



**Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue ('Africa' sub-group)
of the *Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)* - European Higher Education Area**

Recognition for Lifelong Learning

Perspectives in the European Higher Education Area, Africa and the Near East

The demand for flexible and/or alternative learning pathways is increasing, as a growing number of people - in Europe and in the rest of the world - seek to update and improve their knowledge, skills and competences to better match them with socio-economic needs.

This article summarises the key takeaways from an [online Conversation on Recognition for Lifelong Learning](#), organised by the Africa subgroup of the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue of the [Bologna Follow-up Group \(BFUG\)](#) within the [European Higher Education Area \(EHEA\)](#).

The Conversation, held on 6th June 2023 supported by the [In-Global Project](#) funded by the [Erasmus+ programme](#), gathered around 120 participants from Europe, Africa and other world regions, and involved an informal exchange of views, experiences and good practice, enriched by contributions through an online chat.

This was the second EHEA-Africa online Conversation on Recognition organised by the Africa Subgroup. The [first one](#) took place on 12th December 2022 and focussed on instruments, tools and practices for academic recognition at regional and national level, both between and within the European and the African regions.

Recognition for Lifelong Learning - Europe and Africa face the same challenges and need to address similar issues.

- Europe and Africa have both made significant efforts to establish systems, frameworks, policies and institutions to support lifelong learning and the recognition of qualifications for lifelong learning in higher education.
- Recognition tools for lifelong learning exist in both regions, but they need to be effectively implemented. Both Europe and Africa face challenges regarding the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), such as the dissemination of information among stakeholders and ensuring quality, inclusion, as well as fairness and transparency, of procedures and of training programmes offered by traditional and non-traditional training providers. International instruments facilitate the recognition of competences acquired through experience and accreditation of prior learning. Nevertheless, where policies on RPL exist, automatic recognition is limited.
- Both Europe and Africa are seeking diverse and flexible types of learning delivery, also involving employers, including through *micro-credentials*. Micro-credentials support

lifelong learning, but need to rely on a common understanding and on quality-assurance, including for the recognition of prior learning, in order to enhance trust.

- Higher education institutions need to realise and acknowledge that the understanding of the nature of qualifications is changing. Universities are gradually moving from being solely providers to being also recognisers of micro-credentials. Throughout this process, they need to adapt in order to avoid rigidities in the admission of persons with relevant credentials, that might prevent such persons from accessing further education and restrict their potential.
- Digital platforms can make recognition more accessible for the holders of qualifications/micro-credentials, as well as for potential employers or institutions that may want to use such credentials to facilitate further opportunities. However, digitalisation is not without risks in terms of inequality (access to digital platforms and digital competencies of students, staff and administrators to exploit platforms) and security.
- Higher education institutions should also reflect on the aim of recognition for lifelong learning, particularly when it comes to upskilling and re-skilling for employability, considering that it takes up significant resources. Is academic recognition really needed for every micro-credential in order for it to be recognised by the labour market? And what types of certifications do employers look for when it comes to micro-credentials issued by higher education institutions?
- Both Europe and Africa need to devote more attention to the needs of migrants and refugees, especially of those who lack proof of their qualifications.
- Information sharing, exchanges of best practice, international co-operation and capacity building on the different aspects of recognition are essential in order to ensure that all ‘speak the same language’ and work towards the same goals. As Europe’s framework and tools are more mature than Africa’s continental frameworks and tools - such as the African Continental Qualifications Framework - African countries could draw some lessons and good practices from Europe regarding when it comes to resourcing, promoting and implementing such tools. Practice sharing should always consider different speeds of development and implementation across African countries and institutions, and the fact that some African regions are more advanced regarding recognition, quality assurance frameworks and qualifications frameworks.

Recognition for lifelong learning in the European Higher Education Area - expanding but facing implementation challenges

Professor [Cristina Ghitulică](#) (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education –ARACIS), recalled that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was founded in 2010 as a framework for voluntary cooperation, steered by the Bologna Process, which was launched in 1999. The EHEA brings together 49 countries, the European Commission and higher education stakeholders, and has developed a range of tools and frameworks to support higher education reforms and the implementation of tools, notably those related to recognition, quality assurance and qualification frameworks.

The 2020 [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#) has a strong focus on lifelong learning and calls for flexible and open learning paths, but also for developing smaller units of learning using EHEA



tools. The call for lifelong learning and flexibility is also reflected in the principles and guidelines adopted by the EHEA Ministers to strengthen the social dimension of higher education. The EHEA also provides a forum for dialogue with other countries and regions of the world through the [Coordination-Group on Global Policy Dialogue](#), who initiated this EHEA-Africa Conversation.

