The changing institutional and political role of non-formal learning: European trends

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The changing institutional and political role of non-formal learning: European trends

Jens Bjørnåvold

Abstract
This contribution discusses the theoretical basis and main European initiatives in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. Over the past few years most EU Member States have emphasised the crucial role of learning that takes place outside of and in addition to formal education and training. This emphasis has been followed by an increasing number of political and practical initiatives, gradually moving the issue from the stage of pure experimentation to early implementation. The task is challenging because developments in a number of settings, at European, national, sectoral and enterprise levels have to be considered. The interplay between these settings has not yet been extensively explored; the challenge is to see whether there is a common core to be extracted from this wide range of initial experience.
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1. Introduction

This contribution aims at providing an overview on some of the main European tendencies in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. This is a difficult yet challenging task. The task is difficult because the rate of change and innovation, in terms of methodologies, institutions and policies, is very high. During the past few years most Member States of the EU have emphasised the crucial role of learning that takes place outside of and in addition to, formal education and training. This emphasis has led to an increasing number of political and practical initiatives, gradually shifting the issue from the stage of pure experimentation to that of early implementation. The task is challenging because of developments in a number of settings at European, national, sectoral and enterprise levels. The interplay between these levels has not been focused upon very much and the challenge is to see whether there is a common core of experience to be extracted from this heterogeneous body of experimentation.

In the White Paper on ‘Teaching and learning’ presented by the European Commission at the end of 1995, the idea of a common European approach in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning was presented. Consisting of a ‘personal skills card’ and operating within the framework of a ‘European skills accreditation system’, the ambition of this proposal was to develop an instrument making it possible to broaden the range of skills utilised by individuals, enterprises and in society at large. This ambition of creating one single instrument has not been fulfilled. Notwithstanding a high number of pilot projects focusing on technological and organisational issues at stake (in the Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates and Adapt programmes), neither the ‘personal skills card’ nor the ‘European skills accreditation system’ have been transformed into actual tools operating at European level. The main developmental thrust can be observed at national, and to a growing extent, at sectoral and enterprise levels. This may be looked upon as a reflection of the need to tailor methodological and institutional solutions to specific needs and users. The needs of an enterprise may differ entirely from those of national education and/or labour authorities and individual needs may differ from those of branches and sectors. This leaves us with a paradox. Assessment methodologies are developed to make non-formal competences more visible and make it easier to transfer them from one context to another. The development of a high number of national/sectoral and enterprise-based methodologies tailored to specific and limited needs may contradict the general objective of increased transparency and transferability. This paradox cannot be fully solved at national, sectoral or enterprise levels. Whether it is possible to find European solutions (through some form of common framework linking otherwise separate initiatives together), is an open question.

This contribution is divided into four parts. The first part treats basic theoretical issues linked to the character of non-formal learning and the political implications of setting up systems in this area. The second, and by far the largest part, outlines initiatives and developments in Member States. The third part presents and discusses initiatives at EU level, concentrating on the message of the White Paper on ‘Teaching and learning’ (European Commission 1995) and on experiences from the Leonardo da Vinci programme. Concluding remarks are presented in the fourth and last part.

2. Theoretical pretext

Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning is very much a practical issue. The term non-formal learning encompasses informal learning which can be described as unplanned learning in work situations and elsewhere, but also includes planned and explicit approaches to learning introduced in work organisations and elsewhere, not recognised within the formal education and training system.
issue. Methodologies have to be simple and inexpensive and they have to be based on a clear notion of how technical, institutional and political responsibilities are to be shared. This requires a profound understanding of non-formal learning. By highlighting some of the theoretical aspects involved, we hope to be able to clarify some of the practical challenges faced.

2.1 The contextual and tacit character of non-formal learning

To develop methodologies actually able to capture the learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions in a valid and reliable way, some basic characteristics of learning need to be explored. Firstly, learning is contextual in its character. When taking place in social and material settings, knowledge and competences are very much the result of participation in ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991). Frequently, learning has been conceived as a process by which the learner ‘internalises’ knowledge, whether ‘discovered’, ‘transmitted’ or ‘experienced’ in interaction with others. But learning cannot be reduced to passive reception of ‘pieces’ of knowledge. This focus on internalisation establishes a sharp division between inside and outside, and suggests that learning is exclusively something happening inside the brain in some cerebral process, and takes the individual as a non-problematic unit of analysis. Accordingly, learning is reduced to a process of absorption, a matter of transmission and assimilation. The alternative approach formulated by Lave and Wenger provides a potentially better basis for understanding and identifying various aspects of learning and knowledge-formation. This shift in perspective implicates a focus not only on the relational (the role of the individual within a social group) but also the negotiated, the concerned and the engaged nature of learning (the communicative character of learning). The individual learner is not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge that he or she will reapply in later contexts. Instead, he or she acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in an ongoing process of learning. Learning is thus not only reproduction, but also reformulation and renewal of knowledge and competences. As Engeström (1993, 1994) has underlined, facing a new situation or an unexpected problem, a learner cannot rely only on the established basis of competences, but must try to find new solutions and develop alternative practices. This corresponds to Herbert Simon (1973) who points out that ill structured problems are more common than well structured problems in organisations. The successful learner must not only be able to reproduce competences already existing in a community of practice, but must also be able to question and improve these practices. Following Engeström’s expansive’ learning model we can identify a number of elements that should be reflected in assessment methodologies:

- the ability to question established facts;
- the ability to define and clarify problems;
- the ability to cooperate and find possible solutions; and,
- the ability to formulate and implement solutions.

These are important aspects of competent behaviour in a work setting. The ability to learn is thus emphasised as the most important quality, even more important than the specific bits and pieces of knowledge and experience being learned. Returning to the issue of developing assessment methodologies, this points to the need for balance between the attention given to learning abilities and factual competences. Learning how to learn, including learning how to approach unexpected problems, are key elements to be addressed by any methodology in the attempt to capture non-formal learning.
Second, competences are partly *tacit* (Polanyi 1967) in their character. This means that it is difficult to verbalise and delimit the single steps or rules intrinsic to a certain competence. In some cases, people are not even aware of being in possession of a competence. This is an element of high relevance to the task of assessing non-formal learning, and has to be reflected by the methodologies. Most of us know how to ride a bicycle but we face great difficulties when trying to formulate the specific rules intrinsic to this competence. The ‘know-how’ in question has been acquired through practice and painful experience. An experienced carpenter knows how to use a tool in ways that escape verbalisation. Normally we take this know-how so much for granted that we do not appreciate the extent to which it pervades our activities. This is perhaps most apparent in situations where this know-how deserts us, when our intuitive and non-reflective attitude towards these activities for some reason or another is interrupted. An important part of what we include in the term non-formal learning belongs to this area of implicit know-how. An experienced worker facing a new situation or a new problem will normally, without giving it much thought, be able to make use of his or her accumulated reservoir of abstract knowledge and concrete experiences. To transform tacit, implicit and intuitive knowledge into officially stamped elements of knowledge is difficult and full of risks. Difficult because we enter an area partly evading descriptions, full of risks because we might end up with misconstructions of the know-how we intend to capture. In addition, whether the tacit know-how can be captured in formal descriptions is also a question of economic and practical feasibility: how much time and resources should be spent on assessing each individual?

Thus, the quality of assessments relies on a number of factors. Methodologies have to reflect and balance the individual and contextual as well as the tacit and implicit character of non-formal learning. Testing within a formal education and training setting is normally judged according to the criteria of reliability (consistency) and validity. These criteria are just as important within the setting of non-formal learning but in many ways even more difficult to achieve than in the setting of formal education and training. The question of validity is crucial as methodologies have to be able to capture the variety and heterogeneity of learning paths and learning results. Surrounded by constraints imposed by limited time and resources, methodologies must be able to combine the need for standardisation and simplification with an open attitude towards the non-standard and what is specific to an individual or a group. Proper ‘measurement’ implies openness for the richness and complexity of learning; maps should be drawn according to the terrain, the terrain should not be described to fit the map. To find the balance between optimal validity (to pursue perfect validity implies endless assessments), necessary standardisation and simplification, is the basic challenge. The question of reliability (and consistency), is also of crucial importance. Users must be confident that results can be compared and that unfair variations in assessment practices have been avoided as far as possible. A situation where candidates are treated differently due to unclear procedures and varying interpretations of procedures by assessors, risks a threat to the legitimacy of the system.

Generally speaking, the challenge of assessing non-formal learning consists of capturing, on a piece of paper, learning results specific to individuals and contexts. This has to be done within a procedural setting aiming at standardisation and simplification (due to limited resources and legitimate demands for consistency). This balance of seemingly opposing principles is what makes the task a challenge for policy-makers, researchers and practitioners.

### 2.2 The need for legitimacy and social acceptance

The future role of systems for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning cannot be limited to a question of methodological quality. While being important, reliable and valid methodologies are not sufficient to make individuals, enterprises and/or educational institutions trust and accept assessments. A number of political and institutional preconditions have to be met to attribute some ac-
tual value to the assessments in question. This can be done partly through political decisions securing the legal basis for initiatives but should be supplemented by a process where questions of ‘ownership’ and ‘control’ as well as ‘usefulness’ must be clarified. In this way, assessments of non-formal learning would be judged according to technical and instrumental criteria (reliability and validity), as well as normative criteria (legality and legitimacy). The acceptance of assessments of non-formal learning is not only a matter of their legal status but also of their legitimate status. As with ordinary certificates from the formal education and training system, the function of assessments of non-formal learning may be compared with money. Parsons has defined money as:

‘…a code, providing certain information from holder to receiver. Money is valid in a certain set of standard situations, it must be based on a generalised value, accepted not only in a legal sense, but also on a popular basis, and it must be measurable’.

If we apply this perspective to assessments of non-formal learning several parallels appear. As with money, assessments can be understood as a code, providing information from holder to receiver. An individual applying for a job using assessments exemplifies this. Information is not enough, it must be presented in a specific code to be acceptable. As with money, assessments are valid in a predefined set of standard situations, e.g. in the labour market, within the hierarchy of an enterprise or in the system of education and training. Like money, assessments must also be based on some form of generalised legal and legitimate value. The competences in question must be accepted as potentially valid/useful outside their narrow context of origin. Only actual use can prove whether such a generalised value will actually be attributed to assessments of non-formal learning. Nobody can guarantee that the relative value of formal versus non-formal learning can be changed through the introduction of methodologies and systems for the assessment of non-formal learning. The strong links between formal education and social bargaining processes (which influence the setting of wages and access to jobs), illustrate the complexity involved in attributing generalised value to assessments of non-formal learning. Finally, as with money, assessments must be able to ‘measure’. This means that both the quantitative (time, volume) and qualitative (content, profile) aspects of learning must be captured in as valid and reliable a way as possible.

Accordingly, assessments must be able to store information, measure the learning in question and signal the value attributed to it in the broader setting of the labour market, the education and training system and society in general. Unlike money, assessments cannot operate on the basis of a one-dimensional and quantified code, rather, they have to use written texts to capture the complexity of individually-held competences. The metaphor of money highlights the challenges facing this new ‘currency’. First, interpreting assessments as a code transforming a complicated set of information (about learning) into a standardised and simplified language, points to the methodological paradoxes already discussed. If standardisation and simplification become too radical, the information value is reduced in such a way that the overall benefit is threatened. In this respect the difference between money and assessments is made clear. If the contextual, individual and tacit characters of non-formal learning are lost during the ‘measurement process’, the information value is reduced in a way which threatens the legitimacy of the exercise. The strength of money lies in its ability to simplify and standardise what would otherwise be a complicated process of barter and exchange. The weakness of assessments of non-formal learning may very well lie in the same need to simplify and standardise. Furthermore, the legitimacy and value of assessments will be defined through their actual use. Theoretically, these standard situations arise when individuals try to enter the labour market, or access certain levels of the education and training system or improve their position in the internal job-hierarchy of an enterprise.

Questions of legitimacy and acceptance rely partly on political and legal actions by the State or some other authority. The setting up
and ‘design’ of institutions and political processes are thus of equal importance to the methodological considerations outlined above. In other words, a perfect methodology is of no value if not working in tune within legitimate institutional and political settings. It would be naïve to think that institutional design can provide a complete solution, it would however be equally naïve to overlook the potential importance of such an approach. The following criteria need to be considered when constructing the institutional basis for the new methodologies:

- relevant participants must be heard;
- relevant information must be delivered;
- different interests should be balanced.

Acceptance implies a shared and balanced ownership between representatives of the formal education and training system and representatives of enterprises and trade unions. So far, the institutional and political aspects of assessing non-formal learning have been left untouched to a large extent. This may be due to the fragmentary status and novelty of initiatives in this area. The issue has been looked upon as not very controversial, something everybody can agree on. In a situation where methodologies and systems for the identification, assessment and recognition of learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions are being developed, this may change. Such a situation could increase the general value of competences acquired outside formal education and training institutions and affect collective bargaining, both in terms of setting wages and access to jobs.

