



Recognition of Prior Non-Formal and Informal Learning in Higher Education

Eurydice Overview

*Education
and Training*

Introduction

The establishment of systems for the recognition and validation of all forms of learning has become one of the central themes in all sectors of education and training. This evolution reflects various societal changes, in particular the shift from the 'job for life' culture to the expectation of a succession of jobs throughout a career, often in different occupational areas. It is also closely related to the need for all active citizens who wish to secure their employment and employability in a fast-evolving technology-rich environment to constantly develop their knowledge and skills through learning activities which may, or may not, be explicitly designed as formal learning. In this context, it has become necessary to enable all those involved in lifelong learning – regardless of where it takes place – to have their learning achievements recognised and validated.

Since 2004, European institutions have supported national developments in this field through various initiatives, including the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽¹⁾, the European Guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission & Cedefop, 2009) and several editions of the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These efforts resulted, in December 2012, in the adoption of the Council Recommendation ⁽²⁾ inviting EU countries to establish validation systems allowing individuals to obtain recognised qualifications on the basis of non-formal or informal learning.

The recognition of prior learning in higher education has not only been addressed in all the above documents, but it has also been integrated in the Bologna Process – the process driving forward significant higher education reforms in 47 countries. Already in 2005, the ministers responsible for higher education made a clear reference to the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning stating that:

We will work with higher education institutions and others to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programmes ⁽³⁾.

Four years later, in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve, the ministers specified:

Successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes regardless of whether the knowledge, skills and competences were acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths ⁽⁴⁾.

Alongside the Bologna Process, the establishment of procedures enabling the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in higher education has also been promoted by the European

⁽¹⁾ Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, Brussels, 18 May 2004.

⁽²⁾ Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01).

⁽³⁾ The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005.

⁽⁴⁾ The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the new decade. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009.

Commission, in particular within the European agenda for the modernisation of higher education. This policy framework invites Member States to:

Develop clear progression routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training, especially by tackling challenges related to the implementation and use of national qualification frameworks linked to the European Qualification Framework ⁽⁵⁾.

The theme of the recognition of prior learning in higher education has been addressed in several reports produced or co-produced by Eurydice in relation to the Bologna Process and the Modernisation Agenda (namely EACEA/Eurydice, 2011a; EACEA/Eurydice, 2011b; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Eurostat & Eurostudent, 2012). The aim of the present document is to bring together the information published in these reports in summary form for policy makers, practitioners and all those with an interest in the topic.

The document is divided into four sections. The first section looks at the recognition of prior learning as one of the main forms of alternative access routes into higher education. It is followed by a section that provides information on whether students can use the process as a mean of progression in their studies, i.e. to gain credits towards a qualification and/or exemptions from some programme requirements. The third section evaluates the overall level of development and implementation of recognition practices across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), while the fourth examines whether and how such recognition practice is addressed in legal frameworks covering the higher education sector. The document concludes with a look at other developments in the area of higher education that could have an impact on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, and issues that could be considered for future policy development.

For the purpose of this summary, the term 'recognition' (of non-formal and informal learning) is used as a synonym for the term 'validation' (of non-formal and informal learning) referred to in the Council Recommendation ⁽⁶⁾.

The country coverage of figures presented in the document corresponds to the country coverage of the source reports. Consequently, some figures only cover countries that are members of the Eurydice Network, whereas other figures cover all the countries involved in the Bologna Process for which data is available. Reference years of figures presented in this document are the same as reference years of figures in the source reports. During the production of the source reports, top-level authorities approved all figures published in these reports.

⁽⁵⁾ Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education, Brussels, 28 and 29 November 2011.

⁽⁶⁾ Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01).

1. Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning as an alternative route to enter higher education

The recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in higher education is commonly associated with the two main purposes: to gain access to a higher education programme or to gain credits towards a higher education qualification ⁽⁷⁾. When access to higher education is the main objective of the recognition, the groups targeted are either the candidates who followed a short upper secondary vocational path (i.e. a programme that does not provide access to higher education) or those who abandoned initial education prior to the completion of upper secondary level.

