

# Models of Recognition of Knowledge in Higher Education in the European Union: Transformation from the European Union to Mediterranean Countries

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THE EUROPEAN UNION MEMORANDUM on lifelong learning emphasizes the key conditions for effective development of lifelong learning skills evaluation together with the objective. One of the key conditions for success of the lifelong learning represents recognition of knowledge. The recognition of knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning, lifelong learning is to contribute to the approximation of the learning needs of a knowledge society. So, the recognition of knowledge leads to important changes in the educational systems on national levels. In the European area, widely diverse skills recognition models are known, which are primarily conditioned by tradition and relationship development skills between the worlds of education and work. Despite this diversity, we can distinguish four models of the national recognition of knowledge, namely: the Scandinavian, Mediterranean, Anglo-Saxon and Francophone model. The paper presents the similarities and differences by implementation of these models in higher education. In particular, we will be interested to know how the homogenization of the European Higher Education Area will impact on these models and how they will develop in the future. This is particularly important for countries in the area of the southern Mediterranean countries which want establish comparable standards for the recognition of knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Paradigmatic changes in education policy of the European Union were first introduced thirty years ago and intensified over the past ten years. These are based on a priori economic changes. The education policy

of the European Union has seen a very strong focus on economic interests. A first look at the fundamental objective of the Lisbon Agenda, launched in 2000, suggests that the European Union would become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by year 2010 (Contribution of the European Commission to the special European Council in Lisbon 2000, 3).

This objective reflects on education as one of the key subsystems of the European Union. The new paradigm of education policy stresses the importance and role of non-formal and informal learning. Alternative forms of learning require the European Union to cope with increasing competition in the market, rapid technological developments and globalization. Despite the rapid development of non-formal and informal learning and mobility on the labour market, the problem in practice is an extremely diverse and often insufficient recognition of non-formal and informal learning by the state and employers. This has prompted policy makers of the European Union to establish bases for common standardization of the system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning was, even ten years ago in the European Union, based on the principle of subsidiarity and within the domain of each Member State of the European Union. But since the last few years, is trying to standardize as much as possible.

So, the European Commission adopted in 2004 the common principles of recognition of non-formal and informal learning (Common European Principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning 2004).

Despite the clear principle of recognition of non-formal and informal learning at the European level, many differences are emerging at the national levels. In this paper we answer the question of what model of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is used by countries of the European Union. In particular, we will be interested to know which models of recognition of non-formal and informal are the most effective and dominant in the European Union. This is particularly important for countries in the area of the southern Mediterranean countries,<sup>1</sup> which are faced today with the problem of a high level of mobility on the labor market.



RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL  
LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Lisbon Strategy has already clearly indicated that formal education alone can not pursue the basic objective of the European Union as the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy without integration of non-formal and informal learning (Contribution of the European Commission to the special European Council in Lisbon 2000, 9). But the integration of alternative forms of learning opens up the question of, how the results of these forms of learning would be recognized. This question has been for many years in the domain of the members, but now it is becoming the subject of a common European education policy. The latter also has a significant effect on the fact that today more and more European countries, are underlining the importance of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which is taking place outside of formal education (Gomezelj Omezelj and Trunk Širca 2006).<sup>2</sup>

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In close connection with the Lisbon Strategy, in 2000 there was adopted the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. The principal purpose of the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning was to 'create pan-European debate on a comprehensive strategy for the introduction of lifelong learning at individual and institutional levels and in all areas of public and private life' (Commission of the European Communities 2000, 3). By encouraging a discussion about a comprehensive strategy, the subsidiarity area was brought under the umbrella of the European Union. This can be understood in the context of dissatisfaction with the partial approaches to the development of lifelong learning. According to the drafters of the Memorandum, one should be thinking about lifelong learning to build on the common European basis, which may have different national implementations. At the same time, in the Memorandum was exposed one of the key substantive findings, that 'non-formal learning is truly undervalued' (ibid., 8). From the Memorandum grew the intention to develop alternative forms of learning and increase their role.

The contents of the Memorandum clearly establish that this will be possible only at the moment when the right individual and social force is provided. In this context we can understand the strong link be-

tween the development of non-formal and informal learning through the recognition of various learning outcomes.

