

GUIDELINES FOR THE RECOGNITION OF FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING



This document is part of a set of guidelines that relate to accreditation. It provides *Guidelines for the Recognition of Formal, non-Formal and Informal Learning* which include principles, criteria and procedures for academic policies that recognise different kinds of learning.

A module of studies normally consists of a number of predefined and structured learning activities – the so-called curriculum. Such a curriculum is characterised by clearly defined learning outcomes, proper coherence and integration as well as appropriate progression and process. However, It is common understanding in education today that significant and relevant learning takes place outside (prior and alongside) the formalised module of studies. As more students enter formal education with considerable prior experience, and stakeholders more urgently ask for skills and competences which often are not covered by traditional curricula but acquired ‘in practice’, the entire realm informal and non-formal leaning comes into focus.¹

This is where the recognition of non-formal and informal learning come into play. With these guidelines, the ECTE seeks to equip institutions as they engage with this realm.

We offer these updated guidelines as a tool in helping our stakeholders to progress toward greater fitness for service, for God’s greater glory in Europe.

ECTE Review committee

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¹ Drawn from SG-GETE, Appendix E

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1- DEFINITIONS OF FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

The foundational concern for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is expressed in the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015* with the following statement (p. 10):

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility.

Based on this concern, definitions and procedures for the proper assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning in higher education have been developed in recent years. Several key documents provide the basic information, summarised in these guidelines and applied to the context of ECTE-related institutions:

- Official documents of the *European Union*: Council Recommendation (2012/C 398/01) of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF> (quoted as EU Council Recommendation 2012)
- Documents from *The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)*: Cedefop (2015). European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 104. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/008370> (quoted as (Cedefop Guidelines 2015)).
- Documents from the Eurydice network of the European Commission: Eurydice (2012), Recognition of Prior Non-Formal and Informal Learning in Higher Education. Overview: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/focus-on/152.pdf> (quoted as Eurydice 2012).

Several definitions and differentiations are necessary in order to handle our topic properly:

1.1 - Different types of learning

The key terms formal, non-formal and informal learning are defined as follows:²

FORMAL LEARNING

Formal learning is learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

Applying these concepts to the theological institutions related to the ECTE, we can say that Formal learning refers to all teaching/learning activities, which are part of the defined and accredited curriculum of a given programme. ECTE credits are allocated to the learning units and proper module descriptors in place. This also includes all practical learning components, which are part of the formal curriculum, such as field education, mentoring, etc.

² According to the *EU Council Recommendation 2012 (Annex)*, and *ECTS User's Guide 2015*, pp. 71-75.

NON-FORMAL LEARNING

Non-formal learning is learning which takes place through planned activities (in terms of learning objectives, learning time) where some form of learning support is present (e.g. learner-teacher relationships); it may cover programmes to impart work skills, adult literacy and basic education for early school leavers; very common cases of non-formal learning include in-company training, through which companies update and improve the skills of their workers such as ICT (Information Communication Technology) skills, structured on-line learning (e.g. by making use of open educational resources), and courses organised by civil society organisations for their members, their target group or the general public.

Applying these concepts to the theological institutions related to the ECTE, we can say that non-formal learning refers to intentional learning experiences planned and carried out in an appropriate learning environment, but outside the formal curriculum, e.g. attending conferences to relevant topics, participating in church based training, taking formalised online courses (such as courses of the ICETE Academy).

INFORMAL LEARNING

Informal learning is learning from daily activities related to work, family or leisure which is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support; it may be unintentional from the learner’s perspective; examples of learning outcomes acquired through informal learning are: skills acquired through life and work experiences, project management skills, ICT skills acquired at work, languages learned, intercultural skills acquired during a stay in another country, ICT skills acquired outside of work, skills acquired through volunteering, cultural activities, sports, youth work and through activities at home e.g. taking care of a child.

Applying these concepts to the theological institutions related to the ECTE, we can say that informal learning refers learning from everyday life, which may have a formative effect, but is neither part of the formal educational programme the student is enrolled in, nor part of a non-formal educational set-up. In the context of ECTE this may refer to community life, social activities, chapels, church attendance, etc.

