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for international cooperation
in higher education

Study on formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Final Report

- Public Part -

Project information

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Project Summary

Project Objectives (envisaged objectives, target groups, needs addressed)

Within the Bologna Process - the European higher education reform process - there has been a shift in focus towards the importance of recognising non-formal and informal learning, in other words competencies and skills gained outside of formal learning environments, such as universities. In several countries, steps have been taken to formally recognise informal and non-formal learning through certificates and reports. This development poses new challenges for the international recognition of qualifications, which is a necessity to ensure the mobility of citizens.

The aim of this project, therefore, was to begin to explore the possibilities of international recognition of certificates of non-formal and informal learning assessment in higher education. This was to be undertaken through research, analysis and recommendations for both certificate-issuing institutions and bodies, and credential evaluators.

In short, the objectives of this project were two-fold:

1. To conduct a study of the formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning through certification in several European countries, to present an overview of the status of certification of non-formal and informal learning in the selected countries.
2. To analyse a number of sample certificates and/or reports from the countries involved, which will lead to formulate recommendations for credential evaluators on how to deal with these certificates/reports for transferability purposes. In addition recommendations for issuing (HE) institutions and bodies on how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for transferability purposes would also be formulated.

The countries and regions that were to be studied and the partners who would be responsible for them are as follows:

- Nuffic: Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders)
- UK NARIC: England, Ireland and Scotland
- French NARIC: France, Belgium (Walloon Provinces)
- Swedish NARIC: Sweden, Norway, Denmark

Project Outcomes and Undertaken Activities (including information on the involvement/activities of partners, if applicable)

Within the project, a brief state of play regarding the situation of non-formal and informal learning in each country was prepared. Furthermore the project came up with a couple of recommendations formulated to credential evaluators and certificate issuing institutions and bodies, based on collected examples of 'RPL certificates'.

The main recommendations towards credential evaluators include:

- ensure that the information presented on the certificate is similar to certificates issued following a period of formal learning, to ensure consistency in evaluations
- identify the standards against which the non-formal or informal learning has been assessed,
- check that the format of the certificate complies with national or institutional norms, and
- when evaluating RPL certificates, credential evaluators should adhere to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the paragraphs in the Recommendation on Criteria And Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications adopted by the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee that are relevant to RPL.

The main recommendations towards institutions and bodies include:

- providing information in the RPL document including items indicating the level at which the RPL was assessed, the profile of the course/module/programme for which exemption/certification/crediting on the basis of RPL is sought, and the exemptions granted in terms of institutional/national credits and/or ECTS credits,
- to provide information in a schematic form and clear and transparent manner, and
- to include additional information for example in an annex, that could provide information on matters such as the learning outcomes of the course, the RPL assessment procedures and reference to the RPL contact point at the institution.

UNDERTAKEN ACTIVITIES

The project consisted out of two parts, the research phase and the evaluation phase. Within this framework, several activities were undertaken to achieve the abovementioned two objectives aiming to explore the possibilities of international recognition of certificates of non-formal and informal learning assessment in higher education. In the following these will be discussed by first going into the research and evaluation phase, followed by the activities.

I Research phase

This phase began with the production of a report for each country on the current state of formal recognition through certification of non-formal and informal learning in higher education. The overview of the state of play certification of non formal and informal learning in the selected countries also served as a contextual basis for the evaluation phase. In order to complete this phase, the project partners agreed on a standardised¹ analysis framework that was used to address questions about the type of certificates issued, their intended purpose, the academic and/or economic value of the certificates and recognition within the country between issuing institutions or bodies. In more specific terms, the analysis frameworks focussed on issues such as:

- What kind of certificates/reports are issued by what kind of institutions/bodies?
- For what purpose are the certificates/reports? (labour market, access/exemptions higher education, other)
- Is there recognition of certificates/reports within the country between the certifying institutions/bodies?

¹ The content and format of the analysis framework was agreed by all partners at the kick-off meeting in The Hague

- Does a certificate/report for non-formal and informal learning provide economic or academic advantage on an individual or national level?

In addition to the country-specific reports, each NARIC collected sample documents from their selected countries, in which non-formal or informal learning was formally certificated. This collection of certificates served as the basis for the evaluation phase.

