



*Education International Task Force on Vocational Education  
and Training: Draft Working Paper*

## Recognition of Qualifications and Assessment of Prior Learning

In a global economy, workers no longer spend their lives working within one company, one sector or even one country. Changing personal ambitions as well as increasingly precarious employment conditions have fundamentally changed the career patterns of skilled labour. Skilled workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must therefore have transferable qualifications that give access to decent employment in various environments.

Much of the discussion on VET in Education International has focused on the consequences of this evolution for teachers and their students. In 2007, EI adopted a set of 'Guidelines on Cross-Border Provision of Vocational Education and Training' (VET) to deal with this problem. Since then, EI's Taskforce on VET has continued the discussion, as different international organisations started to develop policies on recognition. In 2009 the EI Executive Board felt that a deeper discussion was needed and invited EI's Task Force on VET to develop a background paper on 'the recognition of qualifications and the assessment of prior learning'. The present paper is a response to that request.

It should be acknowledged that the (legalistic) discourse used in debates on recognition is confusing, even for experts. Foucault taught us that debates dressed up in jargon usually conceal deep inequalities; a pertinent lesson if one is to understand the debate on recognition. As much as possible, this background paper aims to provide a clear overview of the problems of inequality that are locked up in this debate. It can guide the reader if a separation is made between two different problems. On the one hand, the debate addresses the *recognition of qualifications across borders and employment sectors*. This debate addresses the transferability of VET qualifications and inequalities associated with entry regulations to (national) labour markets between countries and employment sectors. A second, more fundamental discussion focuses on *the assessment (and recognition) of competences obtained in non-formal or informal settings*, such as through 'learning on the job'. In this latter discussion, questions surface about insiders and outsiders in the context of formal education and schooling.

Yet even when this separation is kept in mind, the participants in the debate cannot find consensus on the meaning of concepts. The paper will therefore start by a definition of terms, following internationally agreed language (section 1). Following this definition, it will be discussed by recognition is surfacing on the agenda of international organisations (section 2), what the problems with recognition are



(section 3). Finally, the paper will suggest opportunities for EI to undertake action on the issue (section 4).

### 1. Definition of Recognition

How do different international organisations understand the problem of recognition? A recent report by the OECD (Werquin 2010) aims to take stock the wide disparity of definitions of recognition used in member states. It proposes to talk pragmatically about recognition. In order to avoid a conceptual mess, the OECD suggests to understand recognition by dividing it in a number of stages. Recognition starts with the *provision of evidence* (documentation) of achieved learning outcomes by the learner. Then, these learning outcomes are *assessed* and *validated*, and if so, *certified*, by a body that is competent to do so. It is at this stage that we talk about assessment, validation or certification of prior learning. Yet, according to the OECD, *social recognition* of prior learning is at least as important as formal validation, as the process is only useful for the person being assessed if it leads to a (social) recognition of these outcomes by employers, other schools and the learners' peers. Even if the process of recognition is understood as following a number of stages, recognition is by definition locked up in a social and cultural context where qualifications have a certain *status*.

The European agency CEDEFOP (2008: 152) takes a more contextual approach, taking into account the problem of social recognition. It understands that recognition is linked to a number of ambiguous terms and has developed a multilingual glossary to define its terms in a straightforward way. It relates 'recognition of learning outcomes' to 'certification of learning outcomes', 'mutual recognition of qualifications' and 'validation of learning outcomes'. As all these terms mean similar things (and we could add that they conceal the problem) CEDEFOP suggests that it is more fruitful to work an overarching term; the 'recognition of learning outcomes':

*'(a) Formal recognition: the process of granting official status to skills and competences either through the:*

- award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); or*
- grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences;*

*and/or*

*(b) Social recognition: the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders.'*

Both reports acknowledge that discussions on definitions can never be fully resolved. This paper will therefore treat the issue pragmatically, and speak of 'recognition of learning outcomes' or simply 'recognition' in general terms, that can mean both recognition of qualifications and assessment of prior learning. When it addresses a specific issue, the issue will be explained in more detail.



## 2. Why is recognition an important issue?

The discussion on recognition is a sensitive one, as it is more a political than a technical issue. Recognition of qualifications across borders challenges the assumption that a qualification acquired in one education system is fundamentally different to one obtained abroad. Equally, validation of non-formal and informal learning challenges the assumption that someone with a formal qualification has more competences than someone with substantial work experiences lacking a qualification. In recent years, this political discussion has surfaced because of (at least) the following international developments.

### *A. Recognition, lifelong learning and unemployment*

The enormous job losses that we have experienced in recent years, especially in industrial sectors, have led to a situation in which many qualifications have become obsolete. For workers who have recently been laid off, recognition of work experience has become an immediate concern. By having their competences assessed they can either enrol into VET programmes to update their skills or enter a different employment sector. In this way, recognition is used as an instrument to solve the unemployment crisis.