Lifelong learning has been a challenging area for reform since the beginning of the EHEA, and part of the dialogue with other countries since the first [Bologna Policy Forum](#), which called for the recognition of prior learning for developing successful lifelong learning policies. Several transparency tools and key commitments at EHEA level aim at facilitating the recognition of qualifications, with a focus on the way in which programmes are constructed.

[The latest Eurydice report on the social dimension of higher education](#) shows that only 19 higher education systems allow entry to higher education based on the valorisation or recognition of prior learning (RPL), and that only 18 countries encourage adults to follow higher education programmes, although the European Education Area has set ambitious targets for continuing education.

Lifelong learning in Africa: on the path from informal tradition to formal recognition

Professor [Michael Mawa](#) (Inter-University Council for East-Africa – IUCEA) recalled that lifelong learning is deeply rooted in Africa’s traditional oral transmission of learning, and interest for academic recognition is growing. Countries such as *South Africa* and *Mauritania* have developed qualification frameworks that include the recognition or enhancement of prior learning. Credit accumulation and transfer tools and regional initiatives play important roles, such as the national policies of the 2022 decision of the Inter-University Council of East Africa for the valorisation and recognition of qualifications in the region.

On the downside, access to these systems is limited due to lacking information on the importance of public policies for lifelong learning and on the recognition of non-formal qualifications, and to insufficient resources or skills for setting up assessment centres and policy frameworks. Some institutions, for instance, have developed systems that recognise prior learning and enable adults to enter the formal education system and to progress, but many have not, and this is a challenge.

Joint initiatives such as the [1981 Arusha Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in the African States – Legal Affairs](#), the [2014 Addis Ababa Revised Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and Other Academic Qualifications in Higher Education in African States](#) and the [African Continental Qualifications Framework \(ACQF\)](#) provide higher education or vocational training institutions guidelines for the recognition or valorisation of prior learning. The validation or enhancement of prior learning also plays an important role for refugees who are no longer in possession of documents attesting their prior learning or training. It must be considered that many African States still need to ratify the Addis Convention, and that the ACQF is currently being promoted through a second phase of funding (by the European Union and GIZ, with the European Training Foundation and the African Union Commission), which entails capacity building for countries developing their National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and referencing them.

Valuing and recognising non-formal learning

Michaela Martin (International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO) recalled that the validation of prior learning is a process enabling individuals to obtain official certification by recognising and valorising the knowledge, skills and know-how acquired during their professional, personal or voluntary experience. International instruments facilitate the recognition of competences acquired through experience, including international policy frameworks relevant to the accreditation of prior learning.

The [Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education](#) aims to facilitate the international recognition of academic and professional qualifications, whether acquired through formal, non-formal or informal education. The European Union has set up initiatives such as [Europass](#) or the European Certificate of Competence ([eu_competency_framework_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)) to support worker mobility, particularly through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

These frameworks provide guidelines and recommendations for countries wishing to develop RPL policies, but each country is responsible for their implementation and can adapt them to its legislation and needs. Several countries (*France, Belgium, Sweden and Norway* in Europe; *Tunisia, Senegal, Morocco and Ivory Coast* in Africa) have developed active RPL policies and systems.

While RPL policies are a common aspiration for both Europe and Africa, their implementation varies widely from one country to another and even within the same country. A research by IIEP-UNESCO on [Flexible learning pathways in higher education](#) shows that, while most of the countries reviewed have policies to support RPL, automatic recognition based on non-formal and informal learning is not very widespread. Some countries (*South Africa, Malaysia*) organise recognition procedures at national level, while others (*Finland*) tend to rely on institutional responsibility or delegate to external accreditation and validation providers (*UK, Malaysia*). Although some countries are advanced in the use of RPL, it is not a common route into higher education. In *South Africa*, one of the most advanced countries in terms of RPL in Africa, less than 10% of students access higher education via this route.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in adult higher education in Belgium and in Senegal

Valérie Fontaine (French Community of Belgium, Ministry of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation) outlined how, since 1991, the adult higher education system of Belgium's French-speaking Community has enabled a wide range of people (workers, jobseekers, refugees) to resume studies by promoting acquired experience - free of charge - and has been offering modular, credit-stackable courses to address initiation, re-skilling or up-skilling needs.

The system is based on the development of teaching dossiers, written by experts in the profession, featuring common reference frameworks shared by all adult higher education institutions. These frameworks set out key elements such as benchmarks and conditions for access (qualifications or skills) or learning outcomes. Applications can be submitted to higher education institutions by individuals or by training organisations. In the Belgian French-speaking context, the term used is 'valorisation' and not 'validation'. Valorisation is most often awarded for formal learning outcomes, but can also be awarded for non-formal learning ones (voluntary work, professional experience, etc.).