II Evaluation phase

The main aim of this phase of the project was to analyse a sample of certificates and to identify best and worst practice of certification of non-formal learning in order to develop recommendations for credential evaluators and other stakeholders. For the actual evaluation, an Evaluation Panel Meeting was organized in Cheltenham (United Kingdom). For the evaluation a pre-agreed template was used by the project partners who assessed the collected sample certificates/reports of non-formal and informal learning, after each document being introduced by the relevant partner, thus providing additional context to the work. The evaluation focused primarily on the practical comparability and compatibility of the documents for credential evaluators in terms of:

- Quality assurance mechanisms
- Forms of assessment
- Standards used (e.g. NQF levels)
- Format, including the competency statements (or other assessment outcomes)

Following the evaluation of each certificate or report, each partner provided input on best and worst practice visible in the document and offered opinions on what additional information would be required (if any) for credential evaluators to be able to undertake an assessment. This analysis led to the formulation of a number of recommendations for credential evaluators on how to evaluate these certificates/reports for transferability purposes as well as for the issuing institutions and bodies, i.e. how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for evaluation purposes.

The evaluation strategy and activities

The approach adopted in the project is described under 'methodology' earlier in this section. Nonetheless, more specific details relating to the activities can be found here.

I – Kick off meeting

The research phase represented the first stage of the project, with the kick-off meeting held on 11 February 2008 in The Hague and attended by the four project partners: Nuffic, UK NARIC, French NARIC and the Swedish NARIC.

The objectives of the kick off meeting were the following:

- *To start the research phase of the project*
- *To discuss and finalise the framework of analysis*
- *To agree upon the planning of the project*

During a discussion the project partners decided on the 'framework of analysis and

methodology' and furthermore on the project planning, thus achieving the intended objectives.

Furthermore, the meeting provided a forum for discussion and agreement on the subsequent working methods, which follow:

Gathering of information. Within the agreed timeframe, each country involved in the research phase balanced its time between collecting the certificates/transcripts on the one hand and gathering information on the context of recognition on the other. Though research of the context is of importance for a successful completion of the research phase, priority was given to finding the certificates. Because the state of play of recognition differs in each country and access to information may vary, the extent to which the context could be researched differed from country to country.

Collecting of certificates and transcripts. Both certificates and transcripts were collected in order for the panel to be able to assess the quality of the certificates.

Number of certificates. It was decided that, where possible, approximately 1 or 2 certificates (including transcript) from each country would be collected.

Focus upon higher education. The certificates to be collected had as a result an exemption and/or credit transfer within higher education. The project group expected to find certificates which deal with higher education.

Translation of the certificates and transcripts. Each of the partners translated the certificate(s) and the transcript(s) from their original language into English, in order for the panel to be able to evaluate the certificates. Special attention was paid to the terminology, as some practices (e.g. recognition) can have several meanings within a language.

Collecting different sorts of formats. The project partners aimed to collect different kinds of formats in the various countries of their research, in order for the evaluation panel to also evaluate the format design.

'Summative' certificates. This project focussed upon collecting certificates with a summative (formal) purpose.

II - Evaluation meeting

After the research phase of the project, an evaluation panel was assembled to analyse the sample certificates/reports of non-formal and informal learning assessment. This evaluation meeting was held in Cheltenham **on 22 May** and attended by the four project partners: Nuffic, UK NARIC, French NARIC and the Swedish NARIC. The evaluation panel was formed of credential evaluators and experts in the field of non-formal and informal learning of all project partners. The analysis, following a pre-agreed evaluation template, focussed on the practical comparability and compatibility for credential evaluators in terms of:

- Quality assurance
- Assessments, standards, tools
- Value, credits
- Formats
- Good and best practices

The results of this evaluation phase were recommendations to credential evaluators on how to evaluate these certificates/reports for transferability purposes as well as for the issuing institutions and bodies, i.e. how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for evaluation purposes. These recommendations can be found in section three: project outcomes and results.

III – Writing of the final report

The final phase of the project consisted of the writing of the final report and finalizing the recommendations for institutions and credential evaluators.

Contribution to EU Policies and Impact

The following contains a summary of how this study contributes to key EU policies, objectives and priorities:

The London and Bergen Communiqué's

- The London Communiqué of the Bologna 5th Ministerial Conference on 17-18 May 2007.

“..To further develop the use of learning outcomes in credential evaluation with a view to improving the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning and in line with the existing and emerging qualification frameworks (Bologna and EU)”.

- Bergen Communiqué of the Bologna 4th Ministerial Conference, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005.

“...to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programmes”.

The current study addresses this priority as it has started off with investigating the possibilities of recognition of non formal and informal learning, thus making a start with the improvement of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, in doing so and formulating recommendations (see report, section 7) it addresses the use of learning outcomes.

Several objectives within the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) of the European Commission

- *Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Chapter V, Article 32 (transversal programme), 1(b) (to promote quality and transparency): “..the specific objectives of the transversal programme shall be: ... (b) to promote the quality and transparency of Member States' education and training systems”.*

This study contributed to the transparency and quality of Member States' education and training systems as the recommendations of this study (see section

7) are also of importance to Higher Education Institutions and organisations that offer or conduct RPL procedures in general.