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That recognition of non-formal and informal learning is one of the key areas of the Memorandum is shown by the fact that this topic is intended to be one of the most important fields. The fourth field highlights the next goal: 'a significant improvement the ways in which we understand and evaluate the participation and achievements, particularly in the non-formal and informal learning' (ibid., 28). In this context, the authors of Memorandum speak about 'the application of human resources in its fullness' as a factor in maintaining competitiveness. It is also noted that 'the diplomas, certificates and qualifications are an important recommendation for employers and individuals in the labor market and businesses' and 'the growing demand for skilled employers and increased competition between individuals to gain and maintain employment,' leading to 'much higher requirements of recognized learning than ever before' (ibid., 28). Further elaboration of the implementation of lifelong learning in practice will lead to 'achieving higher levels of general education and qualifications in all areas, providing high-quality adult education and training, while ensuring that the knowledge and skills of people respond to changed requirements work and jobs, the workplace and working methods' (ibid., 28).

Diverse national terminology and related cultural bases still contribute to the fact that the transparency and mutual recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a risky and delicate task. 'In integrated Europe, both the open labor market and civil rights to freedom of movement to settle, study, train and work in all Member States require that the knowledge, skills and qualifications can be comprehensible and easily transferable around the European Union' (ibid., 28–29). However, a high degree of consensus is needed at this level to do much more. 'Absolutely it is important to develop a high quality system of assessment and recognition of prior and experiential learning (Accreditaion of Prior Experiential Learning – APEL) and promote its use in different situations. Employers and those who receive the education and training need to be convinced of the value of this type of certification. The APEL system assesses and recognizes the individual's existing knowledge, skills and experience acquired over time and in



different circumstances, including non-formal and informal (experiential) circumstances. The used methods can identify skills and abilities of the individuals, which themselves may not even know that they have and that may be offered by employers. The process itself requires the active participation of the candidate, which in itself raises an individual's self-esteem' (ibid., 28). Recognition of prior learning in any form is clearly an effective way of motivation of 'non-traditional' participants and those, who on the labor market have not been active for some time, either because of unemployment, family responsibilities or because of illness (ibid., 28). 'Innovative forms of certification of non-formal learning are also important because of dissemination of recognition as such, irrespective of the type of participant under consideration' (ibid., 28).

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Closely linked with the recognition of learning is also the fifth section of the Memorandum, which highlights information and advice on learning opportunities throughout Europe and throughout life. In the contemporary social and economic circumstances this requires a new approach, which provides advice and continuous access to all service that exceeds the distinction between educational, vocational and personal counseling, and reaching for new audiences. 'This means that the systems, to shift from the approach "offer" to approach "demand", put the needs and requirements of users in the center of attention' (ibid., 29). The future role of professionals in the counseling can be described as a commission, which should be directed to more comprehensive methods of counseling. Consultants will also be familiar with the personal and social circumstances of those for whom it is intended to provide information and advice, and should also be familiar with the situation on local labor market and the needs of employers. 'In recent years, also showed that a lot of information and advice to seek and find through non-formal channels and random. Official guidance and counseling services started to consider these factors not only by the development of networks of local associations and volunteer groups, but also to design less complex services in familiar surroundings' (ibid., 29). So, the Memorandum provides for a greater involvement of those who ultimately confirm the recommendations into practice and are familiar with the ways in which individuals and businesses use them in

their everyday lives. The social partners and relevant non-governmental organizations are no less important than the official authorities and professional educators.

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An important milestone in the further development of recognition of non-formal and informal learning is represented by the year 2002. The basis for the development of recognition of non-formal and informal learning is the adoption of the Resolution on Lifelong Learning by ministers of education in the European Union. This Resolution urges Member States to develop 'a set of common principles regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels' (Council resolution 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning 2002, 1). The Resolution gives intention to the question of recognition of results, regardless of whether the qualifications are for formal channels, or for the results of non-formal and informal learning. The same role in promoting of cooperation and measures to evaluate learning outcomes is recognized as the cornerstone for building links between formal, non-formal and informal learning. This should be a prerequisite for the creation of a European area of lifelong learning (*ibid.*, 3). At the same time Resolution draws attention to the recognition of all forms of learning, which is crucial for the development of lifelong learning and acquiring knowledge in practical areas (*ibid.*, 9).<sup>3</sup> This means that the recognition of learning outcomes is very important for both spheres, i.e. the sphere of education and the worlds of work, and presents a bridge between education, training, learning and work. Those decisions of the Resolution were reinforced at the ministerial meeting in Barcelona in 2002, when the 33rd. decision was taken to remove barriers by recognition of the results of formal, non-formal and informal learning (Presidency conclusions 2002, 4).