### *B. Intergenerational equity and social mobility*

A high level qualification is almost a prerequisite for having access to decent work, even if it is by no means a guarantee. Older (especially female) workers and marginalised groups often do not have formal qualifications and face structural discrimination on the labour market. Statistics on worldwide participation in VET indicate a massification of secondary and tertiary vocational programmes (UIS 2006). Although we know little about completion rates, current generations, especially women, seem to have much more access to VET than previous ones. At the same time, however, OECD reports indicate that participation in education is still very unequal, as lower socio-economic strata often remain outside formal education. But do those on the margins not have important experience and competences, sometimes equivalent to or higher than those with a formal qualification? Recognition of prior learning ensures that those who didn't have access to formal qualifications receive access to better jobs.

### *C. International migration.*

A recent ILO report estimated that about 90% of international migrants are workers, leading to the conclusion that '[m]igration today is for work' (ILO 2010). Entry to the labour market is regulated by ILO Convention 143, which does not seem to be properly implemented (ILO 2010: 170). Where international legislation exists to recognise qualifications across borders, it does not seem to be very effective. The very detailed European directive on the recognition of professional qualifications (2005/36/EC) was adopted in 2005 with a view to integrating many different existing pieces of legislation and making it more effective for learners. Although it should have been transposed into national legislation by 2007, current assessments (EC 2010) show that the directive is still not properly implemented in a number of member states. Consequently, many migrants (especially women) end up in lower paying jobs, even if they have formal qualifications from their home countries.



Rather than letting them fall outside of the formal labour market, recognition of qualifications ensures that migrants have access to decent and protected jobs.

### **3. What are the Problems in Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning?**

It is hard to answer this question concretely, as national policies diverge considerably. Yet, it is clear that recognition needs fairly complex policy that can easily go wrong when it is implemented in practice. Often, schemes have been set up that are either inaccessible for those who need them, or, at the other extreme, hardly reflect educational standards. This paper will address some of these concerns that could be moved up on EI's agenda.

#### *A. Recognition of qualifications as a legal issue*

There is a wide disparity in regulations concerning vocational professions. In some countries, especially following the German-French tradition, a qualification as a hairdresser or a car-mechanic is regulated by regionally or nationally established curricula. More liberal labour markets, such as those in the Anglo-Saxon tradition do not have these requirements. These different VET-systems have been adapted to regional or national labour market conditions and as a consequence, entry to the labour market is nearly impossible for people migrating from one system to another. Establishing more strict legal requirements is therefore not always a solution to solving recognition issues, leading international organisations such as the OECD to argue for more 'liberal' labour market requirements. On the other hand, more liberal entry-schemes are no guarantee for social recognition of qualifications either. Employers may still have doubts about foreign qualifications and may freely discriminate if there exists no clear legislation that secures the rights of the migrant. Indeed, one sign of discrimination is pay differentials between people with comparable qualifications (e.g. between men and women, or between migrants and non-migrants). For the ILO, the implication is that liberal entry regulations have to be based on the rights of the migrant. Moreover, it recommends measures to build trust between systems to facilitate the social recognition of qualifications.

#### *B. The relationship between recognition and trade in education*

Much like in higher education, private providers of VET strongly argue in favour of liberal recognition schemes. EI should therefore reflect about the question whether a liberal view to recognition would further legitimise private provision in VET. EI has already worked on this issue, through the development of a set of guidelines for cross-border provision of VET, that 'intended to address and counterbalance the threats posed by trade and investment agreements, not only to staff jobs and living standards, but to the quality of education and training students receive' (Education International, 2007). The guidelines are based on the idea of rigorous quality standards for VET, as well as the guarantee of professional rights for staff working in private providers. The implication is that work on recognition should build on these guidelines, and allow recognition to take place only through procedures that upheld these rigorous standards of quality.



#### *C. Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance*

The recent OECD review 'Learning for Jobs' (OECD 2010) argued for the establishment of qualifications frameworks, linked to quality assurance mechanisms. Qualifications frameworks are understood as 'a rank order of qualification levels, allowing each qualification to be assigned to a specific rank. It classifies qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved (ibid, p. 142)'. The aim of these instruments would be to build trust between systems, as well as provide a stimulus for a constant improvement of quality. Yet precisely in these systems, there is a serious risk of formalizing VET-qualifications, through the creation of a bureaucratic system to define curricula. Another danger, highlighted in EI/TUAC's reaction to the review is the introduction of a strict 'audit culture' that may further restrict the professional autonomy of teachers in VET-schools. The implication is that EI could argue for broad, flexible qualifications frameworks, and a peer-review system for quality assurance, in which teachers play the leading role themselves.

