

Discovering Competencies

Tools for your future

Returns of competence assessment for young people



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is increasingly difficult for young people with low or no formal qualifications to find a job. However, even without formal training or labour market experience, young persons gather social and personal competencies. These “soft” competencies are essential for doing a good job. For some jobs, they may even be the most important elements of qualification. However, employers and those working with young people find it difficult to recognise and assess these informal competencies. Such assessment, though, is important to match employers and potential employees and to define training needs of an unemployed person. Besides, solely mastering certain skills is not enough anymore. As a matter of fact the so called hard skills, mainly proved by academic certificates, are rated as being of decreasing direct relevance to companies. Instead of paying attention to narrowly defined skills and qualifications companies are placing more importance on the candidates’ personal qualities and attitudes. The workforce is expected to show flexibility, entrepreneurship qualities, personal responsibility, adaptability, innovation, creativity and in general a self-directed and a self-motivated attitude.

While some European countries have developed widely accepted systems of competence assessment, others need to raise awareness and define methods and procedures for competence assessment. The project “Discovering Competencies – Tools for Your Future” thus aims at a transfer of good practices of competence assessment for disadvantaged young persons. The project is funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission as a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project. The following partner institutions and countries participate in the project: Aarhus University – Department of Education (Denmark); GIB Innovation Research and Consultancy, in cooperation with Berlin Senate for Integration, Labour and Social Issues (Germany); University of the Aegean and Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (Greece); Folkuniversitetet – Kursverksamheten vid Lund Universitetet (Sweden).

General benefits of competence assessment

It is today common sense that nowadays’ companies need meaningful information on what job applicants and employees can actually do. Competencies that individuals gain informally, e.g. during the work process, are not documented anywhere. This is a serious obstacle to the employability and thus the mobility of employees: they have to be able to demonstrate the wide range of their vocational competences to take complete advantage of potentials for employment and advancement. Apart from the workplace itself, competence assessment can also be used as the basis for initiating and guiding both training and development. Individuals and employers are able to detect skill gaps and identify them as areas of positive growth potential.

Thus, competence assessment can benefit both vocational education / training institutions and companies' human resource departments, as it can help to match the employer's needs with the suitable job candidate. On the demand side the assessment of competencies will make skills more transparent and transferable; thus planning and controlling the human resource procurement of the company will be much easier. In addition to school-leaving certificates the department for human resources will be provided with documents on informally acquired competences which allow a more detailed and specific evaluation. A standardized system of competence assessment can simplify the judgement of individual qualities as well as it can facilitate the comparability between applicants. It will also give the top management additional information concerning staff development, skill gaps or resources within the workforce, deployment, outsourcing and hiring policies.

On the supply side the workforce will also benefit majorly from the implementation of a structured competence assessment system and its methods. First of all, it can help unemployed persons to find a job because it supplies them with an objective indicator of an individual's competencies and abilities. Moreover, it can ease the entrance into the formal training system as well as improve labour market eligibility. Competence assessment can also ease a promotion at the workplace. All in all, competence assessment can empower each individual with the responsibility to develop their own competences consistently. A system which includes a comprehensive training system will enhance, guide and permit employees to be in an active condition of ongoing training. A structured system of competence assessment could be especially beneficial for those with low qualification levels (low and semi-skilled workers), for (long-term) young unemployed people, for disadvantaged social groups or for migrants, as it opens the way for the recognition of competences obtained in the work-environment and via other non-formal and informal pathways.

The situation in Greece

In May 2011, the youth unemployment rate (under -25s) was 20,0 % in the Euro area and 20,4 % in the EU27, while Greece has reached the percentage of 38,5 % in the first quarter of 2011 (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-01072011-AP/EN/3-01072011-AP-EN.PDF). Under such circumstances, young people have to struggle hard to remain employable. Lifelong learning participation is considered to be an important key to continuously enhance and improve vocational competences. Such an approach is estimated to allow young people to secure employment rather than just a job. So, a focus on transferable competencies is more than necessary nowadays. These competencies could help young people feel more confident regarding three areas: (a) career development, (b) job attainment and (c) job survival. Thus, non-formal learning approaches could serve to further develop particular competencies and behaviours of people who need it most (especially

youngsters 18 to 25). The path of non-formal education is becoming more and more a crucial complement to theoretic knowledge achieved through conventional formal approaches. So, youth employees participating in non-formal activities and gaining a certification for this are more likely to experience positive employment-related outcomes, even more if the labour-market structures officially recognise it. In this way, the assessment of non-formally and informally acquired competences has a potentially powerful role to play in broadening young people's horizons beyond the constraints of formal education.

A quite large number of adults in Greece have acquired a variety of vocational abilities and competences – by practicing an occupation – which are equal or even greater than the levels graduates have gained from formal training and education. These adults do not have formal training documents to certify the level of their competences. To receive recognition of their experience it is essential to develop a national system of competence assessment. It should allow for the identification of gaps in knowledge also in comparison with the vocational training level and consequently create a process to fill these gaps. It should also establish a process of certification and the provision of respective documentation. Indeed, it is vital to balance competences from formal training and non-formal competences, because many employees practise different occupations and specialisations without having attended any kind of training. 'Opening' the accreditation system is a crucial prerequisite to include the variety of knowledge, competences and abilities gained either through training or through experience. This could considerably boost the mobility of the workforce, enhancing their employability.

A toolbox for competence assessment

In order to raise awareness for the advantages of structured forms of competence assessment and in order to ease the testing and development of competence assessment among training institutions and employment agencies in Greece, the project team is developing a toolbox for competence assessment. This toolbox will be directed to practitioners in the field and will present the underlying ideas of competence assessment. Additionally and even more importantly, it will present exemplary instruments to be used in competence assessment and according tools such as questionnaires or observation guidelines. In doing so, the focus will be on subject-oriented and demand-oriented instruments that can be used to assess different kinds of "soft skills", mainly social and personal competences. However, two to three tests regarding "hard skills", e.g. analytical thinking, will be included, too.

The following method areas and methods from Denmark, Germany, and Sweden shall be included:

Biographical methods / subject-oriented methods:

- Participant-to-participant interview (Germany)
- Biographical interview (Sweden)
- An accompanied self-evaluation with a focus on one's learning and working biography (Germany)

Assessment centre methods / demand-oriented methods:

- Observed group exercise "Building a town" (Germany)
- Observed group exercise "Watch factory" (Sweden)

Testing of computer skills (independent from cultural backgrounds or national educational systems):

- Test for basic computer and media skills (Germany)
- ICT test (Sweden)

Examples for documentation and certification of assessment results

- Online portfolio (Denmark)
- Structured assessment form for firms (Sweden)
- Documenting the results of the assessment of potentials (Germany)

For further details please visit the site of the project:

<http://www.discovering-competencies.eu/>

1 Introduction

It is increasingly difficult for young people with low or no formal qualifications to find a job. However, even without formal training or labour market experience, young persons gather social and personal competencies. These “soft” competencies are essential for doing a good job. For some jobs, they may even be the most important elements of qualification. However, employers and those working with young people find it difficult to recognise and assess these informal competencies. Such assessment, though, is important to match employers and potential employees and to define training needs of an unemployed person.

Globalisation, demographical change, technological advances, and the financial crisis have created major challenges for today’s societies. Individuals have to confront rapidly changing data and learn how to keep up with them. In order to function well in this “new” diverse world, the need for adaptability is no longer a choice. It is vitally necessary that individuals develop competencies in a wide range of fields, which will allow them to adapt to the evolutions and changes. To conclude, solely mastering certain skills is not enough anymore. As a matter of fact the so called hard skills, mainly proved by academic certificates, are rated as being of less direct relevance to companies. Instead of paying attention to narrowly defined skills and qualifications companies are placing more importance on the candidates’ personal qualities and attitudes which cannot be recognized through conventional diplomas and certificates (Grootings 1994). The workforce is expected to show flexibility, entrepreneurship qualities, personal responsibility, adaptability, innovation, creativity and in general a self-directed and a self-motivated attitude.

While some European countries have developed widely accepted systems of competence assessment, others need to raise awareness and define methods and procedures for competence assessment. The project “Discovering Competencies – Tools for Your Future” thus aims at a transfer of good practices of competence assessment for disadvantaged young persons. The project is funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission as a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project. The following partner institutions and countries participate in the project:¹

- Denmark: Aarhus University – Department of Education (Copenhagen);
- Germany: GIB Innovation Research and Consultancy (Berlin), in cooperation with Berlin Senate for Integration, Labour and Social Issues;
- Greece: University of the Aegean (Rhodes) and Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (Larissa);
- Sweden: Folkuniversitetet (Kristianstad).