3. European trends: Developments at national level

In 1994, according to Eurostat (1997), almost 25% of the entire European population was enrolled in some form of education and training (all levels included). The growth of specialised and institutionalised training is one of the most distinct characteristics of European societies today. Against this background, growing interest in learning taking place outside the formal education and training domain may seem paradoxical. In a situation where national education and training systems face over-capacity and where highly educated people face unemployment, the sense in putting resources into systems of ‘assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning’ may seem questionable. This is, however, what is happening. During the past decade, a majority of EU Member States, together with countries outside the EU, have initiated work to establish methodologies and institutions facilitating identification, assessment and recognition of learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions. Pioneered by France (the Law on Bilan de compétence of 1985 and the Law of 1992 on the ‘Validation of skills acquired by work experience’), attention on these issues has been strengthened year by year. The purpose of this report is to provide an updated picture as well as an interpretation of this trend.³

From the outset, it is possible to conclude that no common European approach currently exists. The fact that initiatives have been taken at different points in time and within the context of different systems of education and training leaves us with a heterogeneous mix of national and sectoral approaches. What is important is that most initiatives seem to focus on the same challenges. Firstly, the reorientation of formal (especially vocational) education and training, from strictly input-oriented to output-oriented systems is important to understand activities. In countries like the UK and Finland, it is emphasised that what matters are the competences, not how you have acquired them. By accepting alternative pathways to learning, in addition to the ones provided within formal schemes, the question of assessment becomes a central one. Secondly, the growing emphasis on lifelong

³ Our presentation is based on material gathered within the framework of the Cedefop project on ‘Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning’, initiated in 1997. A total of 15 studies have been commissioned to research institutions in 14 countries, and this report represents a first attempt to bring together the results of this work.
learning implies a stronger focus on the link between different forms of learning in different areas at different stages of life. While the formal system is still very much focused on initial education and training, a lifelong learning system has to face the challenge of linking a variety of formal and non-formal learning areas. This is necessary to meet the individual need for continuous and varied renewal of knowledge and the enterprise's need for a broad array of knowledge and competences – a sort of knowledge reservoir to face the unexpected. Also in this context, the question of identification, assessment and recognition is crucial. Competences have to be made visible if they are to be fully integrated into such a broader strategy for knowledge reproduction and renewal.

More or less explicitly, these two challenges are emphasised in all the countries studied. In some countries, methodologies for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning are looked upon as necessary tools to open up these new pathways. But the issue should not be limited to how to modernise and vitalise existing systems for education and training, the methodological and institutional experimentation may also be looked upon as a reflection of basic changes in our understanding of learning and competences. Closely related to the unprecedented growth in formal education and training (see above), a growing scepticism towards the output of the formal system can be detected. It is questioned whether a harmonised system of mass education is able to serve the needs of societies becoming increasingly complex, both in the technological and organisational sense. Traditionally, formal education and training systems were important vehicles not only for the reproduction and renewal of competences, but also for the selection for jobs and positions. In a situation where many European countries combine mass education with mass unemployment, the role of education as a selection mechanism becomes more problematic. On the one hand, we can observe inflationary trends as the amount of education and training needed to compete on the labour market increases. On the other hand, 'more of the same' is not necessarily what is asked by a labour market facing rapid changes and growing uncertainty. As long as the challenge is to select individuals with the most relevant competences, formal education and training systems may increasingly appear as insufficient and the need to utilise other sources becomes more urgent.

The initial focus of our work on this issue was a methodological one (Cedefop, Bjørnåvold, 1997): is it possible to measure learning taking place outside formal education and training in a reliable and valid way? The introduction of methodologies in this area can only be understood within a broader social and political context as a response to changing conceptions of education and training. This defines our main perspective when trying to overview developments in the EU/EEA context.

The European situation will be presented by looking at five country clusters. Even though countries within each cluster may differ somewhat in their methodological and institutional approaches and choices, geographical nearness as well as institutional closeness seem to motivate mutual learning. The overview presented in this chapter is limited in the sense that it basically focuses on initiatives at public level. As will be documented in later chapters, important additional initiatives have been taken at enterprise and branch levels, partly on an autonomous basis and partly supported by European programmes such as Leonardo da Vinci and Adapt.

We start by discussing the role of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Germany and Austria. Two basic questions define the scope of this presentation: why have so few initiatives been taken in these countries, and how does the dual system of vocational education and training influence work and initiatives in this field. In the second cluster, the approaches of the Mediterranean countries Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal are discussed. These are countries where, due to weak vocational education and training traditions and systems, non-formal learning has played, and still plays, a crucial role. In a situation where formal education and training is generally being strengthened, the role
of non-formal learning is challenged and changed. In the third cluster of countries, Finland, Norway\(^4\), Sweden and Denmark, we ask the question whether a Nordic model can be identified. The Nordic countries enjoy a long tradition of mutual learning in the area of education and training; whether this applies to assessment and recognition of non-formal learning is another question. In the fourth cluster of countries, United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands, we reflect on experiences within, as well as the influence of, the UK NVQ system (National Vocational Qualifications). The NVQ system has received much attention, not least from abroad. As a high-profile system emphasising modularisation and output, the NVQ system has, in spite of domestic criticism, become an important reference point in the international debate. Ireland and the Netherlands can be looked upon as countries where this influence has been strong, especially in the field of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. The fifth and last cluster, France and Belgium, is defined on the basis of geographical nearness rather than a common approach towards non-formal learning. As already indicated, the topic of non-formal learning has moved into the forefront of the French debate on education and training during the past decade. Both in legal and practical terms, the French experience is important. In Belgium the issue of non-formal learning has only recently been introduced to the political agenda. In the Flemish part of the country, cooperation with the Netherlands has been initiated but it is still too early to say in which direction this country will move.

Due to differences between countries, the scope of the presentations as well as the level of detail varies somewhat. We attempt to cover three aspects. First, what is the role of non-formal learning within the existing political-institutional context? Second, is it possible to identify methodological and/or institutional initiatives in this area, established on a permanent basis? Third, is it possible to identify experiments, for example, projects aimed at the development of methodologies or institutions for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning?

### 3.1 Non-formal learning in the context of the dual system: Germany and Austria

In Germany and Austria the issue of non-formal learning is a new and unresolved one. Five years ago it was hardly discussed. Today, a debate on the role of non-formal learning is gradually evolving. A number of experimental projects (in particular focusing on the needs of the unemployed, people reentering the labour market, etc.), have also been initiated, testing various approaches to assessment. The longer-term political-institutional consequences of this debate and experimentation are difficult to predict. We think, however, that these two countries, despite their reluctance, are interesting ‘learning cases’, illustrating the possibilities and potential as well as obstacles and problems in this area.

#### 3.1.1 Germany

A number of factors explain why the issue of non-formal learning has so far played a limited role in Germany:

- direct demand for the assessment of non-formal learning has been low. The formal system of education and training is extensive and has for a long time covered substantial proportions of each age group. There is a very strong education and training fundament, reducing the number of people likely to ask for recognition of non-formally based competences;

- the education and training system is highly focused on initial education and training. Within the vocational field, the status of the dual system has been and still is very high. There is no tradition to follow other pathways to learning, especially outside the formal system;

- the fact that the dual system is based on a combination of school and work-based learning implies that the experiential part of learning is somehow included in the of-

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\(^4\) Norway has been included as the only non-member of the European Union in this study.
ficial model, reducing the need to assess non-formal learning acquired outside the formal system;

- the formal education and training system is based on Berufsprofilen (occupational profiles), representing a clearly defined set of qualifications/competences. Each Berufsprofil indicates what should be learned, how it should be learned and where this should take place. The profiles, which can be looked upon as the ‘benchmark’ of the system, can to a certain degree be seen as ‘input-oriented’. By defining the ‘correct’ pathway to a certain qualification, they also exclude other pathways, for example (partly) based on non-formal learning;

- the concept of Beruf (occupation), following a successful completion of formal education and training, does not only specify a certain training approach, but is also linked to a certain wage level and a set of rules defining rights and responsibilities. This implies that the formal system is not only about knowledge and competences, but also a mechanism for defining the distribution of rights and returns. Consequently it is a way of defining the implicit value of different kinds of learning.

All together, these factors contribute to the high value attributed to formal certificates from the formal system. Enterprises and branches have also been reluctant to consider other learning pathways because of high unemployment rates. The topic of non-formal learning has been (and still is), looked upon with indifference. This indifference also seems to be linked to the high complexity of the existing system, alternatives are difficult to conceive in a situation where all steps are planned and described in detail and where professional status as well as wage level depends on following these steps. But as indicated, a change of attitude is taking place, and a growing awareness of non-formal learning can be explained through the following elements:

- the existing education and training system is accused of being too focused on initial training. The rigidity and inflexibility following this bias makes the system badly animated to support continuous training/retraining. The inclusion of non-formal learning has been introduced as a necessity to balance the current and exclusive focus on initial training;

- the development of the CVT system has not followed the highly structured and formalised model of initial training and education. On the contrary, this ‘sector’ is heterogeneous and subject to limited public or tripartite coordination. The link to the initial training system is weak and rather arbitrary. This state of affairs has underlined the importance of alternative pathways to learning; the fact that the need for competences cannot be entirely planned in advance, flexible learning models are prerequisites for successful learning;

- the lack of complementarity in initial and continuous training/education systems stresses the need for ‘bridging’ solutions which can utilise the growing CVT system in a more systematic way and link these elements to the existing initial training ‘colossus’. Assessment methodologies, and institutions able to provide valid and reliable assessments of a wide range of competences from formal as well as non-formal sources, are essential if this bridging function is to be developed and established.

Increased flexibility through modularisation has been introduced as a key approach in this context. The main argument is that such a modularisation would link initial and continuing education and training in a better way. Candidates could enter and reenter education and training according to their own needs and assessment and testing would be limited to the modules in a more output-oriented way, leading to alternative paths to learning. Regine Görner, representative of DGB, stated in January 1999:

‘Das Prüfungswesen wird sich entsprechend verändern müssen. Teilqualifikationen sind jeweils im Berufsbildungspass zu zertifizieren.'
Die Abschlussprüfung wird dadurch erheblich entschlackt, sogar überflüssig.5

This statement emphasises the need for a more flexible education and training approach where different levels and learning pathways can be linked together in a better way. The German case is important to understand the general context of non-formal learning. The starting point is not the methodologies, nor the questions of reliability and validity of measuring and assessing learning, but rather how overall change in education and training needs can be reflected within existing education and training approaches. The dual system was not intended to be a lifelong learning instrument, but an initial training instrument. In a situation where retraining and renewal of competences is emphasised, the weaknesses of this (in other respects very efficient), model appears. The questions are: how to open up the existing model; how to link to CVT, how to allow for a greater variety of pathways to the same qualifications and competences. Such a shift demands systems for assessment and recognition of non-formal as well as formal learning.

Notwithstanding reluctance to embrace initiatives supporting assessment and recognition of non-formal learning, we find elements in the German system linked to this idea. These arrangements illustrate that the issue of non-formal learning has been considered but within a limited scope and framework. The Externenprüfung (examination of external students) is perhaps the most important single element ‘bridging’ non-formal and formal learning and is a permanent element of the dual system. This test provides experienced workers with the right to take part in the final craft examination (Abschlussprüfung) together with those having followed the ordinary route through the dual system. Although important, the Externenprüfung only provides access to a test, it does not provide any independent or particular methodology aimed at the identification and assessment of the specific experiences. In this respect, the Externenprüfung is designed according to the content, principles and structure of the formal pathway. To put it another way, the competences acquired outside the formal system, irrespective of how different they are from those produced in the formal system, have to be presented and restructured (by the candidate) according to the principles of the formal system. This does not reduce the importance of the Externenprüfung as approximately 5% of all examinations within the German dual system are based on it annually.

In a number of experimental projects the needs of specific groups (unemployed, women trying to reenter employment, drop-outs from the formal system, etc.) were focused upon. A common objective shared by the majority of these projects is to improve access for these groups to continuing vocational education and training, and in some cases make it possible for them to reenter the initial training system. The project Bildungspass-Qualifizierungspass of 1974 is an exception. Working on the basis of more general objectives the Bildungspass can be described as a portfolio-approach trying to ‘paint’, via description and documentation, a broader picture of the competences held by an employee. Together with formal education and training the idea was to include a documentation of experience and practice thus giving a more complete picture of the person in question. The Bildungspass never became a success, and was eventually abandoned. Descriptions of single projects can be found elsewhere (Cedefop 1998a), and it should be emphasised that projects brought to our attention were initiated and financed by public institutions at regional, national or European levels. The last category of projects, notably through the Leonardo da Vinci and Adapt programmes have become increasingly important in this area. This is a phenomenon not limited to Germany, but can be found in most other countries covered (see Chapter 4).