- *Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Article 5.1.f states that the Lifelong Learning Programme shall comprise "...actions to support transparency and recognition of qualifications".*

It is inherent to this study that it supports and contributes to the transparency and recognition of qualifications, as its aim is to explore the possibilities of recognizing non formal and informal learning which includes increasing the transparency of practices.

- *Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Article 20(h) provides that within the framework of this programme, the Erasmus programme shall be aimed at "...bodies providing guidance, counselling and information services relating to any aspect of lifelong learning". And further:*
- *Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). In the administrative and financial provisions of the Decision, under section B.2, under (2) Designation of beneficiaries, the constituent national units of the NARIC network are explicitly listed among the bodies which act as instruments to implement the Programme at national level, in conformity with the provisions of Article 54(2)(c) of Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 1605/2002 as amended by Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 1995/2006 of 13 December 2006 and of Article 38 of Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 2342/2002 as amended by Commission Regulation (EC, Euratom) No. 478/2007 of 23 April 2007.*

The consortium consisted of four NARIC centers: UK NARIC, French NARIC, Swedish NARIC and Nuffic. As such the consortium meets the objective that NARICs act as instruments to implement the LLL Programme at national level by carrying out this project.

- *Decision 1720/2006/EC establishing the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), Chapter V, Article 33 (the transversal programme) article 1(e) mentions under the key activity of policy cooperation and innovation in lifelong learning: "...action to support transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, information and guidance on mobility for learning purposes, and cooperation in quality assurance, as referred to in Article 5(1)(f), which may include: (i) networks of organisations which facilitate mobility and recognition, such as Euroguidance and National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARICs)".*

European Qualifications Framework

The Council Recommendations of April 2008 repeat the urge of the validation of non-formal and informal learning within the framework of the European Qualification Framework. Furthermore it stresses the importance of credit transfer and recognizing these throughout the European Union.

As there is this shift to competency based education within the EU countries –or

at least to describe learning outcomes in competencies- this study contributes to deal with the international recognition of these competencies, with a special focus on informal and non formal learning.

Lisbon partnership for growth and jobs

The project meets the goal of the WP to develop Europe into 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economic area in the world by the year 2010' by offering recommendations on how to recognize competences gained through non-formal and informal learning, thereby contributing to the LLL programs.

II- IMPACT

The final product of this project is a report consisting of two parts, reflecting the two main objectives of the project which, in short, are:

1. To conduct a study of formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning through certification in several European countries
2. To analyse a number of sample certificates/reports and formulate recommendations for credential evaluators on how to deal with foreign certificates/reports and recommendations for the issuing institutions/bodies on how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for transferability purposes.

Following these objectives, in the first part of the report the reader finds an overview of formal recognition through certification of non-formal and informal learning in higher education in the selected countries, following a predesigned analysis framework, as highlighted before.

The second part of the report deals with the certificates that were collected during the research phase, followed by the outcomes of the evaluation meeting. Furthermore recommendations are formulated in this part for credential evaluators (on how to evaluate these certificates/reports for transferability purposes) and for the issuing institutions and bodies (on how to make these certificates/reports more transparent for evaluation purposes).

As mentioned previously, this study has been undertaken to explore how to deal with such certificates, as there is currently no shared recognition practice, in some cases at national level but certainly at European level. Therefore the recommendations for the credential evaluators and the institutions in the second part of the report can be expected to have a significant impact on the target groups, which are the credential evaluators within the NARIC network and beyond. Moreover the recommendations are useful for the institutions and bodies issuing these certificates, who are interested in making these certificates more transparent. This could benefit their own students and also paves the way for the recognition of these certificates by other institutions.

Further research recommended

As the outcomes of the project show, there is still a lot of work to do on how validation of non formal and informal learning can be internationally recognized. One of the reasons being that credential evaluators are faced with a variety of validation practices of non formal and informal learning, not only on international level but also on national level, and consequently have to deal with a variety of different

documents. The project demonstrated that there is still a lot to do as regards of transparency of information on 'RPL certificates' or diploma's containing exemption on basis of RPL. It will be a challenge to develop agreement among credential evaluators within the ENIC-NARIC network on how to tackle this diversity.

The current project has formulated first recommendations to credential evaluators on how to deal with the recognition of the validation of non formal and informal learning. However, further research is recommended. Considering the variety of national practices it would be necessary to research if these recommendations are applicable to the countries outside the study as well. Therefore the current project partners suggest to undertake a follow up project with the purpose to extend the results to the whole network.