



**EXCERPT OF THE**

**NEW OECD ACTIVITY ON  
RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING**

**GUIDELINES FOR COUNTRY PARTICIPATION**

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## 1. Background

1. In 1996, the OECD education ministers agreed to develop strategies for 'lifelong learning for all'. The approach has been endorsed by ministers of labour, ministers of social affairs and the OECD Council at ministerial level. It is an approach whose importance may now be clearer than ever. How far have we come? The concept of 'from cradle to grave' includes formal, non-formal, and informal. Typically, learning that occurs outside formal education is not well understood, made visible or appropriately valued. This hinders overall benefits of 'lifelong learning for all' by focusing only on learning outcomes from formal education, instead of valuing all types of learning outcomes or allowing portability of such outcomes between formal, non-formal and informal sectors. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is an important means for making the 'lifelong learning for all' agenda a reality and, subsequently, for reshaping learning to better match the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge economies and open societies.

2. A recent OECD Education Committee activity, *The Role of National Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning* (OECD, 2005a), concluded that recognition of non-formal and informal learning, credit transfer, and qualifications framework are, among others, the three most important issues that require further study. In addition, a number of other OECD activities (OECD 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005b, 2005c) and existing work outside OECD (European Commission; ILO; ECOTEC; UNESCO Institute of Education; ASEM -the Asia-Europe Meeting) all point to the importance of recognising non-formal and informal learning. How much evidence exists on the benefits of such recognition? Do governments know enough about the impact of national policies on such recognition? Under what conditions such recognition can be beneficial for all? To pursue the investigation, a new activity was included in the 2005-2006 Programme of Work [EDU/EC(2004)1/REV1]. The first technical experts' meeting was held 16-17 June 2005 to design the new activity, to make it salient for policy makers and to ensure a feasible study was developed. The proposed activity was presented at the Education Committee 9-10 November 2005 to invite country participation. The first national experts' meeting to launch the new activity was held 30-31 January 2006 where proposed themes for analysis and proposed guidelines for country background report were discussed to ensure policy-relevance and timeliness of the activity for the participating countries.

## 2. The purpose and scope of the activity

### 2.1 The overall purpose of the activity

3. The overall purpose is to provide policy-makers with useful options for generating effective, beneficial and equitable systems of recognising non-formal and informal learning; to effectively implement the 'lifelong learning for all' agenda; and answer to the question: under what conditions can recognition of non-formal and informal learning be beneficial for all. To this end, the project aims to:

- Take stock of existing institutional and technical arrangements such as who pays, who manages the system, etc;
- Develop indicators to measure the benefits and risks and collect evidence on *who* benefits and *who* is at risk;
- Collect evidence of what is working and what is not working with the current systems;
- Explore effective, beneficial and equitable models based on the review of existing models.

## 2.2 The scope of the activity

4. **Focus:** Originally, the proposed project was titled '*Recognition of non-formal and informal learning and Credit accumulation and transfer*'. Now, the project is re-titled as '*Recognition of non-formal and informal learning*'. The issue of 'credit accumulation and transfer' will be dealt with when the issue is concerned with recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, this activity will look at cases where credits are given to non-formal and informal learning, and are accumulated and transferred within or to the formal education sector, but exclude such cases that credits given to formal learning, and are accumulated and transferred within the formal education sector.

5. However, this activity will cover the formal education sector where the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is perceived to play a role in allowing flexibility in the formal education sector (e.g. as an entry or re-entry into the formal education and shortening the process towards graduation) or strengthening its transition from school to work (e.g. internships and volunteer work). It is also envisaged to cover the formal sector when a country has an overarching recognition system for overall competencies or learning outcomes, which is to cover formal, non-formal and informal settings. In this case, it is difficult to describe the recognition system of non-formal and informal learning without referring to the recognition of formal learning.

6. **Levels:** Lifelong learning encompasses the experience from cradle to grave. However, considering the feasibility, policy relevance and timeliness, the activity will focus on those who are 'out of school', regardless of age, and those who are in post-secondary education institutions.

7. **Definitions:** The terminology for 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning' varies across countries<sup>1</sup>. This paper adopts the definition of 'non-formal and informal learning' from the OECD activity, the *Role of National Qualifications System in Promoting Lifelong Learning* (OECD, 2005a) which intends to cover the above mentioned terms<sup>2</sup>. The definition has been adopted by the community of practice (e.g. EC, CEDEFOP). 'Formal learning' refers to learning through a programme of instruction in an educational institution, adult training centre or in the workplace, which is generally recognised in a qualification or a certificate. 'Non-formal learning' refers to learning through a programme but it is not usually evaluated and does not lead to certification. 'Informal learning' refers to learning resulting from daily work-related, family or leisure activities.