Access to higher education based on the recognition of prior non-formal and/or informal learning can take different forms and can be based on a range of methods and approaches. In some cases, admission is granted on the basis of evidence submitted by learners in their application and/or on the basis of an interview. In other instances, non-traditional higher education candidates are required to pass a specifically designed test or examination to verify that they have the necessary skills to embark on higher education studies. In addition, candidates who would like to gain admission to higher education on the basis of their prior learning must usually comply with various criteria; these often relate to age or to the duration of prior professional experience.

Alongside the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, some countries have established other alternative pathways to higher education, in particular preparatory programmes targeting higher education candidates without the required qualifications.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with regard to alternative access routes to higher education. It classifies the EHEA countries into two groups: The first one includes countries where the standard upper secondary school leaving qualification remains the only way to embark on higher education studies ⁽⁸⁾. The second group comprises countries where the traditional upper secondary school leaving certificate (general or vocational) is not the only way to enter higher education, and where at least one alternative path into higher education exists.

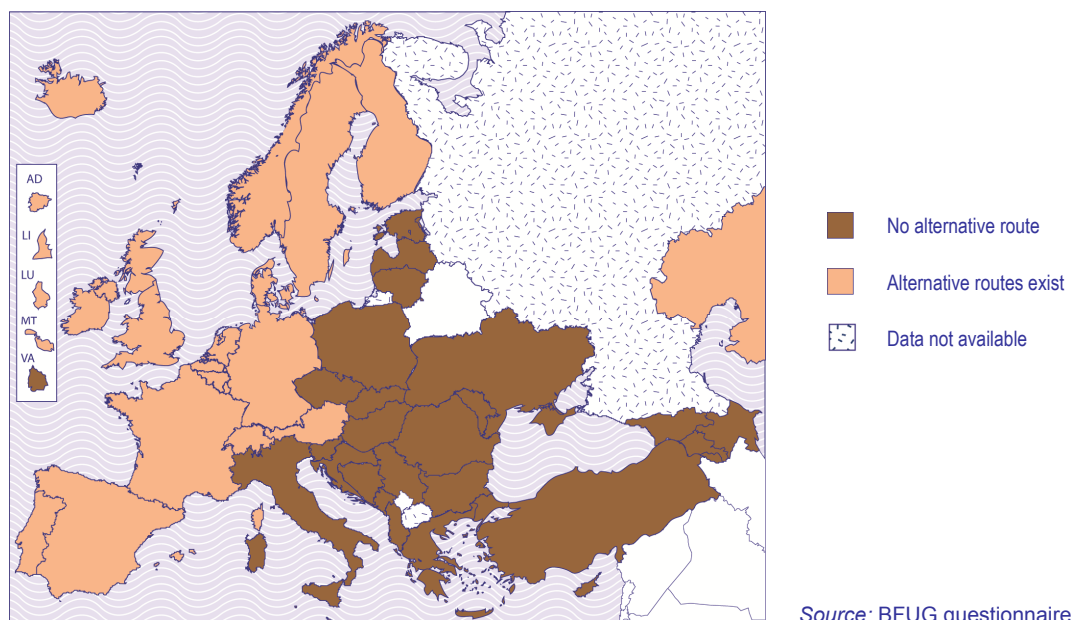
The figure clearly indicates that the countries of Western Europe are characterised by higher flexibility in terms of their higher education entry qualification requirements than other EHEA countries. However, this striking picture may become less clear-cut when other aspects of national system reality are examined. Indeed in order to evaluate the situation of each country, it would be necessary to take into account a range of other factors, including the rate of early school leaving as well as the percentage of an age cohort successfully achieving an upper secondary school level qualification opening access to higher education. Indeed, it could

⁽⁷⁾ These two purposes are not completely independent. In some cases, HE candidates without necessary qualification can not only be admitted to higher education but, based on their prior non-formal and informal learning, they can also gain credits towards a qualification.

