

Lifelong Learning and the Accreditation of Prior Learning in the countries involved in the FamCompass project

Faced with the problems and challenges of an ageing society and convinced of the importance to fully validate the knowledge, competences and skills adult learners have developed in non-formal training and/or work settings, the FamCompass project will develop an instrument to assess and validate the competences men and woman have obtained in family life: the Family Competences Portfolio.

In this paper we look at the EU-policy concerning lifelong learning and the accreditation of prior learning, to which our project responds. With input from the different organizations taking part in the project, we give an overview of the progress made in their countries in the development of lifelong learning strategies and of systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. With this information we situate the project in the needs and challenges of each of the participating countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia).

1. Policy concerning Lifelong Learning and the Accreditation of Prior Learning in Europe

1996 was the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and since the idea of lifelong learning (LLL) has only been growing in importance and rising up the European Union's political agenda. It is the key element in the 'education and training contribution' to the '*Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs*', adopted in March 2000 by the European Council for the decade to 2010.

In 2001, the European Commission published the communication '*Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*' which identified coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all. The set of priority areas for action highlighted included: bringing learners and learning opportunities together, improving the access to information and advice about learning opportunities, enabling people to be given credit for the knowledge, skills and competence they have acquired, developing innovative teaching and learning methods, and investing in human resources. In June 2002 the Council resolution on lifelong learning, supporting that communication, was adopted.



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

Member states of the European Union and the Commission have set up a European policy framework to work on the concrete objectives of education and training systems. The purpose of this cooperation is to support member states and stakeholders in pursuing their own education and training reforms, necessary to meet the challenges that are largely common to all countries. This programme, in which lifelong learning is the guiding principle, is known as the '*Education and Training 2010*' work programme. The major goals to be achieved by 2010 are: 1) to improve the quality and effectiveness of EU education and training systems; 2) to ensure that they are accessible to all; 3) to open up education and training to the wider world.

The European Commission's 2006 Communication '*Adult learning: It is never too late to learn*' highlighted adult learning as an important component of lifelong learning. It states that adult learning, through the acquisition of key competences by all, delivers an essential contribution to social inclusion and to employability and mobility in the labour market. Calling on Member States to promote adult learning in Europe, were presented five key messages for adult learning stakeholders (of which the first and third are most important for our project): 1) Lifting the barriers to participation; 2) Ensuring the quality of adult learning; 3) Recognition and validation of learning outcomes; 4) Investing in the ageing population and migrants; 5) Indicators and benchmarks.

In 2007, the Commission launched the '*Action Plan on Adult Learning. It is always a good time to learn*', to help Member States in their process to implement an efficient adult learning system, integrated into the national lifelong learning strategies. The plan considers actions in five areas, one of them is to speed up the process of assessing and recognizing skills and social competences. The Commission states that the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning form a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy. In order to facilitate their integration in society, this is especially important for those who don't have basic competences. 'They will have skills that are not visible.'

The communication '*Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation*' from the European Commission in 2007 included a draft of the 2008 joint progress report on the implementation of the '*Education & Training 2010 work programme*'. This report points to significant progress in education and training reforms in Europe. Explicit lifelong learning strategies were developed by the majority of countries. Systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning are also coming into place, but more slowly. Progress is not uniform throughout countries; in the annex the situation for the EU countries of partner organizations is showed.

In april 2008, the European Qualifications Framework, a common European reference, was formally adopted. At the national level, the EQF is promoting the development of national qualifications frameworks.

Later in this paper, we will discuss the progress of LLL and APL in the Famcompass project partner countries. But first we'll take a closer look at the main concepts and at the project itself.

2. Concepts

LLL

The European Commission opted for a broad definition of the term Lifelong Learning. It takes into account the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning, from pre-school to post-retirement. The LLL policy is not only aimed at economic aspects – such as enhancing the employability and professional profile of the learners. The importance of LLL for promoting active citizenship, avoiding social marginalization and the fulfillment of individual personal aspirations should be seen as equally important.

APL

The Accreditation of Prior Learning, and especially of informal and non-formal learning, is an important element of the LLL strategy. It makes visible and values the full range of knowledge and competences held by an individual, no matter where or how these have been acquired. This process takes place inside and outside formal education and training, in the workplace and in civil society. The assessment of an individual's learning outcome may result in a formal certificate.

