

SOLIDAR Round Table: An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs



KEY FINDINGS

Almost 120 million people in Europe are living in poverty or at the threat of falling into poverty, of which 24 million working poor. 77 million European aged 25-64 (close to 30%) still have at most lower secondary education and those with low qualifications are much less likely to participate in up-skilling and lifelong learning. This highlights the urgent need for providing all people – especially those ‘far’ from education – with educational opportunities that will support their development on the one hand, and on the other, will recognise the skills, knowledge and qualifications that they have acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments.

SUMMARY

With this event, SOLIDAR and its partners: DGB-Bildungswerk, Amsterdam Institute for Advances Labour Studies (AIAS), Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (ABF), European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and Fagligt Internationalt Center (FIC) organised a European Round Table in the framework of the “Promoting the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: Strengthening individual learning pathways by developing skills assessment tools for workers” project they are implementing with the support of the European Commission, Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

The European Round Table aimed at achieving two goals: developing a common understanding on the need to recognise skills and competences acquired in non-formal education and training environment with relation to the European Qualification Framework, and during the second panel, to exchange on the outcomes of the pilot project that develops assessment and validation tools conducted by project partners.

FULL REPORT

Panel discussion: Validation of skills and competences acquired in the non-formal environment – presentation of national practices

Chair: David Lopez, La Ligue de l’enseignement

Professor Michel Feutrie (Secretary General of the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning) presented the European Qualification Framework (EQF) system that has been adopted by the European Commission and is composed of 8 levels, where the last one corresponds to a PhD academic qualification. The aim of the EQF is to compare the national levels of qualifications in Member States. So far 12 Member States have their National Qualification Framework (NQF) linked with the EQF. The process of creating the connection between National and European Qualification Frameworks is taking longer than expected. It was supposed to happen by 2010, however seeing the current developments, it may only be ready in 2014, as some countries do not have their National Qualification Framework developed at all. The objective of the process is also to take into account non-formal education and to make Member States reflect upon their educational systems.

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Subsequently, Professor Feutrie presented the French validation system. VAE – Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience - is a procedure allowing any French educational institution to grant degrees basing on work experience. Based on a law of 1985, people can access Higher Education on the basis of their individual experience. It is estimated that so far 20,000 people have used this exemption. As of 1992, credits can be granted on the basis of the prior experience. The law implemented in 2002 gave the possibility to gain a full professor title based on prior experience. The process validates prior learning and all the qualifications are subject to the VAE law. It is important to underline the fact that the experience can be sufficient to obtain the paper confirmation of the acquired qualifications. The commission (jury) composed out of representatives of employers, employees and academia stands behind the validation process, and is obliged to respond on the submitted validation request. The statistics show that approximately 50% of applicants are granted with the qualifications.

At the beginning of his presentation **Dr Jeff Bridgford (King's College London)** pointed out a very important aspect of the European Qualification Framework - it is not a directive, therefore it is not obligatory for countries to put it in place. The national framework or qualifications system and its qualifications are based on the principle and objective of learning outcomes and are linked to arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning where those exist, to credit systems. It is one of the criteria for validation. Within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, it is possible to link it with the EQF and use the ECVET for the purpose of transfer, recognition and accumulation of an individual's learning outcomes achieved in formal and where appropriate, non-formal and informal contexts.

With regards to adult education, the Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning from November 2011 states that there is a need for establishing a functioning system for validating non-formal and informal learning, while the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated that this recognition generates four different types of benefits: economic, educational, social and psychological.

In the United Kingdom, there is neither a national approach nor legal framework to the validation as there are devolved responsibilities for Lifelong Learning. The Qualifications and Credit Framework cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Scotland has its separate Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. The application lies with learning providers and awarding organisations.

With regards to the recognition of prior learning, the Qualification and Credit Framework assessment method based on the learners demonstration of acquired competences, possessed skills that do not need to be furthered through coursework. From the learners' perspective, there is lack of guidance and centralised source of knowledge on the recognition procedures.

Dr Bridgeford concluded his presentation by making reference to the EU Recommendation that states that all citizens can apply for the validation of their learning outcomes and that all qualifications, at any level, can be acquired through the Validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Mr Hans Hautvast (FNV Formaat) contributed to the panel with a presentation on the Dutch education system and some characteristics of the Dutch labour market i.e. in the Netherlands, members of the works' councils have a statutory right to education and they execute it on a large scale. The participants of FNV Formaat courses are both blue and white collar workers with different educational backgrounds and levels. Through its association with the Trade Union, FNV Formaat is providing lower educated workers with educational programs with the view that their empowerment is the key to enhancing modern labour relations through education – Empowering people in their jobs.

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In his presentation Mr Hautvast presented the characteristics of the Dutch educational system i.e. vocational education is only available for people as of the age of 15-16, too late for those who leave the education system as drop outs without any degree, leading to the fact that approximately 30% of the labour population has no or an insufficient level of qualification in order to be successful on the job market. One of the biggest problems the labour market in the Netherlands is facing nowadays is the lack of fit between education and job requirements. As the industry is in transition, there is a great need for a development of workers' skills and competences, including the soft skills that are becoming more and more important. Furthermore, regarding the vocational education and training, it became a pre-requisite to change its accessibility and incorporate other than a classroom training teaching methods.

Finally, Mr Hautvast presented three proposals on how to improve the development of skills and competences of workers: to make the working place a learning place, so working experiences can be formalised; to formalise the working experience to a learning experience; and to make learning programmes "just-in-time" and "just-in-case".

DEBATE & CONCLUSIONS

During the discussion following the presentation, a number of questions were asked on the practical aspects of the validation process in France; possible trends in standardisation of the education curricula; relations between formal education system and the non-formal and informal learning environment etc.

It was stated that there will not be a common educational standard in Europe for all Member States, as education is a national prerogative; however there is a willingness among Member States to have similar developments in the education and training sphere. What is important to remember is the fact that 77 million Europeans aged 25-64 (close to 30%) still have at most lower secondary education and those with low qualifications are much less likely to participate in up-skilling and lifelong learning. This highlights the urgent need for providing all people – especially those 'far' from education – with educational opportunities that will support their development on the one hand, and on the other, will recognise the skills, knowledge and qualifications that they have acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments.

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