A Constructivist Policy Rational For Aligning Non -Formal and Informal Learning to Mechanism for Validation and Recognition of Skills: The Case of Cyprus

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Abstract

This paper provides evidence on the practice of recognition of non -formal and informal learning and supports a constructivist approach for the formation of the Mechanism for the validation of non- formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in the case of Cyprus. Since 2012 and according to the EU direction many counties have initiated policy actions for the implementation of a Mechanism for VNFIL. In this paper we present the empirical evidence provided in the context of the project Development of an Action Plan for the establishment of a Mechanism for VNFIL. More exactly, the paper analyses the interviews with stakeholders in Cyprus with the aim to outline current practices on recognition and validation of learning and to sketch the milestones for the construction of the Mechanism proposed by the stakeholders. The paper arguments that the constructivist policy rational that embrace current practices and build on stakeholders' recommendations and even more consensus about required actions is a strong case of a bottom up policy model for the formation of the Mechanism for validation of NFIL.

Keywords: Validation, non-formal and informal learning, policy development, accreditation of prior learning.

1. Introduction

Change in skills and knowledge through the life span and career transition have become core concepts in today's policy discourse for education and employment. Lifetime employment becomes an exception since the majority of employees change job and career several times in their work lifespan. Labour market change, reflecting evolutions in technologies, markets and organisations, requires that skills and competences can be transferred and relearned within a new working context. Employees must be able to transfer knowledge and experience to a new organisation, sector or even a new country (Unesco 2020, Werquin 2010).

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is very much related to this. The purpose is to make visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, irrespective of the context where the learning originally occurred. The transfer of knowledge and skills are a key aspect of the agendas for lifelong learning policies. Lifelong learning requires that learning outcomes from different settings and contexts, employment and education or training, can be linked together. Moreover, in a globalized world, learning in an individual's life takes place through non-formal and informal means while traveling, navigating, socializing e.t.c. As long as learning, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training remain invisible and poorly valued, assessed and certified the ambition of lifelong learning prevented (Andersson and Osman, 2008).

The literature review documents the disadvantages in outcomes of education and employment due to the absence of recognized qualifications. These include the obstacles in finding new jobs although skill shortages don't exist, the denial of access in educational programmes although the required competences exist and/or the denial of the right to practice a profession and migrate in another country to build the mobility of human capital.

Hence in this context, the under-utilization of skilled workforce rises and the importance of policy actions for the recognition and validation of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning (Andersson et al 2004).

VNFIL is becoming apolitical and social priority that attracts the attention of policy makers worldwide, since it addresses the potential of the individual to acquire a formal qualification that matches his/her knowledge and skills, helping in that way to enhance employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. VNFIL can facilitate multi entry–exit between the education system and the labour market. Policy papers from International Labour Organisation, UNESCO and EU have also recommended that countries shall establish Mechanism for VNFIL (Cedefop 2012, 2015b, ILO 2018).

Hence, VNFIL is a system of procedures that lead to the identification, evaluation and certification of an individual's knowledge, skills and competences independently of the time and the place of learning. Validation shall be equivalent to standards-benchmarks for a part (modular) or full qualification. The process of VNFIL is organized in three axes. The first refers to the processes related to identifying non-formal and informal learning (including self-evaluation); the collection and presentation of evidence of learning; the assessment and validation of the evidence; and issuing a recognized qualification if claims are valid. The second axe is organized around the independence of the learning method in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The third axe specifies that an authorized body must certify the learning that conforms to standards of a qualification (full or part). Also, VNFIL is organized around core processes such as the assessment and certification process and counselling, mediation and skills gap training to ensure a successful outcome. Mechanisms such as awareness and publicity, quality assurance, appeals and skills gap training support the abovementioned processes (Cedefop 2015b, Mikulec 2015).

Given the above, most countries have initiated steps in establishing a Mechanism for VNFIL and often face challenges when it comes to implementation and scaling up. The key challenges include complex, time-consuming methodology, particularly for people working in the informal sector or with a low level of education; the capacity of institutions and staff to plan and implement the VNFIL; the mismatch between occupational and qualification standards; limited awareness of the benefits of VNFIL; low participation of social partners and competent bodies in the validation process and thus low acceptability by employers and higher education institutions; and last insufficient training provision for upskilling of candidates to meet accepted standards; and inadequate funding.

