

Context and issue

1- Competences, yes, but not qualifications

2-The limitations of assessment

3-Transparent assessment criteria throughout Europe

4-Participate in the European challenge

Dominique GODET, Euro Cordiale

At present, 20% of a group of pupils leave the school system with no qualifications whatsoever and/or drop out of the system altogether. To counter this serious problem, the European Council of Lisbon in 2000 decided to halve, by 2010, the number of people aged between 18 and 24, who have only completed the first cycle in secondary schooling and are not following any kind of training or further education course. The European Council is also committed to facilitating the development of lifelong education and training.

This commitment, co-signed by the partner countries of the project “New system of certification for young people with no qualifications”, consists in:

1. intensifying the content and methods of general vocational education;
2. developing links and building bridges between general vocational education, compensatory education and further education;
- 3. developing new methods for assessing and validating the competences acquired in formal and non-formal settings to achieve an official qualification of competences.**

Our project meets the third objective.

1- Competences, yes, but not qualifications

The project “New system of certification for young people with no qualifications” concerns young people from 15 to 25 years old who are leaving an education system with no qualifications and no possibility of any socio-professional inclusion in the short term.

In addition to the official education and vocational training circuits (secondary schools and training centres, etc.), these young people also acquire competences during their non-formal learning experiences. Many initiatives for work placements, work experience and further training intended for young people deliver certificates that are not official qualifications. They do not therefore possess a “passport for employment” which would give them recognition with employers in their countries and which would allow them to consider mobility within Europe.

Because of this, the competences acquired by these young people are not given sufficient value. Nevertheless, they do exist: life experience, odd jobs, personal experience and education, even if incomplete, and/or work placements have enabled them to develop basic language and mathematical skills, a capacity for logical thinking, personal and social skills, and more specialised competences from certain professional domains. This inability to recognise learning outcomes has very negative effects: the competences of these young people are not recognised, and yet it would help to develop their self-esteem and their feelings of self-efficacy. We are thus depriving ourselves of an essential means of increasing the young people’s motivation to learn. This situation also does nothing to enhance the value of training systems or teachers.

2- The limitations of assessment

Most often, a direct assessment of the capacities and knowledge of those who participate in training courses **only gives partial information about their real capacities and knowledge**. It must be remembered therefore that a direct assessment only gives an approximate idea of the skills and capacities that a trainee has actually acquired during his training.

Another limitation is the fact **that it remains difficult to assess the educational content of a training programme established in one European country and to compare it transparently to contents of programmes in other European countries**. That is why the European Council created a **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)** for lifelong learning, while recommending that each country in the European Union created its own qualifications system.

3- Transparent assessment criteria throughout Europe

According to the “*Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*”¹, dated 05/09/2006, **“Transparency of qualifications is defined as the degree to which the value of qualifications can be identified and compared on the labour market, in education and training and in a wider social setting.** Transparency can thus be seen as a necessary precondition for recognition of learning outcomes leading to qualifications. Increasing transparency is important for the following reasons:

- It enables individual citizens to judge the relative value of qualifications;
- It is a prerequisite and condition for transfer and accumulation of qualifications. Pursuing lifelong and lifewide learning requires that individuals are able to combine and build on qualifications acquired in different settings, systems and countries. Transparent systems make it possible to judge how qualifications can be linked and/or combined;
- It allows education and training providers to compare the profile and content of their own offers to those of other providers and thus also is an important precondition for quality assurance in education and training.”

In its opinion, dated 30 May 2007, on the “*Proposal for the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*” (EQF), the European economic and social committee² underlines the importance of building national frameworks for qualifications which could be linked to the European qualifications framework. The committee also notes that **the aim is not to create a uniform education and training system within the European Union but that it is necessary to consolidate the steps being taken in the search for transparency, recognition and transfer of qualifications between the Member States.** That would require sophisticated systems of quality assurance, especially for those who deliver the qualifications, in all the member states. In point 5.4, the EESC suggests that the criteria – which would be used to establish the correlation between the national qualification system and the European framework – should be worded more simply, using language that is less academic and closer to the language of vocational training.

It is to defining some of these criteria that we have devoted the project.

¹ [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/com_2006_0479_en.pdf]

² Official Journal of the European Union (27/7/2007). *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the “Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.”*
[<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2007:175:0074:0077:EN:PDF>]]

4- Participate in the European challenge

All people should therefore be able to accumulate the outcomes of their formal and non-formal learning in the different systems and institutions. They should then be able to have these competences officially recognised and validated.

A major challenge now is to provide competence descriptors which, in the long term, could be a common form of recognition of formal and non-formal learning outcomes in Europe.

The work will of course be long and complex. It will be necessary to find common formulae for the different administrative authorities, teachers, employers and the people in education. Similarly, it will be necessary to harmonise the pedagogical language of teachers and the language of the business professionals themselves. Furthermore, it would be expected that the points of view, the analysis charts and the ideas of the various contributors would differ considerably, especially as the construction of qualification systems is a result of partly technical and scientific analyses of the competences and partly social negotiations somehow linked to a struggle or quest for recognition (Honneth, 2000 ³; Caillé, 2007 ⁴).

In our project, we have sought to define **specific qualitative descriptors of knowledge, aptitudes and competences suitable for our public of young people with no qualifications, descriptors which would constitute a foundation enabling them to engage in some form of vocational training.**

The reference tool which we have elaborated and the accompanying methodology for use are intended to **facilitate the recognition and validation of learning outcomes** acquired by these young people by creating common reference levels. Recognising acquired experience targets all the systems by which knowledge and expertise acquired by a person through his professional experience (work placement certificate, practical work experience, competence assessment, training certificate, etc.) would be given an official status on the labour market. Recognising acquired experience would allow them to be validated and would lead to a qualification (diploma or title). **The qualification of acquired experience**, though, is the responsibility of the member states.

³ Honneth, A. (1992). *The Struggle for Recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts* Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Caillé, A. (Dir.) (2007). *La quête de reconnaissance, nouveau phénomène social total*. Paris : La Découverte.