



Eure.K

# MEMORANDUM

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## Eure.K

Valider et certifier les  
compétences-clés européennes

Eure.K is an Erasmus+ project (2015>2018) that has set itself the aim of studying, through experimentation, the use of the European Reference Framework – Key Competences for lifelong Learning, in arrangements established for the recognition, validation and certification of transversal skills and competences, and in particular experience-based competences, in given contexts of action and configurations of actors.

The Consortium brings together 10 partners from Belgium, France, Italy and Portugal.

The partners have undertaken 10 action-research studies serving different purposes, with different objectives and audiences and carried out in different social spaces of validation (company and professional activity, social insertion, training organization) and spheres of acquisition (job, life course, training, civic and social involvement). The experimentations led to draw up 6 recommendations in a Memorandum relevant to all institutions and actors wishing to implement schemes for the recognition, validation and certification of the 8 key competences within the European Qualification Framework.

<http://www.eure-k.eu/>

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## MEMORANDUM

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**Eure.K project** (Erasmus +) aims to experiment “*using the European Key Competences in arrangements designed for the recognition, validation and certification of transversal competences, including in particular “knowledge gained by experience”, in given contexts of action and configurations of actors*” in the field of lifelong learning. To achieve this, the project has undertaken 10 action-research studies of different audiences in different contexts: social inclusion, company, professional development and formal training.

This is consistent with the “**Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018** “aimed at establishing “good practices” (paragraph 10, page 4) as well as with its recommendations to develop “different methods for assessing key competences in non-formal and informal contexts” (p. 29).

Having gained valuable experience in the field, the 10 action-research projects helped draw up and provide to all the actors and institutions involved in lifelong learning, 6 recommendations for implementing competence recognition, validation and certification arrangements and practices based on the European Reference Framework of the 8 key competences.

1. No recognition and validation arrangement can be set by decree, it must be the result of a co-construction.
2. Applicants are the prime and central players of their own recognition.
3. Competences are assessed. They cannot be quantified.
4. Recognition and validation arrangements are areas designed for learning, not for benchmarking.
5. Competence recognition and validation is not suited to be an industry-ready process. It requires the involvement of guidance and assessment professionals.
6. Cultural and intercultural skills cannot be dissociated from the other key competences

## 1. NO RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION ARRANGEMENT CAN BE SET BY DECREE, IT SHOULD BE THE RESULT OF A CO-CONSTRUCTION

### 1.1. IT CANNOT RESULT FROM A MECHANICAL APPLICATION OF THE REFERENCE FRAMEWORK

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We learnt this from our experience of running the project: the first approach chosen by the project was to consider one by one the 4 last key competences to test the procedure that was applied for their recognition and validation. This approach proved inadequate, for two reasons:

1. Although initial education and training institutions can operate on the basis of a practical logic of *curricula*, programmes and pedagogical methods defined *ex ante*, the same does not apply in the field of adult training and vocational training. This field is defined as a wide range of actors that build, through strategies serving specific goals, the training arrangements.

Key competence recognition and validation are no exception to this rule: they must be a coming together of actors with converging development strategies.

2. The concept of competence, however it is defined, includes knowledge gained in the various spheres of activity in which a subject is engaged. It is not confined to academic learning. Yet learning referred to as “non-formal” or “informal” (as opposed to formal learning) is always specific to each person. Such learning is difficult to “comprehend because it extends over a whole life time” (G. Pineau).

Recognising competences must thus be carried out by an orderly reduction of frames of reference to restrict the scope of identification so as to screen what seems relevant to the sponsors /designers as well as to their purposes.

**The European key competence reference framework is therefore not a “one-size-fits-all”. Skill recognition and validation arrangements are always “tailor made” constructions. They require a joint engineering for their design and their implementation.**

## 1.2. THE FRAMES OF REFERENCE REFLECT VALUES AND STANDARDS

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The structure of recognition and validation arrangements is based on the “frame of reference” which consists of a number of statements used to screen the aptitudes developed by individuals through their various areas of activity to bring them out and meet the *requirements*. These *requirements* however, are never without bias. They do not result from an absolute valid at any time and in any place. They reflect standards and values which sometimes are explicit but more often implicit and promoted by the operators and sponsors.

