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# COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT: BEST PRACTICES IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Case studies

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## Keywords

competence assessment  
training  
human capital

## JEL Classification

I 25, J 24

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## Abstract

*In the current changing environment of work, the process of competence assessment is increasingly relevant as workers gain knowledge and practical skills through fulfilling different and new working tasks and through self-education. In this context, innovative tools for competence assessment and validation are very useful for encouraging movement of individuals between jobs and from unemployment or inactivity to employment and for increasing the capacity of companies to respond and adapt to changing and challenging environments. This article presents an overview of best practices for competence assessment and validation in order to identify and select methods that have been effective in various European countries including Romania. The article concludes with a set of „learned lessons” and short recommendations in order to improve the framework of competence assessment in Romanian context. Our findings are useful for the new human resources management that aims toward efficiently usage of the workforce, inside companies and in a global labour market, encouraging flexibility and adaptability.*

## Background

In this paper, we discuss about the necessity of a common European framework for recognition and certification of the competences acquired at work place through formal or informal learning (Cedefop, 2009). Competence standards already exist in several European countries, for specific economic sectors (e.g. Spain, Germany) but they are not harmonized over several/all EU countries. We agree that the competence standards harmonization task is a difficult one and requires a lot of resources (time, money etc.), but never the less we can discuss about it, by looking at a series of case studies from different countries.

By underlying the importance of lifelong learning in the constantly changing world, this work contributes at the European effort to improve accessibility, quality and efficiency of lifelong learning.

In this respect, the Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project, "The Value of Work for Individual Position on Labour Market" (VOW+IPLM) (2013 - 2015), aims to improve the quality of validation of competence assessment process in Romania. The project transfers the results from a previous project "The Value of Work" (VOW), developed by a consortium coordinated by "FRAE-Education and Training Service Centre", an organization from Iceland. The current project, is coordinated by "National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection" from Romania and involves partners from six different countries: Romania, Spain, Germany, Turkey, Poland and Iceland. The aims of the project include: (a) to collect a series of best practices on recognition and validation of the competences acquired in formal/in-formal ways at the work place, (b) transfer and adapt the innovative model of competence recognition, developed in the previous project VOW,

(c) an innovative evaluation platform that will help the employees, and not only to consolidate their career through lifelong learning.

The "Handbook of Best Practices on recognition of informal/non-formal work-based learning (2013)" is intended to do a selection of best practices and innovative methods in evaluation and validation of competencies from partners countries as an important step without cannot be possible to pursuit in our work. Recognizing best methods that have been effective in various European countries including Romania is useful for evaluating the best solutions for improvement the recognition of learning results and employability.

The purpose of this article is to share information on best practices of recognition and assessment competences projects and initiatives in five European countries including Romania.

Because it is foreseen that the national systems and methodologies used in competence assessment are quite different, the best practice examples are selected by a representative from each participating country and is presented in a common criteria for facilitating a comparative way in order to search for innovative approaches that can be successfully applied. The framework include: project data and relevance, describing evaluation process and competences, innovative tools, methods that could be transferred, and benefits. Finally, we'll emphasize some transferable "learned lessons" with innovative potential to stimulate positive further developments.

Recently, Romania as well as all other countries around the world has been facing major challenges. The economic crisis, unemployment, migration of young, determines us to give value to the importance of continue education and equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills, competences required in different workplaces (Cedefop, 2014). In this

context, recognition and validation of competences gained at workplace is a priority. Identification, recognition and certification of these are achieved by completing a process of validation of competences, consisting of a sum of methods and processes used to evaluate the attainments (knowledge, know-how, skills and competences) of an individual, and typically leading to certification.

### **Romania's case study -assessment of competence acquired through volunteering**

“Guide for competences recognition acquired through volunteering was developed within the framework of the European Year of Volunteering (Working Group for Recognition of Competences gained through volunteering, 2011). The formal framework for structuring the process of recognition of competences acquired through volunteering offers the possibility of obtaining a Certificate of Competences, through an online platform. The evaluation process is possible after working at least 120 hours of volunteer activities, considering this time suitable for developing the key competences. The methodology is based on the 360° approach including both self-assessment and assessment by others who can be both mentors/supervisors and co-workers. The project provides a detailed description of eight key competences acquired in volunteering work. The major challenge is to find a balance between the flexibility that is specific to voluntary activity and the strictness imposed by the need for evaluation and validation of competences. All organizations with voluntary workers are encouraged to initiate activities of testing this guide and issuing the Certificate of Competence. Also, this approach is set out in the National Strategy for the Development of Volunteering in Romania.

