



International Economics

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**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS
OF RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION
OF NON-FORMAL ADULT LEARNING
SYSTEM IN GREECE**

Abstract

Non-formal and informal aspects of education are nowadays related to the concepts of recurrent and lifelong learning, as literature significantly supports the importance of education, learning and training that takes place outside typical educational institutions. As lifelong learning is the master concept that could shape educational systems and economies, non-formal education includes any organized educational activity outside the established formal systems that serves identifiable learning objectives, while informal education refers to the lifelong process where every individual acquires knowledge, attributes, skills, values and behaviors from daily life's experience. Furthermore, as there is currently a strong

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trend worldwide, to include similar practices in internal policy strategies, new alternative terms arise such as community learning, community education, etc. together with many pilot initiatives. During the recent years, such initiatives have already taken place in many countries, proving that similar actions could greatly contribute to individuals' knowledge and skills enhancement as well as help in mitigating social inequalities, tackle unemployment, achieve a better match between jobs and skills, and thus improve employment through economic development by supporting human capital productivity. Due to the promising advantages of the organized establishment of non-formal and informal education, the present paper focuses on a thorough analysis of the aforementioned concepts and describes the initiative of a relevant research in Greece, conducted by the authors. The research consists of two parts, one that includes a reliable and representative sample of educational organizations (bodies), examining the current ways used to support and certify certain fields of informal education, noting the typical ways currently used to recognize non-formal and informal learning as well as an additional sample of individuals (beneficiaries) that are interested in further support, validation and certification of non-formal education and informal acquired learning. The results are expected to contribute to the process of highlighting information on the intensity of the demand for recognition of prior knowledge through mediation certification procedures by adult education organizations, as well as to the submission of proposals for the operation of the relevant national mechanisms under development in Greece, according to the European Directive 2012.

Key words:

education; adult knowledge recognition; non formal and informal learning; labor markets; education and economic development.

JEL: I25, I21, I30, O31, E24, A20.

Introduction

A wide range of various economic, technological and social reasons has already diminished the role of initial typical education as the only source of renewed skills and competences, constantly pointing to the need of continuous adult learning. As a result, lifelong learning projects have been taking place worldwide, aiming to develop and enhance individuals' skills, knowledge and competences in order to mitigate major social and economic issues (unemployment, under-employment, mismatches between demand for and supply of skills, reduced social cohesion, etc.) that put constraints on the overall capacity of economies' flexibility and growth.

Validation of Prior Knowledge (known as VPK) contributes to lifelong learning, enhances self-confidence of adult learners, while at the same time it is a key element of lifelong learning policies, generating the implementation of national and transnational qualifications frameworks of individuals (Andersson et.al, 2013). In addition, it allows the transfer of adult learners between different educational programs either within the country or abroad to other educational institutions with similar courses, under the process known as credit transfer (Lafont and Pariat, 2012). Meanwhile, the issue of the recognition of prior knowledge is important in the current context labor mobility and lifelong learning, mostly in cases like vulnerable groups, demographic aging, economic crisis, (European Commission, 2016) for the reintegration of individuals into education and labor markets, as well as for employee flexibility (Lisenkova & McQuaid, 2010).

The recognition of prior knowledge depends on whether the educational background of the trainees is in line with the criteria set by each certification body. Thus, the recognition of prior knowledge is based on the concretization of learning choices that are available to learners through formal, non-formal and semi-formal processes, i.e. through formal and non-formal learning, but also non-formal education. Consequently, the learning outcomes are recognized on the basis of the objectives set by each specific process, as they are reflected through the established procedures, such as learner scoring (Singh, 2015).

Formal learning occurs in an organized and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning in terms of objectives, time and resources. Moreover, formal learning is intentional on the part of the student and usually leads to validation and certification. Formal training includes institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured educational activities offered within the formal education system, from first inclusion in school until university studies.

Non-formal education covers all educational activities, which are not included in formal education. In general, non-formal education is not organized; it

is not systematic and is often conducted without intention (Kapsalis and Papastamatis, 2013). On the basis of the European Council Directive of 20th December 2012 for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning, informal learning is defined as learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organized or structured in terms of goals, time or learning tools. Informal learning may not be intentional on the part of the learner. Examples of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal learning are lifelong skills and professional experience. Other examples are project management skills or ICT skills acquired at work; language learning and intercultural skills acquired while living in another country, ICT skills acquired outside of work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, work in the youth field and through activities at home (e.g. childcare).

Furthermore, recognition and assessment of prior knowledge is linked to both lifelong learning and continuing vocational training. Recognition and evaluation of prior knowledge must be placed within the broader framework of recognition, evaluation and certification of qualifications. Recognition of prior knowledge is based on the concretization of learning choices that are available to learners through formal, non-formal and semi-formal processes, i.e. through formal and non-formal learning, but also non-formal education. The learning outcomes are recognized on the basis of objectives set by any particular process, as reflected through the procedures established, for example, scores of students. Hoffman et al (2009) reviewed 34 prior knowledge assessment programs between higher education institutions in the United States and Canada and identified five critical factors influencing the program structures. These critical factors are (a) institutional philosophical assumptions and policies to support prior knowledge recognition practices; (b) institutional support, including financial resources and administration; (c) prior knowledge assessment program parameters that define the structures concerning how certification is evaluated and applied (e.g. number of credits in the courses); (d) evaluator and content development experts; (e) program feedback and evaluation procedures.