¹ Further information on the project and the partner institutions can be found on www.discovering-competencies.eu.

This paper was developed in a joint effort of all project partners and wants to inform on methods of competence assessment and their successful application in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. It argues that both young people and employers in Greece could much benefit from the use of competence assessment in the fields of vocational education and training as well as in the field of job placement.

The paper first presents the evolution of the concept of “competencies” and the necessity to assess competencies (parts 2 and 3). It continues with a more profound discussion of the term “competencies”, distinguishes it from skills or knowledge and describes different forms of competencies (part 4). In the following, good practices of competence assessment for young people in Denmark, Germany, and Sweden will be presented (part 5). The paper then continues with a discussion of the possible returns of competence assessment if it was incorporated into the Greek structures of vocational education and training, vocational orientation, or job placement (part 6). It concludes with a short presentation of a toolbox with methods of competence assessment that is currently prepared by the project team (part 7).

2 The evolution of the concept of competencies in Europe

The actual concept of “competence” has received great debate over the years throughout the EU and worldwide, while it is said to almost have replaced the concept of ‘qualification’, as stated in Ingrid Drexel’s working paper “The Concept of Competence – an Instrument of Social and Political Change” (2003). In comparison to the concept of “qualification”, the concept of “competence” evaluates more the experience-gained knowledge and focuses on the functionality of this on the job. Competences do not just appear to be a mixture of formal and informal knowledge and skills but also include personal values, motivations and behaviours. Last but not least, the concept of competences attributes a central role to the individualisation and fragmentation of learning results (Drexel 2003). According also to Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel, “competence” is understood to be the abilities that enable a person to attain a goal in given situations in a self-organized way, on the basis of experience, knowledge and skills (Erpenbeck/Rosenstiel 2003). However, a precise, commonly accepted definition of the term “competence” does not exist so far, neither within national nor within international contexts.

Competences and accordingly the assessment of competences have become of great significance. In line with this general trend the European Commission put forward a EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR KEY COMPETENCES in 2006, and EU programmes and projects, such as the ADAPT programme and the LEONARDO DA VINCI programme, take

competencies into focus, too. Among other targets, these activities focus on the validation of non-formal and informal learning as an important priority. All things considered, to reach a consensus at a European level regarding the methodology and quality of competence assessment there is still much to do. As a starting point countries should propose a diagnostic framework as a basis for assessment. Thereby they should choose specific competence concepts and analyse them within in this framework. All countries should further consider concepts from other EU member countries that have already been in practice and evaluate them from a methodological point of view. Moreover, should they suggest implications for policy and users (Straka 2004).

Of course there are principal challenges concerning the assessment of non-formal competences, such as the validity and reliability of the related methodologies. Many researchers have already started this debate (e.g. Wolf 1995, 1998). Despite the fact that some first steps towards assessment methods have been done, it is generally agreed that the public awareness and the discussion of measurement and evaluation of competences will continue for a long time. The transferability and transparency of competences are, however, two significant issues. The recognition and validation of non-formal learning is important for individuals as well as for businesses and society as a whole. If such methodologies existed, it would be easier for employees and companies to “keep stock of” their resources, thus providing a better basis for their practice and distribution. Documentation methods that are closely linked to national (vocational) training systems and their rules are no longer adequate. Consequently, in contradiction to conventional certificates and school-leaving documents from formal training courses, new methods for assessing informally acquired competences should focus on other evidence in order to capture competences acquired outside of formal learning arrangements. This first evaluation leads to the conclusion that structures and methods of competence assessment are indispensable in order to meet the changing requirements of the labour market. Defining and developing a structure and methods will bring many advantages to both the employer and the workforce with a special focus on disadvantaged young people.

3 General benefits of competence assessment

It is today common sense that nowadays’ companies need meaningful information on what job applicants and employees can actually do. Competences that individuals gain informally during the work process are not documented anywhere. This is a serious obstacle to the employability and thus the mobility of employees: they have to be able to demonstrate the wide range of their vocational competences to take complete advantage of potentials for employment and advancement. It is estimated that between 70% and 90% of a person’s

competences are acquired outside of formal learning structures.² Apart from the workplace itself, competence assessment can also be used as the basis for initiating and guiding both training and development. Individuals and employers are able to detect skill gaps and identify them as areas of positive growth potential (Riehl 1998). By identifying competency and skill gaps the organization is better able to lead the individuals to developmental proposals that meet their needs in relation to their needed fields of improvement (Riehl 1998). By doing this, employees are not obligated to go through redundant or unnecessary training – it is more specialized to help them advance as an individual.

Thus, competence assessment can benefit both vocational education / training institutions and companies' human resource departments, as it can help to match the employer's needs (labour demand) with the suitable job candidate (labour supply). On the demand side the assessment of competences will make skills more transparent and transferable; thus planning and controlling the human resource procurement of the company will be much easier. In addition to school-leaving certificates the department for human resources will be provided with documents on informally acquired competences which allow a more detailed and specific evaluation. A standardized system of competence assessment can simplify the judgement of individual qualities as well as it can facilitate the comparability between applicants. Conducting competence assessment on a regular basis can further help companies to identify skill gaps within their workforce. Another benefit from assessing competences can be seen in the empowerment of managers and supervisors. With the additional knowledge about the informal competences they may have a greater level of accountability towards their subordinates' skill set. It will also give the top management additional information concerning staff development, deployment, outsourcing and hiring policies.

On the supply side the workforce will also benefit majorly from the implementation of a structured competence assessment system and its methods. First of all, it can help unemployed persons to find a job because it supplies them with an objective indicator of an individual's occupational skills and abilities. Moreover, it can ease the entrance into the formal training system as well as improve labour market eligibility. Competence assessment can also ease a promotion at the workplace: As an open mechanism it will contribute to the continuous acquisition of competences and even greater recognition of qualifications. All in

² Compare findings from the European survey on continuing vocational training CVTS, the survey on continuing vocational training of the Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (Institute of the German Economy - IW), the IAB-Betriebspanel (IAB company panel) as well as the Berichtssystem Weiterbildung VIII (Continuing Education Reporting System VIII); Weiß 2001.

all, competence assessment can empower each individual with the responsibility to develop their own competences consistently. A system which includes a comprehensive training system will enhance, guide and permit employees to be in an active condition of ongoing training. A structured system of competence assessment could be especially beneficial for those with low qualification levels (low and semi-skilled workers), for (long-term) young unemployed people, for disadvantaged social groups or for migrants, as it opens the way for the recognition of competences obtained in the work-environment and via other non-formal and informal pathways.

4 What are competencies and how can they be characterized?

Parallel to the changes in modern life within contemporary formations of European societies a more general discourse evolved about how to meet labour market employability requirements. When former policies of education and employability dealt mainly so far with investing in human capital via producing required professional knowledge and skills nowadays the inevitable demand for flexibility of the workforce puts these former concepts of labour market qualification(s) into question. In general, human capital policies are about educational investment in/of individuals. This investment is based on the fact that knowledge and skills, adapted via the individual trajectory of education, are coherent to the needs of the labour market implying that this labour market remains a constant period – at least during the time in question – to acquire the demanded knowledge and skills (cf Hansen 2003).

“The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning.” (European Commission 2005: 11)

According to the eight reference levels of the EQF³ concerning knowledge and skills it seems to be obvious that today the challenge is to gain more flexibility with respect to continuously changing process of labour requirements. According the EQF knowledge and skills are based on 1) general basic skills to carry out simple tasks; 2) using knowledge limited and main ideas and facts via routine and defined tools and methods; 3) applying more theoretically grounded techniques and knowledge individually interpreted; 4) combining strategically theoretical and practical approaches; 5) using abstract and concrete knowledge to solve defined problems whilst being aware of systematic limitations; 6) using tools and methods in a specialized and innovative way being critical to theories and principles; 7) being

³ The European Qualification Framework acts as a translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting workers' and learners' mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning (Quelle: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm).

aware of knowledge between different areas and respond with new skills and techniques; and finally 8) “Use specialised knowledge to critically analyse, evaluate and synthesise new and complex ideas that are at the most advanced frontier of a field. Extend or redefine existing knowledge and/or professional practice within a field or at the interface between fields” and ” Research, conceive, design, implement and adapt projects that lead to new knowledge and new procedural solutions” (European Commission 2005: 19f.)