The 8 European Key Competences are no exception. They are the operational expression in the field of education and training of a strategic goal set by the 23 and 24 March 2000 Lisbon European Council aimed at developing a knowledge-based economy (which marks a break with the industrial economy). Some competences such as the 5<sup>th</sup> (Learning to learn) or the 7<sup>th</sup> (Sense of initiative and



entrepreneurship) show evidence of this change. “Learning to learn” for instance had been left out of the Taylorian system, one of the cornerstones of the “Trente Glorieuses” (the 30-year post-war boom).

The more standards and values that serve as basis for the frames of reference are clarified and discussed, the more likely there will be a clear commitment of the actors involved. This is true in the field of insertion (is this a question of self-development? of employability?), of businesses (is this a question of facilitating professional career paths? HR management?), of formal training (which are the standards and values that should be promoted in disciplines that do not include strictly technical dimensions?).

Establishing frames of reference is therefore not primarily a technical issue supported by a body of theoretical work. It first starts by an examining the standards and values that need to be promoted. This implies a relatively long learning time-scale for all the actors – and in particular those who will provide guidance and will carry out assessments – so as to be able to examine the question of standards and values and to deepen their understanding, beyond any technical consideration.

## 2. APPLICANTS ARE THE PRIME AND CENTRAL PLAYERS IN THEIR OWN RECOGNITION



Recognition is at the heart of today's society. This recognition is ever more important when it is the "knowledge" attributed to a person that is at stake: knowledge acts as a significant benchmark of social ranking.

In skill recognition and validation arrangements, the "knowledge" is subverted by taking into account "experiential knowledge" gained through knowledge that has been developed in different social fields. This knowledge is then built through a narrative on past practices and/or by bringing knowledge to light by explicating practices, drawing from the world in which it was experienced and life courses. Unlike abstract forms of knowledge, it is an integral part of the person before being articulated and expressed to the outside world. It is also a construction that helps form the subject: it is formative.

Referring to the competences is therefore not merely a procedure among others used to certify peoples' knowledge. It subverts the way knowledge was built and in this way requires the learning subject to be considered the central player.

Ethical and pedagogical considerations stem from this reflection.

No individual can be compelled to take part in a competence recognition scheme. The constraint may be exerted by an insertion institution or by the person's company. Aside from the fact the constraint is ineffective (how to expect someone to bring to light their own experience by simply requiring that they should?), there is the risk of seeing the person feel further disqualified and submitting them to another stigmatising social labelling in case of failure.

This implies that the applicant needs to be clearly informed on the objectives of the arrangement (purposes pursued by the sponsors / designers), its pedagogical approaches and methods, the benefits the applicant can expect professionally, socially and personally. A contract can then recognise the transition from a simple consent to a genuine commitment. The commitment is always a mutual construction between the organization that implements the recognition and validation arrangements and the applicant.

Pedagogical procedures must also specify the conditions governing the commitment of individuals. First: a specific contract can include a “right to withdrawal” at any time. Then: the guarantee of a “safe environment” that ensures the applicant keeps full control over the disclosure of their personal information; and of a space based on the principle of self-determination. Finally, the assessment is necessarily “formative”: a joint process ensures that the learning subjects identify and measure their learning outcomes and improvements as part of a learning process, thereby avoiding being simply ranked according to a benchmark that would presents the risk of pointing out their shortcomings and failures.

### 3. COMPETENCES ARE ASSESSED. THEY CANNOT BE QUANTIFIED



Skills are not “substances” that can be objectified from outside a person and then be measured using measurement instruments. Skills are “assessed” by being assigned a value resulting from a judgement: a judgement that will appraise a value. The judgement must be based on the best possible tool, but ultimately it is not the measurement tool but rather the human element of the system that will certify (or not) the “so called” person’s skills.

Giving in to the temptation of objectification leads to significantly increasing the number of unending evidence criteria. A person’s aptitudes cannot be “reified”: the assessor can only grasp apparent signs of these aptitudes in contexts that are consistently incidental and unique, or by simulations that are generally artificially set up for the purpose of the validation operation. The assessment connects what is “observable” (objectively identified) and a “referent” (a specific person), and results in an operation leading to a qualification (ascribing defined qualities from the observable to the referent): it is the result of an activity carried out by the assessment operator who is caught up in the intrinsic tension existing between the measurement and a degree of subjectivity that ultimately will be part of the assessment.

