

Quality Assurance and the Recognition of Non-formal and/or Informal Learning

Each country involved in the Refine project was asked 5 questions in relation the quality assurance arrangements for the recognition/validation of non-formal and informal learning in their partner institutions. In general the following points should be noted:

- There are no special quality assurance arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in place and in some institutions there are no quality arrangements at all since the work is at a very experimental phase and frequently there is no legal basis for such activity (especially in the universities).
- Partners in the project suggest that quality assurance for recognition of non-formal and informal learning should be part of the general quality assurance arrangements of the institution rather than something special or different.
- Several partners suggest that there should be some element of externality in the process but there is no consensus on this
- The main features that partners stress as elements of an effective quality assurance procedure are:
 - Transparency, openness and clarity in the procedures, tools and criteria
 - The professionalism and seniority of the people with overall responsibility for the procedures
 - Training of the people who will be involved especially the advice and guidance staff and the assessors

Set out below are the detailed responses of each country team to the 5 questions posed. The full responses are on each country's webpage on the Refine site (www.eucen.org/Refine.html).

Q1. What quality assurance arrangements are in place for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the organisations in your group? How is the **quality of the process** of recognition assured?

Czech Republic: Only one of the organizations (Business School Ostrava – BSO) in our group has got quality assurance arrangements. It is only for the recognition of non-formal learning. Because only HE institutions are able recognize according to the law which is in place right now and this is for recognition non-formal learning organized by HE institution only. The quality assurance arrangements are in fact internal regulations in the sense of administration and organization of courses in LLL area.

England and Wales: The UK tool consists of three sets of general principles for the quality assurance of the process for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Each set is designed to meet the specific roles and responsibilities of the major stakeholders, primarily the deliverers, ie universities, but also those organizations within a country charged with monitoring (and maybe regulating) the process (monitors) and the sponsors of the candidates, be it the employer or the individual, (user).

Estonia:

- University of Tartu

To guarantee uniform level of Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) in the University of Tartu, APEL is brought under central control, i.e. at least once a year the commission, established by the Vice-Rector, looks through the decisions related to APEL. There are organised seminars for sharing experience for the people involved in APEL. We have plans to evolve the rules for quality assurance more clearly.

- Tartu Vocational Education Centre

Right now we only have a clause in the study management regulation, which states that it is possible to make a transfer. Unfortunately at this point we do not have a functioning evaluation system of the whole transfer process. According to this teachers and the commission will decide upon the quality of the earlier knowledge and skills of pupils. We do not know if pupils are satisfied with the current system since there are not many of them who actually request for that kind of transfer. Transfer of earlier or elsewhere obtained (*subjects*): Students who want to transfer earlier or elsewhere obtained subjects, must make a request to the head of the department. Acceptance or refusal will be given in cooperation with the teacher who teaches the subjects wished to be transferred. When needed, an evaluation commission will be brought together.

- Youth organisations

Youth organizations have no arrangements on quality assurance for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Finland: The quality assurance of the recognition of learning has to be included in the general quality assurance system of the organisation. Adult education institutes are developing quality assurance systems for themselves in Finland. The process has been started in the field of vocational adult and higher education and is not progressing very rapidly. The EFQM is implied by vocational adult education institutes and by some of non-formal adult education institutes but the majority of the non-formal AE institutes have not really taken up the issue as yet.

France (Francas – youth third sector organisation): In France, the quality of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning largely depends on the public recognition of the organisation in which the individual is involved. Youth and popular education movements and networks such as Les Francas are a good example of this kind of recognised structures.

A list of criteria (which were collectively defined in a group of civil society organisations together with the Youth, Sport and Associations Ministry – MJSVA-) contribute to the evaluation of the quality of learning attainments through voluntary activities; they include the aims and date of creation of the organisation, the level of its involvement, scope and volume of activities, number of workers, volunteers and members etc.