Possibly due to the wide variety of factors involved, the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, according to Cedefop, is being regularly updated since 2004 in cooperation with the European Commission. Recognizing that society has an interest in using available skills, national and regional authorities and sectoral bodies have introduced many arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning. Yet, information about how such learning is identified, documented, assessed and certified is, in most countries, not easily accessible. Meanwhile, the inventory reports are a solid source of information to encourage more dialogue between the different stakeholders in developing and implementing validation in Europe. The key objective is to support Member States so that learners and workers acquire and make visible new skills, to support their career and further learning and even to enhance their quality of life (Werquin, 2010).

The recognition of prior knowledge rests on two pillars that converge to acquiring educational and professional qualifications. The validation mechanism aims to provide stakeholders with the following opportunities (a) to validate the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning; (b) to acquire qualifications based on validated non-formal and informal learning experiences; (c) to benefit from the implementation of objective and credible validation mechanisms, in particular vulnerable groups, including the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, as validation can encourage their participation in lifelong learning and contribute to their mobility or their access to the labor market.

The certification of various sources of knowledge, the evaluation and training of professions in new skills, and finally the functional use of previous professional experience could create a framework for the development of innovative applications, technologies and interoperable infrastructure. Therefore, the recognition of prior knowledge could lead to the strengthening of social cohesion, utilization of the potential of all members of a community or a society and finally even lead to social and economic development.

Furthermore, the Proposal for a Council Recommendation Establishing a Skills Guarantee (European Commission, 2016) states that «High productivity and sustainable competitiveness and growth depend on the existence of a skilled and adaptable workforce and the full utilization of available skills». As a result, one's employability is a function of one's skills. Countries with high rates of low-skilled adults (literacy, numeracy and digital skills) have lower levels of productivity at work and therefore lower prospects for growth and competitiveness. There is room for making better use of Europe's human capital over a lifetime and even improving it by upgrading its overall skill level (Beaudin, 2008). National and European resources must be mobilized for this purpose. According to the 2016 Annual Development Overview, «smart investments in human capital in Europe» tend to equip people with the right skills to drive innovation and competitiveness as well as to achieve high productivity, thus providing feasible solutions to major issues (unemployment, etc.) as well as reducing the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

There have been several initiatives by the European Union concerning the recognition of prior knowledge, aimed at achieving economic and social objectives of the Union through learning (Lafont and Pariat, 2012), which highlight and value the issue of VPK. For instance, the 2009 European Certification Guidelines provide guidance to policy makers and professionals on how to address the key challenges associated with developing prior knowledge approaches and certification systems. Moreover, the EQF aims to encourage Member States to work for the input of their own national qualifications frameworks, defining levels of learning in terms of learning outcomes. Similarly, the Europass, a set of documents recognized throughout Europe, can be used to demonstrate the skills and qualifications of individuals, as well as visualize and validate their learning outcomes

(Cameron, 2011). Furthermore, there is also another interesting proposal in development for a European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) ranking, i.e. a multilingual dictionary that will link the skills and competencies to occupations, which is expected to help create a common language for employment, education and training, at the same time increasing the overall certification profile. Finally, the Treaty of Bologna in higher education and the Charter of European Universities for Lifelong Learning consider and promote the recognition of prior learning as one of the practices of validation of non-formal and informal learning (Singh, 2015). The revised Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020 (adopted in 2009) identified lifelong learning as one of its four strategic goals to be addressed in the next decade. The strategy states that an effort is needed to ensure the development of national qualifications frameworks based on relevant learning outcomes and their connection to the European Qualifications Framework. It highlights the need for the creation of more flexible learning pathways, including better transition between different forms of education and training, greater openness to non-formal and informal learning, and increased transparency and recognition of learning outcomes. Thus, the strategy makes it clear that there is still sufficient effort to increase the implementation of certification in the Member States (European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning, 2012).

Finally, the 2018 update of the inventory (which is the latest one), provides records on how validation is being used at national, regional and local level in Europe, illustrating available good practices. It, also, contains four thematic reports related to key issues in the design and implementation of validation initiatives, as the end result of a three-year process based on the work of a large network of national experts, extensive review of documents and interviews with key stakeholders.

Yet, despite this huge effort, after carefully examining most European Countries Reports (Cedefop, n.d.), almost all national mechanisms on this issue are still under further investigation, analysis or construction.

The evaluation and certification are often used in formal education for qualification. What constitutes an evaluation, however, is very broad and may include observations, interviews and portfolios, as well as examinations. When the emphasis of validation is more on recognition and documentation, the purposes of validation may be more related to gaining access to official programs or entering examinations. For example, in the higher education sub-sector, validation is often used to support access to higher education programs, so it focuses less on certification and often requires proof of relevant professional experience. It is interesting to note that the four stages are not necessarily undertaken as separate phases.

In Luxembourg, for example, the identification and documentation phases are usually not carried out separately.

