

Players, practices and challenges in NFIL and its validation in Europe
(NFIL: Non-Formal and Informal Learning)

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Presentation of the document

This document reports on the study conducted by a team from the ALPHA¹ Group for the European Trade Union Confederation on the practices and issues involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning². An initial version of this document supported the work of the conference organised by the ETUC in Lisbon on 26 and 27 June 2012: its various parts correspond to the successive milestones in the conference. The definitive version takes account of the debates at the conference.

A general introduction (chapter 1) presents the objectives and the methods involved in the study, based on a survey of ten European countries. It suggests a typology of those ten countries, in light of a criterion blending the ambition of the public NFIL validation policies and the involvement of the social players in the design and implementation of those policies. The characteristics proper to each country are touched upon. This gives the reader a summary overview of the ten national surveys, which form the study's original informational basis³.

This introduction is followed by a series of thematic chapters:

- Chapter 2 gives the economic and social contexts which colour NFIL practices: the state of the labour market, the needs in terms of skills development and access to training, and the needs for recognition of individuals.
- Chapter 3 stresses the driving role that can be played by public policies and collective bargaining in the development of recognised and validated NFIL practices.
- Chapter 4 identifies the diversity of the NFIL recognition and validation processes, as well as the need for simplification expressed by many players in the system, to make it into a right that is genuinely accessible.
- Chapter 5 puts forward some factors in analysing the impact of NFIL on the labour market, an important aspect in the current crisis situation.
- On the basis of the analysis of national practices and these thematic developments, chapter 6 first looks at the European prospects and then explores the avenues for a practice for NFIL validation shared in a better way between the countries of Europe. To finish, it issues a set of recommendations, which, while not claiming to be exhaustive, seek to respond to certain issues identified in the national surveys and in the summary itself.

¹ In addition to the three authors of the synthesis, this team included Mathieu Malaquin (Centre Etudes & Prospective) and Nicolas Rode (ConsultingEuropa).

² NFIL is also sometimes translated into French as *Apprentissages non-formels et informels*.

³ Detailed reports are available, in English, on each of these national surveys.

1. General introduction

For over ten years, the dynamic management of people's vocational pathways and transitions has been attracting close attention from the European social and political players. In that context, the practices around non-formal and informal learning (NFIL), as well as the possibility of their recognition and validation, can benefit a wide diversity of social groups, in particular the most vulnerable, and contribute towards correcting educational inequalities. They can also have a significant impact on the whole system for access to knowledge, skills and competences in enterprises and on the labour market.

A set of descriptive and normative materials has been built up over a number of years by the Community institutions: an inventory drawn up by ECORYS, then GHK⁴, general principles produced by the Council of the Union for the Identification and Validation of NFIL⁵, and the CEDEFOP⁶ *Guidelines*, which are designed to identify the practices for the validation of NFIL and encourage their development.

Box 1: Community definitions

Formal learning is delivered by educational establishments, it is intentional on the part of the learner and leads to qualification. **Non-formal learning**, too, is intentional and follows a structured methodology, but it does not occur in the framework of an educational establishment and tends not to lead to any qualification. **Informal learning**, which results from everyday work-, family- or leisure-related activities, is not usually intentional and does not lead to qualification. Understanding and implementation of these European distinctions vary depending on the national and local contexts. Some countries like to refer simply to recognition and validation of *prior learning and experience*, irrespective of the path taken to obtain such prior learning and experience.

What we call **recognition** of non-formal or informal learning refers to its being taken into account, specifically on the labour market and by the employer, in defining a worker's job, position and career. **Validation** (or sometimes **accreditation**) of non-formal or informal learning means the transformation of the experience acquired into some form of **qualification**.

The **formalization** of NFIL advocated at Community level is intended as a complete, integrated process, structured according to a clearly ordered series of stages: **validation** of the competences acquired non-formally and informally covers the sequence of **identification**, **documentation (or registration)**, **evaluation** and **recognition** of those competences, right up to a possible **qualification**. Very often at national or regional level, only some segments in this validation chain exist; and the national terms for describing these segments do not always directly translate the Community terms ...

Final certification is not a compulsory result of the validation process, but the prospect of such certification offers a purpose which motivates people entering the process. It is regarded as desirable by a very large majority of the respondents to the public consultation organised in 2011 by the European Commission on NFIL (European Commission, 2012a).

⁴ The ECORYS inventory, carried out in the early 2000s, is available on the ECORYS / ECOTEC site: <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>. The 2010 update is available on the CEDEFOP site: CEDEFOP, European Commission and GHK (2010), *2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning - final report*.

⁵ *Conclusions of the Council and representatives of the governments of Member States meeting within the Council on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*, Council of the European Union, EDUC 118 SOC 253, 18 May 2004.

⁶ *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*, CEDEFOP, 2009.

The European Commission is committed to a process of framing recommendations on NFIL, its recognition and validation. Against that background, the ETUC has commissioned the ALPHA Group to produce a study exploring NFIL practices and how it is recognised, on the basis of a survey conducted in ten European countries. While taking account of the work already carried out on the subject, the aim was to identify the involvement of the social partners, as a factor in countries' commitment to the validation of NFIL and its social and economic impact. This introduction, after outlining certain key issues around NFIL, presents the investigative methodology used by the ALPHA Group team and gives a snapshot of the countries surveyed.

1.1. Issues involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning (NFIL)

A broad and diverse span of social groups affected by the validation of NFIL

The interest shown in the processes and outcomes of non-formal and informal learning is warranted by the large proportion of the active European population (between a quarter and a third) who have low qualification levels, in other words not beyond the first cycle of secondary education. This population includes a heterogeneous assembly of vulnerable social groups: young people leaving school with no recognised diploma; migrants with qualifications not always readily transferable in the host country; women starting or restarting work late; low-skilled unemployed people who have been long excluded from the labour market; illiterate adults, etc. The handicaps affecting these groups may prove persistent: adults with low levels of initial formal education also very often find it harder to gain access to continuing training in the course of their working life: inequalities mount up over time⁷.

'Formalizing' NFIL to correct educational inequalities

The focus on the validation of NFIL draws on the European trend which has emerged in favour of the valorisation of learning outcomes. This means:

- giving a more important role to vocational evolution in the workplace in the acquisition and validation of skills,
- paying attention to the outcomes of continuing learning throughout the career path, rather than simply the diplomas issued after initial education.

This recognition of learning outcomes is regarded, in the work of expert groups, as highly desirable from the point of view of better management of vocational pathways and transitions⁸. It reinforces the motivations of individuals vis-à-vis lifelong learning. It draws upon a set of on-going developments, within which the European social players are bringing their influence to bear (see box 2). The purpose of the NFIL mechanisms is to get themselves embedded in the national skills qualification systems and encourage their alignment, via the learning outcomes approach.

⁷ This is further confirmed by the study: *Adults in Formal Education: lifelong learning in practice*, Eurydice network, European Commission, February 2011.

⁸ Cf. *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now. A report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs*, European Commission, February 2010. The Community initiative *New Skills for New Jobs* drew critical attention in the framework of the work carried out by the Centre Etudes & Prospective of the ALPHA Group for the European Trade Union Confederation, *For a trade union version of the New Skills for New Jobs initiative*, October 2010, <http://www.etuc.org/a/8180>

Box 2: A Community 'acquis' consisting of principles and instruments

In the field of education and training, the European Union has developed a set of mechanisms and instruments allowing students and employed workers to access mobility options which expand their personal and vocational horizons, while respecting their rights and competences. These tools help to gradually forge a genuine European labour market, regulated by recognition of skills and competences which is comparable and transferable from one country to another. The Lisbon strategy proposed a framework for action in this field, but its disappointing achievements have added to the determination to tackle the obstacles in the framework of the *Europe 2020* strategy more resolutely. The lifelong learning programme is involved in these issues: building bridges between initial and continuing training, transitions between vocational training and university education, preventive treatment of vocational ageing, broader access to continuing training and recognition of competences acquired in the workplace.

The European social players have fostered this evolution. They have agreed on some reference principles, in particular when it comes to ensuring that access to training helps the European labour market to be more inclusive. They have at their disposal works conducted jointly in the framework of their social dialogue. In 2002, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), BusinessEurope (then known as UNICE), the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises. (UEAPME) and the European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP) adopted a ***Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competencies and qualifications***. One of the main thrusts of this framework was to stimulate a positive interplay between workers, enterprises and public authorities around four priorities: anticipating the needs in terms of competences and qualifications; recognition and validation of competences and qualifications; information, support and advice for individuals; resources to mobilise. An evaluation of the implementation of this framework was conducted in 2006.

In order to animate and develop these 'acquis' from the social dialogue, the ETUC has regularly and vigorously reiterated its proposals on the role of lifelong learning. In March 2009, it adopted a ***Resolution on initial and continuous vocational training for a European employment strategy***, calling for a genuine right to training, accessible to all citizens and workers. This resolution visibly influenced the communication published by the European Commission in June 2010, '***A New Impetus for European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy***'. This communication reaffirms several objectives and principles for action proposed by the European trade unions:

- Equipping people with the right combination of skills and updating them, via initial and continuing vocational training.
- Encouraging systems which favour lifelong learning, by furnishing people with guidance services, enabling learning pathways to be customised, and ensuring the transparent recognition of prior learning in the workplace.
- Modernising vocational education and training systems by harmonising the national qualification frameworks by reference to the European framework for the sake of encouraging permeability between vocational education and higher education and promoting positive mobility for workers.

The ETUC adopted a new resolution in December 2010, ***More investment in lifelong learning for quality jobs***. This resolution recalls the terms of the ***Framework Agreement on Inclusive Labour Markets***, concluded between the European social partners BusinessEurope, CEEP, ETUC and UEAPME in March 2010. These texts focus on the introduction of individual skills development programmes, defined jointly between employer and worker. The ETUC stresses the need for validation of non-formal and informal learning, according to credible procedures ensuring the transferability of the skills thus recognised.

On 18 April 2012, the European Commission published a communication, ***Towards a job-rich recovery***, which plans to promote the topics put forward by the *Europe 2020* strategy, at a time when the countries of Europe are concerned with the pathways that can be envisaged to return to growth that will create jobs. This communication focuses on social inclusion and confidence as factors in economic dynamism. It devotes one section to the need to 'invest in skills', stressing the tangible skills shortage evidenced by the number of vacancies remaining unfilled on Europe's labour markets. It seeks to reinforce the monitoring and anticipation of skills, specifically by setting up a ***European Skills Panorama***, to be launched by the end of 2012, and designed as one step towards the convergence of the existing anticipation tools: it will furnish an overview of employment prospects and skills needs in the short and medium term at European, national and sectoral levels.

At the operational level, the Commission is aware that the role played by the European employment services portal (EURES) today is too marginal. The ***European multilingual taxonomy of Skills, Competencies and Occupations*** (ESCO), currently underway and designed to contain several thousand descriptives, should favour the adoption, by the education system players and those in the labour market alike, of a precise common operational language to match those offering jobs with those looking for them; European employment services and employers will use the ESCO to define a set of skills and competences required when they describe a job. The agenda of the ESCO programme should be fully open to intervention by the national and European social players: it is a matter not of building a heavy, rigid 'white elephant', but promoting a process taking account of the different national perceptions of the same jobs.

The Commission plans to promote systematic reference of certificates issued in the various countries to the skills levels in the ***European Qualifications Framework*** (EQF). It proposes that the ***CV Europass***, which is already in operation, be accompanied by a ***European skills passport***, listing the holder's skills, irrespective of how those skills were acquired. For the most mobile workers, the Commission recalls its proposed directive in December 2011, designed to bring in a ***European Professional Card***.

NFIL validation seeks to integrate with the efforts intended to reinforce the consistency of the European labour market, on the basis of recognition of workers' effective competences, possibly via their qualification, thereby facilitating their transferability. The ETUC wants the Commission to urge the Member States to improve the practices for the validation of non-formal and informal learning where they exist, and to nurture such mechanisms where they are still in their infancy.

The potentially systemic impact of the dissemination and validation of NFIL

The large-scale dissemination of NFIL practices is liable to have a systemic effect on the recognised role of skills in the setting of enterprises and the balance of the labour market. The development and recognition of prior learning in the sense of NFIL help to equip workers better when it comes to their vocational transitions: the recognised skills are expanded beyond those recorded simply by diplomas acquired before entering active life, during initial training; and employers benefit from a better overview of the skills on offer. The match between supply and demand in terms of employment can be the better for this.

Private enterprises, the public sector and the world of associations are stakeholders involved in NFIL (particularly when the organisation of their activity is dubbed 'learning' for workers participating in it). The social players, from both the union and employers' sides, are in the business of making an active commitment to the promotion and regulation of promising initiatives. The identification and validation of NFIL automatically mobilise many social and institutional players: their coordination around shared principles and concrete programmes determines the role of NFIL and its validation as a legitimate component in the whole education and training system.

Inserting NFIL into the education and training system in this way may cause tensions and disturbances: the bodies in charge of pre-existing qualification standards may show some reluctance when faced with the validation of skills acquired and recognised by non-formal or informal methods, fitting within specific local and individual contexts. Where NFIL is perceived – rightly or wrongly – as a substitute for formal education organised along the lines of courses leading to diplomas, it can arouse mistrust among social players focusing on equal access to formal education and the quality of training courses.

NFIL responds to objectives of individual development, by offering people from vulnerable social groups easier access to the recognition or validation of their experience. In this way, it is contributing towards social cohesion. In an ambitious version, it has a systemic objective: to improve the effectiveness of the education and training system in its entirety and to contribute towards making vocational pathways more secure, both within and outside enterprises. It follows that it is in the public interest for NFIL to be formalized and effectively recognised on the labour market, and to lead to qualification.

1.2. Survey methodology

In order to point up the diversity among European practices for the recognition of NFIL and the arrangements for the involvement of the social partners, ten countries were selected for the survey, from among those appearing respectively, in the 2010 CEDEFOP and GHK inventory, at a high, medium or low level of progress in terms of taking account of NFIL and its validation:

Levels of account taken of NFIL and its validation

High		Medium-high		Medium-low		Low	
Finland, Netherlands, Portugal	France, Norway,	Denmark, Romania, Sweden, (England, Northern Ireland), UK (Scotland)	Germany, Spain, UK Wales, (Scotland)	Austria, (Flanders), (Wallonia), Republic, Iceland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia,	Belgium Belgium Czech Estonia, Ireland, Slovakia,	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Turkey	Croatia, Greece,

Source: Hawley J., Souto Otero M. and Duchemin C. (2010).

The following ten countries have been chosen: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom (England).