Current challenges include lack of visibility and awareness of this tool, and the fact that it is time-consuming for higher education institutions to use.

According to Professor [Lamine Gueye](#) (National Quality Assurance Authority for Higher Education, Research and Innovation - ANAQ SUP, Senegal) RPL in Senegal is a way of improving employability in a context where 96.4% of jobs are in the informal sector. It also supports the mobility of refugees and immigrant workers. The recognition of traditional qualifications works well at higher education level, but the structuring of the valorisation of acquired experience and know-how is still in its infancy for vocational training.

In line with the 2015 law on vocational and technical training, anyone has the opportunity to obtain a diploma, title or certificate, for professional qualification purposes. An inclusive technical committee set up in 2020 is in charge of analysing applications, while a pilot phase is under way to facilitate RPL in sectors such as masonry, shoemaking, jewellery, crafts, agriculture. A test project also addresses the recognition of prior learning for women in the cereal processing sector.

While the recognition of diplomas is not an issue in Senegal, the challenge is to allow training to continue and progress based on experience. A draft law on this subject is being finalised.

Coordination with quality assurance in both higher education and vocational training is also important. Recognition is smoother for diplomas resulting from training accredited by the national quality assurance authority, following an analysis carried out by a commission involving ANAQ-SUP. One of the challenges for the future will be the link between the laws on higher education and vocational training.

Spotlight on micro-credentials

There is no agreed worldwide definition for micro-credentials, although they have existed for as long as learning itself. They cover a variety of small volumes of learning, ranging from a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) or a digital badge, to certificates, licenses, or to more comprehensive learning programmes, which are always smaller than a short full degree. Micro-credentials can be provided in digital format or acquired face to face. They usually target specific knowledge or skills and may be delivered by higher education institutions, non-governmental organisations, private companies or public authorities. The increasing variety of non-traditional providers creates opportunities for institutions to adjust their role, and shift from being a mere “source” to becoming a “catalyst” of knowledge and embracing the experiences of incoming learners, particularly via RPL.

Interest in micro-credentials is growing, as they support Lifelong Learning in terms of re- and upskilling. However, to fulfil their potential, they must rely on a common understanding, be quality-assured, and be recognised in a way that properly acknowledges the skills and knowledge that the micro-credential holder has obtained. Learning systems must also increasingly think beyond professional skills, also paying attention to the personal development of learners.

According to [James Keevy](#) (JET Education Services, South Africa), *quality assurance* is the key challenge for micro-credentials. Education systems are geared to certify formal learning outcomes, but micro-credentials often describe knowledge, skills, competences and values that are not linked to a formal degree or study programme. Within a comprehensive ecosystem, classic definitions such as formal, non-formal and informal learning therefore become obsolete.



Outlining the European perspective, [Chiara Finocchietti](#) (CIMEA-NARIC, Italy) recalled the Rome Communiqué, in which the Higher Education ministers of the EHEA countries advocated flexible and open paths, and student-centred learning. She highlighted that the [MicroBol](#) project, funded by the European Union, confirmed that Bologna tools are applicable to micro-credentials and has proposed a Common Framework for micro-credentials to be applied in the EHEA, though further work is ongoing. Another significant step in Europe was the 2022 [Council Recommendation on a European Approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#). Furthermore, common guidelines for Higher Education Institutions will be available in autumn 2023.

According to [Irene Mutuzo](#) (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Standards Association – IEEE), employers are looking for jobseekers with formal qualifications as well as general skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning. And the fact that learners can stack-up different micro-credentials, in order to earn a full diploma, encourages long-term learning. In *Uganda* and *East Africa*, education and training institutions are investing in the creation of shorter and flexible learning arrangements.

Proving and verifying micro-credentials increases higher education institutions' workload, but digital credentialing platforms can help to process large numbers of applications and to make the results immediately available. However, digitalisation is not a panacea, especially where there is limited access to digital infrastructure, unstable internet or a risk of fraud.