⁽⁸⁾ The first group includes a few countries (e.g. the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Turkey), where under exceptional circumstances, particularly talented higher education candidates who do not hold an upper secondary school leaving certificate can be granted access to higher education. However, as this concerns only exceptional cases and often only certain fields of study (e.g. arts programmes in the Czech Republic and Slovenia), these countries cannot be regarded as having a systematic provision of alternative entry routes into higher education. The second group also includes countries where candidates without necessary qualifications can be admitted into higher education, but cannot be awarded a higher education degree if they do not complete their upper secondary studies (e.g. the Czech Republic and Ukraine).

be argued that the higher the percentage of secondary school graduates achieving a traditional entry level qualification for higher education, the lower the need for alternative routes to higher education.

Figure 1: Alternative routes to higher education for non-traditional candidates, 2010/11

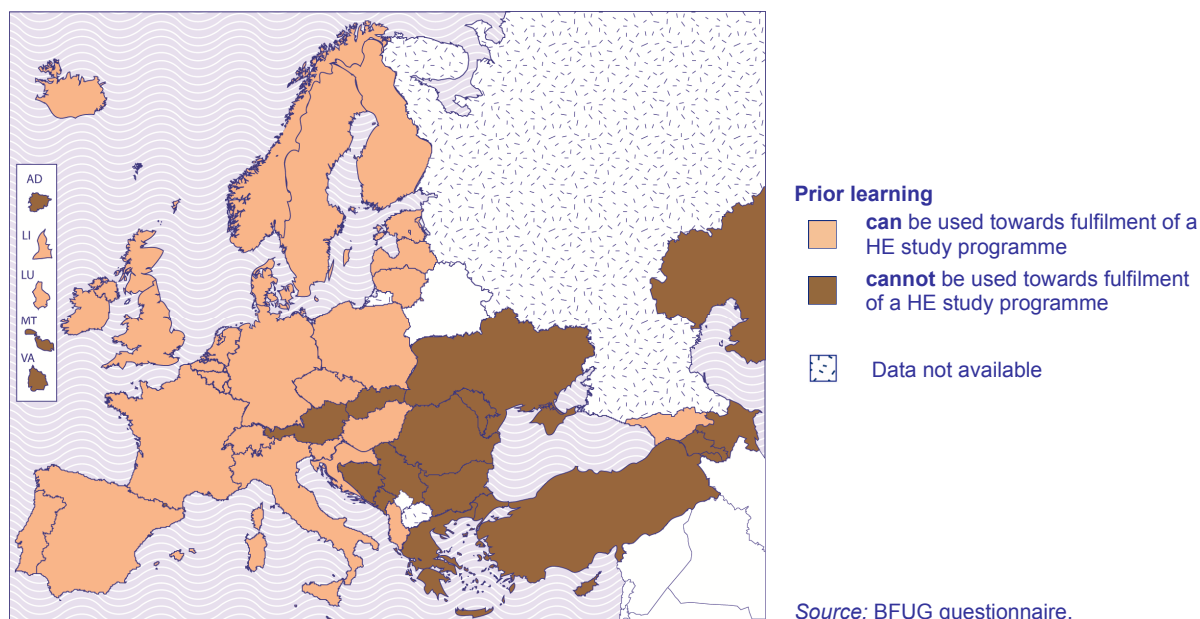


2. Progression in higher education based on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning

The recognition of prior learning for progression in higher education studies means that learners can be exempt from certain higher education requirements if they demonstrate that they already possess the knowledge and skills related to these parts of study.

Figure 2 provides a mapping of this area, showing that out of 47 higher education systems for which data is available, in 29 systems prior non-formal and informal learning can be taken into account towards the completion of higher education studies. The comparison between Figures 1 and 2 indicates that a slightly higher number of countries enable the recognition of prior learning for allocation of credits towards a qualification (i.e. for progression in studies) compared to those where recognition of prior learning for access to higher education is possible. However, it should be noted that regulations often specify the extent to which the recognition of prior learning can contribute to the fulfilment of a higher education programme. This means that recognition for the purpose of progression in higher education studies most commonly specifies limits to the number of credits that can be acquired in this way. Indeed, it is very rare to find systems where a complete award of a higher education qualification is possible on the basis of recognition of prior learning.