3.1.2 Austria

The topic of assessment and recognition of non-formal has not received very much atten-
tion in Austria and few practical initiatives can be identified. However, as in Germany, the issue is receiving growing attention. So far, the role of prior and non-formal learning has for the most part been touched upon in debates linked to the question of modularisation of education and training. While basically non-existent in initial education and training, modularisation has, to a limited degree, been introduced in continuing vocational training. These programmes (for example those organised by the Berufsförderungsinstitut (BFI) and the Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut (WIFI)) have highlighted the need for alternative practices in the area of assessment and recognition of qualifications and competences. Following the trend observed in most European countries, this debate is closely linked to the overarching question of whether the existing system for education and training will be able to meet the requirements for a more ‘flexible’ system operating across traditional boundaries and levels. OECD commented on the Austrian education and training system in the following way (1995:84):

‘In Austria, the idea that there is a time for acquiring knowledge and skills, if possible by obtaining formal qualifications, and a time for using this knowledge professionally, does not yet seem to be out of date.’

This statement reflects some basic characteristics of the Austrian approach to vocational education and training. Elements which explain why the debate on non-formal learning has been a marginal one until now also indicate a future role for methodologies and systems for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. These characteristics can be summarised in the following way:

- initial vocational education and training holds a very strong position. Still based to a large extent on the dual system (40% of each cohort still entering), the Austrian system can be described as highly specialised and formalised. Based on a complex legal and administrative body, the content of each occupational profile (Beruf) is prescribed in detail. Prescriptions also cover assessment and testing procedures as well as regulations concerning link/transfer to other occupational profiles and levels;
- the strong specialisation effect has resulted in rather narrow occupational profiles (currently, if all forms of education and training are included, approximately 700 profiles can be identified);
- the system is hierarchical in its character. No system of ‘credit points’ exists, meaning that a partially completed training at one level is not recognised. Continuation has to take place from the lower level;
- to a certain extent and due to the specialised nature of the system, ‘career lock-ins’ can be observed. A move from one career path to another, either in a horizontal or vertical fashion, is complicated;
- in contrast to initial vocational education and training, continuing vocational education and training has not been subject to much political attention and is far less regulated. The ‘system’ is characterised through competition between private actors and uncoordinated actions from a number of public bodies.

Following these points, the Austrian system for vocational education and training can be described as very advanced in terms of initial education and training. The dual system clearly supports a close interlink between formal schooling and work-based learning. Potentially this creates a strong foundation for the linking of formal and non-formal competences at later stages in life; the importance of work-based learning is clearly understood and appreciated. This potential has yet to be fully released. The lack of bridging mechanisms between initial and continuing vocational education makes any horizontal or vertical move between occupations and/or educational levels complicated. In short, systems for the recognition of partial qualifications or competences have not been developed very much. The only exception to this was the introduction of the Berufsreifeprüfung in 1997. Candidates from the dual system can, by passing this test/assessment, be given access to higher education. The test focuses on
general subjects like mathematics, English and German. Non-formal learning in the sense used here is not a part of this test.

On the basis of the above situation representatives of the social partners and various institutions dealing with continuing education and training were asked to comment on the future prospects of systems for assessment and recognition of non-formal learning (Cedefop 1999a: op.cit.). This small survey reflects the main points made above but offers some interesting clues on future developments. The employers' representative expressed the clearest yet pessimistic view. According to him, competences acquired outside the formal system and not integrated into a formally recognised certificate will hardly be accepted. He concluded by saying:

'We are, I'm sorry to say, big formalists and take as our point of departure that anything not certified is not formally learned, and thus does not exist.'

The same attitude was expressed by others with several having difficulty seeing any positive role for such a system. The high quality and legitimacy of the initial training system was mentioned as a reason why recognition of partial and non-formal competences would be difficult to introduce in the Austrian context. This view was not, however, fully shared by the representatives of the employees, emphasising the potentially positive role of such systems for individuals applying for jobs. In general, recognition of non-formal learning is looked upon as a factor that can strengthen the position of the employee.

The general impression created by the interviews in Austria is one of reluctance: methodologies for the assessment of competences are partly looked upon as an Anglo-Saxon invention reflecting a situation where a relatively large part of the population has no proper vocational qualification basis. This, it was commented, is not the case in Austria where a completely different education and training approach has dominated for decades. However, almost all commentators are aware of the need for more flexible continuing vocational education and training. The need for a certain modularisation and thus new approaches to assessment and recognition seems to be partly accepted but clearly limited to the area of continuing vocational education and training.

To conclude, Austria can be described as one of the EU Member States where we find the most clearly expressed scepticism towards introducing methodologies and systems in this area. The paradoxes identified within the initial vocational education and training system, as well as between initial and continuing education and training, may lead to a stronger debate and to practical experimentation. For the time being, it is difficult to predict in which direction Austrian developments will go.

3.1.3 Conclusions

As seen, the German and Austrian approaches to the question of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning are closely linked. It is interesting to note that the two countries where work-based learning has been most systematically integrated into education and training (through the dual system) have so far been very reluctant to embrace this new trend. On the one hand this reflects success; the dual system is generally viewed as successful both in terms of pedagogy (the combination of formal and experiential learning) and capacity (high proportions of the cohorts covered). The need for new assessment methodologies is not acknowledged. The success of the dual system may further be seen as the source from where increasing attention to assessment and recognition of non-formal learning springs. Focusing mainly on young people however, and the reproduction of knowledge and competences, the existing system is only partly able to meet the increasing demand for renewal of knowledge and competences among adults. The need for a more open education and training system where better and less complicated links between occupations and levels of education are opened up, cannot be met exclusively by the dual system. This is the context of the ongoing and growing debate on non-formal learning within the two countries.
3.2 Non-formal learning in the Mediterranean context: Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal

There are certain common features linking the Mediterranean countries of Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. Compared to northern Europe, these countries (or at least certain regions of these countries), have a much weaker tradition in the area of vocational education and training. Only recently, over the past decade or so, have initiatives been taken to remedy this.

First, the relative weakness of vocational education and training is paralleled by the strength of academic and theoretically based education. Even though academic education in these countries no longer represents any guarantee of employment, high income or high status, the value attributed to formal certificates in general, and academic certificates in particular, is still substantial. In Greece, 70% of all youths prefer academic education to vocational education (Cedefop 1999a), despite a serious mismatch between the output of higher education institutions and the labour market demand. Secondly, the relative weakness of the formal vocational education and training system has established non-formal learning (in particular through work experience), as the dominating form of (vocational) competence reproduction and renewal. This means, and is probably of specific importance in Greece, the southern regions of Italy, and the less developed areas of Spain and Portugal, that a vast reservoir of non-formal, experienced-based competences exists. If this reservoir is going to be ‘tapped’, and if it is going to be renewed (quantitatively and qualitatively), it is necessary to identify and assess its strengths and weaknesses. The quality of competences based on non-formal learning cannot and should not be taken for granted. Proper systems for identification and assessment could be one way to face this quality problem, and if necessary, point to the supplementary actions needed to improve quality and be entitled to recognition. Perhaps more than is the case in northern Europe, this illustrates the need for identification and assessment of non-formal learning. Although building on relative weak traditions in the field of vocational education and training, and facing a deep-rooted underrating of vocational competences in general, and non-formal vocational competences in particular, a growing willingness towards change can be observed. Throughout the past decade, all four countries have been reforming their vocational education and training systems and specifically Spain and Italy are now entering the decisive stages of these reforms. The consequences in terms of methodologies and systems for the ‘identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning’, are important, and probably of relevance to countries outside the Mediterranean area. The four countries, despite their common challenges, have treated the methodological and institutional aspects in different ways and with varying commitment and intensity.

3.2.1 Greece

Greece may be described as the country within the EU where the role of non-formal learning is most dominant (competing with Portugal in this respect to a certain extent). The General Confederation of Greek Workers estimates that only 30% of the Greek workforce has some type of formal professional qualification. This means that a significant part of vocational competences in Greece has been and is still being reproduced and renewed outside formal institutions. Nevertheless, few initiatives have been taken to identify and assess these competences. In 1994, the Organisation for Education and Vocational Training (OEEK), set up a working group to study the ‘accreditation of (non-formal) vocational training of adults’. This work, which represents the most practical initiative in Greece so far, has put forward proposals for the creation of a system for the evaluation of experience, the assessment of gaps in knowledge, and a procedure securing the access to appropriate assessment.

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6 Research in SMEs shows that 66% of these enterprises do not have a specialised technician; 13% of SME owners had a technical school degree; 49% completed 3 years of secondary school; 59% would not feel they had any particular need for vocational training.
and recognition. While focusing on the aspect of experience the emphasis of the group was put more on the question of equivalence between different parts of the formal system. Some paths are officially recognised, others are not; many individuals face a lack of consistency and are unable to build on prior training in non-recognised parts of the training system. Pilot studies of a sample of (four) professions were important aspects of the OEEK initiative. In these professions, individuals were assessed and tested, illustrating how formal and non-formal learning is mixed and combined. Thus far, these experiences have not been integrated into the Greek system on a permanent basis.

There is however an ongoing political dialogue on these questions and the Ministerial Council is supervising a dialogue between the relevant bodies (Ministry of Labour and Employment, OEEK, EKEPIS, and OAED). A main concern is the creation of a national and comprehensive system of qualification profiles and standards which is presently lacking. The future system is being tested through pilot projects in different sectors, partly using the UK NVQ system as their example. The aim is to develop job profiles (and training packages reflecting these) which will make it possible to specify the content and level to be met by a candidate. Job profiles will be established at different levels, specifying required competences for each specific profession and specialisation both at entry and advanced levels. Profiles will be established with the participation of sectoral bodies and the social partners. For example, in the case of the hotel sector, job descriptions will be developed with the involvement of the respective unions of hotel employees and the national sectoral body (in this case, the national tourism board). This will provide the framework for a national system on which assessment and recognition can be based and where prior formal as well as non-formal learning can be taken into account. The plan is to open this system up to everybody, the emphasis being on the content and level of competences, not on where and how they have been acquired.

Details on how these competences will be ‘tested’ have not yet (autumn of 1999) been released. It is possible that the assessment and testing approach applied within the IEK (Institutia Epanelmatikis Katartissis) might be considered. This approach is based on a combination of theoretical and practical testing by ‘tripartite’ committees. Although elements from the IEK system might be used within a future system, it will not be possible to build on the system as such. Operating on a post secondary level, assessment is directly linked to the completion of a course and is thus closed for individuals having followed other learning routes. Some doubt has also been cast on the quality of the assessment procedure: while the inclusion of social partner representatives in the committees can be looked upon as positive, they have not received any particular training, making it difficult to harmonise assessment practices.

The investigation done by Cedefop (1999a) illustrates that broad support exists for the introduction of methodologies and institutional arrangements to assist in this area. There is a certain reluctance among unions of regulated degree-holding professions and among university degrees, and this is partly linked to the question of wages and protected rights challenged by new forms of recognition. It is interesting to note that the scepticism identified in the Austrian context is not so clearly expressed among the Greek players in this field. Contrary to the Austrian situation, the Greek vocational education and training system, initial as well as continuing, is, relatively speaking, much weaker; the need for recognition of partial competences, formal and non-formal is seen as more relevant.

3.2.2 Italy

The Italian education and training system and in particular vocational and continuing training is currently undergoing a remarkable process of reform. Based on agreements between the government and the social partners (Cedefop, 1999b, p.10), the outline of a more comprehensive and national Italian system can be detected. This is particularly clear in the law on ‘promotion of employment’
(Cedefop, 1999b, p.11), in which the basic principles of a (vocational) lifelong learning system is described. The 1996-97 law introduces the principle that competences can be certificated irrespective of the way in which they were acquired. Competences acquired through work should be assessed and potentially recognised in the same way as competences acquired through formal training institutions. This is a system where the partial achievements of individuals in their own life paths can be assessed and recognised. The new law thus adopts a combination of measures: a modular system of training; a system of training credits; and tailored assessment and certification procedures. The aim is to integrate and interconnect the various systems (initial vocational education and training and continuing vocational training) and achieve a personalisation of learning routes. Though still at an early stage of implementation, certain tensions have already occurred. As it is obvious that procedures and methodologies for the assessment and recognition of competences (in general), will be of crucial importance, the development of these easily turn into a ‘battlefield’ of different interests. Observers (Cedefop 1999b) point to the predominance of academic content and curricula in the assessment procedures; making it difficult to treat the non-formal learning elements (e.g. from the workplace), in a fair and valid way. Two main instruments/tools have been developed. An ‘individual training record book’ has been introduced (can be combined with formal attestations/certificates to form a portfolio), as well as ‘skills audits’, introduced according to different models in the various regions. Observers (Cedefop op.cit.) also indicate that these approaches are seriously hampered for the time being by lack of clear-cut definitions/regulations of the tools in question, and furthermore, the lack of a system of national standards to promote consistent and comparable practices. While being the most important obstacle to reliable and valid assessments, the lack of a national standard is not the only obstacle to be dealt with. Lack of resources limit the feasibility of the approach; a problem that can be linked to the low social esteem associated with this field of education and training. The tripartite basis of the current Italian reforms may prove important to move from political decisions to actual institutionalised practices. The dominance of academic values and the lack of a proper set of standards may cause delays in this implementation process.