The contribution to the Lisbon strategy, which may (in addition to other requirements) offer education and training, is outlined in the work programme Education and Training in Europe: Different systems, common targets for 2010 (*ibid.*). The program is based on three long-term strategic objectives, and these are further broken down into 13 objectives and 42 key issues. The Second long-term strategic goal is 'all access to education and training systems in the light of the guiding



principles of lifelong learning, promoting employability and career development as well as active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion' (ibid., 11). In the second subgoal is traced the intention to 'develop options for formal recognition of non-formal learning experiences' (ibid., 11). Similar thinking may have already been seen the year before in Concrete objectives of education and training in the future, where they may be among the measures that should help make learning more attractive. Here is written the desire to develop methods for official confirmation of non-formal learning experiences (Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of the education and training systems in Europe 2002, 28).

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After extensive discussions between representatives of Member States and the European social partners, a set of common European principles was adopted for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, namely at the European Council in May 2004 (Common European Principles for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2004). The common European principles have emerged as the need for establishing common basic principles for recognition of the learning outcomes. These principles were addressed intensively in Copenhagen (November 2002), in the discussions on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. In accordance with the conclusions of the Copenhagen meeting, the main motivation for the development of such principles was to strengthen the comparability of different approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Methods and systems for the recognition have been largely designed and separated into national frameworks, and separately from one another.

The European perspective is to strengthen the comparability of the approaches to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning at different levels<sup>4</sup> and in different contexts, particularly important for the establishment and development of confidence in the international arena. This should be significantly helped by properly and consistently formulated common European guidelines. In an effort to make them more visible, in 2007 more detailed guidelines were drafted, which are designed to provide a reference point and an instrument of quality assurance methods and technical skills recognition in the European

Union (Commission of the European Communities 2007). Since this is guidance in terms of recommendations, it depends on each of the Member States to what extent the guidelines are actually used.

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SYSTEMIC REGULATION OF RECOGNITION  
OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING  
IN DIFFERENT GROUPS OF MEMBER STATES

In the previous chapter we pointed out that within the European Union there is established a process of homogenization of systems and procedures for recognition of non-formal and informal learning. However, since the path to complete alignment is more illusion than reality, the recognition of prior learning is governed by the principle of subsidiarity. Each state regulates this area in accordance with their respective systems, while facing various challenges.

Systems for recognition of non-formal and informal learning are different between Member States. Some of them have systematically settled the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, while others have just considered the opportunities for systemic regulation. Nevertheless, different degrees of order can enable the recognition of non-formal and informal learning to be divided by different criteria. In the desire for more transparency in the development of learning recognition, we used three criteria for the division of the European Union countries, namely:

- depending on the purpose and level of regulation,
- depending on the model, and
- depending on level of development.

*Sharing Methods of Recognition of Prior Learning  
Depending on the Purpose and Level of Regulation*

For the recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies, different approaches can be used. The main two, the formative and the summative approach, both in the formal and non-formal process of validation of knowledge, are equally important. The formative approach is designed as a decentralized and diverse tool for providing feedback and support for further learning, and avoids the association with the award



of formal qualifications. The primary purpose of formative recognition is to enable students to broaden and deepen their learning. With this approach, participants of the learning process gain feedback that would enable them to improve their learning and, with the strengths and weaknesses of their learning, are provided with the basis for personal and work development. In the summative approach the purpose of recognition of non-formal knowledge is to gain acceptance for formally recognized qualification and acquisition of a (publicly valid) certificate. Although the process of recognition of the non-formal and informal learning is designed to be more sensitive to the needs of the individual, but because of the status and confidence, it is necessary that summative elements of recognition be based on (public valid) skill standards, which are used for summative evaluation in formal education. Taking those differences, we must be aware that often the summative and the formative approach are complementary. Their common concern is the opening of qualifications and qualification systems for learning outside of the formal education system. Significant systemic and institutional questions, which are addressed by various European countries in different ways, are: to what extent is the summative approach integrated to the national system of qualifications, and to what extent are these approaches connected with public and other bodies and standards?

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It should be noted that both approaches, to a greater or lesser extent, applied in all Member States. The major difference between countries is the dominance of each approach. This is primarily dependent on the historical and social context and relationship between education and the qualification system. In countries where the concept of non-formal and informal learning and certification of qualifications occurs over time, the summative approach is dominant. Typical representatives of this approach are certainly England, Ireland and France. They are characterized by a well-established and regulated system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Nevertheless, we must recognize that even in this case, the formative approach is not insignificant. Countries with a formative system are characterized by more than a certification of qualifications which emphasizes participation of citizens in the non-formal and informal learning and

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developing their permanent education plans. Most often, these countries appear high on the scales of adult participation in non-formal and informal learning. Among the countries with this approach can be included Sweden and the Netherlands. In Sweden can be traced largely a number of local and regional initiatives to integrate the non-formal and informal learning, which are aimed at specific target groups. A somewhat different approach can be found in the case of the Netherlands. Here, at the forefront, are not local and regional interests, but rather non-formal and informal learning promoted by business and labor organizations (Vuković and Žnidarič 2008, 26). But even in these cases there is the desire that participants of informal and formal learning will be motivated with recognition of their learning achievements.