The study was structured into three successive phases:

1. In a preparatory phase, from September to November 2011, the analysis of the national information available and the exchanges with a series of national trade union correspondents affiliated to the ETUC allowed a pre-diagnosis to be adjusted for each of the countries selected.
2. Phase 2, between November 2011 and March 2012, saw the ten national surveys being conducted, on the basis of interviews in each country with players who participate in the vocational training and NFIL validation mechanisms: social partners, employers and unionists on the ground, public institutions and training centres.
3. Finally, phase 3 saw national monographs being drawn up to present and summarise the national surveys. These in turn give rise to the present synthesis, enriched by the contributions from the Lisbon conference on 26 and 27 June 2012.

1.3. Major criteria in distinguishing three groups of countries

In the ten countries selected, one of the purposes of the study was to analyse the involvement of the social players, specifically the unions, in the definition and implementation of the NFIL validation mechanisms, as well as the impact of that involvement. This commitment by the social players and its effectiveness determine the systemic range, or potential range, of those mechanisms, through their incorporation in the education and training system and in the operation of the labour market.

A typology of national situations emerges from the surveys. It does not contradict the CEDEFOP-GHK classification but focuses on the ***criterion of a cross between the public NFIL validation policies and the method of involvement of the social players, specifically the unions***. It distinguishes between three groups of countries, two groups which are polar opposites and one in the middle: countries where the existence of public NFIL recognition programmes enjoys the involvement of the social partners; others where the autonomous intervention of trade union players on the training front can be very active without (yet) being backed by a mature and stabilised institutional system for the recognition of NFIL; in between these two extremes, the middle group includes the countries where the public initiative is rolled out more at the regional than the national level.

The three groups, differentiated by this prime criterion, are not homogeneous in other senses: the countries grouped together may have quite different levels of development, whether in terms of the economy in general or the training system. This means that the implementation of the NFIL validation programmes does not obey simple socio-economic determinism: it expresses the capacity of the social and political players to produce such programmes and get involved in their implementation. This capacity may prevail in quite different countries, which is a sign that is quite favourable to the implementation of common thrusts at European level.

1. **Countries which implement broad public NFIL validation programmes, with a universal ambition (even if there are favoured targets), and programmes for insertion of validation into the lifelong learning systems: Denmark, Finland, France and Portugal.** These public programmes each have their own limits and contradictions, but they have the merit of existing and being capable of evolution: they may indicate an interesting orientation at European level.
 - **Denmark** adopted a policy in 2004 entitled *Recognition of prior learning in the education system*, developed by legislative evolution in 2007: NFIL validation is given high priority. NFIL is taken into account right across the education system, but its validation is principally a particular focus when it comes to adult vocational education and training. The private sector has a long tradition of validation of work experience, and the unions now support individuals in their moves in terms of the recognition of this experience acquired. Over the period 2004-2006, some 150,000 people benefited from the NFIL validation system. The Danish Education Minister has recently launched several initiatives designed to improve understanding of the system and increase its impact.
 - **Finland** has had a skills-based qualification system since the mid-1990s, with regard to initial education and continuing training. Recognition of experience acquired is central to this system, and the social partners and enterprises alike play a stakeholder role. Between 1997 and 2008, over 65,000 people benefited from this system with a view to obtaining partial or full qualification of their competences.
 - **In France**, the main mechanism, introduced by the law in 2002, is Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL, *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*, VAE), which extends the old mechanism to all qualifications recognised by the State and the social partners. Any citizen with at least three years of experience at work or as a volunteer has the right to engage the validation of his competences through the APL system. This system can be mobilised as a tool for obtaining a complete certificate or as a way of acquiring units towards a full certificate. Over the period 2002-2005, over 50,000 qualifications were validated and 53,000 applicants for APL were logged in 2008. The social partners play an important role in the implementation of APL and many enterprises are facilitating access for their staff to the mechanism.
 - **In Portugal**, a large-scale public initiative, entitled *Novas Oportunidades*, was rolled out in 2006 for the sake of getting the maximum number of people concerned up to a minimum qualification level, corresponding to twelve years of schooling. It took the experience acquired with the prior implementation of the process of skills validation (*'Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências'*, RVCC). The quantitative objectives of the initiative were very ambitious and the progression towards them has relied on the setting up of a network of 450 *Novas Oportunidades* centres, often housed in pre-existing vocational training centres. The implementation of the initiative has enjoyed good cooperation between the public institutions concerned and the active commitment of the social players, both political, institutional and operational. The initiative organised a dual process for the validation of competences acquired: key educational competences; vocational competences. The achievement of the objectives is noticeably more satisfactory for the former, which has limited the impact of the initiative on the operation of the labour market.
2. **Countries where the implementation of NFIL validation processes is a matter first of all for local and regional initiatives, aimed at particular sectors and/or professions: Italy, Spain.** In these two countries, national leadership is weak on the question of NFIL. The national framework is better established in Spain, and the initiatives by the Autonomous Communities abide by a clearly defined national procedure, whereas there is (as yet) no such national framework in Italy.

- **In Italy**, the development of a system for NFIL validation became a priority in the mid-2000s. It is driven, among other things, by the development of the National Qualification Framework, which rests on 'standard' criteria. Several past or current regional initiatives participate in the progress of NFIL validation. Whereas certain regions have launched genuine NFIL validation initiatives, others are still at the stage of partially implementing tools linked to validation. For example, the '*Libretto Formativo del Cittadino*', created in 2005, is an official document recording the skills acquired during training programmes and those acquired in non-formal or informal contexts. The content of the *Libretto Formativo del Cittadino* was tested between 2006 and 2009 in thirteen Italian regions. The *Libretto* remains more a kind of documentation than a validation of competences. In February 2010, an agreement on training policies between the Ministry of Labour, the regions and the social partners refers explicitly to validation as an important aspect to be developed. The institutional resources and the trade union determination do exist to move forwards towards a more ambitious national framework. In fact, two recent agreements and a draft law are preparing for the introduction of a system of validation-certification of skills at national level: the agreement of 19 April 2012 between the regions and the government provides for the introduction of a national system for the certification of skills for all industries, with minimum certification standards; on 20 June 2012, the Italian regions signed an agreement between themselves to reinforce the April agreement by actions to follow up its application at territorial level; at the beginning of the summer of 2012, the Italian Parliament is starting the debate on a future law on the validation and certification of skills at national level.
 - **In Spain**, the 'universally accessible accreditation of NFIL' has been a component in the Spanish vocational training and qualification system since the founding law of 2002, but its practical implementation is recent and selective: a royal decree from 2009 restricts this implementation to certain levels of competences and the annual calls for examination ('*convocatorias*') apply only to certain sectors, at the initiative of the competent regional authorities in the Autonomous Communities. These *convocatorias*, organised at regional level under the aegis of the national rules, target specific sectors of the labour market, in line with the estimated quantitative needs for qualified workers, and also with financial constraints. Certain Communities, such as Galicia, are proactive, but in others, such as Aragon, the social players regard the process as too complex and bureaucratic to really motivate potentially interested workers.
3. **Countries where active trade union intervention in terms of training goes hand in hand with a sometimes incomplete institutional system for NFIL validation, whose development is not considered to be a priority.** The reasons for this situation differ from country to country: in Germany, the highly structured system of vocational training leaves little room for NFIL validation; in England, the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) system opens the way to modular NFIL validation, although this pathway is not completely exploited; in Romania, the active trade union supply of training services cannot make up for the weaknesses of an institutional system for the validation of NFIL which still lacks maturity and stability; in Poland, developments in NFIL validation are embryonic and revolve around local initiatives.
- **In Germany**, NFIL validation does not spontaneously fit into a very structured and very demanding system, which today sees vocational training as having to be of a high standard, of university calibre: NFIL is by way of the gaps within that system. Employees have an individual, formal, privileged pathway of validation of their vocational prior learning and access to later training courses, the so-called 'external examination' or *Externenprüfung*, which affects a significant fraction of each age cohort. This path does not seem to be adequate today to respond to the needs of those

who escape the virtues of the dual training system: young people leaving school too young, migrants, etc. If there are fault lines in the training system which allow manpower elements to 'leak' out in a country in a situation of demographic ageing, better recognition for the place of NFIL formalization can be a welcome adjunct to the high-level vocational training system.

- **In England**, NFIL validation is solidly anchored in the NVQ system and proven methods for the recognition of experience, although without being a priority today. Trade union intervention, thanks to Learning Representatives, helps to ensure a genuine informal training community in the workplace and provides substantial services to workers, without a compulsory outcome in an explicit validation of competences by qualification. However, the modular, pragmatic approach of NVQs opens the way to such qualification. Methods and guidelines for the validation of NFIL, linked to the national qualification framework, exist in well-defined areas of education and training. These approaches are very varied in their scope and in the number of people who benefit under them. The oldest one, the NVQs, came on stream in the 1980s and offers individuals the possibility to get the skills they have acquired validated. This qualification can be issued in the workplace, in approved centres, or 'à la carte', according to the individual needs. Similarly, the various processes for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) have been mobilised since the early 1990s, both for admission and qualification in higher education.
- **Romania** has a system for the validation of NFIL organised by a series of laws and decrees in the course of the first ten years of the 21st century: this system makes explicit reference to the qualification of competences acquired in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. The *National Council of Adult Training* (CNFPA), which recently merged with another body into the *National Authority of Qualifications*, has authorised, and supervises, a network of validation centres, which play a basic role in the certification of skills. Between 2006 and 2010, the centres approved by the CNFPA issued almost 30,000 certificates for 150 professions. This institutional system, which is being revamped, continues to seek balance, stability and credibility. The remarkable trade union initiatives, which involve making certain activists into specialists on training questions and running vocational training centres with the backing of other economic and social players, provide substantial services to workers. But they do not always lead to public qualification. Work still needs to be done to build a solid relationship with the institutional NFIL validation mechanisms.
- **Poland** has a tradition of a strong focus on academic education and a weak culture of lifelong learning. The formal effort of alignment on the European frameworks clearly has trouble establishing itself in committed practices and policies by the social players. Poland does not yet have any system of NFIL validation. The current legal framework takes account only of the acquisition of knowledge via a formal framework of initial education or continuing training. However, many initiatives by the Polish authorities show a growing interest in lifelong learning-related issues and in taking account of the 'acquis' of NFIL. Local initiatives, at the level of regions or universities, show embryonic development.

2. The validation of NFIL: a response to socio-economic needs

2.1. The validation of prior learning in the face of national socio-economic issues

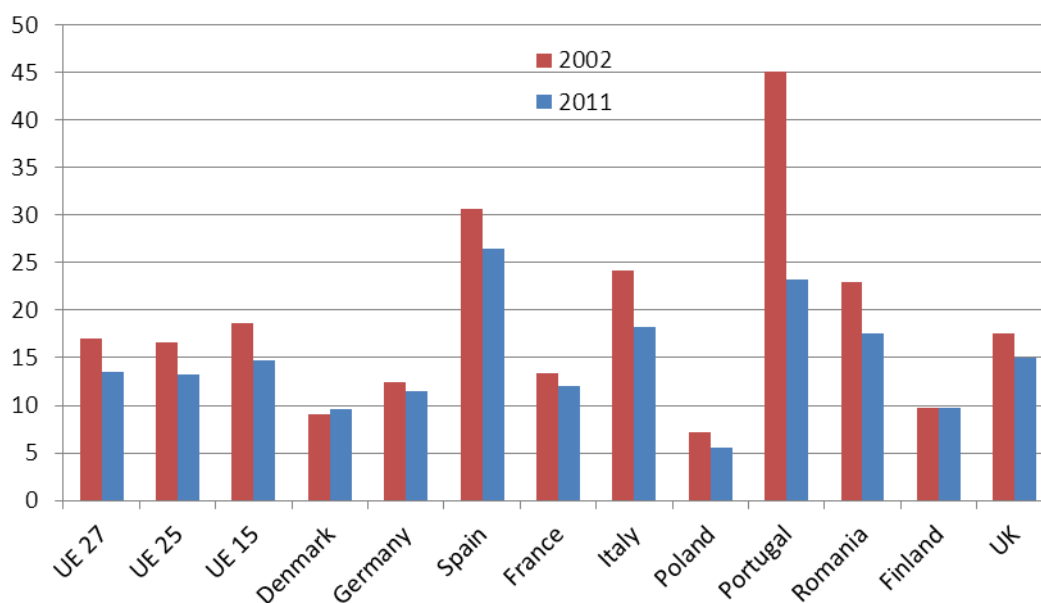
The main aim of this part is to illustrate the socio-economic contexts where the practices for the validation of non-formal and informal competences operate. These practices respond to certain needs, but at the same time they do not constitute a solution to all the problems encountered in terms of access to training: it is important to recognise their rightful place.

A general need for the upskilling of the active population

The need to upskill the active population is the most important shared characteristic for all the countries belonging to the sample in the study.

Two common problems are broadly characteristic of these countries: the number of young people leaving secondary school without a diploma (cf. graph 1), which remains fairly high in the developed countries, coupled with an average level of education that is quite low among senior workers.

Graph 1: Early leavers from education and training
(% of people aged 18 to 24, 2002 and 2011)



Source: Eurostat, Education and Training, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/education/data>

Note: The graph refers to the percentage of the population aged 18-24 who have not completed their secondary education and are not in a later education or training situation.

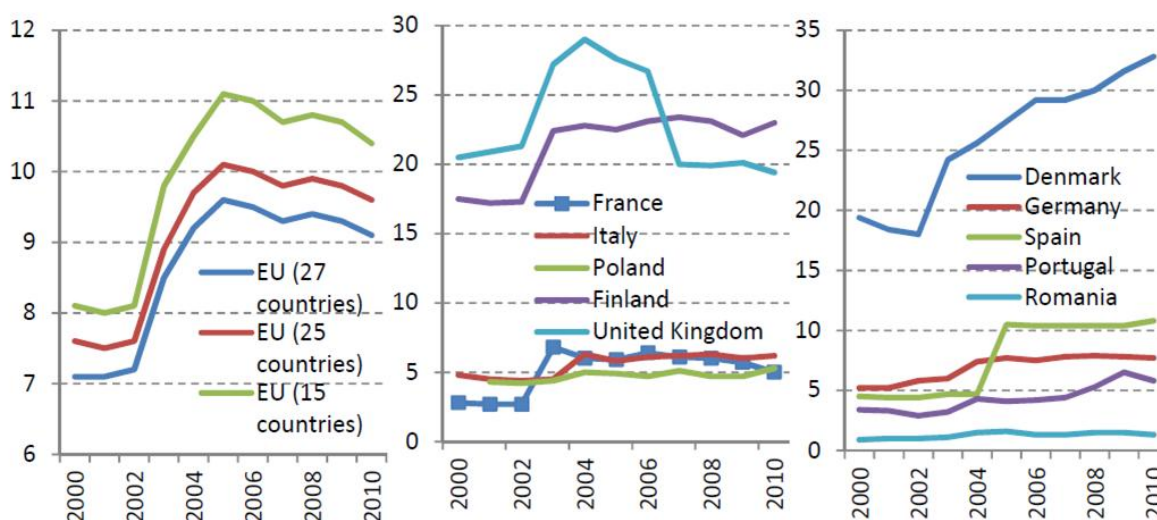
Some countries show more particular characteristics: the percentage of the population without a secondary education diploma may be very high (for example, in Portugal); workers in some countries experience harsh conditions on the labour market, being employed in jobs with low pay, on fragile employment contracts, as in Romania. Box 3 sums up the situations in the countries in our study, as they are considered by the trade unions and the other players encountered: this is a summary of the opinions gathered in the course of the national surveys.