This framework of knowledge and skills has been already further developed with individual and professional competences, especially in the context of vocational competences where the focus is about the awareness and mastering of solving problems using various sources of information, techniques according to (social) complexity, developing innovative strategies and taking social as well as ethical issues into account of decision making processes, that are meant to be the starting point for action (cf. European Commission 2005 19f.).

Hence, competence includes: i) cognitive competence involving the use of theory and concepts as well as informal tacit knowledge gained experientially; ii) functional competence (skill or know-how), those things that a person should be able to do when they are functioning in a given area of work, learning or social activity; iii) personal competence involving knowing how to conduct oneself in a specific situation; and iv) ethical competence involving knowing how the possession of certain personal and professional values. The concept is thus used in an integrative manner; as an expression of the ability individuals to combine – in a self-directed way, tacitly or explicitly and in a particular context – the different elements of knowledge and skills they possess. The aspect of self direction is critical to the concept as this provides a basis for distinguishing between different levels of competence. Acquiring a certain level of competence can be seen as the ability of an individual to use and combine his or her knowledge, skills and wider competences according to the varying requirements posed by a particular context, a situation or a problem. Put another way, the ability of an individual to deal with complexity, unpredictability and change defines/determines his or her level of competence.

According to Erik Jørgen Hansen the term competence is in general understood as an undecisive disposition enabling the individual to solve a not-defined problem, i.e. the process of identifying the aim and developing the problem solving strategy (cf. Hansen 2003: 91). Whilst understanding competence as process it seems to be on the first sight a contradiction to the reproductive and stable notion of knowledge and skills. But this notion is dialectically related to competence (in action) because it is impossible to disconnect the individual from his/her competences. The development of identity formation is constituted by the reciprocal

influence of knowledge/skills and the development of competence(s) whereas the latter aspect qualitatively elevates the former one lifting the whole process on a higher level. This process of identity formation has to be understood as a demarcation from the notion of pure human capital defined as a (stable) resource disconnected from the individual as such. The concept of competences is therefore intra-related with the ability to identify, analyze and to evaluate complex situations disembodying in competence of action on the background of existing knowledge and skills.

4.1 Differences between vocational skills and competences

In the light of the conceptual disadvantages of stable and inflexible skills and thus especially vocational skills that are inseparably connected with predefined working place situations it should be clear by now that the concept of competence is the adequate answer to contemporary challenges in modern (working) life. "It asks what it means for an individual to act competently in modern life. What knowledge and skills should people have and be able to use in different situations and contexts? Here, the important question seems to be 'What should people be competent for?', or 'What does it mean to become flexible for a modern society and a flexible labour market?'" (Mørch/Stalder 2003: 205) Referring to the new challenges of contemporary labour market demands Mørch and Stalder emphasize the difference perspectives of competence and employability. (cf. Mørch/Stalder 2003) They use the following definition of competence: "A competence is the ability to meet a complex demand successfully or carry out a complex activity or task." (Rychen and Salganik, 2002, p. 5)

Even if this definition tends to be a more professional definition and thus focuses (bare) on the capability of problem solving in a given context both authors emphasizes also dimension of competence as "a form of personal characteristic" (cf. Mørch/Stalder 2003: 2005). Both concepts employability and competence deal with the individual practice of knowledge and skills. "From the demand perspective, employability asks what sorts of knowledge and skills are *required* for different persons in different positions in the labour market. From the supply perspective, competence points to existing personal skills and knowledge and the way in which they refer to labour market demands. In every day discussions, competence is often seen as some sort of private modern personality quality and employability as the demand of 'a total individual fit' to whatever is needed in the labour market" (Mørch/Stalder 2003: 2005 f.). Mørch and Stalder argue that competence and employability are both "interdependent and intrinsically related to the general developmental aspects of processes of individualisation" (2003: 206). The relation of both concepts is neither to be understood as contradictory nor just as aiming for a sort of "employability" (Mørch/Stalder 2003: 206). It is

rather the intersection of structural (labour market) demands/requirements and individual capabilities.

Combining thus the notion of processes of identity formation with the concept of competences it is valuable to use the development of competences pointing out the dialectics between the being, the knowing and the doing. The “being” refers to the formal concept of learning and the accumulation of knowledge as it was developed in the school of the 19th century, i.e. specific school-subjects as well as a specific class manners acquired at school formed the basis of the “educated” person. “Thus, social class was expressed in ‘being’ through qualifications and opened the way to adult life and employment.” (Mørch/Stalder 2003: 217) It is unquestionable that today the determining trajectory of learning has become more fluent and the “being” became more individualized and thus can be understood as a specific part of identity formation concerning to self-understanding with respect to labour aspects. When the “being” is deeply related to the concept of identity formation, the concept of “knowledge” is based on the understanding on relation between school curricula, practical subject knowledge. A certain trajectory of education leads – with only few exceptions – to a certain labour trajectory. Today knowledge is on the one hand a precondition but not a guarantee to get a job. The path to gain knowledge is diversified and much more open to the individual that is now in the position to choose from a variety of opportunities where and how to get knowledge about the subject in question. The “doing” dimension is strongly related to the learning process taking place through the apprenticeship or in everyday labor situation. This dimension refers to the adaptation of practical work during the actual process of doing. It is the combination of theory and practice in that actual work situation taking the changing demands and requirements of specific work situations into account. With respect to these changing requirements and demanded flexibility on the labor market the dimension “doing” can be seen as a basic contemporary competence (Mørch/Stalder 2003: 217).

4.2 Vocational skills vs. competences as personal capabilities:

Personal competences, social competences, activity-related competences

Individual competences are constituted by the dimensions of “being”, “knowledge” and “doing” as it refers to the process of identity formation with respect to labour market requirements. In contradiction to the concept of vocational knowledge and skills referring especially to the time of industrialization competences are inevitably connected to the individual and thus the specific capability of the usage of competences deriving from formal learning, informal learning as well as non-formal learning. Competences can be acquired in all situations through the identity formation process and are flexible because they can be

translated and contextualized by the individual in a given situation. To challenge and fulfil changing labour market demands and requirements it is crucial not to build upon an inflexible and stiff understanding of labour market competencies. Therefore it is evident to understand that each individual offers a specific combination as personal capabilities that can be improved in various directions.

Taking the enormous changing of labour market policies and practices into account the core of required contemporary competence is a flexible one that can be translated into “personal competence”, “social competence” and “activity competence”. “Personal competences” refer mainly to the dimension of “being”, i.e. they refer to one’s commitment and the ability to work patiently and hard. “Social competences” are strongly related to personal competences due to the deep connection to the process of identity formation but social competences emphasize mainly social praxis. It is not just about practical issues but social interaction like group work, i.e. solution finding within a group based on non-hierarchical structures and openness concerning strategy finding processes. The core of social competences is not the solution finding itself but carrying out the demanded work in a given social context using one self’s and the resources of the other participants in the way that leads to best way of finding the solution for a given problem. When social competences and personal competences are deeply related with respect to the dimension of “being”, identity formation and the competences deriving from the trajectory of growing personal and social competences, “activity competences” are related to these concepts in a different way. Commitment and the will to carry out a specific tasks referring to personal competences are related to experiences that have been made in social interaction, i.e. social competences, related to specific labour tasks. Juveniles and young adults that have had problems in working place situations of abstract labour, for example an examination situation in an institutional learning setting, have a tendency to de-activate their commitment and possible competences whereas in a more (examination) free work situation competences of various forms of activity for solution finding might be observed. It is the individual drive that enables competences for individual and social practice.

The individual formation of competences is an unique relation between the ability to understand a task or problem, to analyse and to assess the problem or task in a given situation, to find a decision and to have the capability of action. All individuals do have these competences but in different variations. Thus it is crucial to understand and activate these individual sets of competences.

5 Profiting from European expertise in competence assessment

Many EU member states already proposed new methodologies for the identification, validation and assessment of non-formal learning. In the following, good practice approaches from Denmark, Germany and Sweden will be presented.

5.1 Good practice from Denmark

Prior learning comprises an individual's overall knowledge, skills and competences. This applies whether they are acquired within the formal education system, through on-the-job training or through an in-house employee training course. Other learning settings include liberal adult education activities, such as a stay at a folk high school, through which participants gain many personal and social skills, an evening class computer course, and participation in civil society activities, e.g. as a volunteer for a charity. The Danish education system currently provides the opportunity to get credit transfer for previously completed education in accordance with the credit transfer provisions of all educational programmes. This is a significant contribution towards securing flexible and coherent pathways through the education system that allows the individual to build on previous education. However, credit transfer for formal education forms only part of an individual's overall competence.