In France, validation of prior learning (VPL) has been established as a right for every citizen. The current system (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience, VAE), established in January 2002 (Social Modernization Act), is used to provide all or part of the qualifications. Each qualifying body has developed its own rules for applying specific frameworks of the principles described in the legislation.

In Norway, the law on universities and colleges has since 2008 allowed both university admission and exemptions from the *realkompetanse* curriculum. *Realkompetanse* is defined as «all formal, non-formal or informal learning acquired by adults». The background to this reform lies in the growing awareness of lifelong learning between the Norwegian trade unions and employers' associations in the 1990s.

The first joint call for certification of professional competencies took place in Spain in 2011 and covered only certain competencies. Other capabilities are expected to be included in calls launched in the coming years. The first round of validation of professional skills under the new regulatory framework at national level took place in 2011, covering sections included in the Catalog in the fields of education and medical care for children. Validation data is limited. However, the adoption of some of the validation initiatives currently available is relatively high. For example, between 2004 and 2005 the number of people who used the registered university entrance exams was 19,853 and the number of students who had access to the VET through midterm entrance exams was 12,267, while at a higher level the number was 7,796 (Harris et.al, 2011).

Following the same concept, Cyprus has developed a national qualifications system in line with the vocational qualifications system and the European Qualifications Framework. The Human Resources Development Authority (HRDA) has the legal responsibility for the promotion and gradual establishment of the Professional Qualifications system. In fact, the law clearly establishes the power of the HRDA to set professional qualification standards for any category or categories of persons employed and to provide for the evaluation and issuance of the relevant professional qualification certificates. To develop the national qualifications framework, Cyprus sought recognition and validation through the harmonization of other formal certifications with national curricula, vocational and further training and higher education on a case-by-case basis and by institution at institutional level (Cyprus Qualifications Framework, 2019).

The country report on Greece (Manoudi, 2019), claims that progress, in terms of implementing the 2012 Council Recommendation on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, has been slow, in the sense that a framework that can encompass informal learning gained through work experience is not part of the immediate plans. In fact, validation of informal learning is not seen as a societal need or political priority. Yet, Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) has been the policy priority and this is where most progress has been made. Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) has also been prioritized due to the fact that there is a large volume of IVET graduates. So, the accredita-

tion of Institutes of Vocational Training (called *IEK* in Greek) graduates has been regularized over the past two years (*IEKs* are defined as non-formal education in Greece).

Employee's certification has become an important element in verifying the capacity of an increasingly mobile and global workforce, underscoring the value of recognition by the accreditation industry that can be transported across national borders. Staboulis (2017) emphasizes that the certification of persons stems from the need to establish a modern and internationally recognized process, where employees of various specialties and professions can prove their skills through examinations in an objective and reliable manner. The international ISO standard 17024:2003 has been established with the aim of achieving and promoting a globally accepted benchmark for certification bodies (International Standardization Organization, n.d.). Certification of persons is a way of ensuring that the certified person meets the requirements of the certification system. Confidence in the respective certification systems is achieved through a universally accepted evaluation process, follow-up monitoring and periodic review of the competency of certified persons. However, it is necessary to distinguish between situations where certification schemes for individuals are justified and situations in which they are more suitable than other types of qualifications.

The development of new certification schemes for individuals, responding to the ever-increasing speed of technological innovation and the increasing specialization of staff, can offset the differences in education and training and thus facilitate the global labor market. Alternatives to certification may be needed in public service positions, as well as official or government enterprises. Unlike other types of conformity assessment bodies, such as certification and registration bodies of the management system, one of the characteristic functions of the staff certification body is to conduct an examination, which uses objective criteria for competence and grading (Staboulis, 2017).

In the European Union, the bodies that provide certificates for recognition of previous knowledge and experience are the Adult Schools, the Chambers, the Youth Schools, as well as other Schools and Organizations. Each country has also set up its own body, such as the National Qualifications Framework (AQF) in Australia, the National Qualifications Framework (QCA) in England, the National Qualifications Framework of South Africa (NQF) and the National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand.

In some countries, however, such as Finland, France, the Netherlands and Canada, there is no integrated national qualification prior recognition system (Al-lais, 2010).

Therefore, it might be expected that individuals in Greece, who successfully sit the EOPPEP certification process benefit significantly. EOPPEP¹ is the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance, an all-encompassing statutory body investing in better quality and more efficient and reliable lifelong learning services. It operates under the supervision of the Minister of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and is headquartered in Athens. It has emerged from the amalgamation of three national bodies, all under the supervision of the same Ministry: the National Centre for the Accreditation of Lifelong Learning Providers (EKEPIS), the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications (EOPP) and the National Centre for Vocational Guidance (EKEP). Regarding the validation of foreigners in Greek language, their benefit is explicitly recognized in the related legislation as the Greek Language Competence certification is a prerequisite to obtain a 'long-stay' permit in Greece and it must be submitted along with the relevant application to the Ministry of Interior. In addition, the Greek Language Competence is a requirement to practice several professions in Greece – anyone who wishes to obtain a professional and/or vocational license must demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the Greek language. The level of competence in Greek is determined by competent authorities for each license and is adjusted to the demands of the profession, (According to Presidential Decree 38/2010 that transposes the EU Directive 2005/36/EK).