Box 3: Situation and issues in the countries surveyed

Denmark	• Maintain high access to high qualifications so as to guarantee the country's development path • Take account of the demographic trends and the necessary workforce renewal
Finland	• Raise the qualifications of the population lacking basic education or vocational training • Recurrent problem of young people with no diploma (estimated at the beginning of the century at almost 50,000)
France	• A major share of the population at work continues to have low skills • Continuing training does not always lead to qualification
Germany	• A highly qualified industrial workforce, but growing insecurity in service jobs • Potentially 7 million fewer workers by 2030 (major demographic decline)
Italy	• A major share of the population has low levels of qualification • The 'unification' of the Italian labour market, in terms of recognition of competences, remains to be completed
Poland	• Over half of the population lacks a secondary education diploma • An intensive economy and low-skilled labour
Portugal	• Over half of the active population has not completed secondary education • An intensive economy and low-skilled labour
Romania	• An urgent need for improvements to the position of workers in a difficult labour market • An institutional system for promoting competences in search of balance and stability
Spain	• Low qualification of a major share of the active population • A large number of workers with no recognition of their vocational competences
United Kingdom (England)	• The focus is on the content of operational competences, more than on the level of education • A lack of funding for continuing training and the recognition of competences

Moreover, according to the European *Labor Force Survey*, which directly questions people about their employment conditions, participation by adults in lifelong learning and education actions has stopped growing at the global European level since the early years of the century: after the initial inspiration of the Lisbon strategy, things began to run out of steam. Graph 2 below shows these trends. The contrasts are stark: participation is unequal and low in many of the countries surveyed. Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom are fortunate to be the exceptions, but Denmark alone has continued to advance all through the early years of the century.

Graph 2. Participation by the adult population in lifelong learning actions (% , 2000-2010)



Source : Eurostat, Labor Force Survey

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=0&language=en&pcode=tsiem080>

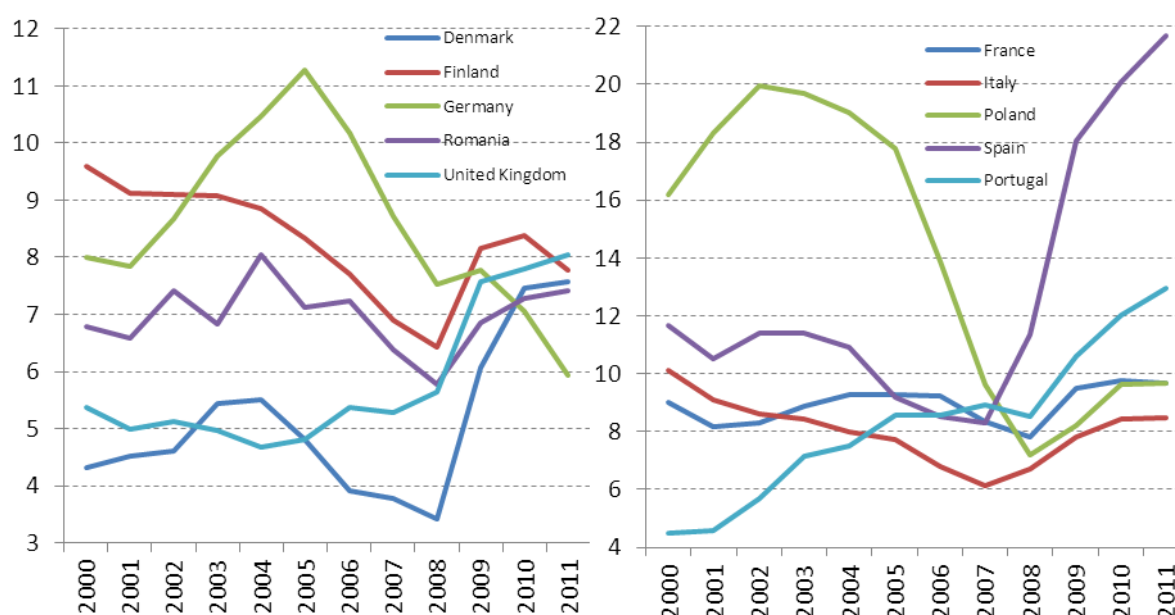
Note by Eurostat (extract): lifelong learning actions refer to persons aged between 25 and 64 who have stated that they have received education or training in the 4 weeks preceding the survey.

Other European statistical sources – the CVTS (*Continuing Vocational Training Survey*), and the *Adult Education Survey* – shed additional light. They confirm, in particular, that the intensity of training efforts within enterprises is very uneven between countries and enterprises, partly as a result of the size of the latter. And these two types of inequalities mount up: access to training for workers in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is made more difficult by the fact that they live in countries where enterprises make little effort globally. Workers in SMEs can be frankly excluded from access to training, while the SMEs have real trouble attracting talent.

The persistence, in the Community figures, of the ambition of lifelong learning thus emphasises the distance from a notably more mediocre reality. The resources ploughed into this ambition and the results achieved remain too limited to satisfy individual and collective training needs in the European Union. Effective access to lifelong learning remains too weak, globally, and too uneven between countries and people. Across all countries, the proportion of European adults remaining outside effective access to continuing training is considerable.

This situation is all the more problematic for the fact that there is a common, growing need for greater security in career pathways and transitions, in national economies affected by rocketing unemployment rates – with the exception of Germany – since the start of the European economic crisis (graph 3): while difficulties to do with competitiveness contribute to this rise in unemployment, the development of skills should be a priority.

Graph 3. Rates of unemployment in the countries in the study (% , 2000-2011)



Source: Eurostat, Datastream

The characteristics outlined above – too many young people leaving school early, low levels of participation in lifelong learning, the need for greater security for vocational pathways – call for the development of practices to recognise and validate non-formal and informal skills, with a view to bringing about a general increase in skilling among the population accompanied, depending on the national needs, by attention to more specific ‘target’ groups.

The frequent definition of target populations

Where a national framework exists for the validation of NFIL, the target populations can be quite large or more limited, with regard to precisely defined groups. In Portugal, for example, one of the major objectives of the validation policy was to certify 600,000 adults and enable 350,000 adults to benefit from upskilling between 2006 and 2010: the aim was to establish the level of secondary education (12 years of education) as the minimum level of qualification for the Portuguese population.

The local authorities, the education or training institutions, the unions or the employers may sometimes take the initiative of validation actions, by defining target populations as a function of their own perceptions, areas of expertise and resources. This may be particularly the case where the national framework forming the structure for the validation practices is non-existent, weak or in its infancy. In that sense, Italy represents an interesting case: the country does not yet have a national NFIL validation framework, meaning that the targets depend exclusively on local initiatives (regions or universities). In Germany, various organisations are concentrating their activities on specific groups such as low-skilled workers, the long-term unemployed, or migrant workers. The target groups differ depending on the level at which the validation is practised (regions, sectors).

The results obtained by the validation practices must be interpreted in light of the socio-economic issues specific to each country, which determine the definition of any target populations. For example, in Spain, despite serious general needs for increased levels of qualifications, the validation possibilities offered turn out to be quite limited in quantitative terms: validation involves the annual selective

procedure of the '*convocatorias*' (calls for examination) aimed at certain professions. Finland has made substantial progress on developing validation practices since the 1990s, but half of Finland's active population still lacks a sufficiently high level of basic or vocational education: the system seems to have been of more benefit to the more highly skilled workers. According to the experts interviewed, several groups have already benefited from existing initiatives, but might derive more benefit from targeted validation actions, such as migrants (representing a growing slice of the active population in Finland, particularly in the construction sector), young unskilled people, and workers working or having worked in the traditional industries being restructured (like the paper sector).

2.2. The importance of NFIL validation for the individual worker

Above and beyond the collective needs emerging from the socio-economic context, the recognition of non-formal and informal competences, whether or not it leads to a qualification, is a response to individual needs which correspond in part to non-monetary elements: consideration, confidence, autonomy, etc. Naturally, the salary corresponds to a recompense considered to be 'normal' or 'expected' when we are talking about NFIL validation, but that does not make it easy to get! However, for an individual, the motivation to enter a process for the validation of his experience includes advantages which are not necessarily monetary (or at least not immediately):

- ***To favour his career with a view to lifelong learning***, by helping to make the pathway and the vocational transitions ahead more secure, particularly in the face of the intense restructuring operations implemented by enterprises.
- ***To valorise the experience gained in the workplace***, but acquired also in associations and in the family environment. Recognition of all the skills acquired is particularly important for the unemployed, in order to help them to find another job.
- ***To drive his personal development and that of his family.***

The social integration of individuals, their consideration by others and their confidence in themselves are bolstered. This is particularly the case where the validation process leads to formal recognition: qualification is experienced as an important symbolic event.

Such validation can be particularly gratifying for low-skilled workers who have no diploma, as we can see from the survey entitled *Attitudes towards vocational education and training*, in the Special Eurobarometer in September 2011: *'People who see themselves as being low down on the social scale have less belief that VET can improve their job prospects than people higher up the scale. This represents a major challenge: one of the EU's main objectives is to open up opportunities to disadvantaged groups, but these results show that these groups, which have the lowest aspirations in general, have the least faith in the ability of vocational training to change and improve their circumstances'*. This makes it important to ensure that access to the tools for the recognition of skills is particularly open to the less well-skilled workers.

The possible non-monetary benefits of validation for individuals are not always sufficiently taken into account. Too many workers potentially concerned do not grasp the scale of the validation of their competences acquired through non-formal or informal avenues: having rights is not enough to assert them. The concrete dimension and the uneven awareness of the individual non-monetary benefits of the validation of NFIL are illustrated through the accounts of unionists in two countries:

- **In Finland**, certain testimonies report that the existing validation system makes it possible not only to offer certain workers a 'second chance', or even 'endless chances', but also to favour 'everyday

innovation' and 'worker-based innovation': skills liable to validation are firstly those acquired in the workplace. For the individual, the Finnish validation system, CBQ, or *competence-based qualification system* constitutes a flexible way of acquiring and recognising competences. But the unions, and other parties, also highlight the following fact: workers often think that preparatory training is indispensable to them, and are uneasy at seeing the duration and content of that training being pared down, when it is coupled with the validation of prior learning. The validation process can also prevent the worker concerned from remaining engaged with a work collective, while this collective dimension is important for most workers.

- **Italy**, where a national validation framework does not yet exist, although its construction has been embarked upon by recent agreements between regions and government, offers a different perspective. The point is that according to the trade unions, workers do not attach sufficient importance to the valorisation of their knowledge and competences, tending to think that the obligatory competences required to perform certain jobs are enough; the concept of 'validation of non-formal and informal competences' strikes them as very abstract. Sometimes they are not aware of the possibilities of validation, or do not want to benefit from them. But the Italian unions take a very pronounced interest in the validation of NFIL and believe that promoting validation instruments is in workers' interests.

The recognition and validation of skills acquired, irrespective of how they were acquired, must constitute an individual right that is practically accessible to all workers. Such recognition, which might stretch as far as certification, is an advantage for the worker, because it enables him to escape from strictly internal subordination to the enterprise, by improving his employability on the labour market.

2.3. The training and validation services offered by the unions

The unions' role in training, and more specifically in the development of NFIL validation practices, may take different shapes:

- **Informal participation methods**, for example in the framework of forums relating to training and validation processes, in liaison with the local educational institutions and public authorities. Italy does not yet have a national framework organising a unified system for NFIL validation, but the unions aspire eagerly to the development of such a framework. The role of the social partners varies depending on the local circumstances: in the Emilia-Romagna region, for instance, the social partners have a fairly weak role in the validation processes, but are very active in running the training system: one important stage in the development of validation in this region would be to get the social partners more closely involved. A similar diagnosis might be made in the case of the Autonomous Community of Aragon in Spain. In the Italian Marche region, there have so far been only a few experiences linked to the validation of prior learning, representing a first step towards a duly organised process. So the skills summary and the *Libretto Formativo Del Cittadino* are two tools for the identification and documentation of competences which the social partners are particularly keen to see disseminated in the crisis context.
- **Explicit involvement, at the national, regional and sectoral levels in the development and running of institutional NFIL validation mechanisms.** This involvement raises a parallel question: is validation an autonomous process vis-à-vis training, or is it rather organically tied to the training system? This is an important question for the trade union organisations, in particular when they have a far older tradition of involvement in the training system.

➤ ***Contribution to the management and financing of training and validation centres:***

- One particular feature in **Finland**, for example, is that it has a profusion of training centres, only some of which have to do with vocational training and validation, while the others offer *folk education*. Among the former, some are partly funded by the unions. For example, the *Siiikaranta-opisto* centre based in Espoo, near Helsinki, which is devoted to construction workers affiliated to the union *Rakennusliitto* (SAK Confederation), organises and prepares qualification examinations at the further vocational and specialist vocational levels. The centre focuses on competence tests conducted in companies, in the workplace. The centre likewise offers so-called general education services (social questions, collective bargaining, bargaining capacities, law, etc.) for labour protection delegates. Similar trade union centres exist in **Spain, Portugal and Romania**.
- **In the United Kingdom (England)**, Union Learning Centres have been created to coordinate all the trade union training actions. There are currently about 400 such centres. A hundred or so of these centres are involved in a network, offering a tool called Myguide, and in a second known as Unionlearn network (u-net), offering access to courses. Some centres are based in the workplace or very close by, in partnership with the employers, allowing for co-investment in the development of training.

➤ ***Information, guidance, assistance and support for workers in the training and validation mechanisms***, or participation in the processes and boards devoted to evaluating workers' competences. The unions can define their own integrated service provision, including training services, often giving priority to their members. Even where these services are developed, validation of competences is not always the end point.