## 3. Working methods

8. It is proposed that the working methods consist of a desk-based research, and two types of field research (thematic review and interactive case study). In addition, the activity can be supplemented by commissioned papers, workshops, and electronic discussion groups.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. 'Recognition of non-formal learning' may be covered by the terms: 'Recognition of Prior Learning'; 'Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition'; 'Accreditation of Prior learning'; 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning'; 'Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning'; 'Academic recognition of experiential learning' 'Validation of competencies'; and 'Validation of Prior Learning', etc.

<sup>2</sup> International comparative research needs careful attention to the use of terminologies as the different use may embrace different implications. Therefore, a review study on terminologies is planned in Phase I of this activity as different definitions have different implications. That is to say, programme/projects with different terminologies may result in different policy aims and outcomes (Oates et al, 2005).

### ***3.1 Desk-based research***

9. The desk-based research consists of: development of framework for data collection (qualitative and quantitative)<sup>3</sup>; preparation of guidelines for country background report; development of framework for analysis; data collection and analysis; mapping existing models and evaluation of such models; development of pilot models in consultation with countries concerned; moderating an Electronic Discussion Group, etc.

### ***3.2 Field research: Organising a thematic review and/or implementing an interactive case study***

10. The handling of risks should be embedded in policy making and planning<sup>4</sup>. It is timely to initiate research on potential risks concerning the recognition issue. The process requires thorough research on current practices and experiences as well as capturing unintended outcomes of policy-making. In addition to the results of desk-based research on a system of existing institutional (in a sociological sense) and technical arrangements, collecting data on the ground will help detailed picture of benefits, barriers and potential risks for different stakeholders (the user, the funder, and the manager) of the system.

11. **Thematic review.** The thematic review aims to advance on understanding of stakeholder behaviour and to investigate what is working and not working with current practices. Capturing innovative case studies and unintended outcomes may not be possible from the standardised questionnaires. Given the heavily institutional nature of the issues, it is proposed that a second stage consists of a focussed thematic review, consisting of a short (about three-day) visit to participating countries. This will help assess the functioning of the institutional and technical arrangements and understand the stakeholders' behaviour. The review team would include two to three members. Past experience has shown such visits to be effective complement to desk-based research and analysis.

12. **Interactive case study.** An interactive case study is a practical tool to test an idea. In some countries, it may be a way to scale up from a 'good practice' into a 'model' under the country's specific contexts. . Since an idea can be experimented in a small scale before applying it at a national scale, it can work as a risk-limitation tool to avoid unforeseen loss of resources. The process is interactive and there is high level of close consultation with the country concerned. The invitation is open to those countries that already have a certain system of implementing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, based on existing good practices among peers, the country can gain practical guidance and knowledge-base from the Secretariat and other peer countries. Also, the end result will be a tailor-made product based on a country's specific needs and may be a base to develop a 'model' which can be adoptable on a larger scale.

### ***3.3 Commissioned papers***

13. It is proposed that research (e.g. literature review) be commissioned on specific topics to supplement the desk-based research and the field study.

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the quantitative data collection at the national level, data on recognition of non-formal and informal learning and credit transfer using national statistics alone may undermine the purpose of the study. It is believed that such data can be obtained only from institutions, labour force, and household surveys in many (if not most) countries.

<sup>4</sup> 'Risk management – getting the right balance between innovation and change on the one hand, and avoidance of shocks and crises on the other – is now central to the business of good government' (Blair, 2002).

### **3.4 Workshops**

14. Workshops are proposed with the aim of reporting in-progress work, collecting further data from countries and to share country experiences.

### **3.5 Electronic Discussion Group**

15. To ensure open dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, it is proposed that the EDG is used to open discussions with participating delegates and other stakeholders (i.e. technical experts, a unions' representative, a higher education institutions representative, a learners' representative, etc).

## **4. Intended outputs, dissemination, timeline with intended tasks, and partnerships**

### **4.1 Intended outputs and dissemination**

16. The outputs of the activity will be:

- Background reports produced by participating countries based on the guidelines prepared by the Secretariat;
- Commissioned papers;
- Indicators concerning recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- Case studies of innovative practices and unintended outcomes of policies;
- Country specific recommendations for countries that participate in the thematic review;
- ⟨ Model examples of recognising non-formal and informal learning from participating countries in the interactive case studies;
- ⟨ Conditions under which recognition of non-formal and informal learning can be beneficial for all;
- ⟨ Policy options and knowledge-base (i.e. a series of workshops and the EDG) that may help countries for their policy development on specific themes; and
- ⟨ A final comparative report that will analyse and synthesise all the data from the proceeding outputs.

