

2018

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### Recommended Citation

Mile, Dzelalija and Carev, Ivana (2018) "Quality Assurance Challenges for Inclusion of "Non-formal Education Qualifications" into NQFs," *Level 3*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 5.

doi:10.21427/D7WJ0S

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/level3/vol14/iss1/5>

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# Quality assurance challenges for inclusion of ‘non-formal education qualifications’ into NQFs

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## Abstract

In this article we analyse practices of various forms of learning in different countries and their key roles for individuals regarding their potential on the labour market, in further education or any other interests of individuals and society. In addition, we analyse validation processes for non-formal and informal learning, as well as quality assurance practices in those countries.

Based on our analysis, we discuss the challenges of the inclusion of ‘non-formal education qualifications’ into national qualifications frameworks, emphasising the quality assurance principles for qualifications that are part of national qualification frameworks, and propose the theoretical base for inclusion of such qualifications into national qualifications frameworks. Some of the key quality assurance challenges discussed are related to the design of qualifications, the application of learning outcomes, valid and reliable assessment according to the agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards, and the process of certifications of those ‘non-formal education qualifications’.

## Key words

Learning outcomes; qualifications frameworks; validation of non-formal and informal learning; quality assurance

## 1. Introduction

Development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in countries worldwide originates from the individual’s and society’s interests in increased economic progress and improved quality of life. Over one-hundred and fifty-five countries worldwide have already developed or implemented their NQFs, which have different roles in different countries. But all NQFs have some common elements: classification of qualifications based on defined learning outcomes, level descriptors, and credit systems. This improves transparency and the evidence-based quality of qualifications.

The quality of an entire qualifications system in any country, especially the quality of the higher education systems, is important for societies who wish to achieve knowledge-based economies and greater social inclusion of individuals. Modern globalised economies require societies with more and more well-educated and trained individuals who are able to perform complex tasks and adapt rapidly to their changing environment and the evolving needs of society, labour markets and individuals. Thus, formal education is important, but often not enough for the requirements of the globalised world. Non-formal and informal ways of learning are necessary and valuable for an individual's progress. Knowledge, skills and competences achieved by non-formal and informal learning are crucial to competitiveness and sustainable employment of individuals. The quality of processes for validation of non-formal and informal learning, methodologies for inclusion of qualification into NQFs, and their referencing to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) and Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) create trust.

The purpose of this article is to support understanding and discussions on the processes and methodologies of the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and quality assurance challenges for inclusion of qualifications into NQFs.

## **2. Non-formal and informal learning**

The concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning have been used by many organisations worldwide, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as by researchers and practitioners around the globe. Formal education mainly relates to the organised, formal, curriculum-based learning that leads to a formally recognised degree or diploma. It is often guided and recognised by government, and teachers are usually trained as professionals in their fields of expertise. Non-formal learning is usually organised but may or may not be guided by a curriculum. Qualified teachers or experts with experience can lead this form of education. It doesn't necessarily result in a formal degree or diploma.

Informal learning is characterised by absence of formal curriculum and no formal credits earned.

In addition to these ways of learning, the key difference between formal education and non-formal and informal learning is in the assessment process and awarding of formally recognised degrees or diplomas, or any other publicly recognised certificates.

In some countries learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning remain publicly and individually unrecognisable, which leads to insufficient involvement of skilled and knowledgeable individuals in the development of society. Learning outcomes, acquired throughout non-formal and informal learning, tested, evaluated and ultimately recognised through public documents and classified as appropriate for inclusion into the qualifications framework, open many possibilities for both the developments of individuals and for society's potential.

### **3. Characteristics of qualifications and learning outcomes**

Learning outcomes, as defined in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), are statements referring to learner's knowledge, understanding and working ability after completing the learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and responsibility and autonomy. A qualification is a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process, which is obtained when a competent authority determines an individual's achievements of learning outcomes to given standards, through the issue of a certificate or diploma [EQF].