- **The German unions** deliver political training to their teams, for the employment councils based on a specific law, the *Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*. They also train their members of the examining boards (legal problems, interpretation of accounting balances, training in insolvency, rhetoric, etc.). These courses are not annual, but are run on request.
- **In the United Kingdom (England)**, not all the unions offer the same training services. The offers involve strong activity by the Union Learning Representatives (ULRs). The ULRs are union members who take part in the initiatives in terms of education and training, by informing workers, mainly union members, and by offering them support during the training process. These Learning Representatives are not entitled to negotiate with the employers about training. In practice, some unions only offer initial information and basic advice, while others offer genuine vocational guidance services (skills summary, draft career construction, methods for access to training, etc.).
- **In Romania**, the development of an integrated package of services to workers corresponds to a strategic choice of the union *Blocul Nacional Sindical* (BNS). This integrated package focuses on a 'pillar' dedicated to the labour market, in such a way as to reduce workers' vulnerability in a market regarded as hostile: legal expertise, databases on job offers, training options for jobseekers, e-learning platform, etc. This service package relies on training tools designed for trade union activists intended to become 'catalysts' for training actions with their colleagues in enterprises.

3. Public policies and collective bargaining around validation

3.1. National validation framework and decentralised initiatives

In the countries studied which have a system for the recognition and validation of NFIL, validation most commonly occurs via the frameworks forming the structure of this system at the national level. However, the regional authorities or other institutions very often take the initiative and put forward their own arrangements for the recognition of prior learning. Local experience, which is substantial in the countries surveyed, may take varied paths. To distinguish between the countries' experiences, two questions arise:

1. ***Is there a national framework dedicated to the validation of NFIL, or only local initiatives*** (at the level of the regions, sectors, or from the universities, etc.)? The availability of a detailed national register or catalogue of qualifications, covering all professions, seems to be a condition for the solid and reliable development of NFIL validation because it allows for equivalences to be established between vocational competences acquired in different ways.
2. ***If a national framework does exist, how far does the involvement of the national authorities allow the effective implementation of the NFIL validation practices?*** This involvement may take the form of large-scale public initiatives, as was the case in Portugal with the *Novas Oportunidades* initiative between 2006 and 2011, which mobilised the validation methods already trialled earlier.

The need for a national qualification framework organising the comparability of competences

The sample of countries surveyed offers various experiences in the validation of NFIL, which may operate within a national framework providing a structure, or first go via local initiatives. Finland, France and Denmark, for example, are countries which enjoy clearly defined national institutional frameworks. Italy and Germany, on the other hand, are two countries which do not have a national framework devoted to the validation of prior learning from non-formal or informal avenues.

- **In Finland**, the validation of NFIL mainly occurs via the CBQ (competence-based qualification system), which plays a central role. This system has existed since 1994, although it was not codified by a law until 2006. The possibility of recognition of competences, however they were acquired, is a fundamental principle in the system in the field of adult education, but also in the field of higher education. The basic principle is the demonstration by the individual of his learning outcomes in the workplace. The Finnish validation system in the field of adult education is based upon tripartite collaboration: the social partners are involved from the local level to the national level. This tripartite involvement is regarded as a very important general principle by the people encountered in the national survey. It applies at the level of the National Board of Education, which supervises the national validation framework, and the Qualification Committees, which define the occupational standards, as well as at the level of the skills evaluation groups. Outside the CBQ system, validation may also take the form of the recognition of prior learning by the universities: in the university field, however, there is no unified framework and the initiative depends on the autonomous decisions by the universities.
- **In France**, practices for the validation of non-formal and informal competences are partially institutionalised within a legal framework. The social modernisation law of 17 January 2002 creates the right to Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), which allows anyone, on the basis of at least three years of paid, self-employed or volunteer activity, to acquire a full or partial qualification. This law also introduces the *National Register of Vocational Qualifications* (RNCP, *Registre National des*

Certifications Professionnelles) to log the vocational qualifications recognised by the State and the social partners. To appear on this register, these qualifications must be accessible via APL and include a validation procedure based, inter alia, on a series of modules. The national register is managed and controlled by the *National Commission for Vocational Qualification* (CNCP, *Commission Nationale de la Certification Professionnelle*), in which the trade union and employers' organisations participate. In 2010, the register contained over 7,000 vocational qualifications which are mainly accessible via APL. They represent over 96% of all nationally recognised qualifications, aside from those in higher education. The regional level plays a key complementary role in terms of access to information, the coordination of the players, and the organisation of the services on offer under APL.

- **Denmark** passed a law in the early years of the century bringing in a national framework for the recognition of prior learning, following a consultation process. In 2004, a document entitled *Recognition of prior learning within the education system* provided an initial formulation and some first incentives for the recognition of prior learning. The law dated 6 June 2007 defines the validation of prior learning for various fields of adult education. Since then, every adult has had the right to demand that a continuing education system institution conduct an evaluation of their prior learning, for the sake of securing recognition of their competences. If the decision does not satisfy the applicant, he can appeal against it. In order to achieve a better understanding of validation practices and their impact, the *National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning* (NVR) has been created.
- **Italy** does not yet have a national framework for validation, but many regional or university experiments have been conducted in recent years. One obstacle is the lack of occupational standards shared at national level, even though work has been underway on the subject for a long time. Frequently cited among the other obstacles are: a certain lack of leadership or political will on the part of the governmental authorities (but national validation of NFIL, following agreements between regions and government in the spring of 2012, is now on the agenda for debates in Parliament); the number and diversity of the players (it is difficult to agree on common rules); the lack of funding for vocational training; the difficulty of setting up a unified system when the regions already have their own systems and are wedded to them. The point is that certain Italian regions have taken the initiative of creating their own NFIL validation procedures. For example, Emilia-Romagna has been developing its first validation tools since 2003 and the regional validation system has been operational since 2005. Its establishment has been greatly facilitated by the availability of a broad range of occupational standards. The system, which is quite flexible, focuses on vocational training, with the possibility of obtaining various types of qualification: the underlying philosophy is that everyone can obtain a qualification, regardless of how their skills were acquired.
- **Germany** also has no national framework for the validation of NFIL. The government, the stakeholder institutions and the social partners are currently working on the *German Qualification Framework*. But the recognition of NFIL is not considered to be a priority. However, at the national level, a pilot initiative, *Development of a credit system in vocational education and training* (DECVET), has been run. This project drew on the Swiss modular qualification system. From a general point of view, the recognition of the competences of disadvantaged groups is still at the embryonic stage and involves local approaches, in the framework of pilot projects run by civil society organisations.

Beyond the legal and regulatory frameworks, the effective reality of the initiatives and practices

The validation of prior learning can involve national, regional or local initiatives. However, where there is a framework providing a structure for validation at national level, the degree of implementation of the public policies also needs to be examined. The point is that while certain countries enjoy both a mature national framework and years of experience (example: Finland), the existence of a national framework is not necessarily synonymous with important quantitative results or of genuine effectiveness in the validation practices. The national institutional framework seems to be a condition that is necessary, but not sufficient, for the implementation of the validation practices. A commitment from central government and the social players is indispensable to the effective development of these practices.

Some national experiments demonstrate that a strong consensus on the questions of education and validation of competences, shared by the political players, the educational institutions and the social partners delivers a seedbed that favours the development of validation practices. The cases of countries as different as Finland and Portugal show this. In contrast to this favourable factor, a binding environment in terms of political priorities, cultural conditions and socio-economic situations may seriously hamper the validation of NFIL, even where a legal framework clearly prevails. The experiences in Romania and Spain illustrate such situations.

- **In Romania**, the national institutional framework is neither mature nor stabilised. A set of laws and orders adopted in the first few years of the 21st century organised the evaluation of non-formal and informal competences. The validation of NFIL benefits from the expansion of the validation centres, an improvement in procedures and methods for evaluation under the aegis of the *National Council of Adult Training* (CNFPA). A reform in 2010, in the process of being implemented, created the *National Authority of Qualifications* as a merger between the CNFPA and another body. The purpose is to improve coherence between the national qualification framework and the validation of NFIL, but this reform has caused controversy among the institutional players. The problem is classic, and is equally found in other countries: which, between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, will hold the leadership? As things stand, the consequences of the reform are not very clear, and this confusion does not facilitate the participation of the social players in the validation system.
- **In Spain**, there is a clear national framework for validation, with the bolstering of the legal framework in recent years and the royal decree in 2009 organising the process for the recognition, evaluation, accreditation and registration of vocational qualifications (*procedimiento de reconocimiento, evaluacion, acreditacion y registro de las cualificaciones profesionales*). However, there are major limits curbing the development of NFIL validation practices. The experimental dimension of the process calls for committed involvement by the social partners, which is acquired unevenly across the regions. Then, the *convocatorias* (calls for examination) correspond in practice, at present, to limited, selective processes which do not allow a 'flexible' response to the needs of workers and employers.

There is much discussion of the principles and the arrangements for the recognition and validation of NFIL in public circles, particularly between the Ministries of Education and Labour. Understandably, the education ministries give priority to equal access for all citizens to good-quality initial training and education. But life does not stop when initial education ends. It is only fair to give those with limited initial education but a wealth of experience at work or in associations fresh opportunities in the course of their active life. This is a public policy objective which is of key interest to the trade unions, on which they have points of view which they wish to air.

3.2. The embryonic relationship with collective bargaining

It is no easy task to gather information on the collective agreements paying attention to the validation of NFIL. Yet this is not a field that falls outside collective bargaining, even if the latter is still not active enough on that score.

Upstream: the concerted definition of occupational standards in the Sectoral Councils

The Sectoral Committees or Councils, which contribute towards the definition of the occupational standards, with serious consequences for training and qualification practices, exist in most countries, sometimes at regional level. They are currently evolving at European level. Their work feeds into the framing and updating of the national directory or catalogue of occupational qualifications. But these Councils or Committees are more or less operational and the commitment by the social players to their activity is very variable. A common drive by the unions is helpful in making these Councils and Committees fully proactive.

In the work of these Councils, the reference to the competence levels defined by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF⁹, cf. box 4) is not automatic, it can be more or less clear, and more or less direct. It depends on the degree of elaboration of the national framework itself and its conformity with the European framework. At best, the establishment of the national framework makes it possible to describe, for each occupational standard, the learning outcomes which correspond to the knowledge, skills and competences, according to a form of words that is consistent with the European approach. The rigorous identification of this prior learning and the listing of the evaluation criteria mean that its validation can be authorised, as appropriate, where it is the result of non-formal and informal learning. A national framework is among the optimum conditions for the development of NFIL validation, although it is not sufficient.

A look at the national cases surveyed confirms the diversity of the experiences in Europe:

- **In Finland**, the 26 Sectoral Committees and the 154 qualification committees, under the supervision of the National Board of Education, are important places for collective discussion and bargaining, where the social partners take a very active part: their presence is evidence of the recognised importance attached to their sound understanding of the skills necessary for a particular job. The sectoral committees are in charge of anticipating sectoral needs for qualifications and competences. The qualification committees define the needs associated with each qualification defined in the CBQ system and issue the qualification after the validation process. They involve a thousand experts (representatives of the employers, the employees and the training centres).
- **In Italy**, there is not yet any shared framework of occupational standards at national level, even though the work underway on this subject now has the benefit of an agreement between regions and government to progress towards the setting up of a national system for the validation and certification of skills. For a number of years, 28 organisations of social partners (4 trade union confederations, 24 employers' organisations) have been involved in the definition of the occupational standards, which should facilitate the establishment of the national framework for competence validation. The work is well advanced, but no agreement has yet been reached on the definition of the occupational standards, the associated training content and the qualification of competences. The process is difficult, partly because of the divergent points of view of the ministries involved: the lack of political leadership is clear. The social partners have also launched work at

⁹ Consult the European Commission's website dedicated to the European Qualifications Framework: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm.

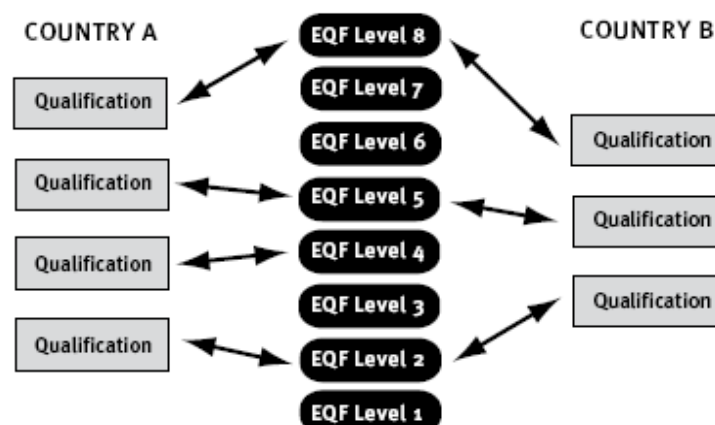
sectoral level, but the work has been stopped for want of sufficient political involvement. The regions have also been working on validation standards since the early years of the century. The regional systems have been examined and compared: the aim was to define a minimum level of occupational standards for each region, so as to favour inter-regional mobility.

- **The Portuguese experience** with the concerted definition of occupational standards has mobilised 16 Sectoral Councils, the *Conselhos Sectoriais para a Qualificação*, which collaborate with the National Agency for Qualification (*Agência Nacional para Qualificação eo Ensino Profissional*, ANQEP), which is responsible for coordinating the national qualification system (*Sistema Nacional de Qualificações*). This system covers the National Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Catalogue. The Sectoral Councils allow the ANQ to factor in the realities of the labour market, incorporating representatives from the *Institute of Employment and Vocational Training* (*Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional*, IEFP), the social partners, the training centres and the educational institutions. One particular issue for the social partners' representatives is to play an educational role vis-à-vis their members, so as to mobilise information and advice. The ANQ wants to make these Councils more effective in collecting information and producing forecasts. There is an open consultation method which allows anyone to put forward proposals to create or update qualifications.
- **In Romania**, the Sectoral Committees are the focus of the collective bargaining on the occupational standards and allow for exchanges between the social and institutional players in vocational training and qualification. These committees mobilise the representatives of the employees and employers in such a way as to organise the social dialogue on occupational standards and thus provide a basis for the validation of NFIL. Progress is being hoped for by the players in the system, so as to ensure the full role of these committees and their living relationship with collective bargaining in enterprises and sectors.
- **In Spain**, the social partners have contributed towards the construction of the National Vocational Qualifications Catalogue (*Catálogo Nacional de Cualificaciones Profesionales*, CNQP), via the definition of the occupational standards and the definition of each qualification. The CNQP is now complete, and contains almost 650 qualifications. But the social partners believe that the actual supply of qualifications and associated training courses is too rigid, and not sufficiently 'agile' to respond satisfactorily to the needs of companies and individuals.

Box 4:

**The European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a translator between certified levels of qualification
(qualification = knowledge + skills + competences)**

The EQF operates as a translator which is supposed, via the eight levels of increasing qualification that it incorporates, to allow equivalences to be transparently established between national qualifications



... but the translation is far from being automatic. The EQF links the competences (in the columns) and the levels of mastery of those competences (in rows). A given EQF level (cf. example of level 5 below) is characterised by a combination of the capacities expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. The situation gets complicated in cases where we might think that a given person belongs, for example, to a rather high level for his knowledge and a rather low level for his skills or his competences.

