

Implementing and Developing Recognition of Non-Formal Learning Systems

Recommendations and Guidelines
for Higher Education Institutions



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Preface and Scope

The importance of Recognition of Informal (Prior) Learning has been highlighted for a long time at the European level. Since 2004, the European Union Council is encouraging and endorsing the collection of information and best practices on recognition of prior learning matters for the European Inventory on Validation (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018). To promote the implementation of recognition systems and frameworks, in 2009 have been published (and in 2015 updated) the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning. The Guidelines provide some clarifications for organizations, responsible for initiating, developing, implementing recognition, about conditions for recognition, focusing on the most important acceptable solutions at various stages of the process.

A very important document of recent years, which defined the importance and significance of formalization of prior and non-formal acquired competencies – 20 December 2012 European Union Council Recommendation “On the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning”. The Council argues that validation of non-formally acquired competencies can make each country competitive in the global knowledge area. So, by 2018 each member-state is encouraged to introduce national systems for the recognition of competencies in prior and non-formal learning, which would enable individuals to validate knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal or informal learning, also to obtain a partial or full qualification based on recognized non-formal or informal learning. The recommendations also emphasize the general principles which, depending on the region and its predominant economic needs and characteristics of the sector, as well as of the specific community, should be addressed in measures for the recognition of informal and non-formal competencies.

By 28 November 2018 European Union Council Recommendation “On Promoting Automatic Mutual Recognition of Higher Education and Upper Secondary Education and Training Qualifications and the Outcomes of Learning Periods Abroad”, the Council has emphasized a recommendation on permeability and mobility matters: to explore good practice concerning the recognition of prior learning and permeability between education and training sectors, in particular between vocational education and training and higher education. Also, the Council has defined a concept of recognition prior learning as a recognition of learning outcomes, whether from formal education and training or non-formal or informal learning, which were acquired before requesting validation.

National and Institutional Developments in Recognition of Non-Formal and Prior Learning

Although non-formal and prior recognition is highly discussed in various European-wide policies, some differences are existing among different national and institutional contexts, e. g.:

- how the non-formal and prior recognition is understood and be implemented (at the institutional and national level);
- what is the extent of non-formal and prior recognition and how it can affect the student pathway in terms of studying;
- how non-formal and prior recognition is aligned with national frameworks and regulations, etc.

Seeking to understand and spot the similarities and differences between different institutions and regions, how does non-formal (prior) recognition is being implemented, hereinafter will be overviewed the experiences and recognition frameworks in **Vilnius University** (Lithuania), **University Jean Monnet** (France) and **University of Granada** (Spain).

IMPLEMENTING RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING SYSTEM: THE OVERVIEW OF VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

Background

Vilnius University (*Vilniaus universitetas*; VU) is one of the largest higher education institutions in Lithuania and the Eastern European region, established in 1579. It has 15 faculties with more than 22.000 students and 3.000 academic staff members (2021).

Frameworks on Recognition

In VU, the Recognition of Prior Learning was introduced in 2019. Recognition of Prior Learning is designed for expanding the opportunities on students' independent learning matters and satisfying individual learning needs by implementing the main principles of lifelong learning.

Recognition of Prior Learning procedures at VU is dedicated only towards VU students and are not be open to external requests. The Recognition of Prior Learning framework within is based on the process, wherein applicants may seek recognition of their non-formal and (or) informal learning competencies regardless of how they were acquired. The applicant may seek recognition of the competencies acquired in his working field, unpaid and (or) voluntary work or practice, short-term or long-term internships, courses, seminars, projects, exhibitions, independent learning, etc. As a final form of recognition, the accomplishments of prior learning can be fully recognised as a particular study subject only. The maximum length of the procedure is up to 2 months.