In qualifications frameworks there are defined basic characteristics of a qualification (which includes the main elements – learning outcomes), as follows:

- Profile, indicated by a Title
- Level, in accordance with level descriptors
- Volume, in ECTS, ECVET or any other credits related to the workload
- Quality, which includes assessment and certification criteria.

Any qualification, which include defined set of learning outcomes, can be fully described by all four basic characteristics: profile, level, volume, and quality.

Quality, unlike all other basic characteristics of the qualification, can be assigned only after the assessment achievement of learning outcomes. Unless excluded by special requirements, by any forms of learning (formal, non-formal or informal learning) students can achieve learning outcomes of all types of profiles, at any level of the qualification and with any value of workload. It means that the quality of the qualification is the only characteristic which could distinguishes one group of learning outcomes (written within a qualification) achieved by formal education from the same group of learning outcomes achieved within non-formal or informal learning. Unlike formal education it means that non-formal and informal learning does not include formally recognised assessment of achieved

learning outcomes. If some assessment process still exists within non-formal learning, it is probably not covered by recognised quality assurance mechanisms.

The Annex IV of the EU Recommendations on the EQF stresses that the qualifications included in qualifications framework, among others, should have ensured valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes-based standards, and address the process of certification. It means that achievement of recognised qualifications (or a part) is possible after the valid assessment and certification phases of the validation process – as defined by the EU Recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

#### **4. Validation practices of non-formal and Informal learning**

A wide spectrum of non-formal and informal learning validation approaches has been applied by European countries. Either it is done with systematically approach throughout their qualifications systems as well as only validation within a part of qualifications systems such as higher education systems. There are national qualifications systems, which are fully or partly open to admission based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The final decision about validation is the responsibility of education institutions. In higher education in some countries, validation of non-formal and informal learning can only lead to a limited number of ECTS credits. The lowest limits, concerning the number of credits in higher education, may be given on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning, for example in Italy - up to 12 ECTS credits, Spain - up to 15 %, and Portugal - up to one third. In Scotland and Sweden, it is up to higher education institutions to decide how many credits they grant on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning, which is in general up to half. In some countries, like France, Netherland, and Norway, validation of non-formal and informal learning can lead to complete higher education qualifications.

It is important to stress, in most of these cases, it is however more a theoretical possibility, or still in the progress of being developed, rather than a common practice. An example of a country with a commonly used practice to full qualifications based on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is France. Higher education institutions have autonomy to decide about the procedures and results. Very often there is requirement related to the duration and currency of non-formal and informal learning, for example, Denmark, France, Luxemburg, Scotland.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education systems remains an area where further actions are needed in most of the countries.

Assessment of learning outcomes is a key part of the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Trust in the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning is deeply linked to the reliability of the process of assessment the learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning. Therefore, clear principles, criteria and procedures related to the validation of non-formal and informal learning must be transparent and under quality assurance mechanisms. The assessment of learning outcomes must be impartial in order to avoid all possible forms of conflict of interests. The diagnostic assessment in the validation process determines whether an individual's learning outcomes have been achieved or not. Summative assessment determines whether the individual has demonstrated the appropriate knowledge, skills and competences related to a certain qualification. Summative assessment is one of the key ways of testing within the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The EU Recommendations on validation [VAL] promote the involvement of various stakeholders in the implementation of the validation process, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of commerce, crafts, institutions involved in recognition of qualifications, employment offices, youth organisations, educational institutions and civil associations. EU Recommendations on the validation process suggest the introduction of key phases in the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning so that all interested individuals can benefit from the validation process, taking these phases separately or in combinations:

- IDENTIFICATION by communication of experiences and learning of individuals;
- DOCUMENTATION making experiences of individual's more transparent;
- Formal ASSESSMENT of an individual's learning outcomes;
- CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment, which can lead to partial and full qualification.

As described in the EU Recommendations, the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning for individuals, the labour market and society in general, in many countries should be utilised as one of the key tools for motivating individuals for lifelong learning.