Level 5	Knowledge	Skills	Competence
The learning outcomes relevant to Level 5 are	comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change review and develop performance of self and others

Downstream: the role of collective agreements in enterprises and sectors

Upstream, collective bargaining can lay down conditions favourable to the development of NFIL validation practices; downstream, it has a role to play in the concrete organisation of training and validation processes in sectors and enterprises. Within the latter, the identification of non-formal and informal competences is of value to employers, because their more intense mobilisation can be a way of increasing productivity: identifying and mobilising hidden skills can be a profitable investment, at low cost, for an employer. But at the same time, employers are often reluctant to explicitly validate these competences, for fear of wage claims or losing workers to competitors: what is non-formal and informal should stay non-formal and informal! Collective bargaining is necessary to resolve this contradiction by placing a responsibility on employers, and to incorporate NFIL validation into career pathways offering better security, within and outside enterprises.

However, as we can see from the experience of the countries surveyed, empirical evidence does not yet provide many examples of such collective agreements. For most countries, the relationship between NFIL validation practices and collective bargaining remains very tenuous, for several reasons: training, generally speaking, can be outside of decentralised collective bargaining and its priorities; the question of competences acquired in non-formal or informal ways can be perceived as a subject that is tangential or even marginal.

Two examples, at the level of one sector and one enterprise, are drawn from the French experience with Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). The French banking sector provides the first example (box 5). *Club Méditerranée* is a case of a large enterprise involved in initiatives for the validation of NFIL vis-à-vis its staff, with the operational support of trade union representatives (box 6). In both cases, the aim is to promote collective APL routes.

At European level, the reflection and experience of the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), an ETUC member, is interesting. This Federation believes that validating prior learning is an important element, feeding in to the debates on employability and its tools. However, while the Federation has tried to tackle these questions of validation and to make concrete progress on the subject, the diversity of the national situations represents a fairly major obstacle to shared implementation at European level: the issue of qualification is not accorded the same importance or viewed from the same reference points by the national unionists. Box 7 provides some guidance to the EMF's approach.

Box 5: Collective bargaining and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) The case of the French banking sector

The interaction between collective bargaining and the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) in the French banking sector is at the interface between two recent developments:

– **The reinforcement of external incentives:** the obligation, since 2010, by the Financial Markets Authority (*Autorité des Marchés Financiers*, AMF), for compulsory occupational qualifications for professionals in financial investment services who are in contact with the public. The conditions and rules governing the way in which these qualifications are obtained are defined precisely by the instructions from the AMF (see http://www.amf-france.org/home_presta.asp?lang=fr). The French Banking Federation (*Fédération Bancaire Française*, FBF) and the Banking Occupations Observatory (*Observatoire des métiers de la banque*, OMB) are very active on these subjects, for the sake of implementing the AMF's requests. The FBF publishes a Guide to Banking Occupations (*Guide des métiers bancaires*), which takes account of these qualification requirements: this guide describes every occupation by reference to the triptych of missions, environment, profile¹.

– **The reinforcement of endogenous training efforts:** in June 2011, the French Bankers Association (*Association Française des Banques*², AFB) and all the unions representing the banking sector (CFDT, CFTC, CGT, CGT-FO, SNB/CFE-CGC) signed up to an agreement modifying the agreement of July 2005 on lifelong training in banks. This new agreement confirms the important effort in terms of continuing vocational training in the sector (approximately 4% of the total wages). It targets younger staff (aged under 26) and older staff (over 45), particularly those of them who are less well qualified. The agreement provides and describes a broad range of training and qualification pathways, in relation to accredited training and validation service providers. ***It thus explicitly opens the way for individual and collective processes for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) within the banks.*** At the same time, the joint body collecting funding for vocational training for the Banks, Insurance Companies, Mutual Insurance Companies, General Insurance Agencies and Assistance Societies, OPCABAIA, has been created by agreement between the social partners to collect the vocational training resources over the wide field of banks, financial services and insurance companies.

But the impact of these initiatives on practices within banks is neither direct nor automatic. It depends on the conclusion and implementation in each bank of Forward Planning of Employment and Competences Agreements, which a 2005 law made it compulsory to negotiate every three years for all enterprises of over 300 staff. According to the enterprises and banks, these agreements can be more or less demanding. In the case of 'good practices' (not all!), these agreements may contain strong commitments towards objectives of training and qualification. Some banks have the objective of systematically organising vocational qualification for their employees, on the basis of the validation of prior learning from experience, in line with the rules defined by the AMF.

The coherence between the public incentives, collective bargaining at industry level and enterprise agreements seems to offer some promise in terms of stimulating the validation of NFIL in a vocational field, but it is a narrow path and one which assumes favourable political and social conditions...

1. See the sites of the FBF (www.fbf.fr) and the OMB (www.observatoire-metiers-banque.fr).

2. The employers' organisation has two facets: the FBF administers the vocational organisation missions and the AFB handles those involving the representation of the employers, in the field of collective bargaining. The OMB, created on the basis of the Law of 4 May 2004 on vocational training and the social dialogue, was organised by the *Agreement on Lifelong Training in the Banking Sector*, signed on 8 July 2005. A steering committee, with the participation of the employers and the unions, defines the approach of the OMB.

Box 6: Accreditation of Prior Learning in a big enterprise: The *Club Méditerranée* experience

Club Méditerranée, the organiser of holidays in 'holiday villages' all round the world, set up an APL mechanism around the beginning of the century. The Group has almost one hundred occupations, mainly in the hotel and entertainment sectors, for what is essentially a seasonal activity. One key factor in the approach has been the realisation that experience acquired by staff at Club Méditerranée was not being recognised outside the enterprise. The project was run by a trade union, CGT-FO. Because the processes for capitalisation of knowledge belonged to the corporate culture, this project met with a favourable response from the Management and all the other unions.

To set up this project, the trade union representative contacted the Academic APL Centre (*Centre Académique de Validation des Acquis*, CAVA) in Créteil, in the Paris region, which falls under National Education auspices. This centre conducted a study into the 93 occupations in the enterprise, to identify the possibilities for validation compared to National Education diplomas, which took a number of months. The target public was essentially made up of unqualified people, recruited some years ago. They have long experience in the job, but also in mobility, because they have generally done their jobs in holiday villages in various countries. The purpose of the mechanism is that all the 'holiday village' staff the world over, irrespective of the type of employment contract (i.e. whether limited or open-ended) are eligible for APL, so long as they speak French.

To get the project underway, the Human Resources (HR) services and the CGT-FO union ran a campaign to inform the staff in the holiday villages round the world. The APL process is identical everywhere. Following the communication, the people interested in APL were identified and recruited during video conference interviews by a unit made up of representatives from National Education and Club Méditerranée HR services. For the first promotion, 15 people were identified. As the mechanism swung into action, Club Méditerranée involved the National Association for Vocational Training of Adults (*Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes*, AFPA), making it possible to expand the APL outcome to vocational qualifications and certificates and to mobilise methods other than those of National Education. In addition, it called on Higher Education to propose the validation at Master's level, specifically for the village heads.

Club Méditerranée then asked the partners to accompany the project staff in the villages depending on the demand and the number (at least 10 people are required). On site, all the people concerned are brought together and each institution presents its process (conditions for admission to APL, building up a file, help made available to them). The fact of bringing together all the players at the same time in the villages makes the process easier: it is possible to position the staff with a view to a diploma; a situation assessment can be drawn up; the examination dates are set (at 6 months or 1 year).

Applicants receive a call to attend the examination which is held in France for National Education. A board of professionals and trainers is set up and decides on the files that the staff members have built up. Validation of the diploma can be full or partial, with additional units to be acquired in the latter case. One of the main difficulties lies in monitoring these people once the validation group has left the village and they are back in operational activities. Refresher actions are run by the HR service, the trade unions or National Education, which has likewise set up support.

Staff members wishing to gain higher qualifications calling for additional training modules can benefit from a diagnosis on the training mechanisms that can be mobilised, in particular those inside the enterprise. The trade unions support the files so that they are funded and so that those responsible smooth the way for staff into APL. However, staff members can still top up the funding from their own pockets. The additional modules are carried out in the low season for people overseas, or in training establishments in the country where the village is located. Since 2002, 400 people per year have gone through APL. In recent years, the figure has been about 100 people per year.

There is no commitment by the enterprise with regard to the recognition of diplomas acquired in this way in terms of salary, but the unions are pushing to get them valued during pay negotiations. Staff members still have the option of applying for jobs on the basis of the qualification acquired, although HR is under no obligation to follow this up.

Box 7. The approach to the validation of NFIL by the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF)¹

The EMF's approach to the topic of NFIL

The EMF insists on certain principles:

- if the working environment is 'learning', people must be able to validate their competences there.
- a distinction must be made between recognition and validation: validating means conferring a diploma or qualification on a competence acquired through experience.
- validation of prior learning contributes towards the acquisition of a certain number of credits, to be supplemented, if necessary, by training.

But upstream, or outside of any validation, recognition of NFIL can be implemented via human resources management practices: competence-based job management; evaluation interviews making it possible to identify the vocational practices acquired and those still to be developed in order to change jobs; access to internal training courses to make up for initial training shortfalls.

Anticipating the competences needed is crucial, all the more so when there is a risk of a shortage of skilled labour. The EMF believes that staff management practices favourable to the recognition of NFIL should be encouraged in the framework of collective bargaining. In reality, at European level, the debate between employers and unions seems to be easier around the subjects of the recognition of competences, access to training, and 'learning' enterprises: it is less marked by the specific features of the national systems than when it comes to validation in the strict sense.

The validation of prior learning, an issue for negotiation in multinationals?

The EMF is committed to negotiations at European level within multinationals. The Federation runs negotiating groups made up of representatives from enterprises. Anticipating change and vocational development have been negotiated at Thalès, for example. Allowing staff members to evolve, and encouraging them to gain higher qualifications, are the priority concerns when, as in Germany, enterprises are faced in crude terms with demographic transition, of which the proper management will determine the mastery of new technologies.

In big groups, the validation of prior learning is one of the tools that can be mobilised on these issues, but 'it doesn't just spring to mind spontaneously'. In the car industry, the development of competences relies heavily on on- the- job training practices. The car industry pays its workers relatively well, but with limited demands in terms of levels of training and qualification. The EMF raises this question of the explicit recognition of the experience acquired.

1. This box is based on an interview with an EMF official.

4. The validation processes with a view to the qualification of competences

4.1. Variable involvement by the social players in the validation processes

The validation of NFIL calls for the joint mobilisation of the social players and the public authorities to design the validation system and then bring it to life. This mobilisation obviously takes different forms depending on the ways that the social dialogue is organised at national level.

In Finland, for example, the validation tool is run jointly by the State, the social partners and the vocational training centres. This tripartite involvement is verified not just at the level of the institutions which govern the system, but also in the sectoral committees and the operational structures in charge of validating the competences. In Denmark, this involvement uses similar arrangements. The social partners were favourable, even before the law on the recognition of prior learning, to the setting up of the validation system. Today, they delegate the definition of the NFIL validation and training contents to expert sectoral structures which they run jointly.

In the countries where mechanisms for the validation of NFIL are less complete or less coherent, the trade union organisations are nevertheless often involved in the institutions which govern the development of such mechanisms, with substantial regional variations when the initiative first comes from the regions. In Italy, for example, CGIL, CISL and UIL have expressed a common desire to set up a system for the recognition of NFIL. A negotiating forum has been opened on the subject. However, the number of players involved in these negotiations and the diversity of the issues to be addressed have so far militated against any formalized agreement. At present, all that is in place is regional procedures organised in very diverse ways, with some regions not yet having any NFIL validation mechanisms.

Sometimes, the trade unions' involvement goes beyond institutional involvement and delegation to expert structures: the unions can become operational players in the system when they manage or co-manage training centres which commit to the validation of the competences acquired. This is the case in Portugal and, to a lesser extent, in Romania. The unions then take on responsibilities and acquire experiences, which are not neutral in terms of their conceptions and their strategies in the field of employment and training.

4.2. The formalization of validation methodologies

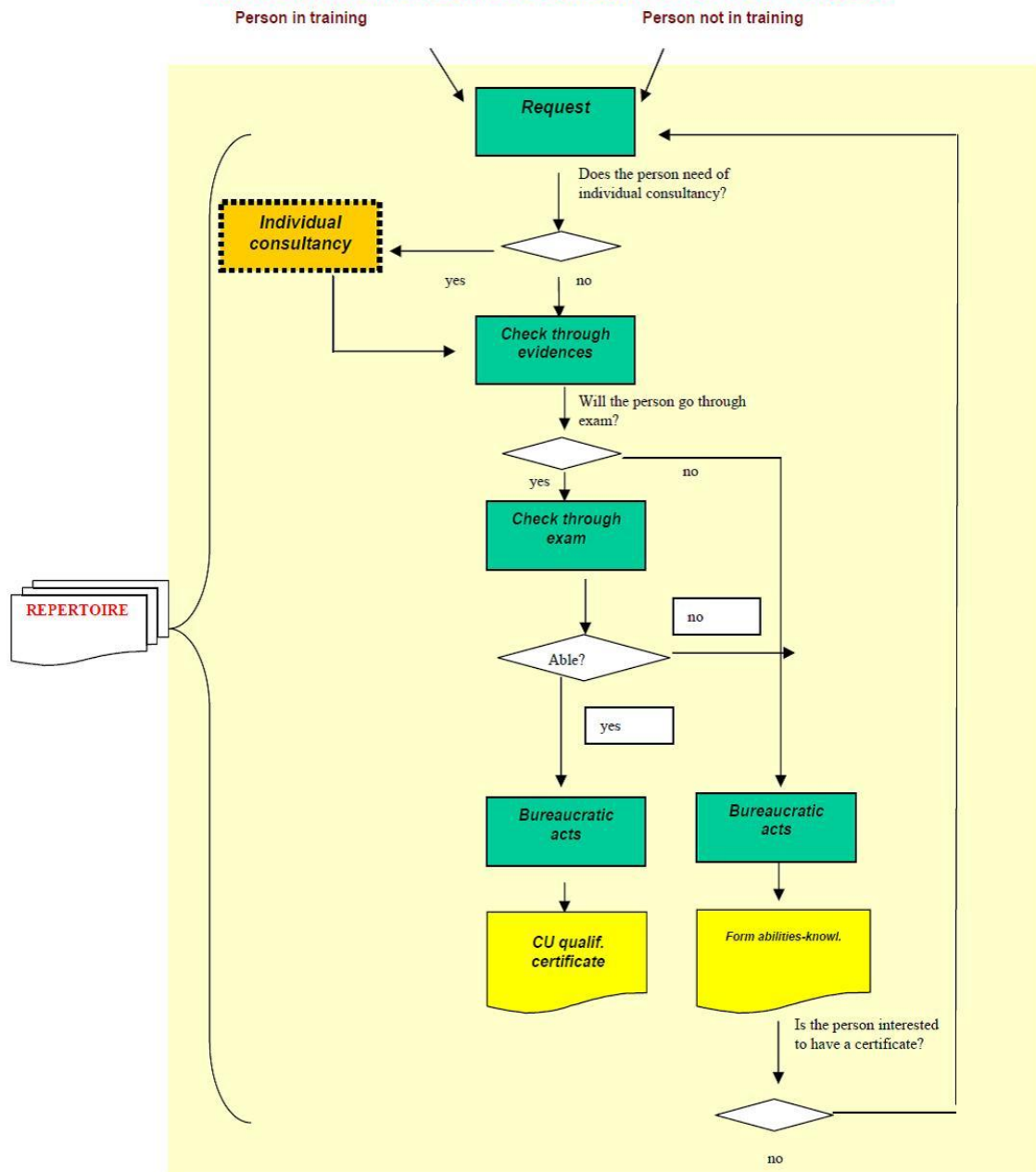
For countries with a system for the validation of NFIL, the same major phases in a validation pathway are implemented: information, advice and orientation towards the mechanism; registration and constitution of proof of experience; presentation before a board for validation; award of the qualification or passage via complementary training (see box 8).