Figure 2: Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning for progression in higher education studies, 2010/11



3. Consolidated indicator on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning

In the framework of the Bologna Process, the recognition of prior learning has been monitored by a specific indicator (so called 'scorecard indicator') measuring the progress of the EHEA countries in this field. The indicator was introduced in 2007, and re-examined in 2009 and 2012. It takes into account the extent to which the two types of recognition (i.e. for access to studies and allocation of credits) are possible within different EHEA systems as well as the extent to which they are used in practice. The 2012 reporting exercise put a specific focus on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning providing a mapping of this area.

The indicator (Figure 3) shows that out of 47 higher education systems for which data is available, in 13 higher education systems (dark green), according to centrally established procedures, guidelines or policies, the recognition of prior learning can be used for access to higher education as well as for progression in higher education studies. In these countries, the recognition of prior learning is a standard practice in the majority of higher education institutions.

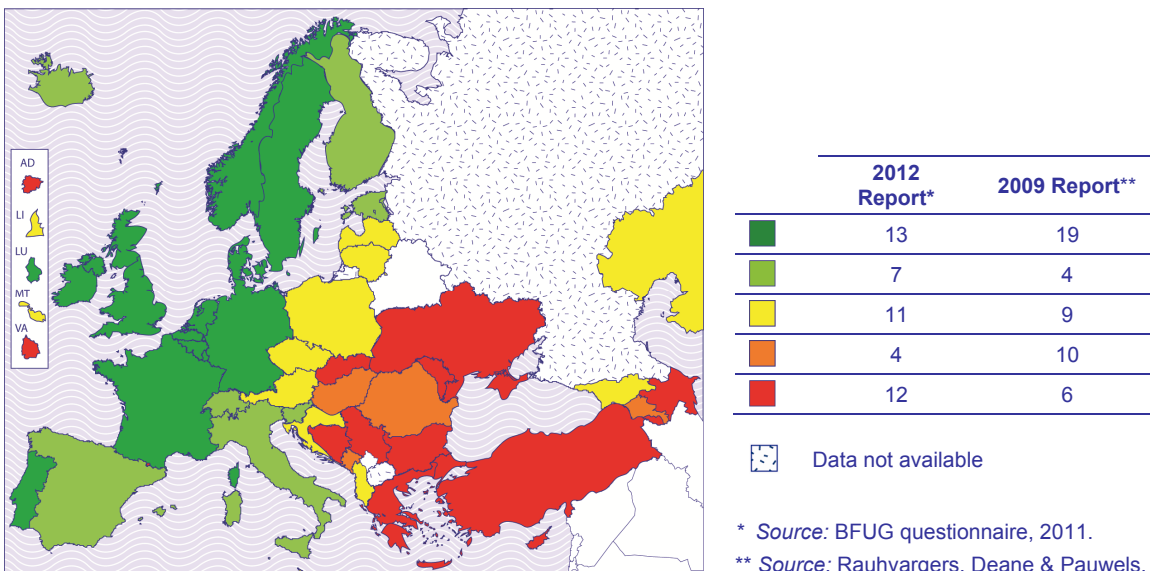
Seven higher education systems (light green) have also reached a relatively high level of development in this field. Yet, in these higher education systems, the recognition of prior learning is either not yet a common practice in the majority of institutions or, if it is a common practice, it cannot be used both for access to higher education and for progression in higher education studies.

In 11 higher education systems (yellow), the recognition of prior learning can be used either for access to higher education only or for progression in higher education studies only. This group also includes countries, where the recognition of prior learning might be used for access as well as for progression, but in these cases is not underpinned by any centrally established guidelines or policies.






The following category (orange) applies to four countries that have not yet developed any systematic approach to the recognition of prior learning, but report some progression in this field (e.g. preparation of steering documents).

Finally, 12 EHEA countries (red) have not yet commenced any systematic activities related to the recognition of prior learning in the higher education sector.