As a result, in order to further investigate the aforementioned issues, the current paper describes a pilot research conducted in various parts of Greece. This particular research is part of a wider project named «Web Platform for the Footprint of Recognition of Previous Non-Formal and Informal Adult Learning in Greece – Registration and Research Study of Participants and Relevant Agencies: Analysis of Conclusions and Policy Proposals», OPS Code (MIS) 5047263 N.A. 6: Improving the Quality and Efficiency of the Education System, NSRF 2014-2020, OP "Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020, 2019SE34510065.

¹ EOPPEP is one of the first organizations of the broad public sector in Greece, Certified for Excellence, according to the internationally recognized EFQM Excellence Model (The European Foundation of Quality Management). In particular, EOPPEP has been certified for the 1st Level of EFQM Committed to Excellence recognition. The newly established national authority, the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP), corresponds to the pressing need of creating and maintaining a holistic and interrelated policy framework for the development of lifelong learning and certification of qualifications in Greece, linking with the open market and responding to the needs of the citizens, a central issue in EU policy. EOPPEP develops and implements comprehensive national systems for the accreditation of non-formal and informal learning and provides scientific and technical support in designing and implementing the vocational guidance national policy, as well as the provision of such services in Greece.

This pilot research examines both educational bodies and participants or beneficiaries, in the process of validating and certifying informal and non-formal learning, trying to note all the relevant attributes such as demographic elements, certain fields of informal education both in supply and demand, non-formal acquired learning, certain skills (hard and soft skills), knowledge, values acquired from participation in relevant programs, wish to validate such knowledge, ways of using it, benefits from such validations, improvement of occupational profile, promotion of knowledge, skills and competence, level of response to the labor market's needs, contribution to the recognition of vocational skills in the labor market, contribution to the promotion of lifelong learning, etc.

The results of this research are expected to contribute to the process of highlighting information on the intensity of the demand for recognition of prior knowledge through mediation certification procedures by adult education organizations, as well as to the submission of proposals for the operation of the relevant national mechanisms under development in Greece, according to the European Directive 2012.

Research Methodology

The research has been conducted by the authors, following a systematic plan of action that includes both qualitative and quantitative observation methods. Two samples have been used, one that includes educational bodies (N1=32) that are related to the validation of non-formal education and informal education and one (N2=124) that consists of participants (beneficiaries). There has been direct communication with several of the educational bodies, through one-to-one face-to-face interviews, in order to gather information in real time, build trust and discuss qualitative data for various issues. In addition, all the educational bodies have filled out an online questionnaire (Google form) in order to gather data that can be analyzed to conclude numerical and statistical results. Moreover, the participants (beneficiaries) have also filled out a questionnaire (Google form), similarly, in order to collect data for further analysis. Both questionnaires in Google forms, contain close-ended questions, so that the received answers can be analyzed in charts, tables, graphs, etc. Both samples are situated all over Greece, for the purposes of the current research, including both metropolitan and rural areas, as there has been a calculated effort in collecting reliable and representative entities.

Description of the Samples

The first sample (**Sample 1: Educational Bodies**) consists of 32 educational bodies that are related in activities concerning certification and validation of prior knowledge and non-formal and informal learning. These bodies are physically located in various areas of Greece and most of them are Lifelong Learning Centers (KEDIVIM or KDBM in Greek). In addition, Institutes of Vocational Training (IEK in Greek), Chambers (Epimelitiria in Greek) and other certification bodies, are included as shown in the following table.

Table 1

Types of Educational bodies (Sample 1)

Type of Educational Body	Number	Percentage
Lifelong Learning Centers	18	56,2%
Institutes of Vocational Training	11	34,4%
Chambers	2	6,3%
Certification Bodies	1	3,1%
Total	32	100%

According to Manoudi (2019), these are the typical educational bodies that are responsible for validation in education and training in Greece. For instance, Vocational Training Institutes offer initial vocational training to graduates of formal non-compulsory education, while Lifelong Learning centers offer continuous vocational training, general adult education, vocational guidance and lifelong counseling.

The above sample covers both public (37.5%) and private (50%) educational bodies, while 12.5% includes non-profit educational organizations, as shown in the following table.

The types of certifications offered by the educational bodies cover mainly certification of qualifications (84.4%) through EOPPEP (the formal Greek national mechanism), certification of person according to ISO/IEC 17024 (46.9%), certifications through international cooperation (21.9%) and certifications through attending educational and training programs. Obviously, educational bodies generally offer more than one type of certification, yet as currently appears, the most common type of certification is certification of qualifications, as shown in the following table.

Table 2

Legal status of Educational bodies (Sample 1)

Legal Status	Number	Percentage
Private sector	16	50%
Public sector	12	37,5%
Non-profit organizations	4	12,5%
Total	32	100%

Table 3

Types of Certifications currently offered by the Educational bodies (Sample 1)

Type of Certification	Number	Percentage
Certification of qualification	27	84,4%
Certification of person	15	46,9%
Certification through international cooperation	7	21,9%
Educational and training programs	1	3,1%

The second sample (**Sample 2: Participants or Beneficiaries**) consists of 124 participants, both male (46.8%) and female (53.2%). They mainly come from Greece; while a small sample (less than 4%) originates from Albania or Georgia but live and work in Greece. None of them belongs to any of the categories such as immigrants, refugees, HIV carriers, abused women, recently released from prison, etc. A small percentage (1.6%) are people with disabilities.