## **5. Inclusion of on-formal qualifications through validation in four countries**

Analysing practices in different countries, in many cases individuals and different stakeholders increasingly understand the value of lifelong learning, especially when validating non-formal and

informal learning is linked to quality assurance mechanisms of qualifications frameworks. The section below presents the basics of the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning in several countries, without going into details of such processes.

## 5.1 Canada

Canada is a country with over thirty years of experience in implementing the validation of non-formal and informal learning *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)*.

Ensuring the quality of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Canada consists of agreed procedures, methods and tools for assessment of the acquired knowledge and skills based on the above-mentioned principles.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Canada has a long history of practice, and has influenced building EU Recommendations and guidelines on validation of non-formal and informal learning in EU member states. Experiences in Canada have also had an impact on the development of a validation system in Scotland.

## 5.2 New Zealand

The interest in the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning in New Zealand has existed since 1990, when the legal basis for its implementation through the development of the Qualifications Framework was adopted. The Qualifications Framework in New Zealand enables individuals to assess the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they have acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning in New Zealand has been integrated into the Qualifications Framework with the following principles:

- The validation process is available to anyone who has acquired the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that can be evaluated;
- Access to the validation process is achieved through institutions accredited for this process;
- Guidelines and support to individuals during the validation process;
- Procedures for validation are such as to ensure fair, valid and conscientious assessment of individuals;

- Certificates can only be awarded for valid knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values regardless of form, duration, and place of learning.

The difficulties faced during the first years of the process of validation of non-formal and informal learning in New Zealand were related to training of examiners and other professionals, institutional management, and teacher's positive attitude towards the evaluation process.

### **5.3 Croatia**

Croatia has begun to develop a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning through the development and implementation of the Croatian Qualifications Framework. Within the Croatian Qualification Framework Act, it is envisaged to adopt a regulation of all elements of the validation process. After lengthy discussions, the 'Rulebook' is envisaged to be adopted in 2018.

The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Croatia is based on qualification standards that clearly outline the learning outcomes and the conditions under which they can be acquired.

The idea is that the validation process in Croatia becomes an additional motivation for lifelong learning, including all forms of learning, and not just the certification of public documents for learning outcomes acquired in other forms. The construction of the validation system and its implementation are extremely slow. Individual education and training institutions, from schools to universities, are already preparing and creating mechanisms for the validation process.

All institutions intending to participate in the validation process for all four phases must have competent professionals in the field of validation, either as employees or external consultants.

### **5.4 France**

The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning (VAE- validation of non-formal learning leading to the certification of qualifications) may lead to the certification of full or partial qualifications in the VET system, and for the purpose of professional orientation. Such a process is possible for all levels of qualifications without the need to participate in formal education. The qualifications gained through the validation process have the same status as those obtained through initial formal education. The validation process includes all phases as introduced by EU Recommendations - identification, documentation, assessment and certification. The development of the validation



process in France has coincided with the restructuring of the qualification system and the introduction of the national VET qualification register. All qualifications awarded through the validation process must be registered in the national register. The validation process in France is strongly linked to lifelong learning, training and employment policies.

Compared to the validation systems in other EU member states, this process has long been in use in France. However, a number of reforms are needed to make the non-formal and informal learning system more accessible to a wide range of users. Improvement in support of individuals needs to be improved, as well as simplification of procedures, improved co-operation between stakeholders, and better quality assurance.

## **6. Quality assurance challenges**

Describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes is part of many reforms in European countries. All European tools for supporting mobility and transparency of qualifications and learning achievements encourage the use of learning outcomes. The role of quality assurance is crucial in supporting higher education systems and institutions responding to changing environments, while ensuring the qualifications achieved by students remain relevant and at the forefront of institutional missions. Quality assurance mechanisms are the core components for all qualifications frameworks – meta-frameworks and national qualifications frameworks. Criteria and procedures in the EQF define clear requirements for the quality assurance mechanisms and the evidence for their implementation, which should include context, input, process and output dimensions, organised as internal and external quality assurance. The quality assurance procedures should give particular emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes. Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies use the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) as a reference document to construct their internal and external quality assurance systems and processes. The ESG also forms the basis for admission of quality assurance agencies to the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR). Quality assurance agencies should be involved in preparing the NQF and the proposal for the QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF referencing, and they should give official developmental advice during the process, which should include information and guarantee that this criterion has been fulfilled in order to provide credibility of the self-certification process.