Quality assurance arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal education:

- Existence of the place where candidates can be received (in France, « point relais conseils »)
- Individual guidance for each candidate

Many training and learning centres offer an individual guidance for candidates, much of which is funded in some way by various authorities.

The quality of the process of the recognition is guaranteed by the State: National Education Ministry, Youth and Sports Ministry, Labour Ministry... each Ministry has its own criteria for its own diplomas. Concerning Youth and sports, the Ministry has just published a list of specifications to assure the quality of the process of guidance.

Greece: In our University, undergraduate students can only present the Lower or/and Proficiency in English (or the equivalent titles for other languages) and pass the exams on the foreign language that they have in their undergraduate curriculum. The quality of the process

is assured by the recognition of the certificates given from other universities or major educational bodies.

Italy: There are no special quality assurance arrangements. The university partners feel the need to put in place arrangements that are more transparent and quality oriented, but no special procedures for APEL are in place at present. This is so even when partners' institutions follow the criteria of ISO/9001.

Lithuania: None at present since there is no legal basis for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Norway: The organisations that were involved in the Norwegian project were universities and colleges. With regard to accreditation and exemptions based on former formal education there is a quite elaborate system which is founded in law and accepted. With regard to acceptance of non-formal learning our study, and two other recent studies, show that there are no general regulations and hardly a common conception of how this could be handled.

Romania: As a general rule, the whole process of quality assurance at institutional level is at its beginning, with variable degrees of implementation, depending on the type of institution (e.g. higher education institutions are at the beginning of implementing the Bologna requirements, some institutions have recently implemented the ISO standards). In this context, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which has been recently regulated at national level by a specific methodology produced by the National Board of Adult Vocational Training (NBAVT), is operating in rather small degrees at institutional levels as well. The NBAVT is currently operating a procedure of assessing and certifying vocational competences of adults, achieved through informal and non-formal education (approved by the Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family, and The Ministry of Education and Research, Order No. 4543/468 from 23.08.2004). At present, the assessment process is conducted in 14 centers all over the country, for adults wishing to certify their competences, according to the occupational standards validated and recognised at national level. NBAVT, which is operating according to the SR EN 45013:1993, ISO 17024, is planning to extend in the future its network of assessment centers conducting this activity. The whole process is at the beginning, the number of adults actually applying for this service being rather small.

The FIATEST partner introduced the ISO standards and procedures at institutional level last year and West University of Timisoara is part of the Bologna process. No information on a systematic implementation of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning at organizational level is available yet.

Q2. What quality assurance arrangements are in place in relation to the specific tool(s) that you have tested? How is the **quality of the specific procedure** assured?

Czech Republic: The quality assurance arrangements are in fact internal regulations in the sense of administration and organization of courses in LLL area. Those internal regulations are approved by Ministry of education. The recognition here is more as mechanical transfer from LLL courses more or less identical with courses in relevant study programme

England and Wales: As explained in Q1, the tool is one of quality assurance itself, with each of the stakeholders having a set of general principles by which to abide. Also each stakeholder knows the general principles by which the other stakeholders should be held accountable. For example there is a set of general principles for the quality assurance of the 'monitors', who in

turn have a set of principles against which the 'deliverers' can be held accountable. The three sets of principles have been piloted with a sample of respondents from each stakeholder group and have gained universal approval. As with all processes and procedures, there will need to be adaptation when being applied in a new situation, eg in a different country, and continuous review with updating as and when appropriate.

Estonia: To obtain the quality of testing we all (youth, vocational education, university):

- Customized all the materials to our conditions
- Compiled the instructions
- Instructed all the testers
- Gathered feedback from the participants about the testing procedure and tools

In addition in the University of Tartu, we organised two seminars for sharing the experience those people who were involved in the piloting using Portfolio for assessment of experiential learning.

In the Tartu Vocational Education Centre, we were testing the performance of Euro CV and Portfolio but did not reach to the point of quality assessment.