EQF

The EQF, the European Qualifications Framework, is a common European reference framework which links countries' qualifications systems together, acting as a translation device to make qualifications more readable. The EQF has two principal aims: to promote citizens' mobility between countries and to facilitate their lifelong learning. It applies to all types of qualifications, from those achieved at the end of compulsory education to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional or vocational education and training. The core of the EQF is that it describes what a learner knows, understands and is able to do - their 'learning outcomes' - regardless of where a particular qualification was acquired. It therefore shifts the focus away from the traditional approach, which emphasizes learning inputs (length of a learning experience, type of institution).

At the national level, the EQF will, and is indeed already doing this, promote the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQF's). Qualifications frameworks promote lifelong learning by, for example, making it easier for people to move between different types of education and training institutions, for example between higher education and vocational education and training. It is planned that Member States relate their national qualifications systems to the EQF by 2010 and that their qualifications contain a reference to the EQF by 2012. In this way it will enable individuals and employers to use the EQF as a reference tool to compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems.

The FamCompass

Due to the ageing society, many European countries face a growing demand for qualified personnel in the sector of care. At the same time, we are facing a low level of education and participation on the labour market of certain groups in society, e.g. women, elder citizens and immigrants. The actual situation shows local variations, but the overall picture stays the same. We will be forced to validate and implement talents that now remain invisible: knowledge, skills and competences acquired in taking up family responsibilities and care.

The FamCompass will assess and validate the knowledge, skills and attitudes men and woman have obtained in their family life, in their roles as educators, home makers and care workers. In creating this tool, we want to stimulate the above mentioned target groups, that currently face a low participation in formal schooling (woman, elder citizens and immigrants), to enter lifelong learning programmes and thus acquire the necessary certification to apply for jobs related to family work and care.

The FamCompass will take the form of a paper-portfolio and a computer programme, available in English and the official languages of the participating countries. The portfolio methodology allows for a well documented and objective basis for the individual planning of training and/or work careers. Such a tool can be the basis for the official certification of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in family life and care. The methodology also stimulates self reflexion on one's own strong and weak points and is very much empowering: it learns applicants to reflect on their own possibilities and to identify ways to improve them, e.g. via schooling and training.

The FamCompass can be used on several levels: to coach the intake for relevant education and training programmes; to grant exemption from exams and facilitate shorter schooling careers; to allow the validation of these skills and competences on the labour market in the sectors of care and childcare.

Competences acquired in family life are basically the same in most EU-countries and the FamCompass will be tested in different settings in several European countries. This will help the tool to be recognized and used in several European countries.

3. LLL and APL in the FamCompass partner-countries

Today, member states of the European Union have reached different stages in the development of their respective lifelong learning strategies and systems for the accreditation of prior learning (APL). We give a summary for the countries of the partners involved in the FamCompass project.

Belgium (Flanders)

Flanders (in Belgium the communities are responsible for education policy) has an explicit lifelong learning strategy. Since the nineties, the importance of lifelong learning has been underlined repeatedly in policy documents of the Flemish government. In 2000, the action plan 'Lifelong learning in the right direction' was approved, stating that every citizen should get the chance to develop his/her abilities and this in the personal, professional, cultural and social spheres. Various actions have been introduced, oriented towards employers and towards individuals.

Over the past few years, a lot has been done in the field of the accreditation of prior learning as well. Different social domains in Flanders (higher education, professional context and social sector) have developed a separate system for the recognition and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning. The Flemish government developed a legal framework for the accreditation of prior learning in higher education that has been implemented in universities and colleges since September 2005. The law allows institutions to develop their APL-procedures autonomously, which resulted in a large variety of procedures between institutions. The methods mostly used to assess competences are a portfolio, an interview and/or tests. The costs differ and can be an obstacle. The Flemish Department of Education evaluates the methods every five years.

As for the accreditation of non-formal and informal learning in a professional context, the Flemish government launched the 'Proof of Experience'. Since August 2006, people can obtain this official document, which declares one has proved his or her competence to practice a certain profession, in recognized test centers. In 2008, an accreditation procedure is developed for 20 professions, for example supervisor in child care. A financial contribution between 25 and 100 Euro is asked, and for some groups access is free.

There are also different initiatives in the social sector, such as in adult education and socio-cultural adult work.

Finland

Finland has traditionally invested in the education of its workforce as a main input in the economy. In the early 1990s, lifelong learning became a key issue in debates pertaining to educational policy in Finland. As a result, Finland has been highly committed to making lifelong learning a reality, and measures taken and implemented place her ahead of many other European countries. Numerous reports, several government strategies, policy documents and much legislation take account of LLL considerations and priorities. Finland's first distinct strategy for LLL was enshrined in its Development Plan for Education and Research 1999-2004, which set aims for lifelong learning policy. It stressed that lifelong learning must be understood as an approach which steers education policy and other policy sectors involved in learning in order to offer opportunities for people to develop skills for continuous learning and to learn throughout their lives.