Figure 3: Scorecard indicator on the recognition of prior learning, 2010/11*



Scorecard categories

-  There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy for assessment and recognition of prior learning as a basis for 1) access to higher education programmes, and 2) allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements, AND these procedures are demonstrably applied in practice.
-  There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy for assessment and recognition of prior learning as a basis for 1) access to higher education programmes, and 2) allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements, BUT these procedures are not demonstrably applied in practice.
 OR
 There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy EITHER for 1) OR for 2) (see above), AND these procedures are demonstrably applied in practice.
-  There are nationally established procedures, guidelines or policy EITHER for 1) OR for 2) (see above), BUT these procedures are not demonstrably applied in practice.
 OR
 There are no specific procedures/national guidelines or policy for assessment of prior learning, but procedures for recognition of prior learning are in operation at some higher education institutions or study programmes.
-  Implementation of recognition of prior learning is in a pilot phase at some higher education institutions.
 OR
 Work at drawing up procedures/national guidelines or policy for recognition of prior learning has started.
-  No procedures for recognition of prior learning are in place EITHER at the national OR at the institutional/programme level.

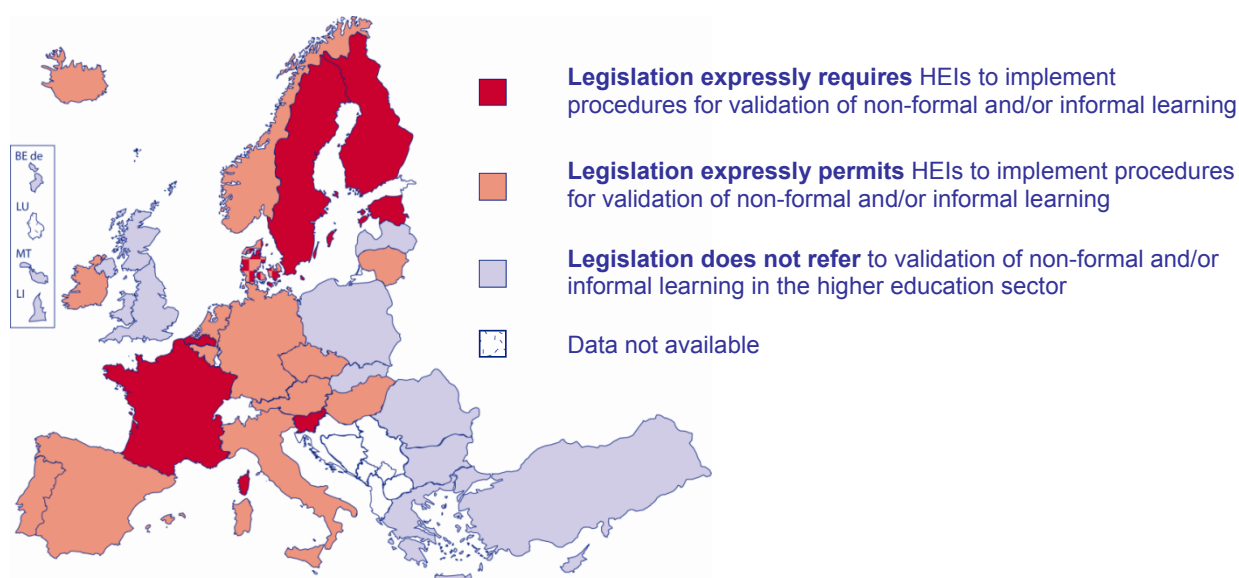
When comparing the 2012 data with the data for 2009, it may appear that the situation in some countries got worse between the two reference years. Yet, the difference can be explained by the focus of the 2012 reporting, which was the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, whereas in the 2009 edition all types of the recognition of prior learning (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal) were taken into account. This shows that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning represents a specific challenge for the higher education sector.

4. Legislative frameworks and the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning

While the previous sections examined whether and to what extent the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning is used within the higher education sector, it is also interesting to have a deeper look at whether and how legislative frameworks address the process.