Recognition of prior learning is about focusing on individuals' overall skills and competences – and not just those for which they may have certificates. This makes new demands on the education system and presupposes that relevant methods are developed to ensure a reliable assessment of an individual's prior learning, including the competences gained at work, through participation in liberal adult education and civil society activities, etc. Another precondition of enhanced recognition of prior learning is that the individual, companies, the social partners and the stakeholders within liberal adult education and civil society take on a co-responsibility for rendering competences visible and documenting them.

5.1.1 Regulation of competence assessment

To a certain extent, competence assessment and recognition of prior learning within the Danish education system already exists. Within adult vocational education and training, access has now been provided within adult vocational training programmes (AMU) and basic adult education (GVU) for individual competence assessment, of which the objective is to recognize the individual's prior learning. Within initial vocational education and training programmes, competence assessment is used as a tool to prepare the students' individual study plans.

Recognition of prior learning also plays an important role within the adult education system at advanced levels, in which assessment of relevant work experience forms part of the admission requirements for e.g. an adult further education programme (VVU) or a Master's degree.

However, the opportunities that are provided for assessment and recognition of competences that have been gained at work or from taking part in a liberal adult education course or association activities etc. remain limited. As a consequence, the Government wished to expand access to individual competence assessment within the education system. The various areas of education and training, not least the area of adult education and vocational training, are to provide young people and adults with the opportunity of having an individual assessment of their prior learning. In this assessment, importance is attached to all types of previous learning and competences acquired. This development is to build on existing opportunities and is intended to be further developed within the individual areas of education. In the areas of education, within which it was currently not possible to get an assessment of prior learning, it was considered how such a system could be implemented gradually and in the most appropriate manner.

Objectives and access requirements etc. for an individual competence assessment is set in accordance with the objectives and requirements of the particular education and training programme. Within relevant areas of education, there has been stipulated minimum requirements as regards age and number of years of relevant work experience or similar as a condition for access to a competence assessment. Likewise, there may be a need for specific requirements in respect of courses providing access to licensed occupations. In other words, recognition of prior learning focuses on documenting that an individual has qualifications and competences that – from the point of view of equivalence – are assessed as corresponding to a certain goal and level of the education programme in question. It does not focus on what the individual may be missing in relation to a (higher) level or degree. These principles are in line with the Lisbon objectives as well as the Bologna and Copenhagen declarations, which also lay down principles for the task of developing common European references for transparency, comparability, transferability and quality assurance.

Real competence assessment is based on the following principles:

- The individual citizen should be able to request an assessment of his or her prior learning based on the framework and regulations applicable within the individual areas of education.

- The individual also has a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of his or her prior learning.
- A user fee may be charged for a competence assessment, excepting the low skilled.
- A competence assessment should always be based on the objectives and admission requirements of the education programme in question.
- The individual's competences should be recognised, irrespective of where and how they were acquired, but without compromising the quality/standard of the education and training programmes.
- The methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome.
- The result of the assessment should be documented by issuing a certificate.

5.1.2 Methods of competence assessment

Recognition is based on following steps (presented in detail in the following) : guidance and clarification (1), collection of documentation (2), competence assessment (3), and recognition of prior learning (4). Usually the assessment takes place at educational institutions / gymnasium, universities of applied science and universities; it may take place at a work place as well.

Guidance

There must be good opportunities to obtain guidance about assessment and recognition of prior learning within the education system. Educational institutions should guide students/applicants about their options and about the regulations, giving the individual the chance to clarify ambitions and goals, including establishing the relevant level of education and the course-specific orientation of the assessment. Information and guidance should also be on offer within the guidance system and in cooperation with other relevant guidance providers. There must be a system in place to refer the individual to a relevant educational institution, and access should be provided to electronically based information on the opportunities of getting a competence assessment.

Personal documentation of prior learning

The individual is responsible for collecting the relevant documentation of his or her prior learning, which is to be included in the competence assessment. This may include documentation from employers, from participation in seminars, training activities or liberal adult education activities, etc. It could also be the individual's own assessment of relevant experience gained from, for instance, working as a volunteer for a charity. The guidance provided is to facilitate access to the tools that support the documentation.

Competence assessment

Typically, it is an educational institution that carries out a competence assessment, based on the individual's documentation of prior learning. The assessment has to be produced on the basis of a variety of methods and tools and with a view to the individual's prior learning being demonstrated and assessed in a reliable way vis-à-vis the specific requirements of the education programme. If required, there must be the option of a competence clarifying course of up to a few days' duration. Other forms of evaluation, other than traditional tests, must also be included.

Where does this take place?

Usually at education institutions, but if relevant, such evaluations could take place in e.g. the workplace. The methods that can be used for assessment of prior learning include:

- Written documentation of competences in the form of a CV or a personal document file etc. that can form part of the basis for the assessment.
- Structured interviews during the different phases of the assessment process, including for instance use of forms for assessing the individual's competence against the objectives and course-specific content of the education programme aimed for.
- Observation and assessment of the applicant's skills and competences. For example, the applicant may be asked to solve a practical task, which is relevant in relation to the competences that the education and training programme aims for.
- Tests and examinations to assess the individual's theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

A competence assessment is likely to include a combination of different methods, adjusted in accordance with the individual's qualifications and choice of education. After completion of the assessment, the educational institution will normally, on request, issue a 'competence certificate', which is a certificate documenting the result of the assessment.

An important tool is an electronic portfolio, "my competence portfolio" which is available at the home page of the Danish Ministry of Education (www.uvm.dk – my competence portfolio). The portfolio is used by citizens, companies and the professional guidance system. For citizens the use would point to education or further education, recognition of competencies or seeking a job. The firms use it to plan the employees' further education, and the professionals use it for preparing guidance.

5.1.3 Results of competence assessment

Recognition of prior learning within the education system will create a new and better basis for a competence boost and for increased mobility on the Danish labour market and aims at providing excellent prospects for the individual, companies and society in general. In detail, recognition of prior learning:

- ... is motivating for the individual when the focus is on what the individual is capable of.
- ... will make the individuals' competences more visible and contribute towards giving everybody – and perhaps particularly those with a practical turn of mind – the chance to utilize their potential to a much greater extent.
- ... can provide better opportunities for the unemployed and refugees/immigrants to get started in the education system and qualify to join the labour market.
- ... will support a more targeted demand for and provision of education.
- ... helps to utilize financial resources better when unnecessary education is avoided and when students move more quickly through the education system.
- ... will contribute to increasing the overall level of educational attainment within society.

Assessment and recognition of prior learning is to provide the individual with more flexible conditions for meeting the admission requirements of an education programme of his or her choice or to complete a shortened, individually organized education programme. This does not have any impact on the admission requirements or the admission level of any education programme; it merely changes the way in which applicants may meet the requirements, viz. by getting recognition of competences that are specifically assessed as corresponding to the specific requirements. In addition, the individual should also have the opportunity to request a formal certificate of education for a part of an education programme purely on the basis of recognition of the particular individual's prior learning.

Experience with competence assessment in AMU (adult vocational training programmes) and GUV (basic adult education) shows, among other things, that students get a much more targeted education and training, and companies find that it qualifies their demand and strengthens education and training initiatives when a study plan is based on a specific assessment of the individual student's competences. The concrete outcome of a competence assessment in relation to AMU is that on the basis of an identification of a student's competence vis-à-vis the job requirements, a study plan can be put together that describes the educational path that the particular student should take in order to achieve the relevant competence requirements.

5.2 Good practice from Germany

In Germany, disadvantaged school leavers, with or without a school-leaving certificate, are absorbed by the so-called transition system that offers a large variety of policies and programmes. They aim either at the integration of the young person into the regular VET-system or at the provision of skills and diploma necessary for being successful on the job market. The National Employment Agency is an important actor in this field, however, a large number of educational institutions or welfare associations, both for-profit and non-profit, are crucial actors, too. They compete for funding and mandates from the National Employment Agency or government bodies to develop and/or to provide for the support of disadvantaged young unemployed. Indeed, private or third-sector organisations are prioritised over state-run organisations in this field (Kroos/Gottschall 2011, Zimmer/Priller 2007). As these institutions carry out independent work as well as they act on behalf of the National Employment Agency, both private for-profit and non-profit organisations in the sector depend on public contracts. Berlin is an example for a region with an especially large number of such organisations that act both on their own and cooperate in larger projects, reflecting not only the size of the city but also high rates of long-term unemployment and a comparatively large migrant population.