Recognition for lifelong learning - a perspective from Portuguese-speaking countries in Europe and in Africa

The Africa-EHEA Conversations are designed to give a voice to all Africa regions and dominant linguistic groupings, respecting the diversity of higher education systems that this entails. Following a detailed overview of the European approach to automatic and mutual recognition and validation of skills, presented by [Eduarda Castel Branco](#) (European Training Foundation), [Professor Ana Nhampule](#) (Universidade Joaquim Chissano, Maputo, Mozambique) confirmed that the recognition of lifelong learning is complex and requires a joint response involving different policies and stakeholders, as well as extensive research. Micro-credentials are also key to recognise lifelong learning. The ultimate goal is to ensure that countries and institutions have transparent qualifications and skills that will be subject to mutual recognition. In Mozambique, the higher education sector has a limited role in catering for continued professional development needs and lifelong learning. Only the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector has recently introduced mechanisms for recognition of prior learning and, in 2022, recognised competences of about 30 professionals and issued certificates. From this experience, it was learned that there are many Mozambicans interested in RPL.

More than policies, there is a need for appropriate tools for the recognition of lifelong learning. Some tools, such as the [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System \(ECTS\)](#), are already in place in the EHEA and also utilised by some partner countries for student exchange, but the qualifications frameworks need to be comparable in order to make sure that institutions are certifying and recognising similar skills. African Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as other African countries, have developed policies of their own, but are yet to develop the required mechanisms and tools. The aforementioned ACQF II is supporting capacity to develop and implement National Qualification Frameworks in Africa, and the [HAQAA3](#)



(Harmonisation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance in African Higher Education) initiative, funded by the European Union, is supporting a mapping of credit systems in Africa and a university pilot of a very nascent tool – the African Credit Transfer System (ACTS).

Overall, there is a need to create a space for dialogue and mutual learning between Africa and Europe, in order to establish a system that will enable all, including refugees and other displaced persons, to actually enjoy and increase work and career opportunities and facilitate recognition of prior learning and other new forms of learning.

The role of employers

According to Professor Mawa, capturing the views of potential employers, graduates and credential holders is important not only to develop higher education or professional programmes, but also policies. In different East African countries, employers are involved in the preparation of the regional policy for the recognition of prior learning, for instance in the assessment and certification processes, and even in interviewing the candidates who are seeking the certification of certain competences. Employers are beginning to define their expectations in terms of qualifications, but also – more critically - of the competences expected in the workplace from higher education graduates at all levels. But this is not sufficient. There is a need to engage employers more, especially because they are now looking for soft and communication skills, beyond the theoretical classroom competences. To meet employers' expectations, higher education institutions and other testing centres are therefore beginning to assess candidates on such competences.

According to Prof. Nhampule, employers should also report on the extent to which their expectations of graduate performance are met.

Prof. Ghițulică stressed that the involvement of stakeholders is a basic principle of quality assurance for higher education institutions. She was however somewhat skeptical about the interest of employers in recognising the different certifications on the market, because employers often prefer to develop programmes in-house and do not look into the offer of the market or of higher education institutions. Also, many of the skills assessed by employers when hiring their personnel are not traditional professional ones. A [study by the World Economic Forum](#) shows that skills such as analytical and creative thinking are the most important ones for workers in 2023. Also, according to [LinkedIn](#), management, communication, customer services, leadership or sales are the most popular skills today. These may not be traditionally offered or certified by higher education. Employers look at resumes and motivation letters, but about 76% of them also rely on interviews and direct interaction with jobseekers. Employers also use a variety of specific skills tests which are on the market. They don't really look at credentials - except maybe for an initial screening of applications - and prefer to test the candidates themselves.

Addressing the lack of awareness: a role for authorities, institutions, stakeholders and the international community

The lack of awareness is linked to the fact that diverse modes of learning or acquiring competences are new to many people and societies. However, it can also conceal an element of rigidity and a reluctance to embrace change.



According to Professor Ghițulică, after 20 years of conceptual developments and collective work in Europe, the [European Higher Education Area](#) is not working as well as one would wish, and maybe more time is needed. Higher education institutions tend to stick to their traditional role of delivering regular degrees and practicing research, but now it's time for them to adapt. Today, given the pace of technological change, skills have to change every 5 years, people do not have time to go for a full degree and will need smaller, dynamic units of learning, throughout their lives. Public authorities need to support both institutions and beneficiaries in this process – including financially, which requires re-thinking higher education public funding.

The push might also come from the learners themselves. Guidance towards different types of learning for professional and personal life is now available everywhere, but social and emotional skills are also important. People need to feel empowered by lifelong learning, not only in terms of professional skills, but also of personal development, to be able to choose what is appropriate for them, because this has an impact on personal or professional success. It's also about building cultural and educational assets from kindergarten to retirement, and beyond.

Reaching out to the wider community of higher education practitioners, and promoting cross-border dialogue and exchanges with stakeholders will help to raise awareness and mutual trust in the credentials that result from new learning experiences, and support a collective contribution to recognition.

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