#### *D. The relationship between formal and non-formal and informal education*

Scepticism about recognition issues can also be traced to the importance of formal education. This discussion could challenge many fundamental questions of the value of education, as well as inequalities between those with and without a qualification. This is especially visible in the sensitive question of whether recognition of non-formal or informal learning should lead to the awarding of full degrees, such as in the French validation scheme. The obvious danger is that recognition becomes a cheap alternative to providing formal education, or that formal education receives the same status to on-the-job training. A solution to this problem could be provided by the question of who validates the learner's achievements and who awards recognition. EI could argue that this competence should always lie with schools and teachers, who are in the best position to judge whether someone has reached the desired level of outcomes. If the formal education system remains in charge of awarding degrees, rather than bodies of civil servants or private enterprises, it is more likely that the standards of formal education will be upheld.

### **4. What can EI do to approach the issue of recognition on the international level?**

#### *A. Adopt a cross-sectoral approach*

Recognition issues in VET are closely interlinked with recognition issues in higher education. While some tools have been developed in higher education to facilitate the recognition of qualifications on the international level, such as the UNESCO/OECD guidelines on the cross-border provision of higher education, no similar tools exist for VET. At the same time, it seems that these tools are not yet very effective. The experience in higher education could be used to develop more effective tools for the VET-sector, perhaps including other partners (see below).

#### *B. Work with relevant international organisations:*



#### ILO

In its recent report on international labour migration, the ILO (2010) addressed the issue of recognition of qualifications as a solution to discrimination on the labour market. It mentions its Convention no. 143 as a tool to improve this and the lack of implementation therefore (ibid, p. 170).

*EI could work with ITUC in the framework of ILO on improving the implementation of Convention no. 143. Also, it could address the issue of recognition in its follow-up work with the ILO on the global dialogue forum.*

#### ITUC/GUFS

The ITUC doesn't seem to mention the issue of recognition in its documents on migration or on young workers. Yet, as recognition issues are as much a labour market issue, as an educational issue, EI would stand much stronger if it engages in a debate with other trade union organisations, including the sectoral ones.

*Concretely: EI could engage in a dialogue with ITUC on its work on migration and young workers.*

#### OECD

As already mentioned, the OECD recently produced a report on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (Werquin 2010). While the publication mostly aims at a better understanding of recognition systems in member states, it also contains a number of policy recommendations. The obvious issues that EI should look out for are the involvement of stakeholders (ibid, p. 74), the development of quality assessment (ibid, p. 79) and equity and equality issues in accessing recognition schemes (ibid, p. 81). However, more broadly, EI could pay attention to recognition leading to standardised VET schemes (ibid, p. 72) as well as cost-benefit issues (ibid, p. 86). If recognition procedures combined with on-the-job learning will be seen as a cheap alternative to formal education, the consequences of such a policy might be financial. Similarly, the recent VET review 'Learning for Jobs' (OECD 2010) pointed to the need for qualifications frameworks (ibid, p. 141) and the related need for quality assurance frameworks (ibid, p. 144) as well as national assessment schemes for practical skills (ibid, p. 147).

*Concretely: EI could argue through TUAC that recognition procedures should first of all be based on building trust between education systems, rather than on developing complex and expensive testing schemes. EI should pay close attention to any cost-benefit analysis of recognition that arises from its current work.*

#### Students' Unions and Youth Organisations

Students' unions and youth organisations have approached the issue of recognition from the perspective of learners and argue for a much more liberal approach to recognition. Although no world organisation for students or youth exists, work could be undertaken with regional organisations, which would most likely provide support for EI's views.





*Concretely, EI can undertake a dialogue with students' unions and youth organisations on the issue of recognition.*

#### UNESCO/UNEVOC

At present, UNESCO has one general and several regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications in higher education. No such convention exists for TVET or for informal and non-formal learning. There are however three clauses on recognition of non-formal and informal learning in its revised TVET recommendation (UNESCO 2001, clauses 13.c, 15.a and 45). So far, UNEVOC does not seem to have initiated specific work on recognition issues, although we could stimulate them to carry out an investigation on the basis of the revised TVET Recommendation from 2001.

*Concretely: EI could engage in an initial dialogue with UNESCO/UNEVOC about recognition issues in the view of the revised TVET recommendation from 2001 as well as promoting the EI 'Guidelines on the Cross-Border Provision of VET'.*

#### World Bank

At this time, the World Bank has not taken any concrete action on the issue of recognition.

#### WTO/GATS

The issue of recognition of qualifications could become an important issue under GATS-strand 4, the movement of natural persons, even if this area of the GATS seems to have had little influence until now.

*Concretely, EI should keep a watch on the liberalisation of labour regulations following GATS-clauses on the movement of natural persons.*

#### *C. In Europe, work towards an evaluation of the Directive 2005/36/EC*

The evaluation of the recent directive integrating 15 previous directives concerning the recognition of qualifications has just started. A meeting took place in March 2010 consulting major professional organisations, although excluding the voice of teachers. In the future, EI/ETUCE can draft a position on the directive and take part in the evaluation, working with its member organisations in Europe.

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