It needs to highlight, the recognition of prior learning procedures are implemented in each VU faculty. Also, the Faculty ensures academic consultancy services for students by appointing tutors from non-academic staff. The recognition of prior learning at VU faculty is implemented by the **following procedures**:

- The Candidate, who seeks recognition, has to provide to VU Faculty's Study Department the Application and student-prepared Learning Achievement Folder (*portfolio*). By the portfolio, the Candidate provides all the information and documentation regarding previous prior and non-formal learning experiences and makes self-reflection on his/her prior learning experiences;
- Faculty's Study Department forwards application and portfolio, submitted by the Applicant, to Study Programme Committee;
- The Committee takes the decision that:
 - the evidence, provided by the Applicant, allows acknowledging that the Applicant has acquired competencies, corresponding to at least the threshold level of achievements;
 - the evidence, provided by the Applicant, allows acknowledging that Applicant has not acquired competencies corresponding to the level of achievements.
 - the evidence, provided by the Applicant, is not sufficient to objectively and comprehensively assess and acknowledge that the Applicant has acquired competencies corresponding to at least the threshold level of achievement and to prescribe additional assessment methods and exercises (test, practical tasks, monitoring of practical tasks, etc.). The coordinating lecturer of the study subject is responsible for carrying out the assessment, appointed by the Committee, and submitting the recommendation on the decision to the Committee no later than 10 working days after the appointment.
 - the evidence, provided by the Applicant, may not be objectively and fully assessed by the members of the Committee. In that case, the Committee may request the Vice-Dean

for Studies of Faculty to form a new commission, which could make an additional assessment and make a recommendation to the Committee on the recognition of the Applicant's non-formal and informal learning competencies and the crediting of the subject (module).

- The final decision, made by the Committee, on recognition of the Candidate's competence and the crediting of the study subject (module) matters are fixed by the official record the Committee meeting and the Candidate is be informed.
- The Candidate, who does not agree with the assessment results, provided by the Committee, have a right to appeal the final decision of the Committee to the Dispute Settlement Board of the Faculty.

DEVELOPING RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: THE EXPERIENCE OF JEAN MONNET UNIVERSITY

Background

Jean Monnet University (*Université Jean Monnet Saint-Etienne*; UJM) has been established in 1969. It is a comprehensive institution with five faculties, and several institutes and 1 Engineering School. More than 20.000 students (among them, 16.5 per cent are coming from 129 different countries) are registered in its different curricula (300 diplomas from Undergraduate to Doctorate levels) and it has 1.500 staff members (among them, 915 – academics).

Since 2007, it is one of the founding member of the University of Lyon (*Université de Lyon*), one of the French Communities of universities and institutions.

UJM is currently involved in various national and international projects financed through different programmes such as *Erasmus+* learning mobility, *Erasmus+* international credit mobility, EMJMD, *Erasmus+* Strategic Partnerships. It is the second French university with more of 6 EMJMD programmes.

Frameworks on Recognition

Recognition of Prior Learning is based on two mechanisms: **the APEL – Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning** (in French: *VAE – Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*) and **APPPL – Accreditation of Prior Personal and Professional Experience** (in French: *VAPP – Validation des Acquis Personnels et Professionnels*).

The APEL is based on the Social Modernization Law of 17 January 2002 and the national Decree No. 2002-590. Everybody who can prove at least one year of experience in the field of the targeted diploma can apply for an APEL. According to 2nd article of the Social Modernization Law:

The experience acquired corresponding to the exercise, whether continuous or not, can be validated for a cumulative duration of at least 3 years of salaried, self-employed or voluntary activities. These skills must justify all or part of the knowledge and skills required for obtaining the diploma.

The objective of an APEL is to get a diploma issued in the name of the State, by proving that the experience acquired by the candidate covers the content of the diploma. The APEL is based on a single application for a single diploma in a single establishment – if different diplomas: applications limited to 3 in the same year).

The APEL process is based on **four phases**:

