on the effects of validation.

In addition to these regulations, the Commission proposed that persons moving to Sweden should be given the opportunity to have their education and professional experience assessed/recognised as soon as possible. Also, there should be “*a common point of entry*”, to which such persons can turn regardless of whether their education is completed or not and regardless of the level of their education and such persons should be able to have their education assessed/recognised. Persons who lack documents to prove their competences will be offered validation of a more extensive kind based on assessments made by subject specialists.

The Commission proposed the following structure of the validation procedure (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 22-23):

1. Exploration of the knowledge and skills of the individual, together with a guide or an official. This phase can last up to 1-2 hours and can consist of an interview and a self-assessment. This exploratory phase precedes another in-depth assessment stage, validation of knowledge and skills.
2. The second phase is also an exploratory assessment, but relates to an assessment made by specialists: vocational teachers, assessors from validation centres, rep-

representatives of an industry association or a vocational committee. Theoretical knowledge and practical skills are assessed during 2-8 hours.

3. When relevant, the third phase involves an assessment carried out by a vocational teacher or occupational assessor, which may take 1-10 days and may be followed by issuance of a certificate certifying knowledge and skills in the field.
4. When relevant, the fourth phase involves an assessment that will lead to the issuance of a professional or occupational certificate, or a license. The assessment is a verification of knowledge and practical skills, and, if the assessed individual does not prove the level of knowledge required in the tests or exams, he/she can receive a certificate indicating the modules or knowledge elements that the individual demonstrated during the assessment. This phase may take 1-10 days and is performed by quality-assured assessors.

Assessment may be carried out through structured interviews, in writing, by submitting a CV and/or a portfolio, through seminars, workplace visits or even self-assessment. Documentation resulting from the validation should specify: the objective of validation, the method (s) used for validation, supporting materials (if any), validation provider's authority, and the method used for quality assurance of the assessment process.

England

Pilot RPL projects were introduced in England in the 1980s, followed by institutionalization of recognition of prior learning in the 1990s. In 2004, the *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher*

Education (QAA) developed the “*Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*”.

According to NUFFIC and NARIC (2008, 39), the introduction of recognition of prior learning in England came primarily as a response to the fall in the traditional higher education attending population. It was necessary to find a way to recruit students, specifically those with knowledge acquired in non-formal and informal education. In the early 1980s hardly anyone in the UK had heard of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In 1982, a foundation funded the first course run by the University of London and Greenwich University called “Making Experience Count”, a course that served as a model for other similar initiatives.

Although it is hard to ascertain which sectors use the recognition of prior learning in England more successfully, it can be stated that this process occurs more often in higher education systems for adults wishing to return to higher education or to enter higher education (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 41). Accordingly, we will continue to focus on the “*Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*” developed by QAA in 2004.

These guidelines provided by the agency that manages the quality of higher education in England provide, as in other situations, rather general recommendations that may be followed by stakeholders to implement recognition of prior learning.

”The *Guidelines* are not a ‘how to do it manual’ and do not provide models of practice or a detailed account of approaches and procedures to be followed. They are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. The purpose of the *Guidelines* is to encourage HE providers to explore, with their partners and stakeholders, a range of issues that can emerge when developing and refining ap-

proaches to the accreditation of prior learning.” (QAA, 2004, 4). Perhaps, such a flexible approach based on key recommendations would be appropriate for Moldova.

General principles, some of which can be found in the guidelines developed by CEDEFOP (QAA, 2004, 6) are as follows:

- policies and procedures should be explicit and fair and applied consistently. They should help institutions meet the standards of requirement to provide a certificate on their behalf;
- information available to applicants and staff should be clear, explicit and accessible;
- roles and responsibilities of staff and applicants should be defined clearly. Staff should be competent to undertake their responsibilities;
- appropriate support should be offered to applicants;
- policies and procedures should be monitored and reviewed.