In order to monitor changes in the policies for VNFIL different policy models have been constructed. To these models belong the CEDEFOP Inventory on validation of NFIL in cooperation with the European Commission. The European inventory makes information on current practices – including examples from selected sectors – available and if follows a descriptive approach in monitoring changes. There are also other studies though (OECD, UNESCO, ILO) that use quantitative system models to estimate actions that cannot be observed or measured directly. These studies use tools such as diagnosis (estimating what factors have the greatest leverage to change a specified outcome or what is the primary source of a given outcome), forecasts (estimating present trends to predict how a variable is likely to evolve in the future) (Cedefop 2016, 2018, ILO 2018, Werquin 2010). Also, case studies on implementation of actions for establishing Mechanism for VNFIL are also used as learning tools, to gain an understanding of how the system works, or may work in the future (European Commission 2019).

In this framework, the paper reviews contextual EU and national factors in so far as they may influence in one way or another the development of the Mechanism for VNFIL in Cyprus. The paper presents the analysis of the interviews conducted with the main policy stakeholders and claims that a constructivist policy approach that builds on common understanding of the reality and its change is a case of a bottom up policy approach for the establishment of a national Mechanism for VNFIL. Using the example of Cyprus, it offers a description of how systems of recognition and validation of NFIL are organised, their legal framework, the procedures and technical arrangements that take place and possible the pilot programmes that are running. The results of the interviews are structured by topic. The paper concludes indicating challenging areas for implementation in the regulatory framework, the institutional framework and the stakeholder's ownership.

2. The EU Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning

According to the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, "the validation of learning outcomes, i.e. knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, can play an important role in strengthening employability and mobility, as well as increasing

motivation for lifelong learning, particularly in the case of the socio-economically disadvantaged or the low-qualified" (Official Journal of EU 2012).

The Council Recommendation is aligned with other EU initiatives such as the 'Europe 2020' strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth which calls for the development of knowledge, skills and competences for achieving economic growth and employment (European Commission 2020). The accompanying initiatives of 'Youth on the Move' and the 'Agenda for new skills and jobs' emphasize the need for more flexible learning pathways that can improve entry into and progression in the labour market, facilitate transitions between the phases of work and learning and promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Also two more policy frameworks are considered as milestones for the implementation of VNFIL: a)The Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) which underlines the importance of lifelong learning as a principle penetrating learning in all contexts, and, b) a series of Communique for VET and Higher Education, the Bruges Communiqué of December 2010 and the Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers for Higher Education in Leuven respectively which declared that Member States shall initiate national procedures for the recognition and VNFIL, supported, as appropriate, by national qualifications frameworks.

In accordance with the European guidelines Member States should include in the arrangements for VNFIL, the following elements, while providing the possibility for each person to benefit from them, either individually or in combination, depending on his needs: i. Identification of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and non-formal learning. ii. Documentation of the learning outcomes of a person through non-formal and informal learning. iii. Assessment of learning outcomes achieved by a person through non-formal and non-formal learning. iv. Certification of the results of the assessment made by a person through non-formal and informal learning in the form of professional qualifications, credits leading to a professional qualification or in any other way deemed appropriate.

The Recommendation on VNFIL updates the European Guidelines, introducing a comprehensive set of principles governing national schemes as follows:

1. The validation arrangements are linked to the National Qualifications framework and are in line with the European Qualifications' Framework.
2. There is information on the benefits and possibilities of validation, as well as the relevant procedures.
3. Disadvantaged groups, including the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, are likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, as validation can enhance their participation in lifelong learning and facilitate their access to the labour market.
4. The unemployed and those at risk of becoming unemployed have the possibility, in accordance with national law and national particularities, to be subject to "skills control", with the aim of determining their knowledge, skills and abilities, within a reasonable period of time.
5. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by accessible appropriate guidance and advice.
6. Transparent quality assurance measures are implemented, in line with the existing framework, which support reliable, valid and certifiable methodologies and assessment tools.
7. The development of the professional skills of the staff involved in the validation process in all relevant areas is foreseen.
8. Professional qualifications or, where applicable, partially acquired professional qualifications obtained through the validated learning experiences meet the agreed standards that are identical or equivalent to the standards of professional qualifications acquired through formal education programmes.
9. Promotes the use of Union Transparency tools, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass, to facilitate the recording of learning outcomes.
10. There are synergies between validation arrangements and credit schemes applied in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET (Cedefop 2015b).