The countries that have already referenced and self-certified their qualifications systems to the EQF-LLL and the QF-EHEA confirm that the referencing and self-certification process is an opportunity to

bring coherence to quality assurance arrangements – this is possible because all of the main quality assurance bodies have been involved in self-certification processes.

The analysis of practices in different countries shows varying degrees of implementation of the ESG, starting from a group of countries that have yet to establish an independent external quality assurance agency, and ending with a group of countries with the full implementation of the ESG whose quality assurance agency or agencies have been subject to repeated independent reviews for membership of the European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA) and inclusion in EQAR. All countries have established some form of external quality assurance systems, but there are significant differences in the approach behind these systems.

One important distinction that can be drawn is between countries where the primary aim and orientation of external quality assurance is to regulate institutions and study programmes – deciding which of them have a sufficient threshold of quality to operate – and those where the main thrust of external quality assurance is to support improvement in the quality of provision.

In systems where responsible quality assurance agencies have the power to permit or refuse study programmes and/or institutions to operate, or where they advise governments in such decisions, quality assurance can, in broad terms, be perceived as supervisory in character. In these cases, it generally aims to ensure that the minimum quality thresholds are met.

In some countries agencies play other roles, including giving advice on the enhancement of quality of institutions, study programmes and activities at higher education institutions.

Another important distinction is whether external quality assurance in a country focuses on the quality of study programmes or looks at higher education institutions as a whole. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of quality assurance systems now focus on a combination of higher education institutions and study programmes. Some systems focus more exclusively on study programmes, and some focus on higher education institutions. The analysis of implementation of quality assurance systems in higher education shows that quality assurance systems are becoming more complex, and deal with more information at different levels. It is difficult in the manner that quality assurance systems are presented in referencing reports to declare a comprehensive comparative analysis. A number of surveys and reports by ENQA have presented such comparisons. Figure 1 below shows distributions of the implementation level of the quality assurance in higher education systems in European countries.