It should be noted that QAA highlights three major issues: good information and collaboration between staff and applicants, the quality and thoroughness of assessment, respectively, improvement of policies and procedures over time. The insistence used in this document to emphasize the importance of good information, transparency of requirements for access to recognition of prior learning and guidance/support to applicants is a common element in any guidelines or document providing recommendations on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Information regarding policies, procedures, practices, terminology, assessment criteria, fees and ways to acquire a certificate as a result of recognition of prior learning should be clear, accurate and accessible.

These general principles of good practice take the form of 16 specific principles. We will not dwell on all these 16 principles, firstly because some of them are very similar to general principles of the educational process, and secondly because some of them cannot be extrapolated beyond the higher education system.

A principle that should be taken into account is that where limits are imposed on the proportion of learning that can be recognised through the accreditation process, these limits should be explicitly stated. Also, there should be clarity in terms of possibility of an interim assessment, and possibility to attend some training courses leading to progress and to have a final assessment. If appropriate, applicants should be informed that an assessment may be followed by the award of a degree.

It is important that applicants are well informed about their opportunity to provide evidence of knowledge and skills assessed, such as: portfolios, interviews, artefacts or projects. They should match the learning to be assessed, therefore QAA believes that four criteria for selection of such evidence should be observed:

1. *Acceptability* - is there an appropriate match between the evidence presented and the learning being demonstrated?
2. *Sufficiency* - is there sufficient evidence to demonstrate fully the achievement of the learning claimed?
3. *Authenticity* - is the evidence clearly related to the applicant's own efforts and achievements? For example, is the Portfolio entirely the result of applicant's knowledge and skills?
4. *Currency* - does the evidence relate to current learning? This criterion is closely related to the proper information of applicants, eventual new requirements

should be made public in a transparent way.

These requirements are highly general and show that stakeholders, especially assessors, should adapt the requirements for proving evidence of knowledge or skills to the area assessed. Moreover, these requirements should be updated, especially in terms of knowledge, and any change in the assessment should be clear and transparent to all stakeholders.

One last aspect relates to all staff dealing with recognition of prior learning, including counterpart institutions involved, in one way or another, in the process of assessment and certification. Everyone should have clear roles and receive training, in order to ensure that these people are properly informed and supported to apply their role as required. Thus, emphasis is laid not only on good information of applicants, but also on good information of the staff involved in the recognition of prior learning.

France

Recognition of prior learning in France started as early as in 1934, when individuals were able to receive the title *titre d'ingénieur diplômé* through presenting a practical case in front of the *Commission des titres d'ingénieur* (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 81). Before 1934 many people were trained as technicians, but after the economic crisis that started in 1929 there was a need for engineers, therefore awarding a qualification of engineer to technicians was a way out in this regard.

In the 1980s there was again a shortage of skilled labour on the labour market, and, therefore, the issue of recognition of prior learning emerged as a need. Lack of certified qualifications was pointed out by the 1982 census, when

40% of the total population aged 15 and over said they did not have any degree (Ballet, 1999, 63). This negative situation regarding individual competences, performance and skills led to addressing the issue of recognition of prior learning (*reconnaissance des acquis professionnels*), which was formalized in 1992 through the implementation of a law on *validation des acquis professionnels*. Ten years later, a new law on was passed (the *loi de modernisation sociale*), which clearly underlines the need to validate previously acquired knowledge (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*).

Although useful, the 1992 law was not well known by those who were most directly involved, i.e. people that were already working. Moreover, the process was rather time consuming and doubts surrounded the quality of the diplomas obtained through this process (NUFFIC and NARIC, 2008, 81). There are sectors where recognition of prior learning was successful, such as building, defence and social care, and less successful sectors, such as nursing, infrastructure and accounting.

According to the Social Modernization Law of 17 January 2002, Chapter 2. Development of training, Article 133: "All persons of working age engaged in the labour market are entitled to validation of their professional experience, in the first place, with a view to obtaining a diploma, a professional degree or a certificate of qualification". Assessment of acquired skills can be done not only for employees, but also for self-employed or voluntary workers, and having at least a 3-year experience in the area assessed.