Box 8: Where a mechanism exists for the validation of NFIL, the pathway towards validation is similar regardless of the country.

Examples of Emilia-Romagna (Italy) and Spain (following page)

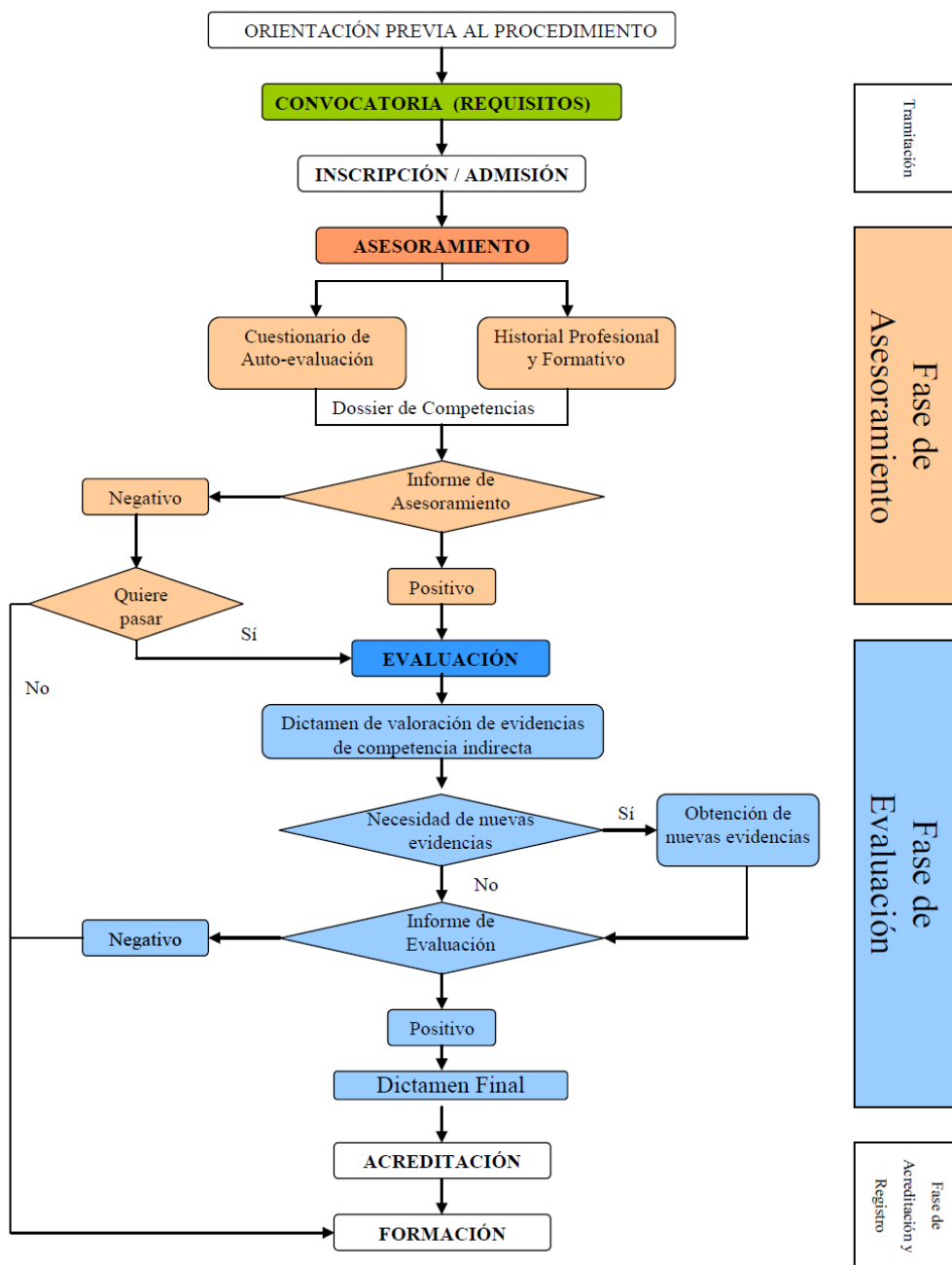


FORMALIZATION OF COMPETENCES CERTIFICATION PROCESS





APÉNDICE. DIAGRAMA DE FLUJO DEL CANDIDATO EN EL PROCEDIMIENTO



These different phases require dedicated resources and organisation. They are the subject of attention from the experts, the social partners and the public authorities for the sake of simplifying access to them and the way they run for the applicants: to be informed more easily; to have guidance; not to be plunged into difficulties when it comes to proving their vocational experience; to have rapid access to a jury with a good knowledge of the principles and the methods of validating vocational experience; etc. In the countries with a solid NFIL validation system, the validation process is often formalized; it may be the subject of specific legislation or regulation to guarantee fair treatment among applicants, in the same way as a traditional formal procedure for access to a qualification. The CEDEFOP *Guidelines* (2009) make precise recommendations for the proper organisation of the validation process, guaranteeing its quality and credibility.

While the elementary validation process may seem technically fairly homogeneous from one country to another, the regulatory and legislative framework organising its implementation can vary widely according to the country. In Spain, the number of people able to benefit from validation is predetermined and limited by profession. To have any hope of validating their competences, people therefore need experience in the vocational fields designated by the annual *convocatorias*. In other countries, validation is an individual right which can be exercised by any person so wishing, and is not automatically restricted by a quota. This is the case in the likes of Denmark, the United Kingdom, Finland and France.

But whatever the regulatory or legislative contexts allowing access to the validation of NFIL, the validation processes remain complex, meaning that their operation can vary within a single country. Portugal applies a tried and tested methodology that was standardized in the early years of the century. In the United Kingdom, the methods that can be mobilized are far more varied. In France, the practices differ depending on which ministry is issuing the qualification. For instance, the file to be produced to prove one's know-how is very scholarly when it comes to gaining a diploma from the French National Education: applicants need to write and describe, in well-chosen and appropriate words, what they are capable of doing in the work situation; to obtain a qualification from the Ministry of Labour, they have to demonstrate competences in a reconstructed vocational context. In Finland, even though the validation procedure is sometimes accused of being too cumbersome, it is still possible for people to validate their skills in the workplace: a procedure which is more accessible to workers who do not wish to return to a school context to validate their vocational experience.

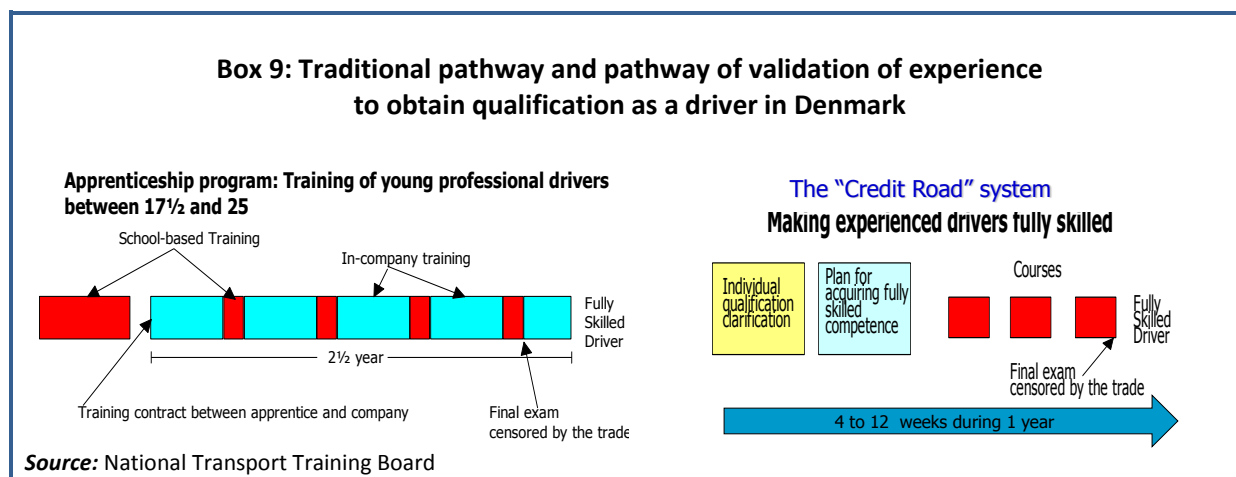
In all countries, the complexity of the system is regularly flagged up, and adaptations are being sought to simplify access to the validation process and make it easier to navigate.

The processes for validation of NFIL, founded on similar methodologies, face a knotty problem: how to reveal and identify the experience acquired, especially if it has been acquired at work? Written or spoken expression is not always the method best fitted to reveal such experience. This common problem can call for different solutions. The CEDEFOP *Guidelines* record the methods available. Exchange of experiences, in each country but also at European level, in the framework of the sectoral dialogue, is useful in this connection.

4.3. Towards complementarity in the various validation and qualification pathways

The systems for the validation of NFIL make us look again at the status of qualifications. The latter are not always the end of a long training process, but they can reward the acquired and effective mastery of a skills set. These skills can be acquired quite quickly, in the framework of a specific pathway or one partially shared with traditional vocational training.

In Denmark and Finland, it is possible to obtain a vocational qualification through experience or through a more traditional method of attending courses: the two systems cohabit in order to allow people validating only partial experience to progress gradually towards complete qualification thanks to complementary training (see box 9 for a Danish example).



In France, only the qualifications recognised nationally (listed in the national register of vocational qualifications) can be acquired via the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) scheme. In Portugal, the validation of NFIL is embedded in the vocational training system: the *Novas Oportunidades* centres can be considered to be crossing points towards lifelong learning pathways. Indeed they are often managed jointly with the traditional training centres, which allows for synergies and economies of scale, but also an enrichment of the teachers' work: this combination, which might look like a difficulty, is something that the practitioners concerned in training and validation experience in a positive way.

In all cases, the linkage between traditional training and the validation of NFIL involves modularizing the training on offer, supplementing the validation of prior learning for the sake of obtaining full qualification. The point is that while the validation of NFIL can replace a formal pathway for obtaining a qualification, it does not remove the need for training. The two pathways – the formal training and qualification pathway *versus* validation of NFIL – can be alternatives to each other, under certain carefully defined conditions regarding the equivalence of their outcomes. They can also complement each other, depending on applicants' pathways and their vocational experience. In that sense, we can talk about two complementary pathways for access to qualification.

However, if this complementarity is to be effective, the training centres need to give equal consideration to both options. In France, the two ways have to be connected to each other for qualifications which cannot be acquired unless training courses are followed and validated: this is the case with some diplomas in the health and social sector. But beyond this precise obligation, some teachers have waited before pledging to support the APL scheme, specifically in the university courses, for fear that the value of diplomas would be adversely affected. In Denmark, there is a different obstacle: the remuneration received by training centres committing to the validation of NFIL is lower than that earned when dispensing traditional training courses. Situations like this limit the interest of promoting the validation of NFIL.

In fact in most countries, some work needs to be done to legitimise the validation of NFIL and ensure that it is respected, on condition of the quality of the procedures, as a pathway for the qualification of competences equivalent to the more traditional, formal pathways.

The correct resolution of the methodological problems, throughout the validation process, is important for the fair treatment of the various people. Diplomas obtained by initial education deliver limited information about a person's effective skills, but the value attached to the skills acquired through experience depends on their validation and their certification. There must be reliable regulation in place to ensure that the validation frameworks have the credibility necessary to guarantee fair treatment between those who have gained their diplomas after long periods of study and those wishing to gain a certificate of equivalent value to validate the skills acquired by long vocational experience. According to a large majority of the respondents to the public consultation on NFIL (European Commission, 2012a), this equivalence is far from being guaranteed today.

5. The impact of the validation of NFIL on the labour market

The validation of NFIL has a welcome net impact on the personal and family development of the individuals benefiting from it, particularly if it is associated with a complementary or later training course. Such impacts can have economic consequences in the short and long term:

- More autonomous, more dynamic and more self-confident workers.
- More inter-generational progression, thanks to improved educational transmission within the family.

But the full realisation of these favourable effects, especially for the improvement of the match between supply and demand in terms of jobs, depends on the effective commitment of enterprises to the process of validating NFIL and on making them responsible vis-à-vis the recognition of their workers' skills. From this point of view, in most countries, the current situation is not satisfactory and significant progress needs to be made. One symptom of this situation is the low level of responses from the private sector to the public consultation on NFIL organised by the European Commission in 2011:

- Large enterprises frequently develop their own internal practices for the recognition and development of competences, albeit without always being driven by their validation: the latter provides workers with qualifications which they can use on the labour market outside the enterprise, which is fearful of a brain drain.
- The commitment of small and micro enterprises in the process of validation remains awkward for a string of reasons: practical, organisational and financial obstacles; lack of awareness among managers of the issues of competences; lack of proximity between these small enterprises and the institutional mechanisms. This difficulty is striking in those countries where the economic and social importance of very small enterprises is massive, as in Portugal and Poland, but also in countries where the training system is highly effective, as in Denmark.

These factors help to explain why the NFIL practices look like a barely visible 'underground' component of the education and training system, a point which limits the potentially systemic impact of the dissemination and validation of these practices. This problem is well documented by CEDEFOP and the trade unions' intervention can be considered as a way of revealing and formalizing these underground practices¹⁰.