1. **Information.** Candidate must contact the APEL department. The APEL department reviews the candidate's highest level of study and the professional experience they have in order to suggest/target the most appropriate diploma that would suit them (usually vocational degrees and Master's Degrees). If the student is oriented to a specific degree, the APEL department can put him/her in contact with the pedagogical responsible of the concerned program. If the candidate is accepted by the responsible, APEL department send a Starter Pack with all the information concerning the APEL process.
2. **Feasibility.** Candidate and the APEL department work on a "feasibility record". This document describes the candidate's professional experiences and trainings with supporting documents.
3. **APEL Record Process.** Based on a blended approach, the candidate receives administrative and teaching support in different formats: MOOCs, Flipped Classroom, Record Review, and teacher approach. This is the phase where teachers and the APEL department work on the record to identify and develop legally binding document based on the applicant's skills to align it with the content of the diploma. They also prepare the candidate to the oral presentation.
4. **Decision.** A jury, constituted by teaching staff members and people from the concerned sector, makes the decision. This will be based on the APEL Record and the oral presentation. The recognition of the experience into a diploma could be refused, totally recognised or partially recognised. If some skills or knowledge are missing, the jury could recommend the candidate to take complementary courses in university, acquire other/new experience or write a thesis.

An alternative version of APEL is the APPPL (Accreditation of Prior Professional and Personal Learning), which allow candidates to enrol on courses in order to obtain a degree because of their prior professional experience. In contrast with APEL, the only eligibility criteria to apply for an APPPL is to have interrupted studies for 2 years.

THE EXPERIENCE ON APPLYING RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING SYSTEM IN UNIVERSITY OF GRANADA

Background

University of Granada (*Universidad de Granada*; UG) is established in 1547. It has 22 faculties, 4 schools, 1 associate school, 124 departments with more than 50.000 students with 3.500 academic and research staff members.

According to the National Law 1393/2007, which establishes the structure of official university teaching, as well as the regulations of the University of Granada in terms of the creation, modification, temporary or definitive suspension and management of degrees The University of Granada can request the recognition of credits for the following reasons:

1. **Non-official university studies**, understood as such studies the University of Granada own degrees or those of other universities, the courses organised by faculties or services of the University of Granada or non-profit institutions and under the protection of the respective agreement. In these cases, non-official university courses will be recognised according to their official degree The faculties will be the ones to approve the recognition of these courses in the degrees within their competence, for which they must develop a regulation that includes, at least: the number of classroom hours for each ECTS, which may not be less than the credit of the official courses where it is to be recognised, and the timetable compatibility with the development of the degree.

2. **ECTS recognition for professional or work experience**, provided that the competences acquired in such work are substantially identical to the competences of the degree. In these cases, the faculties are also responsible for approving the recognition, following the procedure established for this.

In both situations, 1 and 2, in according with our national law (Law 861/2010), the number of credits recognised for non-official university studies and for professional or work experience may not exceed, as a whole, 15 per cent of the credits of the degree.

3. **Recognition of credits for participation in university activities**. These are recognised for optional credits and don't have a qualification. A distinction should be made between the different types of university activities:

- Cultural activities;
- Sports activities;
- Student representation activities;
- Cooperation and solidarity activities

The proposal of university activities will be made by the university's faculties, services or vice-rectorates. Once they have studied their suitability for the current regulations, they will be forwarded to the vice-rectorate responsible for degrees. Finally, will send a report with the proposed number of credits to be recognised for each activity to the UGR Governing Council for approval.

The procedure for formal and non-formal learning, to apply for credit recognition, starts with the request of the person concerned, together with the documentation accrediting the activity or study completed, and addressed to the centre of the University of Granada in which he / she is obligatorily inscribed. Subsequently, it will be the Deans and Directors, by delegation of the Rector, who will issue the corresponding resolution, positive or negative, which will be included in their academic dossier. For this purpose, deadlines are established in the official academic calendar of the University of Granada, and each faculty publishes, together with the corresponding applicable regulations, the application procedure and subsequent recognition.

Action-Lines and Cycles of Non-Formal Recognition

The Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning by its' procedure could be divided into four stages:

- I. **To-Create**. Creation and (or) making enhancements on recognition of prior learning system and its' procedures within higher education institutions.
- II. **To-Prepare**. Preparation of student's portfolio, wherein self-reflection on experiences during prior learning and evidence on past accomplishments are provided by the student.
- III. **To-Assess**. Higher education institution evaluates students' prior learning experience and assesses, how it aligns with the competencies and academic outcomes in the higher education institution.
- IV. **To-Recognise**. Decision-making procedures on recognition of prior-learning outcomes and results.