### **Poland's case study -recognition of informal qualifications**

*Let's Build it Together* project was established within the framework of the EQUAL Community Initiative in order to find new ways of solving problems related to insufficient use of new technologies in enterprises and inequality in the labour market, including difficulties stemming from the lack of possibilities to recognize and certify competences. The validation system allowed the unemployed people and workers to obtain a *certificate* confirming their competences, without a need to participate in a full training cycle, which in turn increased their employability. The lists of competences was described based on the National standards of professional qualifications for these two job profiles and the Standards for the underlying conduct exam training by the Central Examination Commission.

Due to the innovative nature of the project, one of the important elements of the process of validation of competences was the information campaign. Wide information campaign - promotion in the press, radio and regional television was aimed to inform the local community the possibility of certifying skills acquired through experience and encourage people to participate in the process.

### **Germany's case study - assessment of migrants' competences**

*Assessment of Migrants' Competences in the Elderly Care (AMICO)* project relates to the demographic change in Western European societies, the demand for personnel in the elderly care activities and the growing number of migrants willing to work. In fact, it supports migrants in the pre-assessment of occupational competencies acquired in their home countries and checks them against German qualification profiles and learning outcomes set out in the national training plans.

At the heart of Amico lies the assessment-tool, which comprises

“questionnaires and exercises to hygiene, nutrition, mobilization, environment, first aid, communication, ethic and cultural sensitivity in the elderly care competences that were acquired formally, informally or non-formally. The AMiCo tool provides the elderly care givers with comprehensive feedback regarding their level of vocational competences and gives them recommendations for the acquisition of supplementary competences which are necessary for the aspired activity. Moreover the users will receive a certificate about their competences and recommendations about the possibilities and fields of employment in the country of destination.

The competencies are translated in the target countries, such as Romanian and Bulgarian language. However, project helps the candidates to prepare for formal assessments.

### **Spain's case study- monitors the progress of transversal competences and technical competences**

*Centre for Innovation in Basque Vocational Training (TKNIKA)* project aims to elaborate a tool that can be used to evaluate competences. The project has been built on the principle that it makes no sense to apply active and collaborative methodologies in the classroom and then to evaluate and grade students in a traditional way. For this reason they created a tool that can be used by instructors to monitor the progress of his or her students with regard to transversal competences and technical competences, more difficult to evaluate with the traditional evaluation methods. There are three main types of transversal competences are evaluated: creative thinking and innovation (adaptation to change, entrepreneurial initiative), working in team (communication, conflicts resolution, leadership), learn to learn (planning and organization, prevention, autonomy, decisions making, digital competences, implication). The trainer,

considering different criteria, develops the evaluation. But the trainee could access to his/her assessment in any time and check the status. The application is based on an Excel file that converts the evaluation in simple graphics.

Thus trainers and trainees could check their improvements easily, compare the evolution and react to the lack of competences, if necessary. The process is part of the process of formal acquisition of competences that is the trainee is acquiring technical knowledge and at the same time he/she can acquire different transversal competences valid for their both professional and personal life.

### **Iceland's case study - recognition of non-formal and informal learning on upper secondary level**

One of the most important measures to restore the society's infrastructure after the financial crisis is to heighten the educational standard of the population in order to create new jobs opportunities and improve the skills on the labour market. The project *Creation of a Recognition System of Non-formal and Informal learning on Upper secondary level* is a part of Instrumental Pre-Accession programme which is connected to the member application of Iceland to enter the EU. The project aims to develop the infrastructure to recognize non-formal and informal learning to support upgrading of qualifications of low-qualified workers. The target groups in this project are mainly adults without university degrees and the main purpose of the project is to address that shortage in sustainable employability. Competence model contains four sections branched in several competences (metacompetencies, personal competencies, social competencies, intra-organizational competencies, professional competencies, technical competencies, managerial competencies) and many units of competence. Training of accredited guidance counselors (500 persons) is part of the quality cycle and they assist the

participants to document and train them for the assessment of their competences.

Making the competence profiles simple but accurate, consistent but also flexible is the strength of this project, but there are many new jobs emerging that have not yet been formalized and no formal training is supporting the development.

### Conclusion

Joining together all selected good practices and their „learned lessons” in the field of evaluation and validation of competencies in general and those acquired at work place in particular will contribute to exchange of experience, results and products, and best solutions between partner countries and worldwide, via on-line project site and E-evaluation platform including the electronic version. Thus, human resources managers from companies which have their own training department could have an evaluation tool; training providers can improve their own system of competencies evaluation; policy makers in the field of education and training might be also

interested. It is foreseen that the labour market actors has more interest in shorter, more concrete, more practical and more transferable competences, to suit the workplace needs.

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*This research was conducted in the framework of Leonardo da Vinci project "The Value of Work for Individual Position on Labour Market "VOW+IPLM" 2012-1-RO1-LEO05-21119. This article reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*