*Sharing Methods of Recognition of Prior Learning Depending on the Model*

Bjørnåvold placed in the book *Making Learning Visible* four groups of models according to their similarity in forms and methods of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, namely:

- Scandinavian,
- Mediterranean,
- Anglo-Saxon and
- Francophone model (Bjørnåvold 2000, 11).

The first model is defined by Bjørnåvold as the Scandinavian model. In this model of recognition of prior learning we can find Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. All four countries joining a common tradition in the Scandinavian market training and work, which has enabled the international transfer of skills. They are connected by two characteristics, namely high institutionalization and formalization of public education and participation of employers and employees in management training. Despite the fact that the two countries are geographically close, they are not completely identical in the manner of recognition of prior learning. Finland and Norway, are on the issue of non-formal education, rather advanced countries. The introduction of reform and public debates about education are in these countries the main interest. Sweden and Denmark are in this area still somewhat on hold as such. For example, in Sweden the importance of



non-formal education is not clearly defined in the national educational system (*ibid.*, 12).

The Mediterranean approach is characterized by a positive orientation in promoting non-formal education. In this model could be placed Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. The common point for all countries is a strong general education and a small number of participants in formal education. This speaks in favor of the development of untapped potential and large stocks of non-formal and informal learning. It should be noted that the actual recognition of non-formal education has not progressed, but there has been willingness to change, which is definitely positive. This is clearly reflected in the adoption of legislation and reform of vocational education and training (*ibid.*, 13).

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A flexible model is provided the Anglo-Saxon model, which is placed in England, Ireland and Holland. This model was the inspiration for many European countries, because the educational system is based on competences and is results-oriented. In this model are clear procedures of recognition of prior learning, which indirectly leads to (publicly valid) qualifications. Despite the positive characteristics of this system, it has also some weaknesses. The introduction of an acceptable qualification standard may make it difficult to maintain a balance between too general or specific definitions of competence (*ibid.*, 14).

In the final model are included France and Belgium. This might be called as a challenge to formal certification. France is, according to many scientists, the most successful in the recognition of non-formal learning. The first attempt to establish recognition of the non-formal education system took place in France in 1989 with a system of 'bilan de competence.' This was followed by another big step in 1992 with the opening of a national system of vocational education and training for professional certificates obtained outside the education system. The third step in development of recognition of non-formal learning has emerged with the idea of establishing a Chamber of Commerce about common procedures and standards for recognition of non-formal education, which are not based on formal education and training. France with the opening of national education and training, enables individuals to obtain the certificates under the national system

of recognition of prior learning. The problem of this system is to have formal certificates and diplomas given a major role in the education system, but to overcoming this obstacle is possible with transparency and diversity of non-formal education (ibid., 14).

[262] In the case of the four models designed by Bjørnåvold we can see the differences between individual countries in systemic approaches to dealing with the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. In this way, we have raised concerns about the quality and development of individual Member States in the field of recognition of prior learning.

*Sharing Methods of Recognition of Prior Learning  
Depending on the Level of Development*

Despite these differences in models of recognition of different forms of learning, the interest in different countries to develop this system at the national level is very different. Countries are at different stages of practical implementation of the recognition of non-formal and informal acquired skills and competences in education and the training system. In an effort to improve the implementation of the development of recognition of prior learning, the European Union at the end of 2007 modeled the distribution of the Member States relating to the level of development of this system. Member States are divided into three main groups. The first group includes countries that have already implemented the system of evaluation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Another group of countries comprises those which have established a national system that will allow individuals to gain a (public valid) certificate for their knowledge, skills and abilities. Most of this group has formed the normative basis, started to establish a methodology for recognition prior learning and is expected to implement methodology in the coming years. In the last group are countries where the system of recognition of prior learning is a new concept and is only exercised or receiving criticism, which hinders its further development. In accordance with that, CEDEFOP classified the Member States into three groups, as follows (*Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Europe 2007*):

1 countries where the procedure is well established, organized and



- includes individuals already in it (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom),
- 2 countries in which the procedures are developed, the rule bases are in place, but people do not follow them (Austria, Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Sweden),
- 3 countries in which recognition of prior learning is not happening a lot and which are in early stages of development (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Slovakia and Turkey).

