# and certifying non-formal and informal learning: a contribution to its understanding

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SUMMARY

**This issue of the *European journal of vocational training* is dedicated to assessment, recognition/validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning (ARCNIL), one of the emerging core subjects of European vocational education and training policies.**

**The purpose of the issue is to contribute to the discussion and understanding of ARCNIL, adopting various but complementary approaches and research perspectives, at different levels of analysis. It offers an opportunity to enrich the contemporary educational debate by analysing fundamental issues and critical aspects.**

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## What is ARCNIL?

ARCNIL is a set of social practices developed to assess, recognise, validate and certify non-formal and informal learning, also commonly referred to as prior experiential learning. The different terminologies used to describe such practices or forms of learning attempt to capture the variety of social practices and constructs that underpin ARCNIL. As seen in the general bibliography – as well as in specific publications such as the *Terminology of European education and training policy* (Cedefop, 2008) – there is a variety of terms used in different countries, aiming to cover a diverse range of articulated practices: accreditation, recognition, certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Driven by a complex articulation of political, economic, educational and other social aspects, ARCNIL has been named, understood and practised differently in various countries and contexts. As Harris (2006, p. 2) points out, these ideas and practices were shaped 'by the interrelation of historical, cultural, economic and political forces in different social contexts'.

ARCNIL has been developed in the context of social systems: in relation to formal education and training, to the labour market – sectors, branches, enterprises – and to civil society. Situated at the crossing of these systems, these social practices can only be understood from a systemic, transdisciplinary, integrative perspective, as well as from different levels of analysis: macro, meso and micro, and taking into account their interrelationships and recursive effects.

Despite being complex, multilevel and also a contradictory concept, subject to tensions, dilemmas and conflicts between different logics – not always clear and explicit –  ARCNIL still has the potential to offer new opportunities to adults, aiding achievement of educational and emancipatory goals, access to employment and the promotion of social justice and inclusion.

## ARCNIL and education: diverse traditions and theoretical frameworks

A key assumption that dominates education is that adults learn, acquire knowledge and develop competences throughout their lives, in multiple contexts and situations, not only in formal education. Life

is a learning process in itself. The complexity sciences approach emphasises learning as a process – rather than as an outcome – where person, learning and context are inseparable: 'a complexity-based view of knowledge helps to expand, rather than suppress or colonise, our understanding of people's learning' (Fenwick, 2006, p. 288), suggesting ways forward and opening new possibilities for rethinking its recognition, according to the author. 'When learning is understood to be continuously coemergent with persons and environment, part of complex adaptive systems occurring at micro and macro levels, it simply makes no sense to treat knowledge as a product (…)' (Fenwick, 2006, p. 290).

As many theorisers state, although experiential learning is the basic process of learning, its potential has only been recently recognised and valued, specifically among formal education and training systems and institutions.

Experiential learning, learning from experience, experience-based learning: there is a wide range of terms for processes that have gained visibility and centrality in education, both in discourse and practice. The multiplicity of meanings and practices associated with experiential learning were analysed by Weil and McGill (1997), who identified four distinct 'villages' or clusters within the global one. According to the authors, the first one is related to assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning 'as a means of gaining access and recognition in relation to educational institutions, employment and professional bodies'; the second village is related to 'the activities oriented to change practice, structures and purposes for post-school education'; the third village places 'learning from experience as the core of education for social change mainly outside educational institutions'; and the fourth village is focused 'on the potential and practice of personal growth and development'. These villages are underpinned by different approaches: humanistic and psychological; humanistic and progressive; social change, transformation and empowerment; and experience as the basis for personal growth and development. However, borders are considered fluid and the dialogue between villages is possible, influencing one another and providing possibilities for new integrations.

Experiential learning and the social practices aimed at making it visible, have different associated meanings and values, and are related to different epistemological and theoretical traditions. Logically therefore, tensions and critical issues are arising from this new field of educational practices, challenging traditional and formal structures,

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particularly questioning assumptions about learning, knowledge, curriculum, power, and social relationships, as social and historical constructs (Harris, 2006; Pires, 2005; Weil and McGill, 1997).

In consequence, ARCNIL, as social and educational practice and as object of research – developed in diverse empirical settings and at the crossing of different disciplines – must be approached in its complexity, with development of new theoretical frameworks.

The current literature provides different approaches and perspectives that emphasise specific aspects: the liberal/humanist perspective, the critical/radical perspective, the technical rationality/ market-oriented perspective. However, we still need to go forward and construct new forms of understanding and new approaches to this phenomenon.

In current education, ARCNIL offers us, according to Young (2006), an opportunity not only for retheorising the frameworks that are used to understand and approach existing practices, but also for new theories.