In a recent study (ISFOL 1998), Italian managers have been asked what they look upon as the most crucial elements for managing competences and developing continuing training. This study, it turns out, is closely linked to the question of non-formal learning and how to develop methodologies and institutions in this area. The investigation focuses to a large degree on how to measure competences in such a way that they can be managed and utilised in the best possible way. Some of the points made were:

- who should assess the competences acquired by individual workers and how. This already happens in many enterprises but based on internal and not easily transferable standards. Some employers fear that more visible competences would lead to the loss of core competences in the enterprise. Hence, a common framework balancing the interests of the individuals and the enterprises is requested;

- firm public control over systems for the assessment of competences is seen as necessary. The aim should be to uphold standards and to secure proper representation of the social partners. If the rules and procedures are clear, a strategy towards the recognition of non-formal learning is seen as feasible and useful;

- systems for the recognition of non-formal learning should be linked up to general standards open to comparisons. Standards should not be too specific due to the need to take into account the context of the learning in question and the wide variety of learning paths and learning forms involved;

- there is a great deal of goodwill and readiness to try out procedures and instruments to promote visibility and transparency of competences. As indicated earlier, this must be done within a common publicly-
controlled framework. This interest is linked to the question of flexibility of the education and training system as such, emphasising that the opening up for transfer of competences between education and work and between different levels of education is a crucial objective which has to be met;

- the idea of a portfolio in the sense of recognition of ‘experience credits’ is looked upon as a potentially promising way to go.

This study clearly indicates that there is a shared conviction among Italian managers that work-based learning is important and that these competences should be made more visible and attributed equivalent value to qualifications and competences acquired in formal settings.

### 3.2.3 Spain

The Italian reform movement in the area of vocational and continuing education and training is paralleled, albeit in an even more comprehensive way, by Spain. Since 1990, three important legal/political initiatives have been taken. A law on ‘the general regulation of the education system’ was introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1990, and two interlinked ‘national vocational training programmes’ (I and II), were introduced by the Ministry of Labour in 1993 and 1997. The purpose of all these initiatives, which are linked, is to integrate the different subsystems of training and different forms of acquisition of competences (i.e. combine ‘regulated, occupational, continuing training and work experience’ with each other). This bridging effort is clearly based on an output-oriented, competence-based view of vocational training education. It can also be said to aim at a lifelong learning system. Until now, the role of non-formal learning has been weak in the Spanish formal system. Confined to the level of enterprises, the transfer of non-formally based competences has been difficult. The restructuring of the education and training system, however, implies that this may change. Two initiatives are of particular interest in this context. First, the integrated service plans for employment (SIPE), establish procedures for the competence assessment of the unemployed. Using a combination of ‘occupational interviews’ (to identify the vocational and competence profile of the individual) and ‘occupational qualification tests’, this procedure aims to improve the basis of guidance and improve the self-understanding of the individual’s own strengths and limitations. The procedure does not, however, lead to any formal recognition. Second, certificates of occupational proficiency represent an effort to certify non-formal learning. Set up in 1995 (see Cedefop, 2000), the system currently covers 185 vocational titles in 22 sectors/areas. A certificate of occupational proficiency can be obtained through two main pathways. The ‘training pathway’ is the dominant one, whereas the ‘work experience pathway’ is of minor importance. The Ministry of Labour, responsible for the scheme, has identified the following aims:

- identify the characteristics of vocational competence and thus objectify accreditation;
- integrate vocational training in a system which will guarantee the acquisition of vocational competences;
- increase the minimum training content of workers;
- give certification national validity;
- accredit, through work experience, the qualifications of workers who do not have a formal title.

The practical testing will be conducted by an assessment committee of seven provincial or sectoral based external observers. Cedefop (2000) suggests that the developmental work within this field is biased through the over-emphasising of the formal training path. Although the legal base ascribes the same value to formal and non-formal routes, there is an impression that those attempting to be certified on the basis of experience face a growing number of obstacles. Currently, the establishment of methodologies and arrangements to assess and recognise non-formal learning in Spain depends on the parallel development...
of ‘national systems for qualifications’, a reference point which could provide a better basis for integration and interconnection of the various forms of competence acquisition. This system or standard was foreseen in the first ‘national vocational training programme’ of 1993, and has been under development since then. The ‘National Institute of Qualifications’ established in 1999, will support this system and is seen as being of vital importance in future.

In addition to the elements mentioned, collective bargaining is increasingly used as an instrument for the regulation of the occupational classification system. Collective bargaining at sectoral level has led to some progress in the area of occupational classification. Agreement on general classifications, thus doing away with purely company-specific reference frameworks, has made it possible to start work on procedures where workers can be assessed and paid according to these categories. In the chemical and construction sectors some progress has been made. Though still not very widely used, a professional skills card has been introduced in the construction sector. The trade union organisations responsible for issuing these cards are already complaining about the practical problems faced.

3.2.4 Portugal

Like Greece, Italy and Spain, the economic role of non-formal learning is important in key sectors of the Portuguese economy. In a recently published article, Carneiro (1998) compares two Portuguese industrial sectors: the shoe industry and electronic-component industry. The latter is new in the Portuguese context and consists of employees with a relatively high level of formal education and training. Shoe production, on the other hand, is based on a very low level of formal education and training and is described as a sector reproducing and renewing itself through ‘on-the-job learning’, or non-formal learning in our context. Carneiro uses the success story of the Portuguese shoe industry, in which the ability to renew and grow has been very strong, to emphasise the huge potential of non-formal learning. The conclusion is that this form of learning and the resulting competences is a resource that has to be exploited in a more conscious and systematic way in future.

An overall strategy for the systematic utilisation of these competences is still under development. Within the domain of the Ministry of Labour and Welfare and the Ministry of Education, arrangements have been introduced during recent years to make it possible for individuals lacking formal qualifications to have their actual competences assessed.

Based on agreements between the social partners and the government (for details, see Cedefop 1999), the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare has put into place a vocational qualification system which in principle is open to competences acquired outside formal education and training institutions. These general agreements, which can be looked upon as efforts to link education and training policies to broader economic and social policy, resulted in three laws on vocational education (401/91, 405/91 and 95/92). The foundation of the vocational training system (SNCP) was laid through these laws, the aim being to establish ‘the conditions for effective attainment of vocational certification’. Commissions at national (the Standing Committee on Certification, CPC) and sectoral levels (CTE) coordinate the actual implementation of the system. The social partners are represented in both these committees. The Institute of Employment and Vocational training provides technical and professional support for this process. These bodies are responsible for the development and issue of vocational profiles defining the scope, content and level of a specific qualification. A certificate (CAP) can be achieved either through traditional school-based vocational training, through recognition of qualifications acquired in other systems (equivalence) or through assessment and recognition of vocational experience.

The last possibility and of particular interest is based on a regulatory decree (68/94) and puts forward the general conditions for issuing a certificate. A procedure containing three main steps is indicated. This procedure is still being tested with the main elements being:
‘application procedure and the prior identification of skills’: at this stage, the vocational file of the candidate is studied. The aim is to establish an overview of the work history of the candidate, including details of formal and non-formal training and learning. Immediate training needs should also be identified. The candidate should provide relevant proof of training and work experience according to the demands set by the certification system. Following this ‘paper-based’ stage, a stage of assisted self-assessment is foreseen. Specialists supplied by the social partners (we do not have documentation on how this is going to be solved in practical terms) will explain the activities and the competences required by the vocational profile. It is expected that this will identify the match or the mismatch between the competences held by the candidate and the requirements set forth by the profiles. Guidance will be a crucial element of this stage;

‘assessment’: it is stated that assessments can take different forms, the main elements being a formal analysis of the CV drawn up in stage one, the second being a technical interview and the third consisting of tests drawn up in accordance with the certification manual. The technical team (three members) who check the files carry out the interview and supervise the practical tests and may include members of the social partners (‘where required’);

‘certification’: this is the formal act of issuing a vocational aptitude certificate proving that the holder has the competences needed to carry out the relevant job.

Following the standards set by the job profiles, a vocational certification manual instructs on how to proceed in each specific job area. In this way, an opening up of the system occurs where the importance of vocational learning outside the formal education and training system in work or elsewhere is acknowledged. Practical experience is limited however. In a few cases (trainers of vocational training, hairdressing and beauty services, taxi drivers, occupational health safety services and engineers) processes of assessment and recognition of experientially-based competences have begun or will begin in the near future (2000). For example, engineers can from 1999 onwards have their vocational experience assessed through the procedure referred to above.

Within the area of responsibility of the Ministry of Education two main forms of assessment/recognition of non-formal learning can be identified. First, assessment and recognition of informal ‘school type of learning’ can be granted for purely vocational purposes. This means part-recognition can be granted to enable candidates to improve their job situation either through internal promotion or change of career. This recognition is not sufficient, however, to grant access to further education or studies. Second, assessment and recognition can take place to pave the way for recurrent education, at primary or secondary level. At both levels, candidates are interviewed and tested. If it is concluded that an applicant already has knowledge of some units of one or more subjects, equivalence will be granted and he or she will be placed at an appropriate level. Following a successful assessment/recognition procedure, candidates follow individual paths, at their own pace, and ask to be assessed when they feel ready for it. A substantial number of individuals have taken advantage of this possibility. In 1997-98, more than 10 000 were assessed for fourth grade primary school, 8 500 for sixth grade and 41 000 for ninth grade. Half of this group of almost 60 000 were more than 20 years of age. At secondary level, 35 000 were assessed during 1997-98. The vocational experiences of candidates are not covered by this arrangement. School subjects define the focus of the assessment. Competences not covered by the school curricula will not be treated in any explicit way. The assessments should not consider where knowledge has been acquired, but if it has been acquired.

In addition to the assessment and recognition efforts covered by the systems mentioned above (under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Welfare and the Ministry of Education), a number of initiatives have
been taken outside these structured systems. The plan is gradually to integrate these autonomous initiatives into the overall framework of the national vocational certification system. CTSs (sectoral commissions) have recently been set up in a number of sectors to prepare integration into the certification system. Examples of groups covered by these initiatives are transport workers, journalists, civil aviation employees, low-voltage electricity workers, merchant seamen and hotel/restaurant and tourism workers. Common to all these groups is that they are covered by sector-internal procedures for recognition of work experience. In the case of transport workers, for example, the General Directory on Road Transportation has issued a 'professional card' to workers with more than five years in a relevant position, and having passed a written test. In journalism, one to two years of experience is sufficient (length according to prior education), to give the individual a right to hold a 'professional card' as a journalist.

The Portuguese approach to identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning can be characterised as unfinished. A number of elements have been put into place which will eventually make it easier for individuals to make use of competences acquired outside formal education and training institutions. The national vocational certification system is clearly the most important in this setting, potentially paving the way for alternative pathways. The social partners will play a crucial role in this setting. Formally supposed to contribute in all stages of the process, from the definition of the job profiles to the actual assessment, their actual contribution.

3.2.5 A Mediterranean model?

As shown in the discussion of the southern EU Member States, the general attitude to the introduction of methodologies and systems for non-formal learning is positive. Both in the public and private realms, the usefulness of such practices is clearly expressed. The huge reservoir of non-formal learning which creates the basis for important parts of the economies in these countries needs to be made visible. It is not only a question of making it easier to utilise this reservoir, but also a question of how to improve the quality of these competences. So long as an important part of the competence base in a society is invisible, it is practically impossible to indicate where improvements should be made. In this way methodologies for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning can be viewed as tools in a quality campaign, encompassing not only single workers and enterprises but whole sections of the economy.

It must be noted, however, that the step from intention to implementation is a long one. These countries are more or less operating at the planning stage. Legal and political moves have been made through educational reforms of various scope but the actual introduction of assessment and recognition practices has not progressed very far. The coming years will show whether the positive intentions almost unanimously expressed in the four countries will be translated into practices which actually affect and serve individuals and enterprises.