Principles and Recommendations for Non-Formal Recognition

TO-CREATE

1. **Recognition of full-degree.** Higher education institution is ought to provide an opportunity for full-degree recognition of prior and non-formal learning accomplishments. If exist any constraints and deficiencies, higher education institution has to be engaged to provide an opportunity for a student to eliminate particular deficiencies and obtain a full-degree diploma.
2. **Monitoring.** Higher education institution has to regularly initiate monitoring of its' recognition of prior learning system. Also, the institution has to collect feedback from the candidates, track and respond to efficiency trends.
3. **Costs.** Within the system, the costs of recognition services can be funded by the applicant, their employers, or internal institutional resources. It needs to mention that recognition services costs for students (who are studying at the same institution) couldbe covered by the institution, social security allocations or other sources of funding. Furthermore, graduates and professionals need to be encouraged to apply for financial allocations to fund these recognition procedures.

TO-PREPARE

4. **Candidate support.** Each candidate, who wants to recognise prior learning experience, has to be supported by higher education institution via academic support services. Each candidate must be followed and consulted by the academic consultant (tutor). The consultant has to be appointed from the institution's academic staff.
5. **Free consultation.** The candidate has to be to have an opportunity to have free (no less than one) consultation with the academic consultant (tutor).
6. **Clear procedures.** The recognition procedures have to be clear and available to anyone:
 - Higher education institution has to provide for candidates different examples of the portfolio;
 - External communication about recognition procedures has to be much simplified as it can; do not use sophisticated academic vocabulary and lexicon (it is suggested to test the procedures with ordinary users and evaluate, how do they understand the procedures). Also, information, dedicated for candidates from abroad, has to be communicated in English;
 - Document templates have to be easy and simple. Also, it is suggested to provide for candidates a *to-do-list*, wherein candidate could be able to track the sequence of procedures.

TO-ASSESS

7. **Recognition criteria.** Recognition and evaluation criteria (or principles) have to be clear and available in public.

- 8. Assessment methods.** Assessment methods have to align with the student's portfolio. It is suggested to have not only one assessment method; try to regularly review and update assessment methods, which are applied during assessment procedures.
- 9. Responsibilities by assessors.** If a candidate seeks to get full recognition of a particular course/subject/module by the recognition of prior learning way, the assessment procedures have to be conducted by a decision-making body, responsible for study programme governance (e. g., study programme committee).

If the candidate seeks to get full recognition of particular competencies, an assessment should be conducted by an experts panel. The panel should consist of experts (academics and social partners stakeholders), who are highly skilled in a particular field.

TO-RECOGNISE

- 10. Grade.** If higher education institution takes a positive decision on full recognition of particular course / subject / module by the recognition of prior learning way, the final result has to be considered as passed and not have a numerical expression (grade).
- 11. Clear information.** If higher education institution takes a positive decision on partly recognition of particular course / subject / module by the recognition of prior learning way, it is suggested to make clear clarification (e. g. in diploma's supplement or other documents), what kind of competencies were recognised from the prior learning experience and how do they align with institutional or national curricula requirements. It is suggested to take attention and explore micro-credentials as a possible solution for some clarifications.
- 12. Social partners.** Higher education institution has to engage social partners in assessment activities. It is extremely suggested to involve different social partners in creating an assessment system and use their practical experience and knowledge.
- 13. Appeals.** It is suggested to have open and detailed appealing procedures, which are clear for applicants and accessible in public.

ANNEX

The Status-Overview on Alignment with the Recommendations and Guidelines (2021)

● have fully implemented

● partially implemented / is implementing

● do not have implemented yet

Recommendation	VU	JMU	UG
TO-CREATE			
1. Recognition of full-degree	●	●	●
2. Monitoring	●	●	●
3. Costs	●	●	●
TO-PREPARE			
4. Candidate support	●	●	●
5. Free consultation	●	●	●
6. Clear procedures	●	●	●
TO-ASSESS			
7. Recognition criteria	●	●	●
8. Assessment methods	●	●	●
9. Responsibilities by assessers	●	●	●
TO-RECOGNISE			
10. Grade	●	●	●
11. Clear information	●	●	●
12. Social partners	●	●	●
13. Appeals	●	●	●