Finland:

- University of Lapland: Recognition and accreditation of prior learning of handicraft in teacher's degree - the professor responsible for the subject/study entity ensures the quality of the recognition of prior learning.
- JAKK Vocational Adult Education Centre and Workers' Educational Association: the authenticity of portfolio, learning diary, and Euro-CV is verified by interviewing the candidate.
- FAEA: recommendation of active citizenship studies: teacher and tutor training
- Youth Academy: Recreational Study Book - the young person decides what she/he wants to have evaluated or accredited. The recognition of non-formal or informal learning is always voluntary on the part of the young person and the recognising organisation from the point of view of the Study Book.

France (Francas – youth third sector organisation): N/A

Greece: N/A

Italy: Same as above. Lumsa discusses credit recognition of prior learning in a special Committee. These are the steps: 1) Prospective students fill the cv, 2) an interview is made with a tutor, 3) APEL program coordinator proposes a certain number of credits for each prospective student; 4) His/her proposals are discussed in a Committee.

Norway: N/A

Romania: The testing of the specific tools was done on a voluntary and experimental basis in Romania. No other specific procedures except the REFINE project recommendations have been implemented at this stage. It is expected that the generalisation of the findings would bring the special concern about the implementation of "solid" quality assurance procedures.

Q3. In the light of your work in Refine, what do you think are the **key features of a quality assurance arrangement** for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning?

Czech Republic: The key features of a quality assurance arrangement for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning:

- transparency of the whole process
- separation of candidate guidance from assessment part
- objectivity of assessment

England and Wales:

The key feature is transparency, so that all the participants/stakeholders are clear as to their roles and their responsibilities and how these impinge upon others in the process.

Estonia:

- University of Tartu

Key features of a quality assurance arrangement for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning are:

- 1) Transparency of the process
- 2) Rules for the APEL committees
- 3) Competence based descriptions of the study programmes
- 4) Sharing experience

- Tartu Vocational Education Centre

The key to assuring the quality is the fact that pupils themselves would be able to evaluate and assess their knowledge. From here on, school must know how to assess the pupils. For that it is necessary to:

- Describe the evaluation process
- Evolve according tools
- Set the criteria upon what to assess the
- Train the people who deal with the assessment

Finland:

- the transparency of all arrangements and documents
- mutually agreed forms of documentation
- face-to-face evaluation
- vocabulary and concepts of recognition shared across the sectors of education, third sector and labour market
- a general familiarity across institutes and actors in different sectors

France (Francas – youth third sector organisation):

An effective recognition of non-formal and informal education by all the institutions and organisations hosting volunteers is a key element. An important work is to be led with hosting organisations (associations, sport Clubs, cultural centres,...) so that they will guide and support themselves individuals for the recording and understanding of technical, social, pedagogical, etc. competencies.

Greece: A common protocol for all EEC countries where all subjects taken in a non-formal and informal learning will be listed and to which extend they have covered the course. Also the practical application of the subjects taught has to be estimated.

Italy: Transparency, lifelong and lifewide cumulation of credits, mobility among HE institutions, equal assessment of informal and non-formal learning.

Lithuania: One of the most important elements is the active participation of a professional mediator who can transfer information about the individual's competence in the best way. Tools are important but secondary.

Norway: We produced a preliminary set of recommendations which were sent to all institutions, the contents of which would be indicative of a quality assurance arrangement. Key points for a more formalised system would be that it would have to be transparent, and based on common principles and thus have a common acceptance in institutions as well as in the working life.

Romania: There are a few prerequisites for a successful implementation of quality assurance procedures at institutional level at the moment in Romania: 1. Knowledge and shared understanding of existing specific methodologies and regulations in the field up to date; 2. Knowledge and debate on good practices coming from national, regional, European comparable institutions; 3. Networking with European institutions already implementing quality assurance procedures

Q4. What do you think is the **most effective kind of quality assurance arrangement** for recognition of non-formal and informal learning?