A striking aspect common to the four Mediterranean countries is the important role played by projects and programmes financed at European level. The examples of Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal illustrate the importance of EU initiatives and support. A high number of individuals and institutions from all countries have participated in projects and programmes focusing on questions of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning, contributing somewhat to attitudes identified within this area. To take Italy as an example, a substantial amount of experience has been gained through such projects and programmes especially since 1996-97. This ‘project approach’ can be described as ‘bottom-up’ in the sense that no centrally established direction or objective has been established. The projects in question seem to have been based on the interests and needs of those individuals and institutions involved and not on general national policies in the area. While supporting innovative practices and widening the scope of experimentation, the problem may be one of implementation and dissemination. Avoiding a detailed examination
of all projects concerned, the majority of them focused on three main groups: women, long-term unemployed and employed at risk. In one case, young school drop-outs were covered. An impressive variety of identification and assessment methodologies and instruments were suggested/developed in these projects, essentially based on three systems:

a) more or less structured individual discussions in which the person’s own statements prevail;

b) self-assessment of personal characteristics using ad hoc instruments;

c) self-assessment through group exercises.

Since no system framework and no formal reference points exist, the assessment system developed for these groups are left ‘on their own’, with the resulting assessments receiving varying degrees of acceptance and legitimacy. The main value of these projects, it seems, is to serve as a reservoir of experiences, potentially supporting the more system-integrated assessment tools introduced on a permanent basis.

3.3 Non-formal learning in the Nordic context: Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark

In two of the four countries discussed in this section, Finland and Norway, the issue of non-formal learning has moved into the forefront of public education and training debates, as well as become the subject of important and far-reaching institutional experimentation and reform. In the two other countries, Sweden and Denmark, interest has so far been limited. This seems to be changing, notably in Sweden, where a number of initiatives, both from the government and social partners, have been taken during 1999. The four countries in question share important common traditions in the area of education and training. Mutual learning has been an important aspect of the development of national systems and a shared Nordic labour market has made cross-border transfer of competences a normal and accepted matter of fact. Two things in particular should be mentioned:

- education and training is highly institutionalised and formalised, covering major parts of each age group;
- education, and especially vocational education and training, is very much a tripartite matter of concern. The steering of training is based on the participation and influence of State employers as well as employees.

During the past three to four decades, however, these countries have chosen different approaches to education and training. This applies in particular to vocational education and training at upper secondary level, where today we can distinguish between four distinct models. The various institutional and organisational choices in the four countries may be linked to a different emphasis on the importance of work-based learning. Recent Finnish and Norwegian reforms very much underline the importance of work-based learning by introducing institutional changes supporting this form of learning. This emphasis has not been so clearly expressed in the Swedish context. The Danish perspective can largely be compared to that of Germany and Austria. The focus has predominantly been on initial education and training within a dual model, generally considered as sufficient to cover the aspect of learning through experience. There might be a link between these differences and current activity in the area of non-formal learning.

3.3.1 Norway

In the Norwegian system for vocational education and training, the apprenticeship element has recently been strengthened. Work experience is now an obligatory and integrated part of all courses in the vocational part of upper secondary education (since

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9 Iceland, the fifth Nordic country has, for reasons of capacity, not been included in the Cedefop study.
Vocational training in Norway is based on an initial (general) introduction to subjects in the form of two years of school-based education and training. After this, two years in an enterprise or institution follows, aimed at specialisation and development of competences through work experience (Cedefop 1999d). Currently, a reform of the system of continuing education and training is being introduced. Within this system, methodologies and institutions for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning (realkompetanse) will be integrated. The work on this reform started in 1996 and a committee forwarded their suggestions in 1997, emphasising the importance of establishing broad-ranging methodologies and initiatives for the assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in general and not only in relation to the apprenticeship scheme. This was followed by the parliament proposing and deciding (Innst. S. nr. 78, 1998/99) on a general reform of the CVT system. The Ministry of Education and Research has been made responsible for developing a national system for identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning (or realkompetanse) has in many ways become a focal point in the Norwegian debate on education and training. In the proposal to parliament which formed the basis for formal decisions and ongoing research and experimentation it was stated that two types of ‘documentation’ (identification, assessment and recognition) should be developed. One, documentation should focus on the needs of work in specific occupations or branches, and two, it should focus on the link to the formal education and training systems and give individuals the possibility to apply on the basis of non-formally acquired competences. This explicit focus on the different needs to be met is interesting and not found in many other countries. It might be looked upon as a reflection of the strong social partner involvement in the debate on non-formal learning in Norway. Both employers and employees have emphasised the need to develop methodologies not only following the logic of the education and training system, but also meeting the needs of employees and enterprises. Consequently, the system is supposed to cover competences acquired through different learning paths, including prior formal learning, learning through work experience, experience through the care of children and/or elders, cultural and social activities, etc. Another interesting point made in the proposal to parliament is the emphasis on legal rights. Individuals will be given the right to make formal complaints on assessment decisions (to a regional body). The formal objectives are listed as follows:

- the system should give adults the right to document their competences relative to the curricula of formal education and training (with the aim of certification);
- the system should open up for access to formal education on the basis of non-formally acquired competences (the aim of continued training);
- the system should provide the basis for exemption for parts of formal education and training courses (the aim of avoiding double work);
- the system should provide access to certain professions and occupations stating that non-formal learning is not inferior to formal learning so long as the same quality and competence level is achieved.

It is stated that the system should be autonomous and not only an ‘annex’ to the traditional testing procedures within formal education and training. More than in most other countries, recent reforms can be linked to a certain tradition. The right to have non-formal competences acquired outside the formal education and training system formally certified, was stated as a general right in the Norwegian Adult Education Act of 1976. However, little progress has been made when it comes to the development of procedures and institutional arrangements. The law of 1976 has
served as a symbol of intention in this direction, but not as a tool to realise this objective. The single most important form of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Norway, is that in which a candidate may take a final examination for apprentices (crafts examination) on the basis of his/her practical work experience. This arrangement was introduced as early as 1952 in the Act concerning vocational training. In Section 20 of this Act, it is stipulated that ‘the craft examination may be taken without any contract of apprenticeship by those who have not less than 25% longer general practice in the craft, than the period of apprenticeship’. During the 1970s and 1980s the utilisation of the scheme was moderate. During the 1990s this has changed and almost exploded during the period 1997-98. Approximately 14 000 candidates attended in each of those years, double for a ‘normal year’. Since an average age group comprises approximately 60 000, these numbers are extremely high. Branches like construction, transport, electro-mechanical industry and health-social care dominate. The popularity of the scheme may be seen as a reflection of the relatively low level of formal training in these areas. It also reflects the general pressure towards formalising qualifications, the most important of these being wages and security of employment.

### 3.3.2 Denmark

The Danish vocational education and training system can be described as dual in its character being very much based on an apprenticeship approach to training. This initial education and training is supplemented by a system of continuing vocational education and training and highly integrated into labour market policies. Currently, a broad reform of adult education is being discussed (Undervisningsministeriet 1997 and Cedefop 1999f). This reform links up with the general trends described in the Norwegian and Finnish cases, emphasising that the role of non-formal learning has to be revised to establish an education and training system linking levels and various learning paths.

Although the debate on non-formal learning has been limited in Denmark we find elements in the existing system attempting to integrate this kind of learning. The first example is the apprenticeship programme for adults (Voksenerhvervsuddannelsen, VEUD). This scheme makes it possible for adults to be exempted from parts of the formal initial training on the basis of prior educational or occupational experience. The relevant trade committee decides on questions of exemption. The VEUD programme operates according to an individualised approach which identifies the experience of each candidate and sets up a training plan accordingly. Assessment of prior learning is an integrated part of the VEUD scheme. For each adult apprentice an educational plan must be drawn up which gives proper credit for competences already acquired. The sectoral trade committees are responsible thereby involving the social partners.

Since 1992, approximately 6 000 adults have started training under the VEUD programme. Also, within the ordinary initial vocational education and training schemes exemption can be granted on the basis of prior work experience. If the application for exemption concerns a school subject, the school in question handles the request. If the reduction of training time is more than four weeks, the trade committee is consulted. The same is the case if the exemption concerns practical parts of the programme. Rules for the recognition of prior learning are formulated in the regulations of each single vocational subject. In the health and care programmes, which are regulated through separate legislation, the county or municipality decides on matters of exemption. Having received a recommendation from the school, practical work experience can result in part exemption. The public authority is required to take all possible competences into consideration when doing this.

It should be mentioned that the Labour Market Training Act of 1995 (see Cedefop 1999f) provides a clearer focus on the role of learning through experience at work. Following this Act, courses to assist individuals in identifying their competences were introduced aimed at subsequent training. These courses have a duration of one to three weeks and can
be characterised as a combination of assessment and vocational guidance.

An additional Danish approach, not directly linked to the schemes discussed above, should be mentioned. This is the SUM system (strategic development of employees) set up by the social partners (the Confederation of Danish Industries and the Central Organisation of Employees within Industry) in the industrial sector in the early 1990s. The aim of the system is to identify (‘measure’) competences within enterprises and is linked to the central agreement between the social partners that each employee shall attend CVT for at least two weeks every year. When this agreement was made, in the late 1980s, the social partners were not able to agree on the content and profile of this training component: who should decide on which courses to attend? To avoid a conflict, a toolbox (the SUM system) was created whereby enterprises were equipped to analyse and describe their own competences and competence needs. The idea was that potential conflict would be solved if discussions took place at ‘grassroots level’.

SUM builds on three fundamental principles:

a) the companies themselves are the users of the methodology, no external parties (experts) are involved;

b) the dialogue between employers and employees is the basic principle followed when using this methodology;

c) a ‘modular’ approach is used so that enterprises may choose from a selection of methodological elements according to the exact needs of the individual company.

The SUM approach covers identification and assessment of competences. It does not, however, cover recognition in the sense that a link to formal qualification is established. The experiences from SUM have illustrated some of the problems likely to be encountered by such an approach. Frequently, the description of competences does not follow the suggested vocabulary making transparency and transfer difficult. It is interesting to note that neither employees nor employers have expressed clear wishes (according to the SUM secretariat) to develop this system further so that it may link up to the formal certification systems. As stated, employees expect to stay in the enterprise and do not see the relevance of tools supporting transfer; employers are afraid of losing their most competent workers and are thus reluctant to establish transparent systems, making transfer too easy.

3.3.3 Finland

The Finnish vocational education and training system is characterised as competence based (output-based) and operates according to a modularised structure. A core element of this system is that ‘skills and knowledge can be demonstrated and recognised regardless of how they were acquired’. Made operational through a new law on vocational education in 1994, the competence-based qualifications system is divided into three qualification categories: an initial vocational qualification, a further vocational qualification and lastly, a specialist vocational education (Cedefop 1999e).

Competence-based qualifications are officially recognised and protected by law. Titles are regulated by the Ministry of Education in close concert with the Ministry of Labour and the social partners. Apart from the ministries and national social partner organisations, the practical work is organised in the following way. Expert groups, administered by the National Board of Education, conduct the actual preparations for ‘the national guidelines’, that is, the requirements/achievements of the qualification in question. Within the expert group, at least the social partners, teachers and preferably self-employed professionals, should be represented. Examination boards (250 in all) are responsible for the organisation and supervision of the tests. They approve the accomplishments of the qualifications and sign certificates. The examination board also has a supervisory status, making contracts for the organisation of tests/assessments with educational institutions (or other institutions) that have the necessary expertise. Contracts for the organisation of skill tests involve assessors of the test performance, maintenance and development of the
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Vocational competence of the assessors and a number of other elements. Despite the existence of national guidelines for each qualification which may be understood as the important point of reference, the actually being carried out of the assessment varies pointing to the problem of reliability and possibly validity. To combat this problem, a national project (ALVAR) was initiated to ensure that the skills tests in certain occupational areas would be nationally comparable and that the requirement levels correspond to appropriate needs in working life. ALVAR gathers and trains experts for the preparation of the test task. Training for organisations conducting tests is also organised. Finally, ALVAR develops and maintains a ‘test bank’ to support the general search for reliable, criterion-referenced testing and assessment. The ALVAR project, financially supported by the European Social Fund, is an interesting example of quality assurance within the area of testing and assessment. The underlying perspective is that it is impossible to specify beforehand in detail, how an assessment is going to be conducted. The most sensible way of assuring reliability and hopefully validity, is to support training of assessors and networking of assessors. Although this process is still too recent to evaluate in concept, it is promising. Finally, following the work of all these institutions, groups and individuals, the actual skills test/assessment may take place if different options are provided:

- the assessment is made on the basis of a portfolio (samples of work products, project works, partial evidence, including employers’ descriptions of work tasks, and competence);

- the assessment is made at his/her workplace, supplemented by written/oral interviews;

- the assessment is held at the educational institution which organises the test.

The Finnish competence-based qualification system is still in its initial phase. The number of candidates passing through seems to be increasing. In 1998, 10,000 are estimated to have passed through the system.

