

Discovering Competencies

Tools for your future

Returns of competence assessment for young people



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

This project is funded with support from the European Commission.
This material reflects the views only of the project partners, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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.¹ 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.

¹ 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.

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 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.

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.