5.2.1 Regulation of competence assessment

As competence assessment forms an integral part of many of the support and training schemes offered by these organisations, approaches to competence assessment are abundant, too. Indeed, the National Employment Agency, for-profit educational institutions and non-profit welfare associations offer competence assessments, implying a high diversity of concepts and methods in the field. A systematisation or standardisation of concepts and methods hardly exists. While the majority of methods of competence assessment are dedicated to larger target groups, some focus on more particular groups, for example on unemployed persons with a migration background (Dellbrück 2009). Nonetheless, there is a considerable degree of overlap between the different approaches, insofar that most approaches build on modules that can be combined differently in accordance with the requirements of the person whose competences shall be assessed. For this reason, competence assessment procedures may vary with regard to the time they take, but usually take up at least a couple of days.

5.2.2 Methods of competence assessment

In Germany, methods of competence assessment have been developed both by single institutions and in larger cooperative projects on behalf of government bodies (compare Preißer 2009 for a comprehensive overview). While the terms “competencies”, “qualifications”, or “skills” are used differently by different providers of competence

assessment, all approaches have in common that they are embedded in larger support programmes for the unemployed in general or for disadvantaged youth in particular. (Competence assessment for the employed, however, is totally detached from this and is more diverse.) In practice this allows for two possible procedures: On the one hand, the local branch of the National Employment Agency can assign an unemployed to a particular for-profit educational institution or non-profit welfare institution for both competence assessment and the realisation of an adequate training programme. On the other hand, the institution may only carry out a competence assessment and derive recommendations regarding further training or schemes that might help this particular person to find a job.

On the content side, most approaches used in Germany combine demand-oriented elements that assess competencies or skills demanded by employers with subject-oriented elements. The latter are meant to disclose unknown informal learning results or the hidden potential of an unemployed person. An example for a subject-oriented instrument can be found in biographical interviews that are to some degree based on a self-assessment and touch on all kinds of formal and informal educational or vocational experiences made, including those that have been made in a private context (e.g. babysitting). Demand-oriented forms of competence assessment often make use of assessment centre group exercises. In these exercises, the performance of each team member with regard to the given task is observed and recorded on a standardised observation sheet, i.e. here the actual assessment is done by skilled personnel such as social workers trained in observation. These two forms of assessment can be complemented by tests regarding “hard” skills; language competencies or media competencies, for example, are often tested in front of a computer with the help of specific testing programmes.

5.2.3 Results of competence assessment

The results of the different modules or elements of the assessment procedure are summarised and documented, in many cases in a threefold way:

- The institution in charge of the assessed person, e.g. a local employment agency, receives a written report on what instruments of competence assessment have been applied and on the results of the assessment. Besides, the report may also contain recommendations on how to best support and assist the unemployed person in her vocational development.
- The assessed person also receives a certificate on the successful participation in the assessment and its main results.

- A competence portfolio is compiled, comprising documents on different kinds of competencies as well as copies of official certificates. Usually all this is compiled in a folder with sections for different stations in the educational and vocational career.

For illustration, in the annexe a typical procedure for competence assessment used in Germany is presented. This procedure is called “KomPass” and has been developed by a Berlin-based, non-profit educational institution and is composed of ten different modules. It contains subject-oriented methods such as biographical interviews, demand-oriented methods in the form of assessment centre exercises, and computer tests concerning hard skills, e.g. German language competencies.

5.3 Good practice from Sweden

Competence assessments, or validation, have become quite a big issue in Sweden over the last fifteen years. The concept of “validering” was introduced in Sweden in 1996 as part of the Adult Education Initiative, but similar phenomena have existed even before that. Much work has been done in various organizations and authorities.

5.3.1 Regulation of competence assessment

The Swedish government stated in 2003 this definition of the term “validation”: “Validation is a process meaning a structured assessment, valuation, documentation and acknowledgement of the knowledge and competence a person have, regardless of how they have been achieved”. As of today the guidelines from European Guidelines for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, published by CEDEFOP in 2009, are used as a base in validation and to meet the guidelines of transparency and comparability between different models used in different countries.

In Sweden, vocational education consists of different educations, those that are formalized to a curricula set by the education provider together with the national board of education, hence included in the national education system. Those educations are formalized and uniform throughout the country and consistent regardless of where you choose to study. The other part of vocational education is less formal, and has been working with competence assessment for a long period of time and in conjunction with the labour market in order to educate to jobs and not to unemployment.

Competence assessment can define skills depending on what perspective is regarded, either from the individual’s point of view or from the point of work, but it is always in its context this will have a meaning and importance. Since people develop their competence in different

ways, and have different purposes with a validation, there are different processes made to interact with the needs of the individual. But the aim of the assessment is always to map, value and document the competence of the individual. Real competence can have been developed through school or universities, courses outside the formal school-system, through work or hobbies. It doesn't matter if this has happened in Sweden or abroad, or when in time this has happened.

5.3.2 Methods of competence assessment

There are several actors working with validation in Sweden: those that work in the guidance sector to guide individuals to the right validation process, those that work with the assessment of competence and those that validates foreign educations. It is mostly counsellors, officials at the Public Employment Service and governmental authorities taking care of guiding individuals to the right type of validation. The assessment or validation itself is most often taken care of by vocational teachers/evaluators, trade organizations and private and public educational providers. Governmental authorities take care of the validation of foreign education.

The work with developing methods, structures and models for assessment in Sweden takes its standpoint in the European principles of validation, they must contribute to uniformity, legitimization and transparency, and also protect the rights of the individual.

In this example we are focusing on higher vocational education, "Yrkeshögskolan", and Labour market education and in what way those two education providers work with validation or assessment of competences, how it is structured, what are the aims and if there are any particular similarities and differences. "Yrkeshögskolan" deals with qualified vocational education and the standards are set by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för Yrkeshögskolan) who decides upon curricular and validation, they also administer governmental funding and administration.

The assessment of real competence is taking place regarding upper secondary education, higher education and academic education, both regarding qualification and having in credit. The enforcement varies between different educations, providers of education and schools and there are lots of models in use, and there are no guidelines for ensuring quality in the process of competence assessment. About 25 branches of trades have developed models to assess competence for about 140 professions, and more are under way. It is the standard of each profession that guides the models regarding qualifications and competence assessment. The models are used for validation of formal education, non-formal education

and informal education and hence, not only linked to formal education. The problem faced is that those models are not standardized, but more a result of the people working with them in their own specific environment.

Quality considerations

- **Validity:** Assessment should measure what it claims to measure and what is important to measure; in other words, there should be a close fit between the assessment method/s and the learning outcome/s. For example, if the learning outcome is to be able to design a poster or a marketing campaign, an essay is an invalid assessment method. However, if the learning outcome is to understand how to write a report, then the writing of a report is a valid assessment method. The cooperation with the labour market and the organizations operating on the labour market is essential if validation is to be seen as a useful tool by the employers.
- **Reliability:** The assessment result should be replicable and consistent either under different circumstances, or with a different assessor.
- **Appropriateness:** Assessment methods should be appropriate for the form of assessment. For example, an initial assessment should build confidence and not deter a learner from appropriate progression.
- **Inclusiveness:** Assessment methods should not raise unnecessary barriers to demonstration of achievement. For example, a dyslexic learner should not be asked to produce a timed assignment without support. Evidence can be tailored to the needs of individuals or groups and should always be flexible, varied and appropriate. Therefore, a learner with physical difficulties may provide visual or oral evidence – photos, tapes, videos – rather than the notes and reports produced by the rest of the group.
- **Authenticity:** Evidence must be the result of the learner's own performance activity. Depending on the type of learning, the target learner and the evidence required, appropriate mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that the learner has done the work that is presented. In the case of word processed submissions it may be necessary for tutors or assessors to require at least one piece of handwritten evidence.
- **Tutor assessment:** The tutor is responsible for planning and managing the assessment strategy and ensuring that it matches the information given in the programme document. The tutor is responsible for sharing the learning outcomes and assessment criteria with learners, recording assessment, giving on-going feedback and for ensuring that all learners have equal opportunities for their achievement to be assessed. The tutor gives guidance to the learner where there are choices regarding

assessment. The tutor is responsible for communication and liaison with any other assessor.