Valérie Ballet (2009, 66), after analyzing this law, believes that recognition of prior learning can be done if the following four requirements are met:

1. A competence cannot be certified unless it is registered in the national register of

- professional competences.
2. There is no difference between degrees acquired through traditional/formal learning and those acquired through RPL: “Validation of prior learning has the same effect as other ways of assessment of knowledge and skills” (Art. 134).
 3. The commission that validates prior knowledge acquired by other means than formal learning institution shall be made of people representing the host institution and specialists in the area being assessed. “Validation of prior learning shall be performed by a jury made of a significant number of qualified representatives of the profession” (art. 134)
 4. Recognition of prior learning is an individual right and is recognized in the Labour Code. The recognition of prior knowledge and skills can be performed at individual level and the applicant may receive financial aid or sufficient time for that purpose.

Reasons for which a person applies for *validation des acquis de l'expérience* are both psychological and pragmatic in their nature and relate to professional career. The first reason would be official recognition of professional competences. An applicant feels good when his/her value is recognized by experts, even if the employer is unaware of the degree acquired (Ballet, 2009, 6). Another reason, as specified by Ballet (2009), is that of acquiring a higher, more prestigious social status, at work, among friends or family. Recognition of prior learning is motivating also because it helps the individual grow within or outside the organization, if he wishes to change his job. In the first case, the individual has the opportunity to negotiate with the organization

a better paid job, and eventually a job with a higher prestige. Therefore, some organizations are reluctant to support the recognition of prior learning, as degrees acquired may be used as arguments for wage rises. A final reason would be that recognition of prior learning may revive the interest in studies, in acquiring new and formal knowledge and skills.

With all these reasons, which may coexist, Valérie Ballet (2009, 74-75) argues that there are a number of difficulties in approaching the recognition of non-formal and informal learning:

1. The file for the assessment of the applicant is difficult to prepare in terms of text structure and reasoning. The file should be visible and comprehensible to jurors. The applicant is, generally, aware of his/her skills, but should be able to present them in his/her file.
2. Preparation of the file is time consuming and labour intensive. Sometimes, it takes months of work, which means less time for family, friends, and generally less free time.
3. The discussion with jurors is not on equal terms. The jury puts questions, makes assessments, and many of the applicants lack relevant experience, some of them having completed school many years ago.
4. The jury may award only a diploma certifying that the applicant has only a part of knowledge and skills in the assessed area and, thus, recommend attending training courses if the applicant wishes to obtain a comprehensive certificate.

Despite these difficulties, and the fact that recognition of prior learning is poorly implemented, Valérie Ballet (2009, 81) concludes that “the beginning is conclusive and favourable for the development of a new career management system”.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN ROMANIA IN ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recognition of prior learning in Romania is a problem which cannot be analyzed without taking into account the temporary massive migration of Romanian citizens into economically developed countries (especially Italy and Spain), the integration of Romania into the European Union and the emergence of the economic crisis (at the end of 2008). These challenges, which the Romanian state has dealt with, have led in the last two years to legislative measures with a significant impact on the Romanian society and economy. New regulations, such as: the Pension Law (2010), the Labour Code (2011), the Education Law (2011), the Social Assistance Law (2011) or the Social Dialogue Law (2011), significantly changed the Romanian labour market. While the Government considered that these new laws are necessary for the Romanian labour market to become competitive on the European Union or globally, trade unions believed that the new labour code was a slavery code.

There is a legislative and, implicitly, an institutional reform in respect of courses offered by specialized centres recognized by the Romanian state, and, respectively, in respect of the recognition of professional and academic qualifications obtained in formal, non-formal and informal learning. Thus, in 2011 the Government Decision 556 was issued, which regulates the organization and functioning of the *National Authority for Qualifications* (NAQ). This institution replaced two existing institu-

tions: the National Council of Qualifications and Vocational Training of Adults (CNCFPA) and the Executive Unit of the National Council of Qualifications and Vocational Training of Adults (UECNCFPA). NAQ is an institution subordinated to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports. While NAQ is organized and functions as a public institution with legal personality, a specialized body coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, CNCFPA, the former main institution involved in the recognition of prior learning, was an institution with a trilateral governing body. According to Article 7 of the Law 132/1999 on its establishment, the National Council of Vocational Training of Adults consisted of 15 members, as follows:

- 5 members appointed by decision of the Prime Minister, at the proposal of the Minister of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family and of the Minister of Education, Research and Youth;
- 5 members appointed by consensus of the national employers' associations;
- 5 members appointed by consensus of the national representative trade unions.