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In order to see the benefits of each model of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, we compare models with the level of development, which was set in 2008 by CEDEFOP experts. As seen from table 1, the two models appear, all of whose Member States have achieved the highest degree of implementation. These two models are the Anglo-Saxon model and the Francophone model. The ranking of countries falling under this model reflects the fact that these countries have a long tradition of recognition of prior learning. On this basis, it is understandable that most of these countries represent an ideal model for other Member States.

A weaker development occurred in the Scandinavian model. In this case, all countries, except Sweden, are at the highest level of development. It is interesting to note that Sweden achieves a high degree of integration of the population in non-formal and informal learning, but has not yet reached full development of a system of recognition of prior learning. The Scandinavian model followed the Mediterranean model. In this case, Spain and Portugal have implemented the system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Italy and Greece are developing a system or are just in the initial stage of development.

Based on a comparison of different models for recognition of non-formal and informal learning, one can support the thesis about the close correlation between the model and the level of development of recognition of informal and formal learning. At same time, the fact

TABLE 1 Comparison of models and levels of development of recognition of prior learning

	Scandinavian model	Mediterranean model	Anglo-Saxon model	Francophone model
[264] The system is introduced	Finland Norway Denmark	Spain Portugal	England Ireland Netherlands	France Belgium
The system is being developed	Sweden	Italy		
The system is in the initial stage		Greece		

is that Member States with a higher level of development system of recognition of prior learning have a higher percent of the adult population involved in alternative forms of learning.

#### CONCLUSION

That the European Union understands the non-formal and informal learning as being a very important upgrade of formal education, is evidenced by the for homogenization of the two alternative forms of learning. The common guidelines and principles have created a basis for joint actions. But practice speaks in favor of the argument that the development of non-formal and informal learning is a distinct national subject. We are convinced of this by the great differences between Member States. If encouraging the development of non-formal and informal learning is often justified by the argument of approximating the retarded to the more development countries, the facts show increasing differences. Extensive research does highlight the positive and significant correlation between the degree of involvement and success in formal education and the effectiveness of non-formal and informal learning. Countries with a more developed system of formal education will also achieve better results in the two other forms of learning. We must be aware that non-formal and informal learning can not exist isolated from formal education. Non-formal and informal learning will be effective only on the assumption that the formal education system functions effectively and that all forms of learning are complementary.



An important role in complementing the formal education, non-formal and informal learning can certainly be played by mutual recognition of all these forms of learning. This certainly can help the models which are detected by Bjørnåvold in the analysis of national systems. Selection of an appropriate model and adapting it to another national system will be not an easy task. By successful integration of a foreign model of recognition of prior learning, account must be taken of the socio-economic factors and specifics of the relationship between qualification and education systems.

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## NOTES

- 1 The importance of the recognition of knowledge in the Mediterranean countries is exposed in the UNESCO International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean, held in Nice in 1976. One of the most important objects of this convention was to 'ensure that studies, certificates, diplomas and degrees are recognized as widely as possible' (International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean 1976). Recognition of knowledge in Mediterranean countries was later discussed by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Application of the International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean, held in Split in 2005. In Article 6 of the conclusions was expressed the main goal: 'Considering that recognition refers to the studies followed and the certificates, diplomas or degrees obtained in the recognized institutions of a given Contracting State, any person, of whatever nationality or political or legal status, who has followed such studies and obtained such certificates, diplomas or degrees' (Intergovernmental Committee for the Application of the International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean 2005).
- 2 In reading the various documents of the European Union one should not neglect the report prepared by CEDEFOP, entitled 'Making Learning Visible – Identification, Assessment and Recognition of Nonformal Learning in Europe' (Bjørnåvold 2000). The report presents an

important overview of the existing national systems of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. At the same time this document points to and provides the basic guidelines of advanced development.

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- 3 This topic was first presented at the European level in 1999 in White Paper on 'Teaching and Learning, Towards the learning society' (White paper on education and training 1999).
  - 4 In the field of tertiary education one should understand the key role of the Ministerial Conference in Bergen. At the conference in Bergen, one of the four priorities to year 2007 was to create all possible opportunities for greater flexibility in higher education, including procedures for recognition of prior learning (Commission of the European Communities 2007). In the same document it was highlighted that under the previous education was understood the concept of all forms of non-formal and experiential learning. Recognition of this is used to increase the possibility of entry into higher education programs as well as recognition of parts of accredited programs. Recognition of non-formal and experiential learning can be understood as an effort to adapt curricula, learning methods and labor market needs.

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