- Learner/self-assessment: The learner identifies his/her own learning in relation to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Self-assessment encourages the development of the learner's own judgement and evaluation skills, encourages reflection on learning, and involves the learner in the whole learning and assessment process.
- Peer assessment: Other learners on the programme, in formal or informal situations, either as a group or as individuals, give feedback and support in assessment of each others' learning. Assessment by peers can encourage evaluative skills, increase group cohesion and reveal unplanned 'windfall' or incidental learning.
- Assessment by others within the learning environment: Support workers, care assistants and others who contribute to the learning process may be involved in assessment. It is essential that these additional sources have full access to the unit specifications, i.e. title, credit value, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. They will work in liaison with the learner and the tutor.
- Assessment by others external to the learning environment: Supervisors, workplace mentors, witnesses and others can contribute to assessment. It is essential that the additional assessors have full access to the unit specifications.

The most common way of documenting experience based knowledge/learning is by using the portfolio model. To create a portfolio for validation/assessment is described as a strict and demanding process. During this process the learners develop not just their self-assessment skills, but also skills in writing and communication. Those who complete the portfolio usually have a clearer idea about what they really know, what they do not know and what they want to know. The portfolio process is also a way to develop responsibility, hence this process should in itself be regarded as a learning process. The main aspect of the portfolio is to, by documentation, show that your experiences have led to the knowledge that is needed to be accepted to, or be able to get credit for parts of a specific education. The portfolio process consist of the following steps: Guidance – the individual gets in contact with a counselor who supports the process → The individual identifies levels of acknowledgement in education or work → The individual gathers evidence on this knowledge → The individual relates the knowledge to the formal demands → The material is gathered in a portfolio → Assessment: one or more professionals assess the application/knowledge (assessor and counsellor should not be the same person) → Documentation of results.

5.3.3 Results

Throughout the learning process evidence of learning will be generated by the student and assessed by the tutor. However, for the purposes of accreditation, evidence of having achieved all the learning outcomes in all the units that are to be accredited, must be assembled. The evidence can come in many different forms. It is very straightforward to provide evidence of learning that is assessed by written work, in all its many forms. But many courses do not involve writing: Observation of practical tasks, performance of skills, or scrutiny of products such as ceramics or paintings are other ways in which learning might be assessed. The assessor is then responsible for recording the evidence in a way that will be accessible to the moderator. This may involve photographs, tape recordings, video, tutor witness statements, computer disks, the artefacts themselves if they are reasonably portable. So the exact nature of a portfolio of evidence may be very variable.

A collection of assessed materials that demonstrates an individual's achievement is generally termed a "portfolio". This evidence may be presented in a number of ways. However, it must always be tracked against an individual learner, be in a clearly structured format and available at one place and one time. A mechanism must be in place to ensure the learner has done the work in the portfolio.

6 The situation in Greece

According to Eurostat latest figures, unemployment in the European Union is at its highest rate in more than a decade (9,3 %). For those under 25, however, the rate is more than twice that. In May 2011, the youth unemployment rate (under -25s) was 20,0 % in the Euro area and 20,4 % in the EU27, while Greece has reached the percentage of 38,5 % in the first quarter of 2011 (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-01072011-AP/EN/3-01072011-AP-EN.PDF). Under such circumstances, young people have to struggle hard to remain employable. Lifelong learning participation is considered to be an important key to continuously enhance and improve vocational competences. Such an approach is estimated to allow young people to secure employment rather than just a job. So, a focus on transferable competences is more than necessary nowadays. These competences could help young people feel more confident regarding three areas: (a) career development, (b) job attainment and (c) job survival. Thus, non-formal learning approaches could serve to further develop particular competences and behaviours of people who need it most (especially youngsters 18 to 25). The path of non-formal education is becoming more and more a crucial complement to theoretic knowledge achieved through conventional formal approaches. So, youth employees participating in non-formal activities and gaining a certification for this are more likely to experience positive employment-related outcomes, even more if the labour-

market structures officially recognise it. In this way, the assessment of non-formally and informally acquired competences has a potentially powerful role to play in broadening young people's horizons beyond the constraints of formal education.

In Greece, until recently, informal learning is provided through the following public structures:

- Second Chance Schools for adults who have not completed compulsory education
- Adult Education Centres (KEE)
- Parents' Schools (Scholes Goneon)
- Centre for Distance Lifelong Education and Training of Adults (KEEENAP)

Those lifelong learning programmes lead to the acquisition of either a 'Certificate of Training' (for programmes up to 75 hours) or a 'Certificate of Lifelong Learning' (for programmes up to 250 hours). However, they are not integrated in the formal Vocational Education and Training (VET) system and the given certificates do not have an official state recognition. The Education Departments of various Ministries and major public corporations also plan vocational in-service training programs for their own staff. These courses lead to certificates which are taken into account for career development within each Ministry or company (see examples of informal learning validation in Greece concerning "hard skills" in the annexe).

However, certificates issued by agencies providing non-formal vocational education and training are not officially accredited for the purpose of certifying qualifications. There is no certification system for qualifications acquired through the different providers. Concerning informal learning, the non-existence of a certification system for qualifications leads to non-acknowledgement of skills which have been acquired by employees via informal learning with everything this entails in terms of pay, professional rights, etc. Nevertheless, certificates are an element that may be positively taken into account during staff selection procedures by employers.

A quite large number of adults in Greece have acquired a variety of vocational abilities and competences – by practicing an occupation – which are equal or even greater than the levels graduates have gained from formal training and education. These adults do not have formal training documents to certify the level of their competences. To receive recognition of their experience it is essential to develop a national system of competence assessment. The system should be able to link certain knowledge and competences obtained from experience to a particular level of formal vocational training. Moreover it should be possible to identify gaps in knowledge also in comparison with the vocational training level and consequently create a process to fill these gaps. It should also establish a process of certification and the

provision of respective documentation. Indeed, it is vital to balance competences from formal training and non-formal competences, because many employees practise different occupations and specialisations without having attended any kind of training. 'Opening' the accreditation system is a crucial prerequisite to include the variety of knowledge, competences and abilities gained either through training or through experience. This could considerably boost the mobility of the workforce, enhancing their employability. An important aspect in the development of such a system is the vertical differentiation of the structures of specification / evaluation / certification, from the implementation structures.

The matter of recognizing competencies which have not been acquired within the national education and training system can be seen as a crucial factor to increase the competitiveness of the Greek economy. Greater competencies can lead to increased viability of businesses and thereby reduce unemployment and can increase flexibility and work supply. The recognition of competencies can also improve social justice as non-formal competences should be equal to those who have been recognised by formal documents in the context of employment and access to further training. In the long term it will improve the professional level of the workforce and improve the cooperative links between systems of education and employment (Turner 1999).

However, assessment of competences not acquired in formal education and training still remains an issue for social debate rather than a reality for the national policy agenda in Greece. In conclusion, the current accreditation system in Greece – concerning the recognition of “vocational” competences – is still far behind many other EU countries. Greece so far has focused only on “hard skills” which apply to technically based branches and professional areas and concern specifically the workplace context. There are many more occupations and horizontal skill areas, including a series of tacit competences, where non-formal learning and experience needs to be recognised. Up to now, there is no overt strategy for the development of a system of identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal competences in Greece. The necessity to improve the situation of non-formal competence assessment has not yet been recognised everywhere. Universities and graduates of formal education and training structures, and relative associations whose occupations are regulated and protected are still opposing the subject. There is an expressed willingness, though, by the government and several social partners towards that and there is work that has been and is being done in fields that relate to the recognition of non-formal abilities which could be used to build such a system. It is becoming more and more understood that competences have to be recognised in a broader way under the framework of global and organizational changes in order to benefit. The employability of young people in Greece could be enhanced in particular through structured forms of competence assessment, which is a good reason for

raising political awareness towards the ‘competence’ agenda that already preoccupies many EU countries.

7 A toolbox for competence assessment

In order to raise awareness for the advantages of structured forms of competence assessment and in order to ease the testing and development of competence assessment among training institutions and employment agencies in Greece, the project team is developing a toolbox for competence assessment. This toolbox will be directed to practitioners in the field and will present the underlying ideas of competence assessment. Additionally and even more importantly, it will present exemplary instruments to be used in competence assessment and according tools such as questionnaires or observation guidelines. In doing so, the focus will be on subject-oriented and demand-oriented instruments that can be used to assess different kinds of “soft skills”, mainly social and personal competences. However, two to three tests regarding “hard skills” will be included, too.

The introductory chapter of the toolbox will discuss the *purposes and objectives of competence assessment* for the unemployed with a particular focus on the project’s target group of disadvantaged young people.

The following chapter will present *quality questions* that have to be considered in the design and implementation of procedures of competence assessment. It will deal in particular with the following issues:

- balanced use of subject-oriented and demand-oriented instruments,
- particularities of the target group and questions of confidentiality,
- how to sensibly combine different instruments or modules of competence assessment,
- the influence of language difficulties on competence assessment and questions to be considered in the design of language tests,
- how to integrate competence assessment into longer processes of educational or vocational development,
- quality assurance.