1.2 - Distinguishing learning periods

In addition to the three types of learning, we need to distinguish between two different learning periods: the phase of formal enrolment in an academic programme and the prior learning phase.

FORMAL ENROLMENT

A first learning period to consider is the phase *during the formal enrolment* in an academic programme. The primary learning will take place within the framework of the formal curriculum, but some learning will also take place outside of it. All three aforementioned types of learning can occur during this phase, but only the formal (academic) learning will normally lead to (academic) credit. Learning achieved outside the curriculum, be it of formal, non-formal or informal nature, could however be recognised. The following chart illustrates this:

	INSIDE THE FORMAL CURRICULUM	OUTSIDE THE FORMAL CURRICULUM
FORMAL LEARNING	Formally offered modules (assessed, credits allocated).	Modules of other formal programs at the appropriate level (assessed, credits allocated).
NON-FORMAL LEARNING	Not possible	Can be recognised under certain conditions (see below)
INFORMAL LEARNING	Not possible	Can be recognised under certain conditions (see below)

PRIOR LEARNING

In contrast to this phase of enrolment in an academic programme, *prior learning* refers to learning which has taken place prior to the enrolment to a given formal program of higher education. Here we further distinguish between two possible applications of prior learning:³ as alternative entry routes to a formal programme and as a means of progression and recognition of within a programme.

1. **Alternative entry routes.** Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning as an *alternative route* to enter higher education refers to components of prior learning which may add to the entrance qualification of a person who is lacking the required academic prerequisites. Applying this to the ECTE context we can say that recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning as an alternative route to enter higher education gives learners (under certain conditions) the possibility “to gain access to a higher education programme” without possessing the standard academic entrance qualification.
2. **Progression.** *Progression* in higher education based on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning means that learners can be exempted from certain higher education programme requirements if they demonstrate that they already possess the knowledge and skills related to these parts of study. Applying this to the ECTE context we can say that progression in higher education based on the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning gives learners (under certain conditions) the possibility to count prior non-formal and informal learning toward the completion of a programme.

These provisions for the recognition of non-formal and informal prior learning do not refer to the recognition of formal prior learning, which is regulated by standard procedures for the recognition of transfer credits.

1.3 - Recognition

Recognition basically means “approval of courses, qualifications, or diplomas from one higher education institution by another for the purpose of admitting students to undertake further studies.”⁴ Three types of “recognition” can be distinguished:⁵

1. Recognition of qualifications, including prior learning and professional experience, allowing entry or re-entry into higher education;
2. Recognition of short study periods in relation to student mobility, having as the main instrument the ECTS;
3. Recognition of full degrees, having as the main instrument the Diploma Supplement.

The latter two refer to programmes or components which are accredited within the formal higher education context so that ECTS credits have been conferred.

The first type of recognition refers to non-formal and informal learning, to prior learning and to professional qualifications, which were achieved outside the formal higher education structure (i.e. apprenticeships, professional training, work experience, or diplomas of professional schools).

In what follows we will explain how recognition be gained through these particular types learning.

³ According to Eurydice 2012, pp. 3-4.

⁴ According to ECTS User's Guide 2015, p. 75.

⁵ According to ECTS User's Guide 2015, p. 75.

2. PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES FOR THE ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

2.1 - General principles

The two key principles are:

1. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is based on its equivalence with the defined learning outcomes of the formal educational programme for which it counts.
2. In order to be recognised non-formal and informal learning needs to be assessed. This means “the learner’s progress” needs to be evaluated in order to “ascertain the achievement of the learning outcomes of an educational component (unit/module)”.⁶

We can conclude: a) no recognition is granted without documented achievement of learning outcomes; b) no documented achievement of learning outcomes can occur without assessment; c) no assessment can occur without defined required learning outcomes.