## ARCNIL and European education and vocational training policies

The evolution of social and education policies, in the context of European construction, and their repositioning in terms of globalisation challenges, has contributed to the transformation of education and vocational training systems, making issues more complex and triggering reflection and the search for innovative responses to emerging problems (Pires, 2007). The recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning have gained visibility in European educational and vocational training settings, following the orientations and initiatives developed by the European Commission. From the political point of view, this issue has achieved great visibility in current agendas and has a significant influence on the European education debate.

According to Feutrie (2005), these European concerns are articulated with the following set of intentions: offer a second opportunity to acquire a qualification, especially for those who do not have one, or who were not successful in their initial education/ training; sustain economic changes and tackle the needs of higher competence levels; promote personal and professional lifelong developmental processes; promote and support internal and external

entrepreneurial, and European, mobility; and ease articulation between the job market and educational institutions, providing better responses.

In the Copenhagen declaration (2002), the development of 'common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning, with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels' is encouraged (Cedefop, Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005, p. 133). Following the work of the European Commission, the European Education Council agreed in May 2004 on a set of principles to be taken into account as guidelines for validation policies and practices, driven by the following considerations: individual rights, obligations of stakeholders, confidence and trust, and credibility and legitimacy.

Setting common principles at European level can contribute to the quality and coherence between the diverse approaches and practices. However, different national contexts and different systems can only be addressed if the specificities of each reality are taken into account. As it is currently understood, ARCNIL is a social practice, developed in particular contexts: we have to consider the social conditions that influence its emergence and further developments.

In this special issue, relevant examples of this national or contextual specificity are provided. Transversal critical questions arising from the research are highlighted. Articles shed light on the complexity of ARCNIL policies and practices, and offer an opportunity to understand the interrelationships between different levels and perspectives of analysis.

## Structure of the thematic issue

The articles selected focus on different but complementary perspectives of ARCNIL: a policy analysis focusing on the structural functioning of systems, their success in implementing ARCNIL, and consequences for education, employment mobility and wages; national case studies; and critical reflection based on literature and empirical research.

From a societal perspective, this issue contains an analysis of why ARCNIL is a social issue, and the challenges associated with this new field of social practice; also from this perspective, there is analysis of the French validation system, pointing out its national

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specificities and shedding light on ruptures that emerged with this innovation. The issue also features an analysis of policy development focused on the relationship between ARCNIL and the European credit transfer arrangements, in the framework of the European and national lifelong learning strategies.

Social, professional, personal and economic benefits and effects of ARCNIL in France and Portugal are discussed, along with an analysis of the concepts of non-formal and informal learning, and their links with the policy aim of validation, and its intended effects.

The first article, by Ivan Svetlik, 'Assessing, recognising and certifying informal and non-formal learning: evolution and challenges', explains why ARCNIL has become a social concern, and puts forward factors that make ARCNIL a pressing issue for European policy; the author discusses some challenges for ARCNIL, pointing out its complexity.

The second article, by Isabelle Le Mouillour and Jens Bjørnåvold, 'Learning outcomes in validation and credit systems', analyses recent education and training developments in the European context – namely the shift to learning outcomes and the development of qualification frameworks – relating them to ARCNIL. The authors identify the need for an integrative perspective as well as future issues for research and policy development.

The next two articles describe the French system of validation and discuss its specificities, pointing out the major challenges and also some of its benefits. The first, by Anne-Juliette Lecourt and Philippe Méhaut, 'Accreditation of prior experiential learning in France: an evolving system with national characteristics', underlines the socially constructed nature of the system. It sheds light on the challenges and ruptures introduced at a societal level. The other article, 'APEL pathways: a passport to employment?', by Isabelle Recotillet and Patrick Werquin, based on data from a survey, analyses the effects of the French validation system on individuals at different levels (employment, salary, personal aspects).

The fifth article, by Pedro Afonso, Recognising and certifying lifelong skills: impact on labour market integration of the unemployed, relies on an econometric estimate supported by a purpose-built longitudinal database. The author analyses the impact of the national Portuguese system of skills recognition, validation and

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([1]) In this article learning is understood as a process leading to knowledge acquirement, and knowledge as contextualised information (Beijerse, 1999).

certification (RVC) on unemployed individuals, and provides clues to understand the role of RVC in the transition between unemployment and employment.

The article Recognition and validation of competences – complexities and tensions, by Carmén Cavaco, addresses the complexity of this specific field of practice, and the tensions that arise between the theoretical approaches and the political and organisational aims. With case study research carried out locally, the author analyses the 'recognition and validation of competences' methodological approach and identifies the paradoxes and tensions faced by the actors in the system.

To conclude this special issue, Gerald Straka discusses the nature of informal and non-formal learning, in his article Informal and implicit learning: concepts, communalities and differences. He analyses the concepts of informal learning in European education and training, relating them to the ARCNIL discussion.

We hope you will enjoy pleasant and fruitful reading, contributing to further and deeper debate.

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