Hence, in the CNCFPA, the central authority (the Romanian Government) held just one third of the decision-making power at the management level of this association, while the

trade unions and employers' associations held the other two thirds. The new institution does not have a trilateral management structure anymore, the only consultative element being the *National Council of Qualifications*, a NAQ institution without legal personality. This institution assists NAQ in the development of national strategies and action plans for the development of the National Framework of Qualifications and Vocational Training of Adults. Pursuant to Article 8, section 2, the Council consists of 20 members, as follows: three representatives of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, to representatives of the Labour, Family and Social Protection Ministry, one representative of the Ministry of Administration and Interior, one representative of the Healthcare Ministry, one representative of the Transport and Infrastructure Ministry, one representative of the Agriculture and Rural Development Ministry, two representatives of the National Agency for Employment, one representative of pre-university institutions, one representative of the National Centre for the Development of Vocational and Technical Education, one representative of the higher education institutions, one representative of students, one representative of professional associations, one representative of employers' confederations, one representative of trade unions' federations, one representative of sector committees, the general director of NAQ. One may notice that the majority of the members are representatives of state institutions, while the trade unions and the employers' association have only one representative each. In conclusion, the new institution, NAQ, is an institution coordinated by the Romanian Government, through the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports. Under Article 4 of the Government Decision No. 556/2011, the

NAQ has, among others, the following functions:

- develops, implements and updates the National Qualifications Framework, ensuring the integration of all levels of professional and academic qualifications obtained in formal, non-formal and informal learning;
- ensures the relationship of the National Qualifications Framework with the European Qualifications Framework, as well as the comparability of the National Qualification System with the existent qualification systems in other states;
- accredits the centres for assessment of professional skills, and the assessment bodies, and certifies assessors;
- coordinates and controls, from a methodological standpoint, at a national level, the description of qualifications and their registration in the National Register of Qualifications;
- coordinates the certification of assessors of professional skills;
- participates, together with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, in the development of the methodology for the identification, assessment and recognition of learning results in non-formal and informal contexts;
- participates, together with the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, as well as with other interested ministries, in the development of the methodology of transferable credits granting.

One could say that NAQ is the key institution that is responsible, among others, for managing the process of recognition of prior learning

in Romania. The disappearance of CNCFPA has political, social and economic implications. The political implications consist in the fact that the new institution is subordinated to the exclusively to Government, hence, to a political authority. Social implications reside in the fact that the major role of employers and trade unions in the coordination of this institution disappears. Economical implications spring from the fact that there is a huge market of suppliers of proficiency certificates, which according to the 2009 National Registry of Authorized Suppliers includes, only in Bucharest, 2630 of such institutions. The fact that NAQ is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, can contribute to a better knowledge of the number of diplomas offered by the accredited centres for proficiency assessment and certification. The old institution lacked statistic data on how many

diplomas were issued, much less on what fields these diplomas covered. Therefore, it is necessary that the new institution quantifies the market of certificates/diplomas, including those that recognize prior learning.

It can be noted that Romania undergoes an institutional change, and the recognition of prior learning is rather a desideratum. In the *Short and Medium-Term Strategy for Continuous Training, 2005-2010*, the strategic objective no. 1 establishes the following direction for action: „Ensure the necessary conditions for the assessment/validation and recognition of prior experience and learning, including skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts”. Yet, this objective and direction for action remained only „on paper”, and are just plans and intentions, which are to be put in practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recognition of prior learning in the Republic of Moldova should be implemented taking into account the global economic competition and the need for a competitive labour market adaptable to technological changes. Lifelong learning is a condition for the survival of both the society and the individual, taking into account the fact that during one's active life (over 40 years) the technology can change considerably and repeatedly. Lifelong learning can be accomplished formally by following practical courses or activities of traditional learning, as well as in non-formal and informal contexts.

