

Report on national Round table and Recommendations on development of a system for validation of knowledge, skills and competences, gained by non-formal and informal learning

I. Introduction

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is of great importance for development of individual competences as well as the process of realizing the presence of these competences and their use in the personal development and practice in the future. This process is developing in dynamic order and with different speed in the separate EU Member States. In 2012, the Council of EU addressed systematic recommendations to the Commission, which described the main elements of this process, including terminology and definitions related to validation of non-formal and informal learning. The European center for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) presented the main principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, closely related to the key points of the 2012 Council' recommendations.

The main draft principals were presented during the Round table held on 24 April 2014, and also were heard different points of view of institutions and civil society organizations that were invited. Representative from The Ministry of Education and Science presented the adopted Strategy for Lifelong learning (2014-2020); the Secretary General of The National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) presented the project “New opportunity for my future” – a project related to the process of validation of the results of non-formal education. The Executive director of the National Center “Youth Programs and Initiatives” (NCEYPI) presented existing and upcoming tools that facilitate and serve the process such as Youthpass.

The Round table outlined the current state, the benefits and key challenges, several recommendations related to the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning were formulated.

II. CURRENT STATUS

1. Terminology. During the round table as the first emphasis is put out the fact that the following terminology is used: formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. The European institutions have have agreed to the terms used. The Youth sector is still on the process of agreement. The reason for the ongoing debate on the terminology used is that the term “informal learning” is literally translated in to Bulgarian as “independent” or “self-dependent”. That’s why the use of “informal learning” with its literal translation is not suitable, especially after the Commission adopted the official term for Bulgarian language.

2. Key Documents on National Level: National Strategy for ongoing vocational training 2005-2010; National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2007-2013; National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2014-2020, which assigns:
 - Increasing participation in lifelong learning activities of adult population between 25 and 64 years. The age limitation is indicated by the Commission. Validation requires participation in LLL-activities, i.e. ensuring of the conditions for participation in LLL-activities is the fundament for validation. Bulgaria ranks last on this indicator among other EU Member States – 1,7%. During the last years, the percent increased by 0,5% (1,2% in the past) which is relatively fast speed, in comparison with the past. The LLL Strategy aims to reach 5% by 2020.



- More efforts from all stakeholders are required. Parties admit that the role of NGOs and civil society organizations, including social partners is much greater at this point. The process is more and more focused on these partners and the Government is accepted as a partner in the process of achieving the goals set. At this point the processes are highly centralized and regulated. Very often the understanding for formal education is limited only to the receiving of a diploma or paper - learners assess the value of possessing a paper, and not the knowledge, skills and competences gained.
- There are different EU practices in terms of validation systems. There are opportunities for employers to validate knowledge, skills and competences, as well as for the volunteering organizations. Some member states had reached the next level - as this process is related to nationally recognized documents, certification is organized and conducted by a legitimate institution.
- It was outlined that without the involvement of employers and volunteering organizations, including NGOs, neither the process, nor the system can exist.

III. Existing tools

1. In 2013, “The National Program for Youth” has launched a pilot system for certification of skills and competences acquired by non-formal education. Participating organizations in the program issue certificates to the participants. The certificates are delivered on paper, but digital copies are saved and protected. The certificates contain information about the participant and the organization, topic and description of conducted activities, skills and competences that are demonstrated and applied by the participant.
2. Youthpass – existed since Youth in Action Programme has started in Bulgaria. It is still present in the new Erasmus+. The Youthpass is based on eight key competences, defined by the European Parliament and the Council in 2006. The key competences are the following: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital

competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression. The third part contains personal self-assessment of the individual the knowledge and skills he or she acquired. About 320 500 Youthpass certificates have been issued so far.

3. An amendment of the Youth Act in its part related to volunteering is pending. It refers the volunteering. A “volunteer-pass” or “volunteer card” can be issued upon the volunteer’s request. The pass certifies knowledge and skills. For the first time matter of this kind is legislative regulated in Bulgaria.

4. Ongoing projects related to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

“New opportunity for my future”, implemented by NAVET. The project aims development of system for identification and recognition of skills, knowledge and competences acquired by non-formal way. The aim is to develop instruments to identify and recognize informally acquired skills, knowledge and competences in the vocational education area. The project is orientated towards employees of NAVET??? The project is developing a handbook designed to assist institutions that perform the consultation, assessment and certification. The project is with limited range - about 10 000 are going to be consulted, professional assistance and deeper consultation will receive about 5000 and about 1200 will reach level for passing a procedure of certification. Total budget of the project: 5 800 000 BGN (approx. 2 930 000 EUR)

- IV. Benefits of implementation of a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning is the self-awareness of the individual with respect to the skills and competences acquired and how they could be applied in practice. Secondly a change in the educational approach is needed.