A systematic framework for the accreditation of prior learning in Finland is being developed from 2004 onwards. Educational legislation already provided for the recognition of prior learning, but there were – and still are, large differences between different forms of post-secondary education. In 2004 the Ministry of Education appointed a committee and in following its report in August 2004, the Ministry of Education started implementing at high speed a regularisation of APL throughout the post-secondary education system. The success rate is however different in VET (Vocational Education and Training) and HE (Higher Education). The Finnish VET system now has in place measures that ensure a fair, equitable and widespread recognition of prior learning. This system of recognition is most widely used via competence-based examinations and on-the-job learning and skills demonstration.

Some of the core curricula for competence-based qualifications do take into account skills obtained as part of family life, and their assessment is done through regular examination procedures. But there are no specific tools for general accreditation of family competences.

Germany

Germany has a national strategy for lifelong learning. The country provides a very good vocational system that combines learning at schools and training at the work place for theoretical and practical apprenticeship (dual system). High quality standards and security are guaranteed by the “Beruf” (between profession, trade and job) as a lifelong vocational structure. Certifications allow permeability as well as assurance against low level competition.

On the other hand, the orientation on certification hinders life long learning approaches for a knowledge based society that needs faster adjustment to new developments on the labour market and more flexibility. Until now, Germany does not have a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Recent initiatives react to this analysis but at the present stage are not realized in practice. Since the early 1990 we find a growing number of competence tests, profiling tools, balances, and methods to document and to admit informal competence development. The Vocational Training Reform Act from 2005 now offers the possibility for validation of non-formal and informal learning in Germany. But the process of putting theory to practice is a pertinacious one. A big problem in this question is the shared competence between federal state and the “Länder”, who are very autonomous in executing the national policy.

In other words: we recognize many initiatives but up till now no national validation system for informal competences and family-related competences is put in place.

Lithuania

Lifelong learning has been on the Lithuanian political agenda for years, and the country has developed a national strategy.

The development of a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, on the other hand, is still in process. The official institutional education is not at all open to the assessment and recognition of unofficially acquired competences.

The legal basis for the assessment and recognition of competences, acquired by the way of non-formal and self-contained learning, is quite fragmentary and lacks organization. The Republic of Lithuania Law on Non-formal Education of Adults (1998) foresees that the participants of non-formal education for adults can receive an assessment of the competences, and a document proving completion of education (or a degree of education or a part of a separate regulated program or a module), recognized by the state only upon passing the examinations at an official vocational training and higher education institution. The competences acquired by the way of non-formal and self-contained training, are assessed only by the way of equivalence examinations, taken at the vocational training institutions. The initiator of the assessment (the student, employer or the state in case of an unemployed initiator) has to pay for the assessment, which does not encourage persons with a low income to learn and strive for recognition of their competences.

Poland

Poland is still developing a national lifelong learning strategy. In September 2002 the document 'Strategy for the Development of Higher Education till the year 2010' was prepared. This document vastly includes the idea of lifelong learning. In July 2003 the government accepted the 'Strategy for Lifelong Learning Development'.

However, lifelong learning strategy realisation in Poland differs when educational market intersection is taken into account: formal learning is well developed, but informal and non-formal education for adult learners is considered as less essential. Coordination and affiliation among formal, non-formal and informal learning hasn't been established. This situation results in weak cooperation among different networks, and difficulties with advising and consultancy services enrichment. The situation is also closely tied to the very slow development of the validation of the knowledge, competences and skills adult learners have developed in informal learning.

Up till now, Poland has no legal basis for the system of assessment of prior learning, procedures for the accreditation of prior learning, nor institutes responsible for the quality and the control of these procedures.

Romania

Romania is a country with a solid tradition of lifelong learning, especially in adult education. The negotiations on EU membership and then the full membership from 1st January 2007 accelerated the development of lifelong learning.

There is, however, lack of an integrated and coherent approach towards lifelong learning, with a view on the whole educational progress of an individual. Each of the educational levels and segments and active unemployment measures have developed their own legal

framework, which includes some principles of lifelong learning. But they do not link to a common framework of public policies.

Romania is yet to finish the development of a national integrated strategy for lifelong learning. Nevertheless, the decision-makers' and experts' interest in the development of a coherent national lifelong learning strategy has increased considerably. As a result, the principles of lifelong learning have been included as priorities in policy documents related to education, continuous training and employment, for example the National Development Plan 2007-2013 (NDP) and the Sectoral Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources (SOPDHR).