Beyond the statement of evidence criteria, frames of reference are used to set out the “requirements” expected by sponsors/arrangement designers for the requirements to be fully used for appraising an applicant, beyond the events /

behaviours observed. In this sense, assessment “in acts” is a co-production process involving the sponsor and the assessor: it is the assessor who will ultimately produce and take responsibility for the assessment. Refining the act of assessment and ensuring its quality, which are features legitimately expected to guarantee equal treatment and credibility, are therefore not dependent on the “frame of reference” tool. This can only be achieved by collectives or professional bodies that, based on discussions, in particular around critical situations, build appraisal standards that go beyond individual standards by establishing professional standards.

The element of subjectivity pertaining to assessment also comes from applicants who, ultimately, will either accept or not to play along in the process of developing an account of their own history and of explicating their practices. This will depend of the degree to which they engage in the process. Their involvement will develop as individuals gain understanding and take on board the “requirements”, those set out in the frame of reference as well as those of the assessor. Individuals will then be able to bring to light past practices that meet the frame of reference requirements, requirements that after an initial formal perception of its judgment criteria they previously considered they could not meet. That is what is at stake when conducting a co-assessment from beginning to end.

#### 4. RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION ARRANGEMENTS ARE AREAS DESIGNED FOR LEARNING, NOT FOR BENCHMARKING



There is a great danger in the process of competence recognition and validation of once again benchmarking individuals. In such case individuals are one more time sent back to the situation in which they are being ranked in the competitive labour market, in the system giving access to training programmes or in their everyday life in which they are assigned a social rank. Such use makes recognition and validation arrangements' ambitions devoid of their core philosophy.

**Recognition comes first and prevails over any validation and certification.** A certification, when it is being considered, is merely the result of a recognition, so that individuals can bring proof that they have acquired new personal resources gained through experience in their different social spheres. Reversing the approach by focusing on a certification creates the risk of “annihilating” this founding and fundamental moment and will subject the approach to criteria that determine achieving the certification.

It is the reason why an arrangement must first be considered a **special place for learning**. This is essentially the case when it offers people the possibility to **switch** between dealing with memories on significant past practices and/or an analytical reflection on aptitudes gained. It is also the case when individuals can experience in real life the precious character of their own world being considered a place where knowledge has been built.

In this sense, the **frames of reference are resources and not benchmarks**. Within the scope of the world in which the applicants live, they are points of reference that will help the applicants to screen and give substance, based on the given criteria, to their own reading of their world and their analytical thinking of that world. By performing this, they meet the criteria that the “sponsors / designers” have themselves chosen for the frames of reference.

Another consequence needs to be addressed: a failure (complete or partial) is possible in the test leading to recognition and validation. Only acquired competences that were previously overlooked can be assigned a value, and with this comes a restored self-confidence for acquiring more skills.

Any sense of failure sends back to a system that is based on a rationale designed to have the applicant subjected to a benchmarking test. In this case hetero-evaluated training (external judgement) prevails over self-training.

## 5. COMPETENCE RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION IS NOT SUITED TO BE AN INDUSTRY-READY PROCESS. IT REQUIRES THE INVOLVEMENT OF GUIDANCE AND ASSESSMENT PROFESSIONALS



Despite the fact arrangements appear targeted and circumstantial, it does not mean they are restricted to certain contexts or to a limited audience: they can be relevant to a wide range of audiences to offer recognition and validation valid throughout a territory.

Arrangements that have a “general scope” are in danger of falling into the trap of industrial mechanisation.

Industrial mechanisation seeks to standardise the arrangements. It aims at defining all the processes and tools beforehand, regardless of the contexts and situations. It is based on the premise that it is the tools that guarantee the quality that is targeted, not the actors involved. Thus, to ensure certifications are the same whatever the places and actors associated, it will add a profusion of criteria to the frame of reference. It thereby aims to reduce assessment to a simple mechanical matching on one side of the criteria and on the other of behaviour observed, with the pointless aim of avoiding any possible subjectivity to emerge.

Industrial mechanisation often appears as a way of cutting costs to the minimum. It goes against the very aim of competence recognition and validation. The most state-of-the-art and standardised tools will never be able to give an account of the singularity of applicants’ “living environment” as well as the process by which this is recognised and validated.



Tools need to be designed more to provide guidance than as prescriptions of operating procedures to be applied in all situations. In the initial stage of a programme in particular, they can be used as training tools to equip the actors and build their ability to judge.

Ensuring an equal treatment of candidates is ultimately founded on an improvement of actors' professional competence in counselling, validation and certification activities. Providing guidance presupposes having already personally experienced a recognition process. Assessing requires *at least* having clarified for oneself one's own judgement criteria at play in the act of assessing.