**Box 10: Extract from
*Learning while working, success stories on workplace learning in Europe, CEDEFOP, 2011***

'It is difficult in quantitative surveys to capture non-formal and informal learning in enterprises, which is often not viewed as training and therefore difficult to monitor in terms of hours and participants. Mentoring and tutoring by more experienced colleagues is a good example, since it tends not to be considered by companies as a training activity; skilled workers who mentor other colleagues and are in charge of the induction of new recruits may not even consider themselves as trainers'.

¹⁰ This is the opportunity to clear up one point, which leads to linguistic confusion: the NFIL practices generally occur within enterprises or associations which are perfectly integrated, in legal terms, into the socio-economic fabric; so they do not have a compulsory link to the so-called 'informal' economy ('unofficial' work, underground or clandestine activities, etc.). Naturally, workers within the informal or underground economy gain skills which also deserve to be recognised: the recognition of skills and the 'formalization' of underground activities can then go hand in hand.

'In some countries a new role is developing for trade union activists who provide front line guidance in working hours and negotiate with employers to open access to workplace learning opportunities. In Austria, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK, trade union representatives are acting as 'learning ambassadors', encouraging employees to take on learning and fill their skill gaps, and advising companies on their training needs'.

5.1. The impact on the labour market: successive stages

Three successive stages can be envisaged to take account of the impact of NFIL practices and its recognition on the labour market. The reality may, of course, be more complex than this logical succession.

1. *Services provided by the trade unions*

The aim of these services is to improve the balance of power in favour of workers on the labour market. The trade unions' intervention, thanks to delegated activists or training ambassadors, strives to equip workers for their vocational mobility, within and outside enterprises, by helping to improve their capacities that can be effectively mobilised. This is a practice with established roots in some of the countries surveyed, such as England, and is emerging in others, such as Romania: in these countries, the unions train and encourage some of their members to make them into activists specialising in questions around training, contributing to providing information and guidance for workers. In England, these activists contribute towards a genuine informal training community in the workplace: the services rendered to workers by these activists can be substantial, without necessarily leading to explicit validation of the skills by means of public qualification, although the modular, pragmatic approach of the NVQs does open the way for such qualification. And employers can take satisfaction from this trade union commitment, without an overt commitment on their part... Romania demonstrates a certain duality between this voluntary trade union intervention and the institutional system for the validation of NFIL: one develops a spread of training services for workers, in cooperation with non-governmental organisations and economic players, while the other – based on a network of validation centres – is still looking for balance, stability and complete credibility.

2. *The specific and/or regulated segments of the labour market*

Shortages of qualified labour affect precise professions, corresponding to specific labour market segments, in industry and services. The perception of these tensions is a strong incentive to develop the validation of experience acquired in those professions, in order to spotlight the real competences actually on offer. An additional incentive comes from the public regulations which impose compulsory qualifications on people wishing to carry out a profession. This may be the case for very different professions: the personal care professions and banking professions, for example. The common feature is often the professional command of the risks normally associated with carrying out a job. These incentives, coming from the market and the public authorities, lead the unions and the employers' organisations to help towards the organisation of processes for the validation of NFIL, the operational responsibility for which lies mainly with public or accredited institutions. When the applicants gain the final validation, it often gives rise to a festive, symbolic collective ceremony. In Spain, the annual calls for examination (*convocatorias*), organised at regional level under the aegis of a uniform national framework, target very specific segments of the labour market, in accordance with the estimated quantitative needs for qualified workers, the regulatory obligations and also the financial constraints. In a region such as Galicia, the care sector

was originally a focus, but the Galician *convocatorias* are now extending to industrial jobs (metalworking, textiles) and those in the tertiary sector (tourism) typical of the region's economic fabric. This diversification suggests that the validation of NFIL is in the process of spreading its effects across the entire regional labour market.

3. The affirmation of a general framework for the recognition and validation of NFIL which helps to make vocational pathways more secure

The third, and most ambitious, stage is the implementation of a framework organising the validation of NFIL and its linkage with continuing vocational training across a wide set of professions and competences. A majority of respondents to the public consultation on NFIL (European Commission, 2012a) believe that such frameworks exist at the national, regional or sectoral level, but that they lack the coherence that would allow them to respond fully to the needs. Achieving them implies meeting certain conditions:

- **A political agreement on the fundamental objectives** of such a general framework is obviously a precondition. To be effective, this framework needs to enjoy strong political support from the social partners and their commitment in the institutions in charge of its implementation, including, perhaps, their operational contribution towards the management of the training and validation processes. In Finland, a country which, of the ten surveyed, may be considered to be the one that best integrates the NFIL validation mechanisms into the training and qualification system, the commitment of the social players is effective in both the institutions in charge of these mechanisms and in the practical programmes for the validation of competences: this shared commitment is a factor of consensus between social partners on the objectives and the methods.
- **An effective network of training and validation centres**, specialising by profession or sector, with good geographical roots at national level, is necessary for the successful implementation of public programmes to validate NFIL on a large scale. One relevant indicator of the effective scope of such programmes is actually the fact that women are fully involved: this is very much the case in Finland and Portugal. However, access to these programmes often remains very patchy: it is easier for workers who are already qualified, especially where the process has to be voluntary on the part of the applicants. The social players can be involved more or less directly in the management and running of these centres or some of them. Where this is the case (in Finland, Portugal, Romania, etc.), they acquire experience and legitimacy which allow them to influence the general thrusts.

A general framework of this nature helps with the transferability of the competences validated, between enterprises and sectors, as well as the positive character of workers' mobility, through a better integrated approach to their individual pathways. The personal return in terms of skills, irrespective of how they were acquired, may benefit, through better employability for workers, which enhances their career and salary prospects¹¹. This is a pathway towards achieving a slogan along the lines of *Make Skills Work, Make Skills Pay*, which would mean a systemic impact on the operation of the labour market. In France and Portugal, public programmes (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* or VAE in France, *Novas*

¹¹ The individual and collective returns on lifelong learning refer to the gains that might result from it respectively for individuals and society. A better understanding of these returns, by appropriate studies, is desirable. If these returns are high, they mean that the private and public funding being ploughed into lifelong learning is a socially profitable investment. In the case of Finland, a recent study shows that these returns are very significant: Erkki Laukkanen, *Wage Returns to Training: Evidence from Finland*, Labour Institute for Economic Research, Studies 110, Helsinki 2010.

Opportunitades in Portugal) are evidence of such an ambition, but their current limits are too tight to allow for that ambition to be completely achieved:

- Lack of recognition of vocational competences in Portugal: the *Novas Oportunidades* initiative is a success in terms of the recognition of basic educational competences, but less so when it comes to recognising vocational competences, according to the social players themselves.
- Quantitative limits on APL in France, compared to the initial ambition: APL is an individual right which it is not always easy for the people concerned to exercise. The excessive formalism of the process is part of the explanation. In addition, there is not always a consensus on the qualifications to be validated. In the validation process, employers sometimes tend to favour *Certificats de Qualification Professionnelle* (CQP) whose validity is restricted to the branch or sector, and which do not correspond to a level of training. The unions prefer the acquisition of qualifications corresponding to a level validated at national level, and one which facilitates mobility, whatever sector the people belong to.

5.2. Combining public incentives and collective bargaining to direct the market

Building an operational system for the validation of NFIL, via these successive stages, is a question of not just institutional engineering, but also a firm commitment by the social players to the practical existence of such a system. In that sense, as we have seen, collective bargaining between employers and unions plays a major role: upstream, the Sectoral Committees or Councils help to define the occupational standards, with significant consequences for training and qualification practices; downstream, in sectors and enterprises, the negotiation of collective agreements is designed to integrate the validation of NFIL for the sake of making vocational careers more secure, within and outside enterprises. Realism forces us to recognise that collective bargaining today is still falling short of that ambition, particularly if we argue at the European or multinational level. Big multinationals can have highly-developed internal practices to detect and promote competences and talents, but this might be the prerogative of their human resources departments and collective bargaining might not really take ownership of this issue.

Where public incentives and collective bargaining converge, this is the best context to boost the validation of competences and include it in the prospect of lifelong learning, but it is no bed of roses: the example of the French banking sector shows that in order to be fully effective, frank public incentives and good sectoral agreements imply active collective bargaining within enterprises (box 5 above). Obviously, the context specific to certain companies can create the conditions for productive initiatives, for example in some French enterprises (Club Méditerranée, Orange), where the employer and the unions agree to develop a collective APL process. In the case of Orange, the objective is to recognise the long experience built up by the trouble-shooters, called the 'linemen', who were at the hub of the historical telecommunications activity. In the case of Club Méditerranée, the aim is to allow better recognition, outside the company, of the experience acquired by employees.

But good practices like these are not the everyday norm. Protocols of agreements between proactive enterprises and the establishments providing training and validation services are one way of reconciling the enterprises' own interests and compliance with public criteria and standards, which is useful from the point of view of the transferability of the competences recognised. In Portugal, such protocols are common between enterprises and certain *Novas Oportunidades* centres integrated into training centres enjoying a good reputation among enterprises. In Spain, there are some pilot experiments by enterprises incorporating their workers in a process for the recognition of experience acquired, integrating complementary training, in the framework of agreements with the Ministry of Education. In Denmark,

certain sectors such as transport are on the initiative for the recognition of NFIL, but other professions (hospitals, electricians, etc.) are more reluctant, for the sake of protecting the traditional access routes.

Identifying, documenting and validating competences helps to increase what we might call the depth of the labour market: the actual supply of competences by workers becomes more transparent because of it. Demand for training and qualification by people who are unemployed, young people facing difficulties in finding a job, etc. also develops. A worker, be he already employed or unemployed, can submit his complete skills portfolio according to standards clearly recognised on an expanded market, whose boundaries go beyond the proximity relationships which limit the mobility that can be envisaged¹²: 'flexicurity' is rebalanced towards security, which is not unimportant in the support provided by the unions for the NFIL validation mechanisms in the country which gave the world the concept of flexicurity, Denmark. The availability of this information is also an advantage for employers, meaning that the quality of the matches between supply and demand when it comes to jobs can be improved. The ensured transferability of recognised or certified skills, outside the enterprise, facilitates mobility.

The present trend towards deregulation of the labour markets might threaten this progress, by 'deskilling' people and jobs so as to pay them less: this will be the case if qualifications, whatever their origin, are recognised less by the collective agreements and if the role of the occupational categories is weakened in those agreements. For such a deregulatory approach, the national and European tools, like the frameworks and catalogues of qualifications, might be assimilated to 'rigidity'! This contradiction needs to be highlighted: European policy seeks to ground mobility in the qualification of vocational skills and competences. The paradox is that excessive deregulation of the labour market might have the opposite effect. Clearly, as one Portuguese unionist put it, we are experiencing 'a very controversial moment'. Raising people's skills levels is one way out of the crisis, and it starts with recognising their effective competences, but the blind management of competitive and fiscal constraints is threatening this thrust.

This comment refers not only to the countries where labour market reforms are currently underway under pressure from the crisis and its political handling, but also countries whose economic and social situation is more solid. Germany and Denmark operate highly efficient vocational training systems, actively supported by the employers and the unions, and anchored in enterprises' HR management, but moderately open to the practices of NFIL validation. If the recognition of formal qualifications is clearly guaranteed for the workers well integrated into the competitive enterprises, there is a risk of a growing dualism: those individuals who, for various reasons, escape the formal qualification routes, may end up swelling the ranks of a peripheral economy of bad jobs, with low pay, which do little to mobilise their competences and offer no prospects of an upskilling career. In those countries, too, guaranteeing a better place for the processes for the validation of NFIL will contribute towards economic and social cohesion, thanks to better integration of manpower components (young people leaving school early, migrants, etc.), whose contribution to the supply of labour becomes a major issue in a context of a slowdown and demographic ageing. This is also something that is making itself felt in Finland, a country where the validation of NFIL is well integrated into the training system.

¹² The National Reform Program communicated by the Romanian government to the European Commission in April 2011, for example, expresses this ambition very clearly: 'The portfolio will include all diplomas, certificates and other documents obtained following the assessment of skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning frameworks. Out of this individual educational portfolio one should be able to extract the following data: student educational pathway, his/her inclinations and skills and particular performances', *National Reform Program (2011-2013)*, Government of Romania, Bucharest, April 2011, pp. 109-110.

Certain thrusts likely to improve the matches on the labour market seem to be common across all countries, despite their differences:

- More systematic global and local anticipation of the skills needed, in order to clarify the priorities. At the moment, the anticipation effort is still too rough and incomplete.
- Training and qualification services that are angled more directly towards the specific internal needs of enterprises, including small ones.
- Better, more personalised guidance for individuals before they get into the validation and training process, with similarly robust and personalised follow-up after the end of the process.

6. European prospects and practical recommendations

The present attention to the validation of NFIL rests upon the trend emerging in Europe, over recent years, in favour of the valorisation of learning outcomes. The aim is to give vocational development, as well as associative involvement, a bigger role in the acquisition and validation of competences: attention needs to be focused on the outcomes of individuals' continuing training over the course of their active lives, more than just on the diplomas they earn from their initial education.

The communication *Towards a job-rich recovery*, published by the European Commission on 18 April 2012 (see box 2 above), recalls and underlines the role needing to be played by the documented, certified validation of competences in regulating a labour market organised at the European level. If the objective is ambitious and its achievement is still a way off, its wording encourages a clarification of the relationship with national realities which remain disparate.

6.1. The European mechanisms, a constraint or a lever?

The European mechanisms are ambitious: they seek to favour free mobility of Europeans both within the training system and on the labour market, by breaking down the barriers around general education and vocational training and incorporating initial education and continuing training into a unified qualification framework. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is a kind of Esperanto or common language, which provides some useful principles for the recognition of qualifications and competences; it offers a reference that can be mobilised in the exchanges between government and social partners when the construction of a national framework is in its infancy (in Poland) or underway (in Italy): the reference to the EQF makes it easier for workers to get direct access to the European recognition of their skills.

That being said, the European mechanisms are not always easy to implement. Transposing them comes up against national conceptions and practices rooted in countries' history and in the traditions of their social players: this might hold true equally for the qualities and for the defects of the national systems, whose evolution is necessarily progressive. Even if they are credited with good intentions, the European mechanisms and tools may look too abstract, too much imposed in line with a 'top-down' philosophy, and too far removed from national perceptions to be familiar in use. The EQF is not yet an operational tool for practical equivalences and freedom of movement on the European labour market: it is still too remote from the languages spoken and the representations made by the national players. So the EQF is difficult to apply directly when there is a binary system of higher education with a sharp distinction between vocational and academic directions. The community vocabulary itself can be surprising: in various European countries, players who are committed and informed about the training system are still disconcerted by the term 'non-formal and informal learning'.