The age group of the participants is quite reliable as it covers all ages, with special focus on the age group of 30-54 years old (62.9%), as this age group is considered to be the most representative and reliable for the targets of the present research. In addition, younger people up to 29 years old are also included together with older ages such as 55-64 years old (8.9%) and above 65 (0.8%), as shown in the tables below.

Table 4

Gender of participants (Sample 2)

Gender	Male	Female	Total
Number	58	66	124
Percentage	46,8%	53,2%	100%

Table 5

Country of origin of participants (Sample 2)

Country of origin	Greece	Other	Total
Number	120	4	124
Percentage	96,8%	3,2%	100%

Table 6

Age Group of participants (Sample 2)

Age group	Up to 29 y.o.	30-54 y.o.	55-64 y.o.	65+ y.o.	Total
Number	34	78	11	1	124
Percentage	27,4%	62,9%	8,9%	0,8%	100%

In addition, 42.7% are single, 44.4% are married, 10.5% are divorced and the rest are widow(er)s, as shown in the following table.

Table 6

Marital status of participants (Sample 2)

Marital status	Single	Married	Divorced	Widow	Total
Number	53	55	13	3	124
Percentage	42,7%	44,4%	10,5%	2,4%	100%

Their educational level covers all educational aspects, for example 38.7% are University graduates, 20.2% hold a Master's degree while 2.4% hold a PhD

degree. In addition, 21% are high school graduates, 8.1% are technical school graduates, 2.4% have attended only the compulsory education in Greece, 5.6% have attended Public Vocational Training Institutes, 0.8% of those private ones. In addition, 66.1% hold a certificate in digital skills, as shown below.

Table 7

Educational level of participants (Sample 2)

Educational Level	Number	Percentage
Compulsory education (up to 15 y.o.)	3	2,4%
High school education (15-18 y.o.)	26	21%
Technical school	10	8,1%
University graduates	48	38,7%
Public Institutes of Vocational Training	7	5,6%
Private Institutes of Vocational Training	1	0,8%
College graduate	1	0,8%
Master's degree	25	20,2%
PhD degree	3	2,4%
Total	124	100%

Table 8

Participants certified in digital skills (Sample 2)

Certified in digital skills	Yes	82	66,1%
	No	42	33,9%
Total		124	100%

Concerning the employment status of the participants, it appears that they hold a quite representative professional profile, in terms of the attributes explored in the present research. For instance, 51.6% have full-time jobs, while 18.6% have part-time jobs. In addition, 13.7% are self-employed, 5.6% are seasonally employed and 8.1% are unemployed. A smaller percentage of 2.4% (other) includes students, retired, and training vouchers' cases. The vast majority (73.4%) work in the private sector, while 15.3% work in the public sector and the rest are either unemployed, students or retired. Moreover, 34.7% have 0-5 years of work experience, 25% have 6-10 years of experience, 9.7% have 11-15 years of experience, 12.9% have 15-20 years of experience and 17.7% have over 20 years of experience (Tables 9-11).

Table 9

Professional status of the participants (Sample 2)

Professional status	Number	Percentage
Full time	64	52%
Part time	23	18%
Self employed	17	14%
Seasonally employed	7	6%
Unemployed	10	8%
Other	3	2%
Total	124	100%

Table 10

Employment sector of the participants (Sample 2)

Employment sector	Number	Percentage
Private sector	91	74%
Public sector	19	15%
Other	14	11%
Total	124	100%

Table 11

Professional experience (in years) of the participants (Sample 2)

Years of professional experience	0-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	20+	Total
	43	31	12	16	22	124
	34,7%	25%	9,7%	12,9%	17,7%	100%

Main Research Findings

Discussing the results that derive from the educational bodies (Sample 1: Educational Bodies), the figures below show the percentage of the unemployed, the wage earners and the self-employed population of the participants that seek recognition and validation of prior knowledge in each of the educational bodies that participate in this research. Smaller percentages, in each case, represent mainly retired, underemployed and students.

Figure 1

Percentages of the unemployed population that seek recognition and validation of prior knowledge from the relevant educational bodies

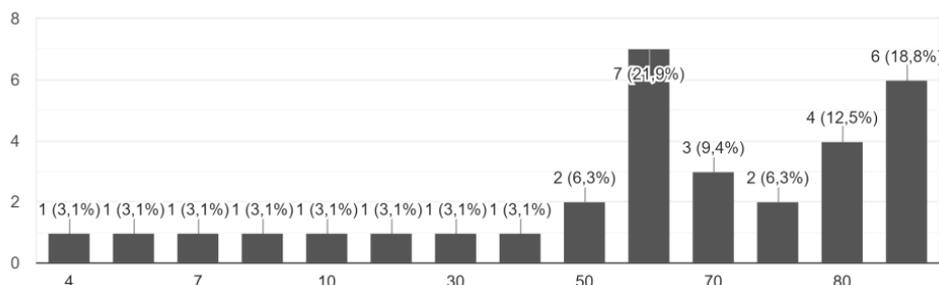


Figure 2

Percentages of the wage earners population that seek recognition and validation of prior knowledge from the relevant educational bodies