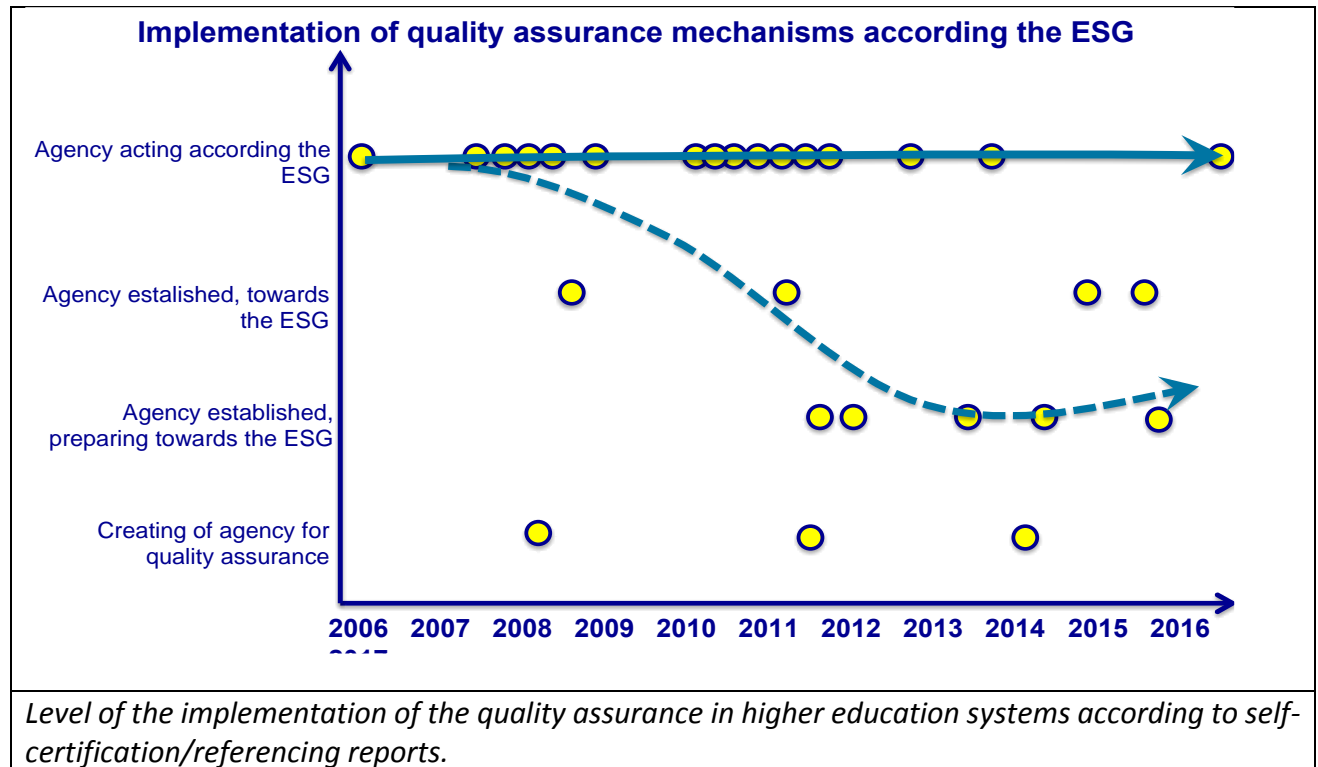


Figure 1: Theoretical base for validation and inclusion of qualifications in NQFs

As written elsewhere, the main elements of any qualification are learning outcomes, often organised and grouped within units of learning outcomes, which gives more transparent structure to the qualification. All learning outcomes need to be assessed according to given standards.

## 6.2 Assessment

From the previous section it may be concluded that the formal public equality of the value of some groups of learning outcomes achieved by different ways of learning is only possible if the assessment standards are similar for any type of learning. This requires that the set of assessment criteria, criteria for the competent awarding institution, and criteria for competent assessors are standardised, regardless of the ways of learning.

Within qualifications frameworks there should be no space for a number of different quality assurance and assessment standards for the same group of learning outcomes organised within a qualification, i.e. no separate assessment criteria, criteria for competent awarding institutions and competent assessors for learning outcomes achieved by formal learning on one hand, and any other ways of learning on the other hand. The assessment criteria should be standardised for achieved learning

outcomes by formal, as for any other ways of learning. Different groups of learning outcomes within the qualification, of course, have their own sets of criteria, awarding institutions and competent assessors.

If it is supposed that within some specific unit there are learning outcomes, which are possible to assess only within formal learning activities and formal conditions, then these requirements become a part of the assessment criteria of that specific unit. It means that in that case the only way for assessment is to follow full formal learning activities and assessment within it. Such examples we can find elsewhere. There will be always some set of learning outcomes, important for society, which is only possible to assess as a part of the formal process of learning.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

Individuals, students and employees, have very clear expectations from NQFs: to achieve right learning outcomes; to be competent; to have widely recognised qualifications; to be employable; and to get an adequate employment with sustained salaries in accordance of their qualifications and other personal characteristics.

All forms of learning enable individuals to acquire various knowledge, skills and competences. Formal education is only one form of the many ways of learning. Other forms of learning (non-formal and informal learning) should not be less valuable forms of learning. Validation of non-formal and informal learning, i.e. learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning, creates additional value, encourages lifelong learning and enhances the economy. Validation and public recognition of learning outcomes achieved encourages individuals to learn more, thus boosting their competitiveness further.

Non-formal education and informal learning have their own specific values, different from formal education, where exceptionally high adaptability to the needs of the labour market, as well as the different needs of individuals, is the crucial value.