The assessor's "professional behaviour" involved in the arrangements are new. They should not be left to the sole individual responsibility of the actors. Experience developed by every actor represents resources that serve to build collectives or professional bodies that will through discussions and disagreements build a collective professional knowledge.

Professionalization is also developed through integrated engineering that involves all the professionals taking part in the arrangement, from its design to its implementation. Contrary to mechanised engineering, a professional engineering is built based on cooperation between actors throughout the stages (design, implementation, assessment); by the training of actors in activities focused on the applicant and not on the benchmark; by an iterative approach supported by feedback from those "who do" and thereby communicate their reflective analysis on the activity they have carried out to help develop the arrangement; and by establishing a body of professional knowledge by sharing practices.

## 6. CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL SKILLS CANNOT BE DISSOCIATED FROM THE OTHER KEY COMPETENCES



The 8<sup>th</sup> competence of the European Key Competence Reference Framework refers to cultural awareness and expression, and more specifically on an “appreciation of the importance of the creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotions in a range of media, including music, performing arts, literature, and the visual arts”.

This competence is all too often forgotten in frames of reference. It is however one of the “key competences that citizens require for their personal fulfilment, social inclusion, active citizenship and employability” (according to the 3 first requirements set out in the 2006 version of the European key competence reference framework). Like all the other European key competences it is transversal to all the other competences. Yet it is particularly relevant for it to be identified specifically to avoid instrumental use being made of key competences, this driven by a short-term utilitarian vision. This competence in particular is in line with the recommendation made during the meeting of Education Ministers of 17 March 2015 for developing intercultural competences, a meeting held in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. It often appears relevant to promote what young people have learnt in informal contexts or in the case of international mobility schemes organized as part of their course of study.

This area of competence explicitly falls within the scope of attitudes and postures developed by individuals, either students or workers, in relation to cultural objects

and situations, or in the context of cross-cultural contacts. It implies ways of learning or transformations outside the scope of a technical approach: the transformations cannot be reduced to an acquisition of theoretical knowledge (although such knowledge does play a role, taking the form of discovery of cultural productions) or to the development of technical skills.

The work carried out with teams of trainers in the context of action-research projects, those in particular including international mobility projects during the course of training, helped identify procedures for providing guidance to students, supporting them in the development of their cultural and intercultural competences so as to achieve an identification, validation and certification of the competences. This confirms and updates, for this competence, previous recommendations.

Two practical ways forward can be identified.

## **6.1 FACILITATE “OPENLY” LOOKING AT COMPETENCES BEING DEVELOPED, STEERED BY THE SPECIFICITY OF INTERCULTURAL SITUATIONS EXPERIENCED BY INDIVIDUALS ENGAGED IN TRAINING**

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Due to the fact the 8<sup>th</sup> key competence in the European reference framework is about attitudes and postures and not knowledge and techniques, it rules out aiming at developing a “catalogue” of pre-established competences: that is precisely what is suggested by the open form of wording of the competence in the European reference framework.

Assessors (in the informal context) and trainers (providing guidance for the mobility period) acquiesce in accepting a certain degree of existing uncertainty pertaining to

the types of competences that will be developed. They consider that the types of competences developed greatly vary from one person to another, depending on their maturity, their past experiences of intercultural situations, their creative experiences, the specific types of intercultural situations experienced during a mobility period. This approach implies that it should be considered that the list of competences that will be developed by each person will progressively emerge and will be specific to each individual. The question is therefore not to confine oneself in a reference framework-based model, and to consider that the transformation experienced will be measured against each person's personal path rather than against a pre-established frame of reference.

## 6.2 ADAPT ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES TO THE SPECIFICITY OF TARGETED SKILLS

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The approach mentioned above requires specific assessment methods that will not be initiated based on a competence frame of reference but on the experience of individuals engaged in international mobility. In practice, assessors favour forms of assessment through which individuals who are back from a mobility period start from a description and analysis of their experience so as to personally identify and formalise their cultural and intercultural skills. In addition, trainers and advisors favour tools offering the students the possibility of producing, throughout the whole process, traces relating to their experience: drawing up a project before the mobility period, spending time referring back to the project either with other students or during contacts with a trainer (by email, phone, videoconference) during the mobility period, individually drawing up a mobility logbook.



**GRAPHIC PROJECT**

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