According to a series of publications of The European Inventory on Validation of NFIL, a project that is a cooperation of the Commission and CEDEFOP, the Member States are gradually focusing more on validating non-formal and informal learning. All countries offer the opportunity to individuals to validate their knowledge, skills and abilities or have developed relevant validation mechanisms and/or established national bodies for validation of NFIL. However, these actions are not generated in all sectors such education & labour market in each country. Though there is considerable diversity in practices for VNFIL, education remains the main area in which validation develops. Labour market initiatives are less common and employer participation is still limited.

Information on the number of beneficiaries and participants in validation procedures is still limited, which in turn restrains the chances for adequate system monitoring and assessment of the impact of validation in sectors such as education and employment (CEDEFOP 2016).

The last Inventory overview (CEDEFOP 2018) suggests that there are two principles where efforts are to be particularly enforced. Firstly, provision for the professional development of validation practitioners remains the principle with the lowest level of development. Secondly, further work is also needed to make skills audits available for individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment and thus increase the participation of vulnerable groups to the Mechanism of VNFIL. The review concludes that the institutional prerequisite of stakeholder involvement is a necessary condition for the effective delivery of procedures for VNFIL

3. Methodological considerations of the paper

This paper aims to provide evidence using a case study the policy formation for the establishment of a Mechanism for Validation of NFLIL in the case of Cyprus. The paper adopts the theoretical approach of constructivism in policy formation. The literature review mentions that constructivism can contribute to the achievement of two crucial goals of policy study: 1) complementing and extending interpretive insights, and 2) making policy theory more promising to developers of policy theory. As such constructivism identifies the theoretical approach that offers the basis for recontextualization of the reality in which and about which policy is made and is studied.

The paper follows the principles of "explanatory constructivism" or "insight constructivism," which emphasizes the importance and value of perception of the reality images or worldviews of policymakers. This approach of constructivism attempts to redefine the policy reality by uncovering and attending the beliefs of practitioners in order better to understand- get insight into, or more satisfactorily explain-why they take the decisions and actions they do. The first key to the value of this approach lies in the usefulness and policy relevance of the analytical framework within which these practitioners-stakeholders believes are examined and further actions for the construction of the reality are recommended.

Policymakers' reality images can be analyzed or decomposed into various sets of key components. A "conceptual framework" breaks the policymakers' beliefs into six key components as follows: a) beliefs about *what is*, b) beliefs about *what causes what*, c) beliefs about *how changeable reality is*; d) beliefs about *what's right,* e) beliefs about *what works*, and f) beliefs about *what should be done in particular settings by whom, how, and why*. The above categories correspond and contribute to traditional social scientific activities such as: description, explanation, evaluation, practical theorizing and policy recommendation (Haferkamp & Smelser 1992).

In order to analyse the views of the stakeholders in Cyprus towards the necessity and the milestones of a Mechanism for VNFIL interviews have been carried out in the period of September 2017 to October 2017. Specifically, personal interviews have been conducted with representatives of 35 organisations that represent political bodies (i.e. Ministries), educational institutions (public and private universities, VET institutions), Social Partners, chambers and governmental and non-governmental institutions, such as Youth Board of Cyprus, Pancyprian Volunteerism Coordinative Council, Cyprus Sports Organization, e.t.c.. In total 43 persons participated in the interviews, 62.7% were men and 37.3% women and their profile were at the senior and middle-management level.

The interview guide contained 23 open ended questions which are formed in the following six (6) axes: a) current practices for recognition of knowledge and skills in education and employment, b) intention of participation in the Mechanism for Validation of NFIL, c) importance of participation in the Mechanism, d) incentives for participation in the Mechanism, e) principles for the implementation of the Mechanism, f) Competent bodies for the implementation of the Mechanism.

Beyond interviews, to record strategic goals existing texts such as the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning or informal texts such as interviews/ press releases but also strategic policy positions papers have been studied. The findings of the interviews are presented in the next chapter of the paper.

4.The case of VNFIL in Cyprus

4.1. Milestones for the establishment of the Mechanism for VNFIL

For the establishment of the national mechanism for VNFIL the Ministry of education has initiated an experts' consultancy project under the title "Development of a National Action Plan for the establishment of Mechanism for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL)".

This project was part of a larger project entitled "Establishing Non-Formal/Informal Learning Validation Mechanism and Pilot Implementation", included in the Operational Programme "Employment, Human Resources and Social Cohesion" 2014-2020. Contractor of the project was a Greek consultancy EEO group who has formed the team of experts (EEO 2018).