The following concise summary in the ECTS User’s Guide 2015 points the way:

Higher education institutions should be competent to award credits for learning outcomes acquired outside the formal learning context through work experience, voluntary work, student participation, independent study, provided that these learning outcomes satisfy the requirements of their qualifications or components. The recognition of the learning outcomes gained through non-formal and informal learning should be automatically followed by the award of the same number of ECTS credits attached to the corresponding part of the formal programme. As with formal education, the award of credits is preceded by an assessment to verify the achievement of learning outcomes.

The assessment methods and criteria should be constructed to measure the achievement of the required learning outcomes at the appropriate level, without reference to specific learning activities or workload. For example, ‘participation in classroom discussion’ of the subject matter would no longer be considered in assessment, whereas the corresponding learning outcome of ‘constructing arguments while interacting with a group’ would become relevant. Appropriate staff should be appointed in each department or subject area, who should have the formal authority and training to award credits for learning outcomes acquired outside the formal learning context on the basis of transparent criteria established and published by the Institution. It should be understood that they will be expected to report on, and document, their decisions through regular reports to an appropriate committee (e.g. at departmental, faculty or institutional level).

Institutions should develop recognition policies for non-formal or informal learning. These policies should include elements such as advice, feedback to learners on the results of the assessment and the possibility for learners to appeal. Institutions should also create facilities for advice, counselling and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These may take different forms depending on national and institutional practices (e.g. they may exist within single higher education institutions or as joint centres for several institutions). Institutions’ policies and practices should be published prominently on their websites. Recognising non-formal and informal learning helps make HEIs more socially inclusive. Widening access opportunities for learners from professional life and a range of non-traditional learning environments helps make lifelong learning a reality. Institutions should be particularly open to the recognition of vocational education and training.

⁶ According to *ECTS User’s Guide 2015*, p. 66.

2.2 – Procedures for the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Based on the standards outlined in the respective documents, the ECTE requires the following procedures for institutions wanting to assess and recognise non-formal and informal learning.

1. Institutions define provisions for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.
2. Institutions appoint and train appropriate staff to carry out recognition processes according to the policy.
3. Institutions implement appropriate assessment procedures according to the standards and procedures outlined in these guidelines. This includes the implementation of an appropriate diversity of assessment methods.
4. Institutions implement proper documentation and decision-making processes.
5. Institutions prepare suitable information for students.
6. Institutions write a policy for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which addresses the aforementioned issues.

2.3 – Implementation of the assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning

In practice, the implementation of assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning includes the following components:

1. **Access to policy and orientation:** Students have access to the standards and procedures for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. They receive appropriate guidance and advice.
2. **Consistent assessment:** The assessment of students' non-formal and informal learning is carried out according to the standards outlined in these guidelines. The selection of assessment methods and tools is "fit for purpose".⁷

The following methods and tools may be appropriate "for extracting evidence".⁸

- Tests and examinations
- Dialogue or conversational methods
- Declarative methods
- Observations
- Simulations
- Evidence extracted from work or other practice

The following additional tools are helpful in "presenting evidence".⁹

- CVs and individual statements of competences
- Third party reports
- Portfolios

3. **Clear decision-making process.** Institutions follow the procedure outlined in their public policy and take formal decisions on the recognition of the assessed prior learning. The decision process is transparent for the student. Decisions can normally go in one of the following three directions:
 - a. The submitted non-formal or informal learning is in full compliance with the expectations and credits can be granted.

⁷ See Cedefop *Guidelines* 2015, p. 45.

⁸ See Cedefop *Guidelines*, p. 47-49.

⁹ See Cedefop *Guidelines*, p. 49-50.

- b. The submitted non-formal or informal learning is in partial compliance with the expectations (not all required learning outcomes are met). In such cases, credits may be granted conditional on the submission of additional work.
 - c. The submitted non-formal or informal learning is not in compliance with the expectations and credits cannot be granted at all.
4. **Proper documentation:** The result of the recognition process is documented properly in the file of the student and included in his/her transcript.

These Guidelines have been approved by the ECTE Council, 20 April 2020 and are valid until their revision.

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