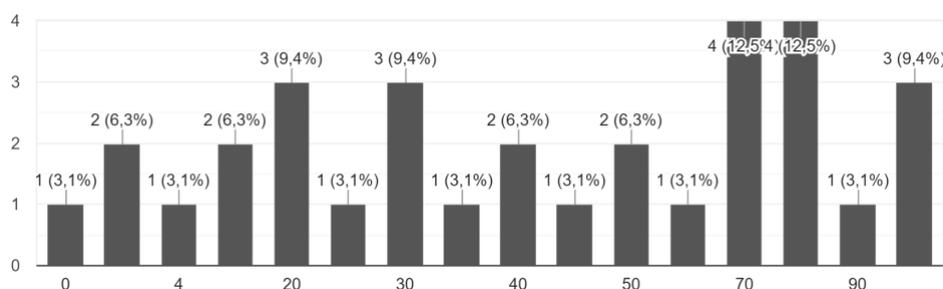
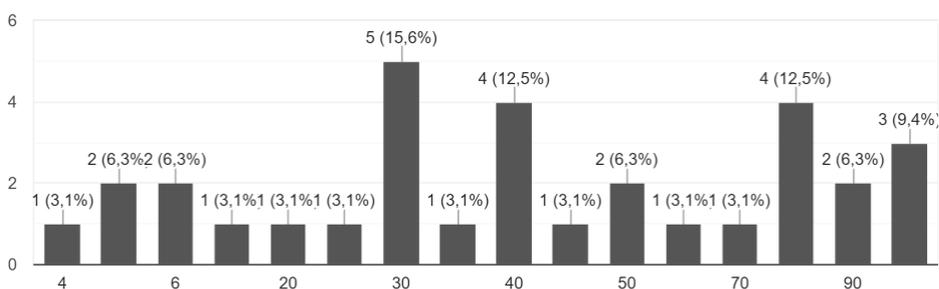


Figure 3

Percentages of the self-employed population that seek recognition and validation of prior knowledge from the relevant educational bodies



It appears that, in general, wage earners and self-employed, followed by the unemployed, are mostly interested in educational procedures that include recognition and validation of prior knowledge. Concerning the age groups that seek recognition and validation of prior knowledge it appears that the age group of 30-54 years old, followed by the age group of below 29, are mostly concerned with the procedures of recognition and validation of prior knowledge. Smaller percentages include ages above 55 years old. These results are highly compatible with the current profile of the local labor market.

The major skills that are validated and certified by the researched educational bodies are digital skills (85%), job-specializations (72%), business innovations (53%), interpersonal and social abilities (34%), and foreign languages (34%). At smaller percentages, more skills include cultural subjects, metacognition, communication with people with special needs, etc. The table below highlights the list of the most frequent skills.

Table 12

Major skills that are validated and certified by the researched educational bodies

Skills	Percentage
Digital skills	85%
Job specializations	72%
Business Initiatives	53%
Interpersonal and social abilities	34%
Foreign languages	34%

Moreover, certain hard and soft skills are validated and certified by the researched educational bodies, as shown in the table below.

During the process of validating prior knowledge, certain stages that are implemented by the educational bodies mainly offer information and personal counseling (90.6%), record learning outcomes (68.8%), determine learning outcomes (65.6%), evaluate learning outcomes (65.6%) and certify the outcomes of the evaluation (59.4%).

When it comes to estimating the level of participation of the beneficiaries in certification processes in terms of **knowledge**, the highest rank goes to knowledge of basic and objective principles in a field of study followed by specialized knowledge in certain job fields.

Table 13

Major hard and soft skills that are validated and certified by the researched educational bodies

Hard Skills	Social media applications	78%
	Computer skills	75%
	Digital communication	66%
	Job specializations	60%
	Marketing	50%
	Computer software applications	44%
	Typing	34%
	Project management	31%
	Automations	31%
	Soft Skills	Teamwork
Time management		50%
Innovation – Creativity		44%
Decision making		41%
Problem solving		34%
Self-control		28%
Flexibility		28%
Negotiations		13%

When it comes to estimating the level of participation of the beneficiaries in certification processes in terms of **skills**, the highest rank goes to skills in demand needed for effective problem solving and provision of innovative solutions.

When it comes to estimating the level of participation of the beneficiaries in certification processes in terms of **abilities**, the highest rank goes to integrity in providing new, innovative ideas in workplace, followed by evaluation in self-effectiveness in the workplace.

Moreover, when it comes to noting the reasons of the importance of the recognition of prior knowledge, the main reason is believed to be the problem of high unemployment, followed by the need of working mobility and wages' mitigations.

Finally, according to the educational bodies, it is estimated that the validation and recognition of prior knowledge is very likely to successfully contribute to the overall evaluation of their offered programs, create new workplaces, improve the link between education, training and employment, lead to better design of the qualifications framework, contribute to the quality assurance framework and generally improve working mobility.

Meanwhile, the sample of the 124 participants (Sample 2: Participants) is mostly aware of the process of validating and certifying informal and non-formal

learning (58.1%) and holds a strong personal interest (88.7%) in participating in such processes both at national and international level.