EU and its Member States are still at the beginning in terms of recognition of prior learning, while the EU recommendations are general, indicative, and each state can adjust these guidelines to its local social, economical and political conditions. Based on EU regulations, experiences of some countries presented in this study and the experience of other countries, as well as scientific studies published by researchers, we wish to propose a series of recommendations for the implementation of recognition of prior learning in the Republic of Moldova, which may fit into eight steps:

- development of a legal and institutional context
- information of stakeholders about the possibility and the advantages offered by the recognition of prior learning
- preparation of institutions implementing the recognition of prior

learning; observance of certain ethical principles in the recognition of prior learning

- information
- assessment
- certification
- monitoring.

These steps are closely linked and, therefore, the recommendations should be viewed as a whole, aimed at the development of a reliable and efficient system ensuring that the recognition of previously acquired knowledge and skills, especially in non-formal and informal ways, is put into practice in the Republic of Moldova. We will consider each dimension, will make relevant recommendations, and will provide certain general conclusions at the end.

A) Development of an institutional and legal context requires the establishment of some institutions and putting into practice some laws which would pursue, at least among other things, the regulation of the recognition of prior learning in the Republic of Moldova. Based on the Decision 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 on establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013 and based on the experience of countries analyzed in this paper, we can make the following recommendations:

1. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Research shall be responsible, among other things, for lifelong learning, and implicitly for the recognition of prior learning.

2. There should be an agency within this ministry (see the National Authority for Qualifications in Romania) which would be mainly responsible for managing life-long learning at national level.
3. The agency shall have legal personality and its own staff, which should be well informed and able to cooperate at international level.
4. The agency should have a proper information and communication infrastructure
5. From the legislative standpoint, the recognition of prior learning should be encouraged through financial advantages for employers providing financial support for the recognition of employees' prior learning. The law may also offer days-off and leaves for preparing for the recognition of prior learning.
8. These awareness actions should be accompanied by short and clear presentations on what the recognition of prior learning is about and which are the advantages and possible disadvantages of this mechanism.
9. Employees should be informed that they are entitled to recognition of prior learning. The individual may not be obliged to assess his/her knowledge previously acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The recognition of prior learning is a right and not an obligation.

B) Information of stakeholders is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of the recognition of prior learning. From the experiences of other states (see France), the lack of awareness of such opportunities for individuals and employers at the beginning of such endeavours, renders useless the institutions and the laws for the recognition of prior learning. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

6. Establishment of institutions and implementation of laws impacting the recognition of prior learning should be performed with a good media coverage.
7. The debates on the introduction of recognition of prior learning in the Republic of Moldova, should involve as many stakeholders as possible, and namely: employers, trade unions, associations, NGOs, local and central authorities, academia, vocational education specialists, public policy experts, etc.
10. Members of these institutions, who carry out the recognition of prior learning, are well prepared, informed and/or participate in different forms of education specific to the relevant activity.
11. Members of these institutions are assigned clearly defined roles within the organization.
12. The assessment team includes predominantly experts from the field

C) Preparation of institutions implementing the recognition of prior learning. The agency subordinated to the Ministry of Education shall coordinate, manage or regulate the recognition of prior learning. Such recognition may be implemented by other institutions such as: universities, lyceums / vocational schools, specialized training institutions, associations, NGOs, trade unions and employer organizations, employing or collaborating with specialists in the area under assessment. For the assessment to comply with the high quality and performance standards, it is necessary that:

under assessment. Therefore, institutions implementing the recognition of prior learning should cooperate to a great extent with professionals, with well-known specialists in the respective field, or even with other specialized institutions.

D) Observance of certain ethical principles in the recognition of prior learning is a necessity, which is closely related to human rights and especially the right to privacy and equal treatment:

13. All persons who wish to have their prior knowledge and/or skills, for which they do not have formal evidence, validated, should be treated equally. Immigrants, individuals with secondary education or without education, ethnic, sexual or religious minorities etc. should be treated without discrimination.
14. Equal treatment upon assessment (*a common point of entry*) – regardless of the level of training, individuals, who wish to benefit from the recognition of prior learning, should be treated equally.
15. Information relating to the applicant, applicant's assessment etc. should be confidential.