The main chapter of the toolbox will then describe different *methods or instruments of competence assessment in detail*. Each method will be discussed regarding the purposes it can fulfil, regarding the competences it can assess or unveil, and regarding its limits. Both

the method itself and the corresponding material or tools, such as observation sheets, interview guidelines, and so on, will then be presented in detail.

The following method areas and methods from Denmark, Germany, and Sweden shall be included:

Biographical methods / subject-oriented methods:

- Participant-to-participant interview (Germany)
- Biographical interview (Sweden)
- An accompanied self-evaluation with a focus on one's learning and working biography (Germany)

Assessment centre methods / demand-oriented methods:

- Observed group exercise "Building a town" (Germany)
- Observed group exercise "Watch factory" (Sweden)

Testing of computer skills (independent from cultural backgrounds or national educational systems):

- Test for basic computer and media skills (Germany)
- ICT test (Sweden)

Examples for documentation and certification of assessment results

- Online portfolio (Denmark)
- Structured assessment form for firms (Sweden)
- Documenting the results of the assessment of potentials (Germany)

The toolbox will conclude with reflections on the usefulness of different forms of competence assessment with regard to different target groups and on requirements to be fulfilled, for example in terms of personnel resources.

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Good practice example from Denmark: Recognition of prior learning

The recognition of a given individual's competence assessment depends on the objective as well as the result of the assessment of the individual's prior learning vis-à-vis a given education and training programme. The recognition may give admission to an education programme of the individual's choice or a reduction in the length of an education programme, or it may result in the issue of formal documentation in the form of certificates of education. When an individual is seeking admission to an education and training programme or a reduction in the length of an education programme, the particular institution of education will continue to have academic responsibility in its decision on any given assessment and recognition. If a competence assessment provides the basis for the issue of certificates of education purely on the basis of recognition of prior learning, the recognition of the assessment must be effected by independent bodies within the individual areas of education, e.g. external examiners, trade committees or other special evaluation boards. In the long term, it may be considered whether there is a general need to establish institution-independent access to recognition of prior learning assessments that can be implemented within the individual areas of education and training.

1. Collection of documentation of prior learning:

- NN's certificates of education from previous schooling, education and courses
- Description of and documentation for job experience and competences within the plumber (gas) sector
- Documentation for coach training in a sports association

2. Application for admission to the further course:

- Application for a reduction in the length of the course
- A completed assessment form
- NN's documentation for relevant qualifications and competences

3. Guidance interview and competence assessment – 1 day:

- Review of assessment form and documentation material
- Test in quality management and costing
- Concluding interview and overall assessment of credit

4. Recognition of NN's prior learning:

- The PC driving license, A-certificate and a course in organizational structure taken in conjunction with the
- Danish Teknonom course (specialised technical study)
- Job experience and competences within the provision of quotations, quality management and accounts
- Coach training from Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations

Result: The course is reduced by 20 weeks

- Reduction in information technology, corporate techniques/costing
- Reduction in the subject "quality"
- Reduction in the subject "organizational structure"
- Concluding long essay in specialized subject

Good practice example from Germany

Modules in KomPass, a typical method of competence assessment in Germany

Module	Elements of competence assessment
No. 1	<i>Introduction:</i> The participant is informed on objectives and expectations as well as the general schedule and content of the assessment.
No. 2	<i>KomPass I:</i> Interview on the participant's educational and vocational goals <i>One-on-one reflection with the participant:</i> The individual schedule for the assessment is determined.
No. 3	<i>German language competence assessment</i> with the software Texteasy 5.0 <i>Potential discovery I:</i> Assessment centre group exercises to assess <ul style="list-style-type: none">- ability to work in teams- creativity- accuracy- work organisation- motivation / willingness to perform
No. 4	<i>Media competencies:</i> Computer-based test of text processing, spreadsheet analysis, internet research
No. 5	<i>Vocational orientation:</i> Test of the ability to gather occupation-specific information <i>Kompass II:</i> Interview on educational and vocational experiences and consulting <i>Potential discovery II:</i> Individual exercises in work organisation, problem solving and other fields
No. 6	<i>Tests:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- mathematics- technical understanding
No. 7	KomPass III: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Documentation of (informal) educational and vocational experiences with the help of a standardised folder- Consulting on further steps
No. 8	<i>Potential discovery III:</i> Individual and group exercises regarding communication skills, presentation skills, on-the-job behaviour and in other fields
No. 9	<i>Tests:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- English language competencies- general knowledge and vocational basic knowledge
No. 10	<i>Self-assessment and assessment by others</i> in one-on-one interviews Analysis and documentation of the results <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Individual reflection- Report and recommendations

Developed and applied by: Gesellschaft für berufsbildende Maßnahmen e.V. (GFBM), Berlin

Good practice example from Sweden

Conducting Assessment in Soft Skills

In planning assessment the trainers/coaches has to check the targets to assess, check the procedures to use, and match the targets with the procedures. The assessment should refer to the learners actual level of knowledge and skills, progress toward goals, it is very important with an **individual schedule** for this target group.

What is assessed	Procedures used to assess
Learning	Oral presentations
Reasoning process/strategies	Projects
Skills & competencies	Portfolios
Attitudes	Observations
Work habits	Questionnaires
Study techniques	Interviews
Personal development	Daily Diary

Meaningful Assessment

Two of the biggest problems the trainers have to cope with in conducting efficient and responsible assessments are making the assessments meaningful to the learners and manageable so they actually understand the outcomes of the assessment.

Meaningful assessment is created by structuring a positive working climate and gain trust, and involving the learners in the involvement and motivation process and the assessment procedures. This is usually done in group settings to start the process of involvement and awareness of the importance of assessing soft skills.

A model of how to conduct assessment of social skills is presented below, this approach is used in different shapes, and this is a good way of involving participants to be assessed not only by trainers/teachers/coaches, but also as a tool for self-assessment. The idea is to make assessment over a period of time to measure changes according to the goals set. The approach used may differ from individual to individual but usually the individual starts by making this as self-assessment as a first step, and in the second step the individual compares his/hers answers with how the teacher/trainer assesses the individual by using the same form. The results are then discussed, especially where the discrepancy is significant if so would be the case.

Score

1 - Very Good
 2 - Good
 3 - Fair
 4 - Unsatisfactory

Soft Skills Assessment and Progress Report

Skill/Quality	(1) Very Good	(2) Good	(3) Fair	(4) Unsatisfactory	Name	Date 1	Date 2
Manners	You are always aware of others' feelings and considerate of their needs regardless of your own current "mood".	You always try to be aware of others' feelings but are influenced by your own needs and moods at times.	You are aware of your weaknesses in this area and are striving to improve.	You show little or no consideration for others and basic courtesies are lacking in your everyday interactions.			
Ownership of tasks	You see every task through to the end, following all organisational procedures and keeping people informed of progress when necessary.	You try hard to meet deadlines and will usually follow procedures but can sometimes "forget" the little things that matter.	You know the procedures and try to follow them. Tasks can be boring and you have to work hard to make yourself stick at them.	You only do the tasks you like. You do not inform people of progress nor do you advise of problems with work			
Attendance	You have 100% attendance or are not absent without a very good reason. You always notify absences by due times in line with procedures.	Your attendance is good but you don't always manage to get in to work or phone within the time indicated in procedures.	You try to come in to work every day but can be influenced by external factors such as late nights or friends "pulling a sickie!"	Your attendance is erratic and it doesn't really bother you. You don't phone in to explain absences either and can't see the point or need for it.			