Table 14

Participants' awareness and interest in validating and certifying informal and non-formal learning

Participants' awareness	Aware	Not aware	Total
	72	52	124
	58,1%	41,9%	
Participants' personal interest	Interested	Not interested	Total
	110	14	124
	88,7%	11,3%	

At this point, it is quite interesting that a huge percentage of those who are aware continue to hold a strong personal interest in the processes of validating and certifying informal and non-formal learning. In addition, 60.5% (75 people) of the participants have already certified some knowledge or qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning procedures.

Most of the participants, wish to validate and certify knowledge in fields of digital abilities (52.4%), job-specializations (51.6%), communication in a foreign language (48.4%), business initiatives (38.7%), interpersonal and social abilities (35.5%), communication with people with special needs (25.8%), metacognition abilities (21.8%) and cultural expressions (18.5%).

Table 16

Participants' wish to validate in certain fields

Field of validation	Percentage
Digital skills	52,4%
Job specializations	51,6%
Communication in a foreign language	48,4%
Business initiatives	38,7%
Interpersonal and social abilities	35,5%
Communication with people with special needs	25,8%
Metacognition	21,8%
Cultural expressions	18,5%

From the above, it follows that participants realize the demand for soft skills by expressing their wish to participate in relevant programs.

At the same time, participants have already received certification in fields such as communication in a foreign language (38.9%), digital skills (29.6%), job-specializations (16.7%), basic ability to understand sciences (11.1%), communication with people with disabilities (5.6%), metacognition (5.6%), personal and social abilities (3.7%) and less than 2% in fields such as business innovations and cultural expressions. About 40% of the participants have no form of formal certification or validation. While 40% has not received any kind of typical certification, 29.8% holds certification of qualifications through EOPPEP, 29.8% certification of persons according to ISO/IEC 17024, and less than 5% holds certifications from other sources such as lifelong learning certificates, cooperation's, etc.

In addition, prior knowledge that has already been validated or certified mainly comes from educational programs (48.4%), ELearning (24.2%), attending meetings, conferences, group talks (22.6%), job experience (12.9%), free time (8.9%), watching educational programs (5.6%), through family (3.2%). At the same time, 32.3% of the participants have no form of certification or validation of prior knowledge (Table 17).

Table 17

Sources that led participants to validating prior knowledge (Sample 2)

Sources of prior knowledge	Percentage
Educational programs	48,4%
ELearning	24,2%
Attending meetings, conferences, group talk	22,6%
Job experience	12,9%
Free time	8,9%
Watching educational programs	5,6%
Through family	3,2%

During the process of validating prior knowledge, certain stages that have been implemented mainly include certifying the outcomes of the evaluation (35.5%), evaluating learning outcomes (33.1%), offering information and personal counseling (31.5%), recording learning outcomes (19.4%), determining learning outcomes (19.4%). At the same time, 36.3%, of the participants have no form of certification or validation of prior knowledge.

Furthermore, according to the participants, it is estimated that the validation and recognition of prior knowledge is very likely to successfully contribute to mitigating unemployment issues, improve working mobility and soften the issue of wage shortages.

Moreover, the participants estimate that validation and recognition of prior knowledge is likely to help in improving transparency in the labor market, mitigate unemployment, create new workplaces, improve the link between education, training and employment, improve qualifications' framework, etc.

At the same time, the participants also estimate that several entities such as social forces, the private sector, vocational training institutes, educational and training centers, nonprofit organizations, the public labor sector and enterprises, could hold the key to the overall procedures of validating and certifying prior knowledge.

Finally, the vast majority of the participants get constant information about validating and certifying non-formal and informal learning through the Internet, while other sources such as educational bodies, seminars, friends, teachers, trainers, national mechanisms, are also in use.

Synthesis Approach

Having analyzed both samples it follows that participants and educational bodies hold a significant interest in the general procedures of recognizing and validating prior knowledge strongly attributing several social and personal benefits to it. It appears that the vast majority of participants are individuals during their working life years that wish to make some improvement in their skills, knowledge and abilities, while more than half have already earned some sort of certification or validation. Therefore, from this point of view, it might be assumed that the sample of the participants is quite reliable and representative, mainly because they appear to have adequate information and personal interest in the matter. Digital communications and job specializations are the fields that hold the highest rank among participants' choices of the basic fields in which they have already been validated. This might be quite promising in terms of expanding these fields in the future, covering more ground in the effort of linking education and training with labor markets. Moreover, skills both soft and hard are being appreciated, as there is quite a strong demand on the participants' part. This is quite promising, as it reflects citizens' wish to improve for both professional and personal reasons.

In addition, the research concludes that both educational bodies and participants agree that validation of prior knowledge (VPK) is quite significant in terms of working mobility, unemployment and wages' shortages, while educa-

tional bodies appear to be a bit more hopeful about the issue, possibly due to long-term experience. It appears that beneficiaries are mostly interested in VPK in order to solve unemployment issues, which is of course highly expected. Table 18 compares the percentage of positive answers (mostly agree [3] to agree completely [5]).