The European institutions have drawn up some guidelines for identifying and validating NFIL, which have become more clear-cut over time. The European Council framed some general principles in 2004 for the identification and validation of NFIL: individual rights and fair treatment of people; obligations of the stakeholders; reliability, credibility and legitimacy of the procedures. The *Guidelines* published by CEDEFOP in 2009 refer to these principles, without constituting a regulatory framework¹³: they propose a set of operating instructions for the European instruments available to make the process for the identification and validation of NFIL more credible and solid, in a way that is comparable between countries. They form a practical evaluation tool at the disposal of the players involved in NFIL.

¹³ *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*, CEDEFOP, 2009.

The analytical and normative skeleton that they propose has been used by GHK to describe and evaluate the national practices in the framework of the last European NFIL inventory. The effective understanding and use of these guidelines by the national players cannot be taken for granted, as we have been able to see from the interviews conducted in the course of the national surveys.

Reluctance vis-à-vis European tools which are both too exhaustive and too abstract is common. In Germany, the players find the EQF not to be very operational from the vocational point of view: the German concept of *Beruf* (profession) insists on an integrated approach to the professional capacity, rather than a modular approach to competences, while in Spain, the institutional players intend to complete the elaboration of the national qualification framework before aligning it on the general references of the EQF. Taking national realities on board leads to a certain pragmatism, in order to give the national players a grip on the evolution of the national qualification frameworks and catalogues and their implications for the procedures for validating competences.

What we are suggesting here is that the European mechanisms be regarded as levers, driving national practices forwards towards convergence, rather than as constraints around which the national systems need to be aligned as quickly as possible. These systems show great diversity: so they do not define the notion of competence in a uniform way. Some of them, such as the British NVQs, give priority to the ‘fine weave’ of competence, conceived as the ability to carry out a set of elementary tasks associated with a particular job, while others, as in Germany and France, take a more integrative approach to competence, which is taken to be a mastery of both theoretical and practical knowledge. It is not enough to have carefully-designed European reference frameworks, to ensure transparent correspondence between the national systems: the conceptual differences between these systems are rooted in long-standing national habits and they are expressed in the operation of the institutions. The European frameworks can be mobilised as a tool to reveal the differences and tensions existing between the national approaches, in a spirit of mutual trust. The problems posed by these gaps between countries need to be resolved without being artificially erased.

Taking more explicit account of learning outcomes in the competence reference materials opens the way to the generalised validation of NFIL. It encourages the educational system to ensure that the diplomas issued will be more defined by the competences that they certify (the outcomes) than by the inputs, which – in theory – allows non-formal methods of acquiring competences to be recognised as equivalent, all other things being equal. The objective is not inaccessible: countries such as Finland are well on the way to achieving it, because there, the principle of the recognition of competences, however they are acquired, occupies a central place in the CBQ (Competence-Based Qualifications) system.

The fact remains that in many countries, we see some fairly generalised resistance in the university system to the recognition of NFIL as a way into higher education. The odd initiative does exist (the university of Roma Tre in Italy, Jagiellonian university in Krakow, the universities of Applied Sciences in Finland, etc.). But the receptiveness of higher education to the recognition of NFIL, according to well-defined rules guaranteeing equal treatment for people who have taken different routes to acquire their portfolio of competences, remains a tricky issue. In Germany, which has a highly competitive economy and an efficient vocational training system, the driving force for progress is located in higher education: university as such becomes the focus for very high-level vocational training, higher than the baccalaureate, knowing that experienced workers can get their experience certified via the tried and tested route of *Externenprüfung* (external examination) and then move on to high-level training courses.

These normal differences in approach between countries should not mask a common issue: ***it is not a matter of the validation of NFIL issuing a 'poor man's diploma' or low-cost qualification*** enabling minimum employability in precarious labour markets and economies with low competitiveness. ***On the contrary, it must be integrated into a general process of upskilling, offering people without initial diplomas a way into lifelong learning***, to help them to benefit from a cumulative process of recognition and improvement of competences: this should improve both their employability and their possible access to higher-level training. In several of the countries surveyed, programmes embarked upon by the public authorities, with the participation of the social players, are moving in that direction, even if they are still only halfway towards achieving the ambitions announced. It would be deeply damaging to the competitiveness of Europe's economies for such programmes to be among the first victims of budgetary austerity.

6.2. Recommendations

This section aims, without claiming to be exhaustive, to frame a set of recommendations for tackling the major issues identified in the framework of the surveys conducted on the ground, and the problems highlighted in this synthesis. These recommendations take account of the contributions from the Lisbon conference on 26 and 27 June 2012. They also reflect the concerns expressed by the respondents to the public consultation organised by the European Commission in 2011: those respondents frequently focus on the needs for communication and information aimed at users, on the need for confidence in the procedures and on the need for customised guidance and support for individuals.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning requires action in a number of directions in order to extend people's effective access to the mechanisms that already exist, in the framework of making their career paths more secure. It is also a matter of allowing countries or regions which are not yet highly mobilised to make a commitment to the more resolute implementation of the mechanisms for the validation of NFIL.

The recommendations described below therefore have:

- on the one hand ***a qualitative objective of improving the services provided to users – individuals and enterprises – and the efficiency of the mechanisms set up;***
- on the other, ***a more quantitative objective of extending access for workers in large and small enterprises, as well as unemployed people, to the recognition or validation of NFIL.***

These recommendations identify some paths for progress and some ways forward. They rely on the observations coming out of the national surveys and covered in this summary report; they take account of the diversity of the national systems and the diversity of points of view; they cover the entire validation process and are attentive to its prior stages (information, advice, guidance, etc.) and its later stages (follow-up, support, etc.); they suggest some proposed indicators allowing steering and evaluation of the actions to be conducted. The timeframe for this set of recommendations is 3 to 4 years, to give the protagonists the time required to sign up to, carry out and evaluate the actions envisaged.

➔ ***Improving the coordination and follow-up of the actions to recognise and validate NFIL***

The NFIL validation processes are, by definition, multi-player, and the coordinated mobilization of all these players colours the scope and success of these processes: at every geographical level, consultation and partnership between these players are priorities. In particular, enterprises, within which people's

career destiny very often plays out, need to be fully engaged in these partnerships. Explicit protocols of agreement between enterprises and training and validation bodies are one way to organise collective processes for the recognition and validation of competences acquired through NFIL, in accordance with the public standards and criteria.

- **Enriching the consultation and the partnerships between players at the territorial level**

Those providing advice, guidance and training services, and those providing funding and qualification, are the technical players with a pivotal role to play in organising and running the validation process. The effective deployment of their action, towards the target categories identified, implies close contacts with the economic, social and institutional players in the territories within appropriate consultative bodies. It is not automatically a case of adding specific bodies, but more of ensuring that the existing bodies in the field of employment and training do indeed properly take on board the issue of the recognition and validation of NFIL.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of partnership bodies involved in the validation of competences.*
- *Inventory of the actions carried out by those bodies.*

- **Getting protocols for partnership with the training and competence validation providers tied in to sectoral and enterprise-level collective bargaining**

Collective bargaining, in sectors and enterprises, could take more notice of the issue of the validation of competences, if the implementation of the agreements concluded between employers and unions could rely on easy access to protocols for partnership with the training and qualification providers. The dissemination of specimen protocols would help to bring about a better understanding, by employers and their staff and representatives alike, of the prospects opened by the validation of competences. Depending on the trade union options and the sectoral or local situations, the validation of prior learning can be a fully-fledged subject for negotiation, or perhaps integrated into a broader field of discussion (training policy, forward planning of employment and competences, etc.).

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of collective agreements relating to the validation of competences acquired.*

- **Enriching the observation and evaluation of individual career paths during and after validation**

The data on the career paths help to steer the validation mechanisms and evaluate their costs and advantages. At present, these data are often difficult to compile: they give only a partial picture of the NFIL activities. Better availability of information is therefore desirable:

- on the beneficiaries' career paths towards seeing the recognition and validation of their competences, and the various milestones on the way (abandonment, total or partial success, access to complementary training, etc.)
- on beneficiaries' later careers, after the recognition and validation: what is the impact on the continued career, on vocational mobility, on remuneration?

At European level, statistical surveys do exist, specifically under the aegis of Eurostat. It would be useful to examine the extent to which they already provide, or might provide, information that can be mobilised about the return, for people, on the training and validation routes that they take. At territorial level, closer to the players, a reinforcement of their tools would be welcome, trialling the setting up of databases on validation pathways. Such databases would make it possible to set up samples of workers so as to question them directly about their perception of the route they have taken, and its impact on their professional development.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Record of survey practices on the validation pathways.*
- *Production of territorial roadmaps with indicators on the validation pathways, the outcomes in terms of access to qualifications, the impact on vocational careers.*

→ Informing and advising workers about NFIL, its recognition and validation

- **Ensuring that accessible, precise information on ways of recognising and validating NFIL is widely available**

As things stand, there is a wide diversity of methods of trade union involvement in the communication of information and advice with regard to the recognition and validation of competences. Without wishing to standardise these practices, a basic pillar might be proposed for indicative purposes and discussed in the framework of the European sectoral social dialogue:

- to promote the harmonisation of the information made available to people potentially interested by the social partners and the certifying bodies, on the web or on paper: this would reassure these people about the accessibility of the process,
- to distribute these information resources to the various contact points and mediators on the ground: reception and guidance centres and networks, bodies funding and dispensing vocational training, certifying bodies, professional branches, etc.,
- to raise awareness among these mediators on the ground and put them on a professional footing, specifically by organising regular information sessions about the mechanisms that can be mobilised,
- to get the big enterprises' HR departments involved in the dissemination of the information; to use targeted campaigns to raise awareness of those in charge in small enterprises.

In many countries, some public institutions in charge of the questions of training and qualification have a legitimate vocation to stimulate and coordinate this communication effort. To be effective, this effort needs to rely on a network of committed mediators and players.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of information and communication tools.*
- *Inventory of information and awareness-raising campaigns.*

- **Encouraging the conduct of experimental actions to provide reinforced advice to target categories and after evaluation, envisaging their dissemination.**

People remote from work or in a precarious situation (the long-term unemployed, workers in occupational reclassification, people in vocational and social integration, those with low skills, migrants whose qualifications are not recognised, etc.) are in particular need of appropriate information and advice.

Thought could be given to conducting experiments with reinforced advice services for these groups: the 'specifications' of these processes could be devised on a partnership basis at local or sectoral level. They would rest upon the evaluation of the first significant experiments conducted, and would focus on identifying the competences, logging and handling the obstacles to a vocational project (such as illiteracy), and the possibility of coupling the recognition of competences to a realistic vocational project.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Logging and characteristics of the people affected by these experimental campaigns.*
- *Evaluation of the content, the duration, the costs and the outcomes of these campaigns.*
- *Following up the dissemination of these experiments.*

- **Developing the information and advice aimed at workers in enterprises, Encouraging the integration of the validation of NFIL into HR management**

Workers' access to the validation of NFIL involves raising awareness within enterprises, specifically in the framework of HR management practices and via proximity work by staff representatives. The joint action of the employers and the unions is crucial, within the enterprise, in guaranteeing good ownership of this issue. Promoting this 'learning organisation' principle therefore implies:

- capitalising at national and European levels on the actions conducted towards enterprises,
- promoting dissemination and professionalization actions around the NFIL validation tools, involving the persons responsible within the HR services and the staff representatives. The unions might call for and monitor the conduct of such actions.

In addition, thought might be given to actions to promote these practices at the level of the big European groups, for the sake of guaranteeing their dissemination, regardless of the state of progress and maturity of the national systems around the validation of NFIL.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of dissemination and professionalization actions aimed at enterprises.*
- *Number of enterprises and workers concerned and actually reached.*

➔ **Supporting workers in the recognition and validation of competences**

The quality of the support they enjoy plays a key role in the success of workers' pathways when they are seeking to validate the competences they have acquired via non-formal or informal learning.

- **Reinforcing support before, during and after the validation pathway**

A set of specimen specifications for support could be drafted at European level. They would serve as a reference pillar for those providing and funding such support in the various countries, but also for the unions wishing to make their contribution to support measures into a part of the services they provide.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of specifications and support service charters at national and local level.*
- *Logging of support actions.*

- **Adapting the support services to the specific categories and the people**

The support must match the personal situations, particularly when these are people facing major difficulties in vocational integration or retraining.

Care must therefore be taken:

- to tailor the support to every category,
- for each category, to ensure the coordinated mobilisation of the various service providers, so as to give people readily accessible proximity support,
- to develop complementary services specifically in support of people faced with the greatest difficulties (particularly those who suffer from illiteracy or disability),
- to get the trade union organisations involved in monitoring the specific support actions.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Logging of the categories specifically supported.*
- *Logging of the specific support actions.*

- **Guaranteeing the professionalization of the support service players**

Information and a practical knowledge of the specifications or the support service charters are crucial to their quality. Professionalization actions aimed at the providers of support services would need to be conducted if the above actions were adopted.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of professionalization actions aimed at those providing support.*
- *Logging of providers of services and support benefiting from these actions.*

➔ **Encouraging complete validation of competences, through access to qualification**

- **Reinforcing the management of expectations from the validation of NFIL by jury members**

Managing the function of a validation jury member requires methodological markers which are distinct from those mobilised in the usual validation of training courses: the point is to evaluate people's practical competences in their vocational context. Actions to develop exchanges of good practices and the pooling of evaluation criteria among jury members (from different countries or regions) might be strengthened or further developed.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory of exchange and pooling actions mobilising jury members.*

- **Guaranteeing access to a modular supply of training to complement partial validation**

During and after the validation process, some applicants need complementary training courses: perhaps some skills – of an educational or vocational nature – might be clearly lacking when they enter the validation process, or perhaps they might fail to validate them at the end of the process. Access to complementary training courses must therefore be organised with flexibility, which involves appropriate organisation into modules. In the countries where such modularisation is not present, joint thought might be given to this matter between the providers of training and validation services, financing providers, and representatives of the trade union and professional organisations concerned.

Follow-up indicators:

- *Inventory, at national or local level, of the complementary and modular training courses on offer.*

The above recommendations, which are incomplete and evolving, have a limited ambition. They do not claim to offer a complete normative framework for the validation of NFIL, and in that sense they are not in competition with the CEDEFOP *Guidelines*. They seek simply to draw attention to certain key points and to the need for better observation of the actions conducted, once the recognition and validation of NFIL are given their rightful place in the overarching education and training system.

The validation of the skills acquired through formal, non-formal and informal avenues is a matter, at both European and national level, of public responsibility in the field of training. The effective exercise of that responsibility is important for the fate of workers, faced with the insecurity of the labour markets in a crisis period, and for the proper operation of the European economies, whose competitiveness depends more on the skill of their workers. These are strong reasons for the trade unions to be clearly and robustly stating their points of view on these questions and trying to convince the employers to make this an active area for collective bargaining.

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Annexes

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- Actors and practices of vocational training and NFIL in **France**, Synthesis of the study visit in France (January – February 2012)
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