E) Provision of accurate and complete *information* to the individuals interested in the recognition of prior learning is a key element in all practices that we analyzed. Access to information is a right of the assessed individuals and a condition of the efficient functioning of the recognition of prior learning. In this case, the following rules shall be observed:

16. Information offered to the beneficiaries of the recognition of prior learning (even to the personnel of the assessing institu-

tions) should be clear, explicit and accessible. The use of the Internet is a good way to meet these requirements.

17. Clear information should be offered on policies, procedures, necessary documents, type of assessment, standards and criteria, necessary proof to be provided by the candidate or the certificates/diplomas obtained depending on the level of knowledge demonstrated.
18. Concepts /terms used should be clearly defined in the information materials. The language should be simple and clear.
19. It is recommended to offer guidance to the assessed individuals, so that they benefit to the greatest extent from the possibilities offered by the recognition of prior learning. This requires a good preparation of the assessing institution personnel, availability and communication and interpersonal skills. Guidance implies more than just information. Based on superior experience regarding recognition of prior learning, the staff of the assessing institution can help the assessed individual to take the best decisions, based on his/her own situation and his/her own interests. In this respect, financial costs or time requirements, self-assessed knowledge and skills, psychological needs or professional career plans should be considered.

F) *Assessment* is a key element in the recognition of prior learning – recognition, validation or certification cannot be achieved without a fair assessment of the possessed knowledge or skills. The recommendations regarding the assessment refer to both methodological, as well as instrumental aspects of the methods of assessment:

20. Assessment should observe the accuracy

and validity principles. A measurement is accurate if, when using the same measuring instrument, in the same conditions, and measuring the same reality, results (scores) of the same or very similar value are obtained. A measurement is valid if one measures what one intended to measure.

21. Assessment can be accomplished by different methods: interviews, CV, portfolio, discussion, observation of certain practical activities, testing, examination or other methods established by the assessment committee, such methods to be publicized and transparent.
22. Assessment should be made based on evidence that corresponds to the assessed field and reflects the reality (for example, the portfolio should be prepared by the candidate and show the candidate's real skills).
23. Assessment may be performed on some levels or sub-areas only. This may be due to financial reasons (the candidate cannot allow to pay the total assessment fee), the individual possesses knowledge only in that particular area or wishes that only his/her proficiency at that level be certified.
24. Assessment requirements should correspond to the requirements of the assessed area. Even if assessment is accomplished based on the knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, the level of requirements should be similar to the one applied in the assessment of formal knowledge.

G) *Certification* is the ultimate goal of the recognition of prior learning. As we have seen, the

individual's motives for the recognition of prior learning are multiple, and the validation and certification of knowledge and/or skills in a (sub) area has positive effects both on the individual and his family, as well as on the employer. Recommendations regarding the assessment refer to the requirements and flexibility in certifying proven knowledge and skills:

25. The diploma / certificate or any other document proving one's knowledge through recognition of prior learning, should have the same value as the document issued after the assessment of formal education. Different treatment is a form of discrimination.
26. Certification can also be made for sub-areas of the assessed area. This allows a greater flexibility of the assessment and of the developments on the labour market.
27. It is very important that the assessed and certified area to appear in the national register of professions. The assessing institution should be bound to check, when receiving an assessment request, that the area proposed for assessment is officially recognized.
28. Partial certification should be accompanied by the possibility of certification in a wider area. The assessed individual should be informed about the ways to obtain a superior level certification. For example, he/she may be advised on what knowledge or skills he/she should acquire and by what means, courses, seminars, workshops etc.