Skill/Quality	(1) Very Good	(2) Good	(3) Fair	(4) Unsatisfactory	Name	Date 1	Date 2
Motivation	You are keen to undertake new tasks and get involved in activities. You are energetic and enthusiastic, making a valuable contribution to the work of your organisation.	You like to get involved in new things but don't like to take the lead – happier to follow instructions. You try to see things through and not let yourself get affected by the goings-on around you.	You are keen at first to start a task but quickly lose interest. New ideas seem appealing if you don't have a lot of work to do towards them. You will sometimes be influenced by negative colleagues.	You don't want to get involved in anything new. You get quickly bored and distract others with your negative outlook.			
Professionalism	No matter what is going on in your personal life, or what your personal feelings are for the person you are dealing with, you maintain a high level of professionalism at all times. You see things through to their completion, giving 100% at all times.	You try hard to keep a business head on you but sometimes judge others or get influenced by your own beliefs, values and opinions. However, you try to remain committed to your work and to the task in hand.	You know what you should do and how you should behave in a working environment but can let yourself down by mood swings and a lack of consistency in your approach to work/others. You find it hard to make a commitment to work and/or relationships.	You don't really care what people think of you or your organisation. You react on a personal level to work matters that upset you or that go against your own beliefs/opinions. If you can't be bothered doing something, wild horses couldn't drag you!			
Work output	You produce a high level and quality of work on a daily basis consistently. You use your working time effectively and use your initiative in finding things to do during quiet periods.	You produce good work although not always accurate or quickly enough. You try to keep on track and not be distracted by other things.	You are easily distracted by things and people around you and this affects the quantity and quality of work you produce on a daily basis. You need to improve on this area.	You produce very little output and what you do produce contains more errors than are acceptable. You do not check your work and would rather surf the net!			

Skill/Quality	(1) Very Good	(2) Good	(3) Fair	(4) Unsatisfactory	Name	Date 1	Date 2
Conscientiousness	You take a pride in your work. You check everything and put in extra effort and time to ensure a task is done correctly and on time. If you are unable to meet a deadline, you report the fact to your supervisor – and you always have a good reason for this.	You check your work although some mistakes slip through. You are more concerned with speed of output than accuracy of input and need to slow down slightly to check the quality of what you are doing. You will sometimes offer to do a bit extra to help out but this is rare.	You don't always check that your work is of a satisfactory quality or relay important information to others but are actively working on this as you know the reasons behind doing these things. Room for major improvement.	You couldn't care less if a task got lost or not done on time, and so what if that means someone else gets into trouble or fails to meet their commitments to others?			
Conduct in workplace	You are always aware of your behaviour and how it can affect others and the atmosphere in which you work.	You are generally well behaved but can sometimes be influenced by personal circumstances and emotions.	You are aware of the need to think about your behaviour but slip sometimes, reacting to situations, incidents or distractions.	You generally do your own thing. Feet up, desk a mess, attitude and answering back to others.			
Timekeeping	Always on time, aware of the importance of image and respecting rules.	Usually on time and have a good reason for any lateness.	Often a few minutes late or unaware of the affect your lateness can have on others. Apologise.	Usually late with no good reason... and why should you apologise?			

Skill/Quality	(1) Very Good	(2) Good	(3) Fair	(4) Unsatisfactory	Name	Date 1	Date 2
Organisation/ planning	Well organised and thought out, your working day is effective and productive. You keep a tidy workstation and can lay your hands on any document at any time.	You try hard to work to deadlines and schedules but sometimes misplace or misfile information.	You are a bit haphazard and untidy in your presentation and working practices. You find it hard to prioritise.	You do whatever task you want to regardless of its priority. You often lose notes or tasks and forget to carry out commitments to others.			
Verbal Communication	You speak clearly and politely to staff, customers and colleagues at all times and don't use slang words in a professional environment.	You try to remember your "p's" and "q's" but sometimes let slip the odd slang word or two. You realise this immediately and correct what you are saying.	You know that your tone of voice can affect the way what you are saying is interpreted by others but you don't always think about "how" to speak to certain people – giving the wrong impression of you.	You say what you think in the words you would use to your mates. You let slip the odd swear word or two but what the heck? Everyone does it, don't they!			
Team-working/ Respect	You like working with other people and are respectful and considerate of their experience and opinions. You welcome constructive criticism and also give it where appropriate in a manner that maintains respect.	You can work well with others usually listening to them and meeting your end of the "bargain". You know that if you don't do what you say you will, others will be affected and you try to meet targets but can let personal feelings or comments affect you.	You prefer to work alone but will do a joint task if pressured into it. You will moan a bit about who you have to work with if you don't like them, but you will get on with it and try and get it over with. No chitchat or unnecessary action with people you don't like.	You refuse to work with anyone on a task unless it's your best mate. You don't get on with others and can't be bothered even trying to find things in people that you could respect or admire. If someone has something to say, they should say it to your face.			

Skill/Quality	(1) Very Good	(2) Good	(3) Fair	(4) Unsatisfactory	Name	Date 1	Date 2
Helping others	You love the opportunity to show your expertise and skill to others and will help anyone who needs it in a non-patronising way.	You will help people you are comfortable with and quite enjoy doing so. You are a bit shy of helping strangers or people you don't usually get on with though.	You will help if asked but won't volunteer. You sometimes make a big to-do about having to help someone do a task but you will see it through.	You never offer to help others. You are actually very skilled at avoiding the public eye and can disappear into the wallpaper if the occasion demands it.			
Ability to ask for help	You don't hesitate to ask for assistance if you need it. You will check you understand the task you are being asked to do and, if it is something you feel you need trained in, you will say so politely.	You will ask for help if really stuck with something but usually only from one or two particular people. You feel it is a sign of weakness to admit to needing help.	You won't ask for help unless you are sure you will get it and that people won't judge you or your skill level as a result. You'd rather look up a text book than ask the person next to you.	There's no-one you will ask for help. That would just make them think they're better than you and make you look stupid. If you're not sure how to do something you'll just do what you think and to heck with the results!			
Adaptability/ Flexibility	You enjoy changing your approach or meeting new challenges. Working a little later than usual doesn't phase you and you'll turn your hand to anything if it will help people out. Nothing is too menial for you. You are a welcome asset to any employment force.	You'll give most things a go but sometimes dig your heels in if you feel you're being asked to do something that's "boring". You like to be trained on new things, even if it means giving up some of your own time to learn them.	If you notice someone is really busy you'll maybe offer to help out but only if it's something you're confident about doing or really like. You don't much like change but will try and go with the flow. You don't believe in doing work things out of hours.	You despise change. If it means you have to work harder or longer or adapt the way you've always worked, forget it. Nothing cheeses you off more. Your philosophy is "why reinvent the wheel – especially if it means more work!"			

Examples of informal learning validation in Greece concerning “hard skills”:

Certificate	Validation Methods	Structure & Content
<p>‘National Language Certificate’</p> <p>(The Ministry of Education,2003)</p>	<p>In 2003, the Ministry of Education set up a system of summative assessment, based on examinations to confirm and certify the knowledge of modern languages obtained through non-formal training. It refers to adults and is recognized as a work qualification.</p>	<p>This Certificate has adopted a scale of six levels of language competence proposed by the European Council. It can be obtained by Greek native speakers for foreign languages including English, French, German and Italian, while foreign nationals can obtain a certification for their knowledge of Modern Greek language.</p>
<p>http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/nationalreport_en.html</p>		
<p>‘Certificate of Greek Language Competence’ for Immigrants</p> <p>(The General Secretariat for Adult Education- GSAE, 2006)</p> <p>www.ypepth.gr</p>	<p>Participants who successfully complete the final level of the GSAE’s educational programme in Greek language and culture are eligible to sit an examination twice a year, in order to obtain a Certificate of Greek Language Competence. This Certificate is a pre-requisite for obtaining a long-stay permit in Greece.</p>	<p>It provides the accreditation and recognition of Greek language competence for immigrants at four levels of competence.</p>
<p>‘Second Chance School’ Certificate</p> <p>Such schools offer adults a second chance to complete compulsory education. (1997)</p> <p>www.ypepth.gr</p>	<p>Graduates (adults) of the second chance school are awarded a Certificate which is equivalent to the Junior High School Certificate. (project and portfolio assessment, student self assessment, descriptive and numerical assessment)</p>	<p>This Certificate is recognised for employment in the Public Sector and allows holders to proceed to higher secondary general education or to vocational training programmes in Institutes of Vocational Education (IEKs), Vocational Training Centres (KEKs), and other structures offering adult training.</p>
<p>‘IT basic knowledge and skills’ certificates</p> <p>The Organisation of Vocational Education and Training (OEEK)</p> <p>www.oEEK.gr</p>	<p>Individuals who have skills in using computers can obtain certificates from examination centres. These examinations lead to the acquisition of various licenses, such as the European Computer Driving License (ECDL), which is recognized as a formal qualification in both the private and public sectors.</p>	<p>The learning modules consist of: a) word processing, b) spreadsheets and c) internet services. These certificates are valid for three (3) years from the day of issue.</p>
<p>There is no specific vocational certification system for assessing and recognising competences acquired through informal or non-formal learning in the private sector. However, there are training courses provided outside the formal educational system that lead to some Certificates (Private Educational institutes, major private companies, the Hellenic Business Administration Corporation (EEDA),</p>		