Available data (Figure 4) show that in a few countries, legislation explicitly requires higher education institutions to implement procedures for the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning, albeit in different ways and to different extents. For instance in Sweden, according to legislation, all higher education institutions are obliged to assess, on request, the prior non-formal and informal learning of applicants who lack the necessary formal qualifications. In France, legislation creates a legal right for individuals to have their prior experiential learning recognised and validated in the institution of their choice. Higher education legislation in Estonia and Slovenia also includes some specific requirements for the validation of prior learning by higher education institutions. However, in these two countries, the validation of non-formal and informal learning cannot replace the mainstream upper secondary qualifications necessary to enter higher education but can only be used for progression within higher education studies. In addition, the requirements for the implementation of recognition procedures are also less explicit compared to some other countries classified in this category.

Figure 4: Legislative frameworks and the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in the higher education sector, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

In around one third of European countries or country communities, legislation expressly permits higher education institutions to implement procedures for validation of non-formal and/or informal learning and higher education institutions can decide whether and to what extent they will do so. Countries classified in this group therefore differ widely in the extent to which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning has been implemented. While in some of them, the recognition of prior non-formal and/or informal learning is already a common practice in the majority of higher education institutions, in other countries this option

is still rarely used in practice. It is also important to note that the way in which legislation refers to the validation of non-formal and informal learning varies from one country to another as does the extent to which prior non-formal and informal learning can be taken into account by higher education institutions.

In twelve countries, legislation does not refer to recognition of non-formal and/or informal learning in the higher education sector. Yet, in some of them, such recognition is common practice. For instance, in the United Kingdom, there is a long tradition of recognising prior learning in the higher education sector, despite the fact that there is no legislation regulating such procedures. Similarly in Poland, the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning is not legally regulated at national level, but prior non-formal learning is often recognised by higher education institutions and counted towards the completion of higher education degrees and qualifications. Decisions on this matter are taken by the institutions themselves. Apart from the above-mentioned cases, countries classified in this group have only very limited experience with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the field of higher education. In most of them, the concept of recognition of prior non-formal and experiential learning is only emerging and has not yet reached the higher education sector (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Conclusion

During the last few years, the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning has been subject to several comparative cross-country analyses that have allowed a better understanding of the extent to which the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning has been implemented in the higher education sector. As this document outlines, the main focus has been on the extent to which recognition of prior learning opens alternative access routes to higher education, and allows those who already possess relevant knowledge and skills to progress more rapidly in their studies.

While knowledge and awareness of national recognition practices is accumulating, this work has revealed a number of information gaps, and thus a need for further systematic analysis. For example, it is essential to understand better the terminology and concepts used by countries when describing their systems of recognition of prior learning. It is also necessary to examine whether countries monitor the degree of institutional activity in this field and, where this is the case, to find out how many students benefit from the process. Another area for exploration is quality assurance, in particular the measures in place to ensure that assessment of prior non-formal and informal learning is based on reliable and valid evidence. It would also be interesting to examine whether the implementation of recognition procedures is commonly included in the quality assurance processes used to evaluate higher education institutions and/or programmes.

Among the different developments in the field of education, it is the establishment of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) based on learning outcomes that could potentially have the greatest impact on enabling higher education institutions to widen access and benefit from the knowledge and skills gained through non-formal and/or informal learning. The shift to clearly identified learning outcomes could support recognition practices in at least two different ways: First, clearly identified knowledge, skills and competences could allow the implementation of

measures to recognise non-formal and informal learning as a part of standard higher education procedures. Second, national qualification frameworks may help to clarify the content of different national qualifications, which could allow certain 'non-traditional' certificates to be better understood and potentially accepted by higher education institutions as an alternative to 'traditional' qualifications. Despite the fact that the implementation of national qualifications frameworks has been subject to regular monitoring within the Bologna Process (see, for example, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Eurostat & Eurostudent, 2012), no attempt has yet been made to assess the impact of NQFs on developments related to the recognition of prior learning in higher education. This could be a challenge for the next Bologna implementation report.

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