17. The dissemination of the outputs will be through:

- ⟨ The OECD Website linking to relevant major websites;
- ⟨ A final international conference and other relevant conferences to present the synthesis report.

### **4.2 Timeline with intended tasks**

18. To meet the overall purpose, the intended outcomes (objectives) are planned below in the three phases: 1) conceptual development and data collection; 2) policy analysis, lifelong learning future scenario development, and interactive case studies development; and 3) policy option development and dissemination.

**Table 1. Summary of the different phases: timeline with specific tasks**

<b>Table 1. Summary of the different phases: timeline with specific tasks</b>	
<b>Phase I:</b> Conceptual development and data collection	December 2005 – August 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreeing on terminology at the international level: recognition of non-formal and informal learning is currently refereed to by different terms: Prior Learning Assessment, Recognition of Prior Learning, Accreditation of Prior Learning, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, Validation of Professional Experience, Validation of Competencies, etc.<sup>5</sup>;</li> <li>• Developing a framework for data collection (i.e. collection of data from the country report; from the field study; from educational institutions concerning credit transfer, assessment of prior learning for purposes of entry, award of credits, award of degrees<sup>6</sup>; from labour unions or any work-related training<sup>7</sup>, etc.); Developing a framework for analysis (i.e. stakeholder behaviour, institutional and technical arrangements, and contextual factors): developing tools (e.g. criteria of performance) to measure benefits and potential risks and to analyse effective, beneficial and equitable systems; and developing indicators for stakeholder behaviour analysis (e.g. incentives and disincentives) and contextual impact analysis;</li> <li>• Mapping existing policies (concerning recognition of non-formal and informal leaning and credit transfer) to investigate policy-thinking;</li> <li>• Reviewing current practices to identify key features of institutional arrangements and to analyse benefits and obstacles of the current arrangements for different stakeholders;</li> <li>• Developing quantitative data to describe key features of practices (e.g. flexibility, transferability, transparency, etc.) as well as indicators to monitor mobility of students and working professionals within and across countries. To do so, quantitative accounts of multidirectional realities of learning will be examined by such as the take-up (flow) into a procedure of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, the number of people resuming learning; the number of people who have been rewarded in the labour market for their learning records, the number of people who undertake further education; whether there is mobility between different sectors (i.e. between higher education, further education and vocational education and training) through such recognition, etc.;</li> <li>• Developing interactive case studies and carrying out research on the implementation;</li> <li>• Collecting qualitative data on dynamics and innovations in the current practices;</li> </ul>	
<b>Phase II:</b> Policy analysis and analysis of interactive case studies	January 2007 – August 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysing evidence on benefits and potential risks with different current policy approaches in terms of effectiveness and challenges (through thematic analysis and impact analysis of contextual factors);</li> <li>• Analysing conditions under which recognition of non-formal and informal learning can be beneficial for all; and</li> <li>• Developing effective, beneficial and equitable models of recognition of non-formal and informal learning;</li> </ul>	
<b>Phase III:</b> Development of policy options, model options, and dissemination	August 2007 – December 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing policy options;</li> <li>• Documenting the results of the interactive case studies; and</li> <li>• Preparing an international synthesis report.</li> </ul>	
<b>Phase I, II and III</b>	on-going throughout the different above phases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing country experiences with the aim of capacity building in participating countries through organising built-in workshops and electronic discussion groups.</li> </ul>	

<sup>5</sup> Further study on terminologies is required as different definitions have an implication, that is, they result in programmes/ [processes which have different policy aims and outcomes (Oates et al, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The first technical experts' meeting (June 16-17, 2005) suggests collaboration with the IMHE for this area.

<sup>7</sup> The data collection regarding work-based learning is envisaged to be drawn in collaboration with INES Network B.

### ***4.3 Partnerships***

19. To gain value added through partnership, the project is envisaged to draw on other OECD projects. In addition, to build on existing work, partnerships with other organisations will be sought as an integral part of the project.

- < Within OECD: EDU/IA, EDU/IMHE, ELS
- < Outside OECD (international and regional organisations): BIAC, TUAC, ILO, World Bank, UNESCO UIE, UNESCO IIEP, European Commission, Council of Europe, EUROSTAT.