Czech Republic: regulations for accreditation of assessors; support of candidates by guiding them till their prior learning is assessed

England and Wales:

Based upon the long practical experience by large numbers of universities in the UK, it is thought that the general principles proposed by the UK team are an extremely sound basis for an effective QA arrangement.

Estonia: Most important thing is to raise peoples' self-awareness so that they themselves would be able to evaluate and assess their knowledge's and would be willing to take part in the process.

Finland: No single arrangement is enough, see Q3 above.

France (Francas – youth third sector organisation): The appropriate method would be to gather organisations working in the field of formal, structures active in the field of non-formal and others in the field of informal education in order to have a common language and create the necessary bridges for the recognition.

Greece: If people are capable of writing a thesis/study on the subjects they say they have learnt, then they might also be capable of applying them in everyday life. That is important for me.

Italy: The Italian partners felt they have too little experience to answer this question.

Norway: As above

Romania: Create a standing program of education and self-improvement, correlated with training-on-the job within the institution. Team-work, team building, effective professional communication, effective leadership are some key issues in Romanian companies and institutions which need to be developed and refined in order to implement effective procedures of recognising informal and non-formal learning at organisational level.

Scotland:

- Integration within existing QA systems: RPL processes need to be fully integrated within existing organisational quality assurance systems to ensure transparency, consistency and reliability. RPL processes should be available for scrutiny by appropriate external quality assurance, for example by an external auditing body.
- Embedded in programme design: RPL as an entry route and a means of gaining credit within formal programmes of study should become more embedded within curriculum design and explicitly addressed at the programme approval stage. Where possible, learning outcomes should be expressed in a way that enables a variety of different routes for their achievement as well as the use of flexible modes of assessment.
- Use of core principles: Within the SCQF, a range of different approaches to RPL can be developed and used by learning providers to meet the needs and goals of learner groups across the different sectors. All RPL provision, however, whether for personal/career development or for credit, should be underpinned by the agreed core principles. The aim of the core principles is to ensure effective, quality-assured practice that will enable all users of the SCQF to have confidence in the outcomes of RPL.
- Effective monitoring mechanisms: Effective monitoring mechanisms of RPL provision should be developed and operated by providers. These may take into account:
 - the number of learners undertaking RPL;
 - the success rate of RPL claims;
 - an evaluation of the learner experience, including the time taken by learners to undertake the RPL process;
 - an evaluation of the staff experience, including the time spent by staff in supporting the RPL process and managing the process of recognition;
 - a tracking of the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
 - an evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative arrangements with other learning providers /learning partnerships/receiving institutions;
 - reports from external assessors or verifiers, where appropriate.

Q5. Any other comments about quality in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning?

Czech Republic: In connection with Q4 – no quality arrangements will ensure effectiveness of recognition if there will be not enough support for candidates on the beginning.

England and Wales:

As with any learning, wherever and however it takes place, the emphasis should be on supporting the learner to gain access to a quality –assured process leading to an accurate, full and complete recognition of that learning.

Estonia: We are trying to work out rules for the quality assurance of APEL during the European Social Fund project on APEL in Estonia. All most important stakeholders are involved in this project.

Finland: N/A

France (Francas – youth third sector organisation): N/A

Greece: To my opinion, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning may give privileges to many educational bodies to give certificates without a very deep consideration to the course material. From the didactical point of view, I believe that students will start avoiding the formal education as they will find an easy way of studying without the discipline required in a formal educational setting!

Italy: This is a very important aspect. It would deserve more information and discussion.

Norway: It is important to stress that non-formal and informal learning is always subject specific, to a much greater extent than parts of the formalised educational system is, and is therefore more difficult to fit into systems that are very much directed at procedures for universal use. A system for recognition must be based on **principles and transparent procedures** more than on standard tools and forms, as the nature of this type of learning implies it will not typically fit into predescribed formats.

Romania: In Romania the process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning is at its very beginning, but this has to be seen as a great opportunity “to build in” the quality assurance procedures together with the development of small and medium enterprises, institutions and organisations blossoming as a result of economic development.