We emphasise that non-formal and informal learning should not be converted into formal education in order to be formally publicly recognised. For individuals who have achieved learning outcomes by non-formal and informal learning and who for some reasons have the needs to formally assess the learning outcomes and present them in the form of a public document, this can be done through clear procedures and assessment criteria at the appropriate authorised institutions. Once the learning

outcomes a person has achieved and assessed by authorised institutions, individuals may or may not need to award a public document of a qualification or a part thereof.

There are different terms used in different countries for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (as defined in the EQF Recommendations), such as: "recognition of prior learning"; "recognition of non-formal and informal learning"; "national credit rating, institutional alignment"; "validation of non-formal and informal learning"; etc. In some cases, even within the EQF referencing reports, new concepts like "*non-formal qualification*", "*informal qualification*" and (usual) "*formal qualifications*", are mentioned. The inconsistency in the terminology can cause new issues related to the validation process.

To make the process of validation transparent, it is important to explain the functions of the validation systems, as they are important for opening up national and international qualifications systems to national and international users. The explanation should include the relationship to the NQFs, including levels and credit systems. The process for validation of non-formal and informal learning is guided by the EQF referencing criteria (Criterion 3, in relation to the Criteria 4 and 5 of the EQF).

Quality assurance, requested by Criterion 5 and the ESG in higher education, is a crucial step in development of trust in non-formal and informal learning validation process. Quality assurance procedures define the content of qualifications, the nature of curricula, assessment practices, awarding procedures, and certification requirements. The importance of the validation of learning outcomes gained through non-formal and informal learning has been stressed by sets of communiqués of ministerial conferences.

In this article we analysed the basic characteristics of qualifications, or a part of qualifications, and has discussed the theoretical basis for the principle of equal value between the learning outcomes achieved by formal education or any other forms of learning and validation.

Before assessment takes place, regardless of the ways of learning, one set of learning outcomes is fully described by the same values of three of basic characteristics: profile (indicated by a proper title), level, and volume (or credits). In order to fulfil the principle of equal value of the formal outcome it is theoretically clear that the only remaining basic characteristic of a qualification (i.e. quality) should have also the same value, which is possible only if the assessment criteria (including criteria for competent awarding institution and assessors) are standardised and used in practice.

From the theoretical point of view, it is clear that the only way to include such qualification into NQFs should be possible only if the assessment and certification, as two final phases of the validation process, follows similar assessment route as for the formal education. For some special groups of learning outcomes, usually for a group of regulated professions, it will be necessary to follow full formal education including assessment.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education systems in most countries clearly remains an area where further actions are needed. The validation system has not been in the focus of self-certification and referencing reports in higher education. According to first analysis of new strategies and development of validation processes in many countries there is a danger to equalise processes of validation of non-formal and informal learning as certification of formal qualifications only.

The focus of individuals and societies should be lifelong learning in order to achieve relevant learning outcomes, which is possible by different forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal learning. The certification phase within the validation process should not be the main goal, but rather the useful tool for some individuals and/or employers. Other phases of validation, especially identification, should be the focus, as it motivates individuals for constant and continues learning – lifelong learning.

Analysing the practices of quality assurance and validation process and strategic actions in various countries, it is clear that practically all countries have established some form of external quality assurance systems and validation process, but there are significant differences in the approach behind those systems and their interrelations. Most higher education systems are using a quality assurance agency or agencies, which are registered in the EQAR, contributing to the development of quality assurance in Bologna countries.

Countries which have flexible NQFs and clear procedure for validation and quality assessment of learning outcomes gained through non-formal and informal ways of learning, usually have progressive economies compared to those which do not apply these mechanisms. The more choices of learning outcomes, and more time to use and to and benefiting from learning outcomes gained gives more freedom to individuals to meet their needs. It also promotes a culture of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning for individuals is an effective way of promoting an economy based on knowledge and on highly skilled individuals.

The countries mentioned in this report with examples of well-structured quality assurance systems and integration of validation processes have better developed economies with more economical freedom. One of the reasons of economic freedom may be in using various phases of the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, as giving more freedom in education and lifelong learning to individuals which raises achievement of their individual potentials and contributes to their economic development. This statement needs to be confirmed with deeper approaches and wider research.

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