3.3.4 Sweden

The Swedish model of vocational education and training can be described as ‘school based’. Though gradually becoming more open to apprenticeships, the vast majority of candidates receive their vocational training through instruction in specialised schools. Officially, one aim is to provide a certain practical-oriented training in enterprises (approximately 20% of the time), but this has proven difficult to realise (Cedefop 1999g). As indicated in the introduction to this section, Swedish initiatives in the past have been few, and more related to specific groups (immigrants, disabled, unemployed), than to the general public. The project ‘immigrants as a resource’, initiated in 1988, developed a testing programme for immigrants with vocational qualifications. This scheme (PTVI), was divided into practical and theoretical parts, taking between two to 12 weeks to complete. After testing, the candidate received a written description of equivalent Swedish education and training requirements. Until 1992, the National Labour Market Board was responsible for organising vocational tests for all the unemployed who wished to be tested. Since then this service has been decentralised to local employment offices resulting in a sharp decline in testing. Nowadays local offices are forced to choose when and to what extent testing should be carried out. The reasons for the decline are complex but the costs and the complexity of the testing itself are mentioned as possible explanations.

Recognising the problems caused by this situation, the Swedish Ministry of Education initiated (1998) an investigation on how to assess and recognise ‘foreign’ qualifications. Following this investigation, a number of recommendations were forwarded (SOU 1998:165), pointing to the need for clarifying responsibilities at national and regional levels. It was suggested that upper secondary school curricula (Gymnasieskolans styrdokument för yrkesutbildning) should be used as benchmarks, defining the appropriate requirements and levels to be met by candidates. The approach is output-based in the sense that no prior, formal schooling or certification is required. Not limited to the issue.
of ‘foreign’ qualifications, the report suggests in its final chapter that a system for assessment and recognition of prior and non-formal learning should be open to all adults and not just immigrants. The ministry has decided to follow up these suggestions by initiating experimental projects in different branches and regions. The discussions following the investigation of the ministry might prove important. One of the major trade union confederations (Tjänsmännens Centralorganisation/TCO) responded by issuing their own report (TCO: 1999) wherein they stated that Sweden needs a system for assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. The ministerial approach is, however, judged as unsatisfactory and far too narrow. TCO suggests initiating a tripartite effort towards a Swedish system for assessment and recognition of non-formal learning, using experiences and best practices from neighbouring Nordic countries as well as from the EU in general.

3.3.5 A Nordic model?

It is not possible to speak of any ‘Nordic model’ at least in any strict sense. Finland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden have chosen different approaches and are working according to somewhat different schedules. These differences do not change the fact that all four countries are taking practical steps, through legislation and institutional initiatives, towards strengthening the link between formal education and training and the learning taking place outside schools. Despite the fact that some elements of this strategy have existed for some time (notably the Section 20 scheme of Norway), the most important initiatives have taken place in recent years, mostly since 1994-95. The mutual learning between the countries is strong and has become even stronger over the past two to three years. The influence of Finnish and Norwegian approaches on recent Swedish documents illustrates this effect.

The rapid changes in the Nordic context contrasts the reluctance encountered in the Austrian and (partly) German contexts. Like those, the Nordic countries have developed very strong and highly structured systems for formal vocational education and training and in Germany and Austria the apprenticeship path is an important and integrated part of these systems (most clearly expressed in Denmark and Norway, less so in Finland and especially Sweden). These similarities have not led to the same conclusions. The willingness to link non-formal learning processes into the formal system is much stronger in the Nordic setting than in the German or Austrian contexts.

The Danish report on ‘Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning’ (Cedefop 1999f) presents some interesting reflections on the specific Nordic approach to education and training and in particular to adult education. The strong influence of the educational philosophy of Grundtvig on adult education especially in the Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden during the past 150 years is probably relevant for the understanding of current developments. The philosophy of Grundtvig focusing on broad and general ‘popular enlightenment’ through a system of ‘folk high schools’ has created a positive attitude towards adult education and learning. The ‘folk high schools’ have deliberately avoided formal testing and certification and instead focused on the learning process as a value in itself, something which is important in all layers of the population and at all stages of life. To use the language of the EU White Paper, this movement has from its early beginnings operated by looking to broaden the individual and societal competence base. This ‘popular enlightenment’ strategy has gradually been built into the educational systems of the Nordic countries and is currently to a great extent financed by public budgets. The notion that non-certified learning is as important as the certified variety has thus been supported and developed over a long period of time. Being one of many factors, this may offer part explanation of why the Nordic countries move faster in this area than Germany and Austria.

While Finland and Norway are currently paving the way for the institutional integration of non-formal learning as part of a general lifelong learning strategy, plans presented in Sweden and Denmark may indicate that these
two countries are moving in the same direction and that the issue of non-formal learning will become more focused in the coming years. In all four countries, however, the role of the social partners is very strong, reflecting the shared tradition of tripartite steering principles in this particular policy field.

3.4 The influence of the NVQs: UK, Ireland and the Netherlands

The National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) introduced in the UK in the late 1980s have become a central point around which an interesting process of international learning evolves. Presenting itself as modularised and flexible, meeting the needs of the public and private realms as well as individuals and enterprises, many countries have looked towards the UK to see if this system, or rather elements of it, could be implemented into their own context. Even more experimental projects (not least within the Leonardo da Vinci programme) have used the NVQ system as a point of departure. Other countries seem to use the NVQ system as an indicator of what they want to avoid, pointing to the problems involved in too strong a modularisation. From the beginning the system had to face the challenges of accrediting a variety of learning paths, resulting in approaches like the APL and APEL (Accreditation of Prior Learning and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning). These developments have influenced the European development of methodologies for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in a profound way. Covering only the UK, the Netherlands and Ireland in our ‘NVQ cluster’ it should be noted that the NVQ experiences have been considered in a number of other countries.

3.4.1 United Kingdom

The UK system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) has, since its inception, served as the most outspoken and clear example of a competence-based, performance-related, output-oriented system of vocational education and training. Although controversial in the UK, the NVQ system has served as an example of an alternative to the traditional, school-based model of education and training. The system is in principle open to any learning path and learning form with particular emphasis on experience-based learning at work. As stated in the presentations of the system (and repeated by those countries embracing similar thinking), it does not matter how or where you have learned, what matters is what you have learned. Such a system, if it follows its own principles, is of course open to the learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, what we in this context have termed non-formal learning. It is no coincidence that questions of assessment and recognition have become crucial in the debate on the current status of the NVQ system and its future prospects. The UK experiences in the area of assessment of non-formal learning, which should be looked upon as an integral part of the general assessment challenge, are also highly important for the development of assessment practices and approaches in other European countries. It is, however, important to adopt a more critical approach to these experiences than what has been the case thus far. In some instances there has been a tendency to copy the NVQ system and not to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses. In the following sections, we will try to discuss some of the underlying assumptions of the NVQ system and how these have been met in reality. The four basic assumptions are (Eraut et al.1996):

a) a near perfect match between national standards and competences at work;

b) because training and assessment both occur at the workplace, high validity of assessments is achieved;

c) competences gained are transferable;

d) detailed specifications together with trained assessors will ensure both validity and reliability.

Until now, there has been an insistent rhetoric that NVQs reflect the needs of employers and although far from perfect represent the best effort so far to merge national and com-

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10 In Scotland: SNVQs.
pany-specific demands. It is true that employers are represented in (the former) leading bodies and standards councils, but several weaknesses of both a practical and fundamental character have appeared. First, there are limits to what a relatively small group of employer representatives can contribute often on the basis of scarce resources and limited time. Second, the more powerful and more technically knowledgeable organisations usually represent large companies with good training records and wield the greatest influence. Smaller, less influential organisations obtain less relevant results. Third, disagreements in committees, irrespective of who is represented, are more easily resolved by inclusion than exclusion, inflating the scope of the qualifications. Generally speaking, there is a conflict of interest between national standards, first, the commitment to describing competences valid on a universal basis and, second, the commitment to create precise standards to minimise the scope for different interpretations when making assessments.

Historically, there has been a shift from narrow task analysis to broader functions analysis. This principle is oriented towards the need to create national standards describing transferable competences. Observers have noted that the introduction of functions was paralleled by detailed descriptions of every element in each function, prescribing performance criteria and the range of conditions for successful performance. The length and complexity of NVQs, currently a much criticised factor, stems from this ‘dynamic’. As Wolf (1995) says, we seem to have entered a ‘never ending spiral of specifications’. Researchers at the University of Sussex (Eraut cited above) have concluded on the challenges facing NVQ-based assessments: pursuing perfect reliability leads to meaningless assessment. Pursuing perfect validity leads towards assessments which cover everything relevant, but take too much time, and leave too little time left for learning. Perfect validity means endless assessment, perfect reliability means meaningless assessment.

We have intentionally undercommunicated some of the more specific methodological tools developed in the wake of the establishment of the NVQ system. Approaches like accreditation of prior learning (APL), and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), have become less visible as the NVQ system has settled. This is an understandable and fully reasonable development as all assessment approaches in the NVQ system in principle have to face the challenge of experientially-based learning, i.e., learning outside the formal school context. The experiences from APL and APEL are thus being integrated into the NVQ system. In a way, this is an example of the maturing of the system. The UK system, being one of the first to try to construct a performance-based system, linking various formal and non-formal learning paths, illustrates the dilemmas of assessing and recognising non-formal learning better than most other systems because there has been time to observe and study systematically the problems and possibilities. A major issue is the close link between standard and assessment. The formulation of standards: who takes part, how much time and resources do they have at their disposal, how do they approach the task of describing these functions, performances or outputs?

3.4.2 Ireland

The Irish accreditation of prior learning (APL) approach is clearly based on the same performance-based approach to assessment as we find in the UK. This is hardly surprising, since mutual learning between these countries has been strong and remains so. The Irish experience, however, is of a more limited character than the British. FÁS, the Irish training and employment authority, has been the main promoter and initiator in this field to date. The accreditation of prior learning is integrated into the general certification framework. The following principles are emphasised: first, FÁS certifies skills and skills levels, not courses. The performance-based output-orientated perspective found in the NVQs and elsewhere is thus central to the Irish model. Second, a modular training programme is matched by modular assessment. Third, emphasis is on practical and personal skills as well as related knowledge. Fourth, industrial standards have been established through cooperation and participation with relevant interest groups. Lastly, assessment
should be criterion referenced, and each assessment should be linked to key objectives identifying the skills and knowledge to be demonstrated. However, actual experience with APL in Ireland has been limited. Since 1992, projects in retail, construction and electricity supply, have been carried out, utilising somewhat different methodological approaches. The future development of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Ireland is not clear. While being important, FÀS represents only one part of the Irish certification landscape and it has yet to be seen whether the establishment of Teastas, a national body intended to nationalise certification of vocational education and training programmes, will make a difference. It should also be noted that the ‘project approach’ of FÀS, promoting APL in time-limited projects towards limited areas/branches, does not guarantee the permanent introduction of these methodologies. It is fair to say, however, that a certain amount of experience has been gained from these APL projects, supplemented by participation in a variety of European programmes and projects.

3.4.3 The Netherlands

The Dutch approach to assessment and recognition of non-formal learning can in some respects be compared to the Irish. The influence of the UK NVQ system is evident, but the general performance-based modular system has been translated into a specific Dutch variant differing from the British. The actual development of methodologies, especially those promoted by the Ministry of Education through CINOP (Cedefop 1999i), can also be characterised as limited in approach, thus far being tested in a limited number of sectors and occupational areas. As in the Irish case, important methodological experiences have been gained of interest also to other European countries. The CINOP assessment model is very well documented (Klarus 1998, Cedefop 1999h)). It is centred on a practical task to be solved and consists of three distinct stages: planning, execution and evaluation. Within these stages, different assessment methodologies are used and the aspects focused on differ from each other. In the first stage, planning, the aim is to assess the candidate’s methodological competences and his or her ability to plan the task ahead. Criterion-referenced interviews are used together with observation of work preparation. The second stage focuses on the actual execution of the task, trying to assess execution as well as reflective skills. Assessment is based on a combination of observation (of process and result) and a criterion-oriented interview. In the third stage, evaluating/adjusting, the aim is to assess the reflective skills of the candidate. The candidate is asked to reflect on the task performed, to identify alternative ways of doing it, and to indicate how the chosen approach could be transferred to other working situations. The CINOP approach is linked to and based on the already existing qualification structure (standard) for secondary vocational education. The approach is clearly integrated into the framework of the Educational and Vocational Training Act (WEB) and can thus be looked upon as an initiative to link non-formal learning to the formal system. The Dutch qualification standard is based on job and task analysis and it can also be characterised as industry driven (social partners take part at all levels in the definition of the standards). The content of the qualification is divided into three types; vocational competences, competences for further development and social and cultural competences. All relevant parties, government, social partners and representatives of the educational system, have agreed that different learning pathways should be accepted and supported. As pointed out by several observers (Cedefop 1999i), the Dutch approach to non-formal learning is more than the CINOP model. Experiments are currently being undertaken both at national and branch levels to develop methodologies and systems for the identification and assessment of non-formal learning. Initiators and target groups differ, from those seeking national official certificates or exemption from parts of the training (as in the CINOP approach), to branches and enterprises trying to identify and assess the competences held by their employees.