Romania is also developing a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The recognition and validation of this vocational competencies is performed by the assessment centres authorised by the National Adult Training Board (NATB). Assessment could be done for all the competence units from the occupational standard, vocational training standard or for one or more competence units, depending on the candidate's request. The assessment methods used in this process are: self-assessment, direct observation, simulation, oral questions, written tests, projects, other persons' reports, and portfolio. The candidate will receive a competences certificate for all the units of competences for which he/she was declared "*competent*". The competences certificates have the same value as the nationally recognized graduation or qualification certificates issued in the authorized formal system. On 31st March 2006 there were 31 authorized centres registered, for 66 qualifications and occupations, in the fields such as: social work, agriculture, education and vocational training, culture, constructions, administration and public services, information technology and communications, tourism, hotels and restaurants, retail trade, food industry, forestry and wood processing, and welding.

Slovakia

In Slovakia, the concept of lifelong learning has been embraced by national authorities since many years and numerous strategic documents and pieces of legislation drafted or adopted during the past five years referred to LLL as top priority. In 2004, a concept of lifelong learning was approved by the government. The main weakness of this concept is that it largely failed to address the coherence of partial policies and financing of LLL. Slovakia has a national lifelong learning strategy, but against proclaimed efforts and policy commitments, a comprehensive national strategy of lifelong learning is still not established. The failure to adopt this coherent strategy underlines the overall lagging behind of the education system in the reform process. Lifelong learning in the Slovak Republic comprises formal and non-formal education, and the legislative framework for both subsystems of education is deficient.

Slovakia is still developing a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Competences acquired through non-formal education are not accepted for academic purposes in Slovakia, only education acquired through the formal (school) system is. A

law on the acceptance of competences acquired outside the formal system is being prepared, but it will only accept qualification for performing a certain profession (e.g. a craft), not for academic purposes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that in all the European countries described, lifelong learning certainly is on the political agenda and integrated in decisions concerning education. Most countries made the deadline to develop a national lifelong learning strategy by the end of 2006, stipulated by the EU within the reformed Lisbon Strategy agenda. At this time, Belgium (Flanders), Finland, Germany, Lithuania and Slovakia all have an explicit national lifelong learning strategy. Poland and Romania - that only joined the EU in 2007 - are developing one.

A main weak point is the lack of an integrated and comprehensive approach towards lifelong learning. Formal learning gets far more attention than informal and non-formal learning, and the link between them is often insufficient.

As to the accreditation of prior learning, various initiatives exist in the different European countries. In Flanders and Finland, the government provides a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Other countries, like Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia are developing one. Specific tools for the assessment of family competences are very rare.

With the FamCompass-project, we want to influence policy on this subject and stimulate the debate about the accreditation of competences obtained in family life. We hope to influence local, national and international authorities to take the necessary steps for the official recognition and validation of skills and competences obtained in family life and care.

With the FamCompass, we don't only want to inspire, we also offer a concrete tool that can be used in several European countries. The FamCompass will be of particular use for institutes offering training programmes that seek to attract more adult learners in several fields, adult learners who want to apply for these training programmes in view of possible employment in these professions, employers in these sectors, and centers for job coaching.

FamCompass = Family Competences Portfolio
Assessing and validating skills and competences obtained in family life

The FamCompass will lower the barriers to lifelong learning programmes for target groups that currently face a low participation in formal schooling programmes and increase their employability and career opportunities.

'Family Competences Portfolio, Assessing and validating skills and competences obtained in family life' (in short FamCompass), is a multilateral cooperation project in the 'Lifelong Learning Program' of the European Commission – Grundtvig I that runs from Nov. 2007 to Oct. 2009.

For more information, go to: www.famcompass.eu

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Annex

Countries' situation in relation to the adoption of explicit lifelong learning strategy, qualifications framework, and validation of non-formal and informal learning

Countries	Explicit national Lifelong Learning Strategies	National Qualification Frameworks	System for validation of non-formal and informal learning
Belgium (Flanders)	YES	Developing	YES
Germany	YES	Developing	NO
Finland	YES	Developing	YES
Lithuania	YES	Developing	Developing
Poland	Developing	NO	Developing
Pomania	Developing	NO	Developing
Slovakia	YES	Developing	Developing

Source: Commission of the European Communities (2007). *Communication from the Commission. Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation.* COM(2007) 703 final, 12.11.2007, p. 12.

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