V. Main Challenges

- A debate on clarification and synchronization of terminology among participants and stakeholders is needed. What is non-formal learning and where is the border with formal learning; what is standardization of non-formal learning; what is system of validation, etc.
- Secondly, what is the benefit of validation of acquired skills, knowledge and competences for different stakeholders. There is a lack of clarity and interest among them. That is the reason why even though this topic is a matter of public debate for the past few years, but there are not enough specific and productive results;
- Thirdly, there is a concern that the more the formalization process of non-formal and informal learning is reinforced, the more non-formal and informal learning is becoming formal process. Stakeholders have to take steps towards harmonization of standards, clarification on their roles and responsibilities in the process.
- There is no clear and united vision about the financial aspects of the validation – is it supposed to be financed by the public budget or it should be through subsidies, or what fees should be paid by citizens and whether should fees be present at first place;
- Standards are still not developed - for quality assurance, for conduction trainings and seminars. A common framework should be developed which should be the base for developing programs for trainers and educators, including using good practices and experiences from Bulgaria and other countries (Telerik Academy in Bulgaria, The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, etc).
- A big challenge in front of the stakeholders is setting standards and criteria for organizations that will offer non-formal learning activities. Who will be eligible to offer this kind of services? On the other hand isn't this standardization going to make the process more and more formal?
- There is lack of interaction between formal and non-formal areas and sometimes the formal education sector sees the non-formal sector as a threat. For stakeholders sometimes the common benefits are sometimes vague and the process of interaction is not being encouraged.

- Concerns have been raised that initiating different documentation for acquiring qualifications could lead to inequality and lack of clarity.
- The link and interaction between social partners and consultants is not effective. Consultants, who have to consult citizens do not communicate enough with educators. Consultations should be on a deeper level and more detailed in order to increase the efficiency of the process. One consultant, who consults citizens for 20 specialties, often cannot provide exact information and guidance.

VI. Recommendations

1. As first pilot project “New opportunity for my future” implemented by NAVET should be completed (end of 2014) and results of the project should be discussed among all stakeholders. Strengths and weaknesses should be reviewed. This should be conducted for all other pilot or limited projects (ex. The pilot project of “The National Program for Youth”, presented above); the strengths should be used in the process of development a system for validation of learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning
2. The process of collecting of good practices should continue, using existing tools for validation and taking these practices into account and use it if possible. For example - The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), using the experience of already working stakeholders such as National Chamber of Crafts, etc.; Teleric Academy (Bulgaria); The

Duke of Edinburgh's Award, etc. These practices should be analyzed and used by policy makers, together with other relevant stakeholders;

3. Raising awareness of stakeholders according the terminology and synchronization of understandings and usage of terms. It is important for all stakeholders to have mutual understanding of what is non-formal learning and where is the border with formal learning; what is standardization of non-formal learning; what is system of validation, etc. This could be achieved by organizing and conducting raising awareness campaign among all stakeholders. The campaign could be implemented by the project partner and supported by established coalition. For terms that are still a matter of debate, an intensive dialogue should continue until the harmonization process is completed.
4. For fostering the harmonization process, a research among stakeholders could be conducted. The research could be on the different aspects of understanding among the stakeholders, where there are still gaps. On the other hand, this activity could reinforce mutual understanding and greater interest among stakeholders.
5. Raising the awareness of stakeholders on the benefits of development of system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is related to the previous two key recommendations. The reason is that often stakeholders don't identify the validation process as a priority.
6. Since the pilot project is focused only on vocational education and training, it should be taken into account how the overall system (that will be established in future) will address also other skills and competences
7. Development of standards to ensure quality in the process of validation. Especially in terms of organizations that issue certificates and other kind of qualification papers. It should be clear which papers and certifications (issued by whom) are eligible and valid if this is institution outside the formal educational system. More efforts should be made in this field.

8. In terms of standards also standards for educators (trainers, teachers) and also for consultants that advice citizens should be defined. All people and experts involved in the validation system should be prepared and trained. This process should be regulated by the Government.

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