H) The *monitoring and re-evaluation* of the system is a strategic element in the recognition of prior learning. It is unknown how many individuals in Romania attended the CNCFPFA cer-

tified courses, and this does not allow an evaluation of the labour market from this point of view. Evaluation and self-evaluation of the activity of recognition of prior learning is necessary both at central level, that of the agency subordinated to the Ministry of Education, and at the level of institution or institutions involved in the actual implementation of the recognition of prior learning. Therefore, we have to take into account that:

29. The monitoring of the recognition of prior learning should consider both technological changes and those related to labour market requirements. Without updating the assessment standards and the courses required in a certain area, lifelong learning loses its significance. Additionally, assessment should be performed always in contact with the labour market, even though, as earlier mentioned, the motivation for the recognition of prior learning is not always related to professional career.
30. The re-assessment of the system implies that not only the candidates should be assessed, but also the personnel and experts of the system should be informed and assessed. We have to take into account that the area of learning is under a rapid change, and from an organizational point of view, the assessing institution operates at high level, if it constantly ensures a dynamic response to internal and external challenges.

The proposed recommendations for the implementation of the recognition of prior learning in the Republic of Moldova are sometimes specific, sometimes abstract, but they always seek to establish a practical system, which would function effectively. Some recommendations can be

altered after discussions with various institutions or after subjecting them to general public debate. Implementation always involves the adjustment of ideas to social and economic reality.

Certain recommendations can be identified, which will accelerate the development of the National Qualification Framework for vocational education:

- Speed up the adoption of the Educational Code, which will stimulate development of the National Framework by Professions based on the credit system, in particular for vocational schools;
- Accelerate the creation of partnerships with the authorities and with economic agents interested in the development of the National Qualification Framework by areas;
- Enhance cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Family and with the Ministry of Economy, which should be involved more actively in the identification of the demand for skills in the labour market, which can contribute to a more precise definition of the professions requested on the market;
- Develop the Unified Classification of Vocational Training Areas for vocational education;
- Enhance international cooperation and Moldova's accession to the Copenhagen Process.

In order to ensure the smooth functioning of the validation process, we propose:

- To establish the Republican Centre for Validation Coordination, subordinated

to the Ministry of Education. The Centre's activity will be based on a Regulation, approved by the Ministry of Education. The Centre will coordinate and will support decentralized regional and local suppliers. The operational services of the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning will be provided by assessment centres, which should be available and accessible to potential clients. They may be public or private, specialized offices or mixed organizations;

- It is recommended that the following instruments, besides the Educational Code, are adopted, as a matter of urgency:
 1. The Concept of the System for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning in Moldova in accordance with OECD recommendations, EU guidelines on APL and based on the 1995 Law on Education (Art. 35, p.6.) and
 2. The methodology of validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning in Moldova.
 - Renewed emphasis on apprenticeship, cooperation between schools and businesses, as well as on on-the-job training;
 - Reconfiguration of curriculum through increased adequacy in relation to life needs by redefining components from the learning perspective, with a greater emphasis on assessment and facilitating a crosscutting approach;
 - An effort of conceptual clarification, especially on learning issues;
 - Identifying the possibilities for the validation of experience / learning ob-

tained through non-formal education, simultaneously with the diversification of certification methods of the proficiency obtained through formal education, especially for theoretical lyceums;

- Reconsidering the studies related to the preparation of graduates for the labour market;
- Diversification of links between formal education and non-formal education based on aforementioned examples;
- Engagement of social partners in funding permanent education through the system of sector-specific funds for training;³

To solve these problems a number of actions are required, which should be formalised into a set of policies. First of all, two types of processes should be set up, which will establish the system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The primary process includes the steps which relate directly to the candidate: registration, counselling – portfolio development, assessment, reporting and certification. Additional supporting (secondary) processes are necessary to implement the system and ensure sustainability, maintenance and innovation in the system of recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

³ The relationship between non-formal/informal education in connection to labour market, Laura Căpiță, http://www.tinact.ro/files_docs/educatia-nonformala-si-informala.pdf

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Regulations

19. Council Decision 2005/600/EC of 12 July 2005 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States.
20. Decision 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 on establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013.
21. Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002, on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training.
22. Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.
23. Government Decision No. 556/2011 governing the organization and functioning of the National Authority for Qualifications
24. Law No. 132/20.07.1999 on the establishment, organization and functioning of the National Council for Vocational Training of Adults.
25. Loi no. 2002-73 de modernisation sociale, 2002 (France).
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