3.4.4 An NVQ model?

Concluding our discussion of the three countries covered in this section, the overwhelm-
ing acceptance of an output-oriented, performance-based model of education and training is most striking. The general acceptance of learning outside formal education and training institutions as a valid and important pathway to competences seems to go without saying. What is questioned, however, is how such a system should be realised. The UK and the Dutch experiences illustrate some of the institutional, methodological and practical problems linked to establishing a system able to integrate non-formal learning within its framework. The challenge of developing an accepted qualification standard seems to represent the first and perhaps most serious obstacle. As long as assessments are supposed to be criterion-referenced, the quality of the standard is crucial. The UK experiences identify some of these difficulties balancing between too general and too specific descriptions and definitions of competences. The second important challenge illustrated in the UK and Dutch cases, but not reflected in our material on the Irish experience, is related to the classical assessment challenges of reliability and validity. In our material the problems have been clearly demonstrated but the answers, if they exist, not so clearly indicated. The Finns, by networking and training assessors and relevant institutions, have probably indicated one possible strategy. Concluding that qualification standards can never achieve a perfect balance between general and specific descriptions, the Finns focus on the competences of the assessors. This is probably relevant in the UK, Dutch and Irish cases as well.

3.5 A French model? France and Belgium

Like the UK NVQ system, French experiences have influenced the general European debate and development in this area. The *bilan de compétence* can be described as the first effort to introduce a full-scale system for the identification and assessment of non-formal and experiential learning. Since the introduction of the *bilan* in 1985, attention to these issues has been very strong. Belgium, in contrast to France, is still at a very early stage of development and has not yet decided on a clear strategy.

3.5.1 France

France has been characterised as an extreme case of 'certificate fixation' (Merle 1998). As in the cases of Italy and Greece (Section 3.3), a certificate not only reflects a formal level of achievement, but the qualities of a person and the rank he or she is entitled to. Mehaut (1977) points to three functions met by French certificates: first, as an internal standard of the education system; second as an external standard for the labour market; and, third, as a personal and hierarchical identifier. This ‘certificate fixation’ is perhaps best reflected in the system of the *grandes écoles*, but influences behaviour in other areas as well, including vocational education and training. The high value attributed to certificates in France is very much linked to the national and homogeneous character of the education and training systems. Education, including vocational education and training, has been provided within predefined, complete national routes, leaving little room for personal or institutional experimentation. Although changes have taken place during the past decade, the stability of the system has contributed to its transparency; individuals and employers are in the main familiar with the various qualifications awarded at national level.

During the past 10 to 15 years, these systems have increasingly been questioned. Stability, it is emphasised, can also be interpreted as rigidity. The homogeneity of the system may easily turn into an obstacle to the renewal of knowledge and competences with alternative forms of learning not accepted because they do not fit into the prescribed routes defined by the national systems. This criticism has been expressed in a number of contexts, gradually ‘spilling over’ into legal and institutional reforms aimed at a closer link between formal education and training and the learning that takes place at work. Basically,

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11 Luxembourg would normally have been presented in this chapter but after consultations with representatives of the educational authorities of Luxembourg, Cedefop concluded that the level of activity in this area was too low to warrant an independent national study.
we speak of two sets of legal initiatives with somewhat different profiles and objectives. First, the 1985 law on the bilan de compétence permits the validation of professional competences acquired outside formal education. The initiative may come from the enterprise or from the worker him/herself. This right was strengthened through the law of December 1991 which states that employees are entitled to educational leave for the bilan. According to the law of 1991, the aim of the bilan de compétence is to assist the employee to understand his or her professional and personal competences, motivation and aptitudes to facilitate his/her professional as well as educational plans and careers. A bilan is divided into three phases: a preliminary phase where the motivation and needs of the employee are clarified and where the procedures/methodologies of the bilan are presented. Second, an investigative phase where motivation, personal and professional interests as well as competences are analysed and mapped out. Finally, the results of the analyses are presented to the candidate and used as a basis for dialogue on future training and career plans. After having concluded the process, the candidate receives a synthesis document supposed to identify clearly his or her personal and professional competences, thus helping to clarify the necessary steps to be taken to realise future plans. On average, the described process requires 19 hours. A total of 700 centres de bilan have been set up all over France. In 1994, these centres issued 125 000 bilans at an estimated cost of FFR 340 million. Three quarters of all requests were made by employees, 52% of these being women, 44% in the age group 16 to 25 and 47% in the age group 26 to 44. Almost 50% of those asking for a bilan indicated that elaboration d’un projet professionnel was their main objective, 20% recherche d’emploi, 21% recherche de formation. Only a very small percentage, 1.9%, indicated that the bilan was a first step taken for validation of a certificate or diploma in the formal education and training system.

Second, the law of July 1992 on the validation of skills acquired by work experience is directly linked to the national framework of diplomas and certificates, and thus recognises the legal equality between competences acquired inside and outside formal education and training. This law, administered by the Ministry of Education and linked to the initial training system (leading to a certificate d’aptitude professionnelle (CAP) or a certain level of the brevet de technicien supérieur (BTS), is paralleled by a system for ‘assessment of competences and skills acquired through work experience’ (EVAP), developed by the Ministry of Labour. This system is linked to the certificates issued by the ministry based on continuing training. Certificates issued by the Ministries of Education and Labour are both based on specifications (standards) drawn up in agreement with the social partners in consultative committees (CPSs). Normally, the work of the CPSs has been closely linked to a specific training course but acceptance of experiential learning as a legitimate qualification pathway implies that the specifications also have to consider this aspect. Different from the bilan de compétence, the potential of the 1992 law has yet to be realised. Merle (cited above) is of the opinion that the system for acquiring formal qualifications through validation of skills acquired on the job ‘…has been slow to get under way and is far from meeting workers’ expectations’. It is estimated (Colardyn 1999) that approximately 90% of the requirements for every educational diploma awarded by the Ministry of Education can be met through recognition of prior non-formal learning. This means that all diplomas are accessible via this route, but also that no diploma can be achieved entirely through assessment of non-formal learning. At some point or another, anybody wishing to have their competences assessed within this framework must acquire a diploma.

While the laws of 1985, 1991 and 1992 are important indicators of a changing attitude towards non-formal learning in France, the qualifications awarded by the centres d’études thermiques et énergiques (CTH) and certificates of vocational qualifications (CQP) can be seen as an alternative to the traditional certification system because they relate to (practical) skills used in firms and are less linked to following a course. So far, industries have been very cautious in creating CQPs, the number awarded annually is rarely in excess
of 4000. Originally, CQPs were designed to certify qualifications of young people who had followed a course of alternating on-the-job and off-the-job training. Today, the industries developing CQPs have given them very different functions: certification complementing the national education system, recognition leading to career advancement and a system of industry certification parallel to that of the national education system.

In many ways, France can be viewed as the country in Europe with the longest and broadest experience in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. The legal base established through the laws of 1985, 1991 and 1992, indicates clearly that non-formal learning is important and that its place, relative to that of formal learning, should be clarified and strengthened. Furthermore, the practical experience gained from the system of *bilan de compétence* is important both in terms of volume/costs and methodological experiences. It is also important outside France. Non-formal learning has, more than in other European countries, become an important part of the political debate on education, training and work. The topic is integrated into the national political debate among social partners and has also become a topic covered by researchers.

Michelle Virville’s proposal that national sets of qualification benchmarks should be set up within a tripartite structure to allow all validated qualifications, whatever their basis, to be formulated in a common language, can be looked upon as an example of the growing importance attributed to this topic in the French context. On the other hand, the traditionally strong position of formal certificates and diplomas indicates that non-formal learning will not automatically be trusted in the same way as formal learning. In France, as in other countries, legal recognition of non-formal learning is just a first step and general acceptance of alternative forms of learning is another matter.

### 3.5.2 Belgium

The Belgian situation is different from that of France. According to accessible information, the debate on these issues has only recently reached the national political agenda, and to a varying degree in the French and Flemish parts of the country. Consequently, few actual initiatives have been taken in the area of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. This may be explained somewhat through the structure of vocational training in Belgium which takes place mainly in educational institutions and specifically in schools specialising in vocational and technical education and training. Compared with many other European countries, the Belgian system is not very strongly linked to the workplace. A very small proportion of young people take part in vocational training through apprenticeships. There might be a link between this predominantly school-oriented approach to training and the lack of focus on non-formal learning outside formal education.

An initiative has however, been taken by the Conseil de l’éducation et de la formation of the French community in Belgium. Their suggestion (of 1997/98) is to reform and harmonise the entire system of validation linked to vocational and professional competences, both at initial and continuing levels. A broader concept of qualifications than the existing system is emphasised and proposed. According to this proposal a qualification must be defined as the totality of those competences necessary to execute a task or those interlinked tasks necessary to have a vocation. This is what we previously characterised as a performance or output-based approach to vocational standards. Competences acquired through work experience are underlined in the proposal pointing to the potential inclusion of non-formal learning in the assessment practices of Belgian education and training. This particular proposal is not explicitly linked to French or other ‘foreign’ models, the change in perspective from an input to an output-based approach is, however, apparent.

The Flemish authorities are currently working on a reform of the vocational training system trying to implement a modularised, ‘output-based’ model. In this context, the issue of assessment and recognition of non-formal learning has been raised, and for the first time introduced on the national (Flemish) political
agenda. The Flemish work, though not very advanced, has so far leaned strongly towards the experience gained in the Netherlands. Both the Dutch system of qualification standards and the APL methodologies developed over recent years are important points of reference. The Flemish case illustrates the important role of mutual learning. To a certain extent we can observe a voluntary, uncoordinated and ‘bottom up’ form of harmonisation.

4. European trends: Developments at EU level

As noted during our discussion on the various national approaches, the role of the European Union in the area of non-formal learning is interesting and important. First of all, the Commission White Paper on ‘Teaching and learning: towards a learning society’, has contributed in drawing attention to the issue, emphasising the importance of making competences acquired outside formal education and training institutions visible. Further, the Leonardo da Vinci and Adapt programmes have been important tools for initiating experimentation on methodological and institutional questions. These programmes, through the involvement of a high number of individual project partners, have also supported an international learning process of potentially high importance, the results of which will only be possible to detect in the long term.

In spite of the relatively high political priority given to the topic of learning at Community level, few (if any) attempts have been made to summarise efforts so far. The ambitious proposals of the White Paper have, to a large extent, remained as general policy proposals without any specific or measurable influence on practical policies at EU or national levels. The programmes, of which the Leonardo da Vinci is by far the most important in this context, are difficult to overview. During the period 1995-97, the Leonardo da Vinci programme alone supported more than 100 projects working specifically on questions related to the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal or experiential learning. This chapter represents one of the first, albeit incomplete attempts to summarise these activities.

4.1 The White Paper on ‘Teaching and learning: towards the learning society’

In November 1995, the European Commission adopted the White Paper on education and training entitled ‘Teaching and learning: towards the learning society’. Of the five objectives set out in the paper the first is to encourage ‘the acquisition of new knowledge’ and several positive effects of ‘opening up (the) avenues for validating skills’ (p. 35) are foreseen. It may:

- generate education and training demand from young people or adults unable or not wishing to enter either a formal system leading to paper qualifications or to undergo vocational training;
- render it possible for each individual to have partial skills recognised under a flexible and permanent system for validating knowledge units;
- identify, assess and reach common agreement on such knowledge units;
- encourage individuals to assemble their qualifications themselves, notably through accreditation of such knowledge units.

The introduction of a ‘personal skills card’ (PSC) is one of several methods suggested to realise this objective. A PSC providing a record of skills and knowledge should, according to the White Paper, be available to all those who want one. The card should be ap-

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12 This chapter is incomplete in the sense that only a minority of Leonardo da Vinci projects, those linked to the context of the ‘automated assessment approach’ are covered. During the autumn of 1999, Cedefop completed a survey and an analysis of all the 1995-97 Leonardo da Vinci projects devoted to assessment. In addition to a description of the profiles of these projects, a more detailed follow-up of the results/the implementation results from 20 projects was carried out. This material will be presented in the forthcoming synthesis report on the Cedefop project ‘Identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning’.
plied to certain fundamental areas of knowledge and even to occupational areas which apply to a number of different disciplines. The White Paper presents the PSC as a ‘tool’ or a ‘lever’ to introduce such standards in the Member States. As it is said:

‘The aim is not to devise a uniform card and impose it on Europe but to contribute to the development of such tools, so as to progressively arrive at joint standards, including standards that cut across a number of occupations’ (p. 34).