Table 18

Comparisons of Positive Opinions of educational bodies and beneficiaries regarding the level of significance of VPK in three categories

VPK Categories	Educational bodies	Beneficiaries
Working mobility	91%	77%
Unemployment	91%	81%
Wages' shortages	75%	71%

Concerning the comparison of priorities in terms of VPK, results are shown in the table 19. It appears that educational bodies hold a bit stronger expectations from VPK, regarding the expected social outcomes, compared to beneficiaries. At the same time, beneficiaries appear to wish or expect that VPK could contribute to creating new jobs, which is highly compatible to literature findings.

Table 19

Comparisons of the ways that VPK contributes to certain categories

VPK contributes to	Educational bodies	Beneficiaries
Connection between education and training	94%	73%
Working mobility	91%	72%
Enhancing efficiency	88%	75%
Enhancing human resources efficiency	88%	70%
Operational mechanisms for attracting and hiring employees	84%	68%
Evaluation of training programs of the educational bodies	84%	69%
Quality assurance of the educational bodies	84%	72%
Design and evaluation of quality frameworks	84%	71%

VPK contributes to	Educational bodies	Beneficiaries
Stimulating economic growth	81%	69%
Support persons with special needs to involve in lifelong learning and labor	81%	69%
Promoting transparency in labor markets	78%	60%
Reduction of business costs about staff training	75%	65%
Creating new jobs	69%	71%

However, regarding the demand from the interested parties, there are low percentages of the need for vertical specializations in specialties or professions, combined with a low percentage of declaration of knowledge acquisition on the spot in the workplace. This, to some extent, is explained by the small and medium-sized enterprises of the reporting regions that do not have adequate in-house knowledge training and certification systems. Therefore, deeper investigation into the matter, from the part of all stakeholders, could indeed bridge the gap between education-training and employment.

Conclusions

The certification of qualifications of human resources that results from non-formal education and informal learning is undoubtedly closely connected with education, training, employment and volunteering. In this context, governments and the European institutions are now clearly aware of the necessity to recognize all the abilities of each individual, acquired through formal education and non-formal and informal learning systems.

The first results of this primary pilot research are expected to be confirmed and verified at larger scales, by extending similar research to more participants in Greece or abroad. Similar interventions, provided they take place, could add up to the present efforts. Yet, the current results appear to be quite related and highly compatible to the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNIL), which is a first step towards integrated validation policy frameworks in EU, as it gives an impulse for Member States to speed up the building of well-functioning validation systems in partnership with stakeholders. Despite the fact that most countries need to further develop their practical validation arrangements, the current research underlines and supports this need, providing hope and opportunities to beneficiaries, as they appear to strongly wish to be given second chances to improve their access to education and thus improve their personal development, empowerment and employability.

The results of this pilot primary research are expected highlight information on the intensity of the demand for recognition of prior knowledge through mediation certification procedures by adult education organizations, as well as to encourage the development of proposals for the operation of the relevant national mechanism in Greece that would align with the European Directive 2012.

The ultimate goal of all this effort focuses on highlighting the opportunities and challenges that demonstrate the need to establish a national mechanism for validating non-formal and informal learning. Such a mechanism should be structured to provide stakeholders with the ability to validate knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning and to acquire qualifications based on validated non-formal and informal learning experiences. Finally, the stakeholders should benefit from the implementation of objective and reliable validation mechanisms (especially vulnerable groups, including the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment), as validation can encourage their participation in lifelong learning and contribute to their mobility or their access to the labor market.

It is worth mentioning that any policy and intervention for the establishment of mechanisms for the validation of non-formal and informal learning should not be limited to the provision of professional qualifications but also to the acquisition of educational qualifications (e.g. through the acquisition of credits), an opportunity that is expected to allow mobility in the field of education and vocational education and training, and consequently in the labor market.

Moreover, the validation mechanisms must be linked to existing certification and recognition systems and follow the procedures for the relevant learning outcomes in accordance with the requirements set by the relevant systems. However, any venture should not be an «introduction» of international certification standards and an «accreditation» of certification companies, without a national design and with costly procedures that arise for individuals and companies.

In addition, the system of certification of the qualifications of human resources resulting from non-formal education and informal learning should be complementary to the formal education system (without substituting it), contribute to the communication of the subsystems of formal, non-formal education and non-formal learning.

Finally, it is appropriate to mention that the recognition of its results is a crucial parameter for the successful establishment of the ratification mechanism. Recognition can be divided into formal and social. Formal recognition is associated with the issuance of a certificate or attestation through which the formal recognition of specific learning outcomes held by an individual takes place. Social recognition is linked to the wider acceptance of the value of certified learning outcomes by both the labor market and society.

Therefore, the validation of non-formal and informal learning is, today, a way of social, educational and work integration, especially for those who do not have qualifications or specializations.

Acknowledgments

We deeply thank all the educational bodies of Greece and the participants (beneficiaries). Without their kind help, this research would not have been possible.

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This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014- 2020» in the context of the project «Web Platform for the Footprint of Recognition of Previous Non Formal and Informal Adult Learning in Greece – Registration and Research Study of Participants and Relevant Agencies: Analysis of Conclusions and Policy Proposals» (MIS 5047263).



**Operational Programme
Human Resources Development,
Education and Lifelong Learning**

Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



Received: October 8, 2020.
1st edit: October 21, 2020.
Accepted: November 11, 2020.