It is recognised that many European countries are attempting to identify ‘key skills’ and the best ways of acquiring, assessing and validating them. National initiatives will, though, be of limited value within a context of increased European mobility. The PSC must be understood as a core element in a European system designed to compare and disseminate validation methods and practices. While not commented upon in any detail, it is assumed that the PSC will depend on broad recognition and acceptance:

‘A European accreditation system covering technical and vocational skills will be set up based on a cooperative venture involving higher education establishments, businesses, vocational sectors, local chambers of commerce and the social partners. Finally, support will be given to concluding a whole range of agreements – at company, branch and regional levels, etc. – incorporating the principle of the PSC’ (p. 34).

The White Paper did not present detailed plans for the introduction of the PSC. Some details were supplied in a document prepared by DGXXII\(^\text{13}\) shortly after the presentation of the White Paper (on ‘European skill accreditation system’). With reference to Objective 1 in the White Paper, it states that the aim is to set up a European skill accreditation system over the course of a few years which will enable everybody to have his or her knowledge and know-how validated on a PSC. This requires the identification of a number of areas of core knowledge, vocational/technical knowledge and key skills (cutting across a number of disciplines). These areas must be clearly defined and broken down into coherent basic units classified in increasing order of difficulty. This should, in the words of the author, make it possible to assess an area of knowledge from the most elementary to the highest level. It is admitted that there is no fixed list of knowledge and skills areas which could be tested at European level. However, the subject should be relatively well established (no major doctrinal controversies) and should leave very little room for national or cultural subjectivity. The following examples are given:

- **core knowledge areas**: mathematics, sciences, informatics, geography, foreign languages;

- **vocational/technical skills**: marketing, business management techniques, accounting, etc;

- **key skills**: logistics, organisational techniques, communication, decision-making abilities, risk assessment and risk management ability, negotiating skills and interpersonal skills.

The accomplishment of this accreditation task at European level should be based on the following: first, skills assessment and validation should use a range of user-friendly validation software packages linked by telematic network (Internet) to a central server which will deliver interactive tests on demand, process the result and validate skills at the level tested. Second, candidates wishing to validate their skills should be able to take these tests anywhere in Europe, and as many times as necessary in order to pass. The skills level will be registered on a PSC, which people will be able to build up at the pace and in the manner which suits them. As the system eventually gains recognition, the skills card will complement paper qualifications and become real passports to employment. The aim, it is stated, is to establish a system which all Member States can agree on, so that the PSC can

\(^{13}\) Directorate General Education, Training, Youth. Now Directorate General for Education and Culture.
become a European tool to enable people to put their skills to use anywhere in Europe. The point is not to create a single European test (national differentiation should be acknowledged), but the methodology used should be the same throughout Europe and everyone should be able to sit all the tests in all EU languages.

The presentation of the PSC and the European skills accreditation system can be interpreted as *instrumental approaches* focusing more on the technological rather than the political challenges ahead. This is most apparent in the presentation of the European skills accreditation system where the development of ‘expert systems’ (software packages) and telematic networks (Internet) are presented as prerequisites for a future system and the political, institutional and social basis of methodologies are hardly elaborated at all (see also the discussion in Chapter 2).

### 4.2 The follow up of the White Paper proposals on assessing competences

Apart from the influence of the White Paper on the general awareness towards the issue of non-formal learning, the most direct follow up of the PSC proposal has been the setting up of an experimental framework where a total of 18 different projects (10 from the Leonardo da Vinci and eight from the Socrates programmes) are working on ‘automated assessments’. These projects can be divided into three main groups. One group focuses on the testing/assessment of basic knowledge in mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry, statistics and geography. A second group focuses on needs in specific sectors, such as banking, business administration, process industry, water supply and food industry. The third group focuses on assessing cross-sectoral competences such as computer skills, written expression, languages and key skills. The main emphasis, in line with the White Paper, is to see how far computer-supported solutions can be used.

An evaluation of these was conducted by the Guildford Educational Services in 1998 (at the request of the European Commission). Of the more general conclusions, the following points are interesting relative to the challenge of establishing a European PSC and a European Skills Accreditation System (ESAS):

- It is judged as generally difficult to develop computer-delivered tests which are valid and reliable to a number of different countries at the same time. It is difficult to agree on a common core of content appropriate to all countries, this is especially the case in vocational areas (banking is mentioned as example), but also in academic subjects like mathematics and physics this problem was encountered (curricula differ between countries);

- Even where an agreed common core had been identified, the test questions had to be ‘localised’ (or according to Chapter 2 above, ‘contextualised’) to take into account the differing conditions in the various countries;

- Properly functioning software is crucial, as a wide a range of users as possible should be able to access and security facilities must be developed. Current technology, especially the Internet, still poses some problems for users of the systems;

- There is a need for an administrative infrastructure supporting the tests. If assessments are going to lead to some form of official certification and/or recognition, this is a fundamental demand not covered within the current scope of the experiment;

- The legitimacy of the assessments poses a problem. They should therefore be developed on clear expressions of

Closely linked to the setting up of an experimental framework on ‘automated assessment’, the Tavistock Institute was asked to
look into the US experiences on ‘accreditation of competences through automated cards’ (Cullen and Jones 1997) and use this as a basis for discussion on the feasibility of a European PSC and ESAS. The US experiences, in some aspects far ahead of their European counterparts, can only partly be integrated into the European context. Cullen and Jones point to fundamental sociocultural, institutional, economic and legal differences making direct transfer of US theory and practice into Europe difficult.

Thus early results from pilot projects the study evaluated are highlighting cultural differences in the ways in which skills are defined and utilised in the different locales involved. These are articulated primarily in different interpretations of the skills required to do a particular job, and in the terminology used to describe skills.

It is stated that the main obstacles are not to be found in the technological area, there would not appear to be any major technical obstacles against the development of a PSC or ESAS, neither when talking of the ‘smart’ card or the automated assessment software. The main challenge it is stated, is to be found in the ‘sociotechnical contextualisation’ of such systems, i.e. embedding the technologies within appropriate institutional and organisational frameworks. The system will stand or fail, Cullen and Jones conclude, on the putting into place of appropriate partnership between government, industry and representatives of worker organisations. Further, such partnerships should be supported by innovations in areas such as occupational classifications and accreditation/assessment networks (the Finnish example of an assessment network illustrates a national development in this direction). In conclusion, Cullen and Jones present two ‘scenarios’ to illustrate the different directions the PSC and the ESAS may take in the future. The first scenario is entitled ‘the big bang’ and envisages a comprehensive pan-European skills accreditation system. Such a system would be based on an evolving database of occupational titles, descriptors and competence definitions. It would be structured according to a content-model corresponding to the organisation of the European workplace. This system would be a variant of the existing US O*Net. A European competence standardisation agency, responsible for the collecting of data on various skills is envisaged in this scenario, together with a European accreditation agency, responsible for high level management of activities at national, regional and sectoral levels. The second alternative is entitled the ‘evolutionary scenario’ and opposes the ‘top down’ approach of the ‘big bang’ proposing instead to build on existing, national and local initiatives, to test to what extent a pan-European initiative like the ESAS can be transferred to different sociocultural settings and, finally, through the implementation of pilot projects in a limited number of sectors (to gain experience). The major advantage of the ‘evolutionary scenario’, it is stated, is that it is workable and that it is embedded in existing sociocultural settings.

Both the Guildford and the Tavistock (Cullen and Jones 1997) studies criticise more or less explicitly the tendency to develop assessment methodologies isolated from their sociocultural context. Of particular interest is the conclusion from Guildford on the difficulties encountered when trying to identify a ‘common core’ of content appropriate to all countries. The fact that this problem was encountered in academic subjects like mathematics and physics, described by the Commission in their follow up of the White Paper as ‘objective areas’ of knowledge, underlines the seriousness of the challenge. This does not alter the fact that both Tavistock and Guildford point to interesting and promising technological developments. The speed of these developments is increasing and the ongoing experimentation through the Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates programmes will undoubtedly bring forward useful experiences. The success of the ‘computer driving licence’ project, one of the 18 projects supported in this specific context, is worth noting. Supported by professional associations in several countries, this specific automated test has become more and more popular. Operating within a limited area and covering skills which can be identified in a clear and unambiguous way, this test is one of the few visible results of the visions presented in the White Paper.
4.3 Conclusions

No final conclusion as to the role of the EU in the area of assessment of non-formal learning can be drawn at this stage. As previously stated, the emphasis of the Commission on this topic has ‘pushed’ the issue at national and sectoral levels. The White Paper helped to define the issue in a clearer way and thus supported the processes at national level. The strategy of the White Paper, focusing on European standards and a European skills card to be implemented on a pan-European level, has clearly not been followed up. The high activity at national level is motivated by practical and long-term challenges at national level (the need to bridge learning areas and learning levels), not by the wish to create transparent and harmonised systems at European level. The question is more how current European activities, basically in the form of projects in the Leonardo da Vinci and other programmes, can support the practical initiatives at national, regional and sectoral levels. The ‘evolutionary scenario’ presented by Tavistock illustrates such a strategy.

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the focus on non-formal learning at work, in leisure activities and at home, is more a question of improving the quality of learning (by broadening the knowledge and competence base) than of increasing the capacity of learning. Having surveyed the different Member States of the EU on this issue, the basic motivation behind efforts in attempting to capture non-formal learning seems to be the hope to identify and utilise other forms of learning and knowledge than those stemming from the formal system. As indicated by the White Paper (1995), there is a need for a broader knowledge base, a need to combine the qualities of specialised teaching in education and training institutions and the qualities of experienced-based learning from actual and practical working/life situations. In this way, the growing interest and focus on non-formal learning is not so paradoxical as it may seem at first glance. Perhaps it can be viewed as a more mature way of understanding the dynamics underlying reproduction and renewal of knowledge and competences. This view emphasises the heterogeneous character of learning. Learning cannot be standardised, rather, we should try to utilise and combine as many and as various forms of learning as possible. But as the follow up of the White Paper has shown, to formulate abstract and general objectives is one thing, to design and implement practical solutions is another.

Methodologies and institutions for the assessment of non-formal learning can be looked upon as necessary tools to build bridges between various forms of learning, from education to work and from initial education and training to continuing education and training. Although incomplete, the experimentation and planning taking place in most EU/EEA countries is an important signal of a changing perspective. Learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions is increasingly receiving attention. This means that the question of recognition of non-formal learning is located at the centre of the debate on lifelong learning and is increasingly understood as a critical question to solve if such an approach is to be realised. This does not mean that the exact role of assessment methodologies in the context of lifelong learning has been clearly defined. We still speak of general objectives at a rather high level of abstraction. A smooth interrelation between learning taking place in school and in work contexts implies a reduction of institutional barriers and an acceptance of the existence of a variety of learning needs and learning forms. A situation where the formal education and training system is given a monopoly on recognition of non-formal learning is clearly problematic. If the aim is to broaden the range of competences utilised in society in general, a shift in the balance between learning in education and work has to take place. This can take place at least partly through careful ‘institutional design’. Securing broad participation in the development and definition of qualification and competence standards is probably one of the most crucial steps to be taken to increase the legitimacy of methodologies and systems (see also Chapter 2). The actual development of methodolo-
gies and institutions at national level illustrates this challenge. In the few cases where methodologies and/or institutions operate at more or less full scale, non-formal learning is treated as a subcategory to formal learning, not as a specific kind of learning potentially leading to different sorts of competences. As we have seen in France, this question has been raised and experimentation has taken place. This however is not the case in most countries for the moment.

The change from an input to an output-based approach to education and training, as demonstrated through the policy changes of several Member States of the EU, will lead to individualisation (or a ‘tailoring’) of competences. By accepting a greater diversity of learning contexts and learning paths, the need for control mechanisms increases. Unlike monolithic and centrally controlled education and training approaches, the need to measure and sort individuals becomes crucial, a precondition for the functioning of the overall system. The need to measure and sort is increasingly felt at many levels and in many contexts such as enterprises recruiting, promoting and dismissing people and by educational institutions deciding on who is to be granted access. The loss of central control experienced when promoting more diversified education and training (which also may be termed decentralisation), is balanced by the development and introduction of new control mechanisms, controlling individuals rather than institutions. This highlights the ethical dimension of assessments. The question of methodological efficiency is not only a question of technical possibilities and limitations, it may also be a question of how far into the personal domain assessment methodologies (sorting mechanisms) should be allowed to penetrate.

Irrespective of the interpretation chosen, and it is obvious that still many more are possible, links between the formalised and non-formalised domains of learning are currently being strengthened through the introduction of methodologies and systems for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning. This trend can be observed in a majority of Member States of the EU/EEA and seems to be gaining momentum.
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