Specifically, in order to promote the establishment of Mechanism for VNFIL the Ministry of Education and Culture submitted a proposal to the Council of Ministers for the establishment of a Commission responsible for the implementation of the relevant Recommendation of the European Council (2012). The proposed National Action Plan contains elements on strategic targeting, principles, conditions, governance in order to operate a comprehensive non-formal and informal learning validation mechanism in Cyprus (Cyprus Ministry of Education 2017, Cedefop 2015a).

More concretely the project entitled "Establishing Non-Formal/ Informal Learning Validation Mechanism and Pilot Implementation": a) briefly reviews the existing European institutional and regulatory framework with regard to policies in the field of vocational education and training, adult education and lifelong learning in general; b)records good practices from EU countries, which implement successfully validation Mechanisms for non-formal and informal learning; c) presents as a result of office research and field research any existing practices for VNFIL in Cyprus; d) records the views of bodies, social partners, Ministries and associations on the establishment of validation Mechanism.

The project has been organized in three phases during the years 2017-2019. In the first phase the project attempted a detailed mapping of the current situation in Cyprus regarding practices for validation of non-formal and informal learning and good practices from EU countries, which successfully implement Mechanism for VNFIL. In this phase the project also recorded the views of institutions, social partners, Ministries and organizations in Cyprus for the establishment of Mechanism for validation of NFIL.

In the second phase, the National Action Plan for the validation of non-formal and informal learning was formulated, which described the general objective, the basic principles, the procedures as well as the requirements of the Mechanism for VNFIL to function smoothly and effectively. The third (and last) phase included the development of an action plan for the pilot implementation of the Mechanism for validation of NFIL. The pilot implementation will be completed on 31/12/2023, during which date the co-funded project "Establishment of Non-Formal / Informal Learning Validation Mechanisms and Pilot Implementation" will be completed.

The National Action Plan, which was prepared during the second phase of the project, identified the framework within which the Mechanism for validation of NFIL will be formed and will operate. It is briefly stated that the validation Mechanism aims to provide interested parties with the following provisions:

   a) validation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
   b) acquisition of qualifications based on validated non-formal and non-formal learning experiences;
   c) benefits especially for disadvantaged groups, including the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, as validation can encourage their participation in lifelong learning and contribute to their mobility or access to the labour market.

Based on the above, the implementation of objectives and credible Mechanism for VNFIL will be based on two pillars: a) Pillar I: Acquisition of professional qualifications. This pillar includes the existing Professional Qualifications System (PEP) of the Cyprus Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA)but also any other system that exists or will be developed and linked with vocational qualifications (in the context of non-formal and informal learning), b) Pillar II: Acquisition of educational qualifications.

Moreover, the Action Plan underlines that a crucial parameter for the successful establishment of the Mechanism for VNFIL is the "recognition" of its results. Recognition is divided into "formal" and "social" axes, namely: a)"Formal recognition'' is associated with the issuance of a certificate or attestation through which the formal recognition of specific learning outcomes held by an individual takes place, b)"Social recognition'' is linked to the wider acceptance of the value of certified learning outcomes by both the labour market and society.

The target group of this Action Plan includes all citizens of the Republic of Cyprus who are interested in validating educational qualifications acquired in the context of non-formal and informal learning in the fields of adult education,

youth and volunteering, with particular emphasis on disadvantaged groups, including the unemployed and the young (or aged) unemployed, as well as those at risk of unemployment.

In the National Action Plan for the establishment of a Mechanism for VNFIL in Cyprus, the fields of validation were identified. In particular, it will be possible to validate learning outcomes that came through: a) training, general education and training programmes (including in-house training and general adult education), b) programmes organized by civil society organizations, c) E-learning (e.g. use of open educational resources), d) work (e.g. use of ICT), e) family (e.g. childcare) f) leisure (volunteering, sports, cultural activities, e.t.c.).

4.2. Experiences from the stakeholders on VNFIL

Experiences, opinions and attitudes of the stakeholders regarding the necessity and the conditions for the establishment of the national Mechanism for VNFIL are milestones for policy formation and provide the insightful basis for the construction of the policy framework. Based on the field research and the analysis of the interviews, the findings for the establishment of a Mechanism for VNFIL is presented below.

The establishment of the Mechanism is considered very important, especially when accreditation of skills is foreseen in different levels of expertise. The professions are changing, which requires the validation of knowledge and skills in regular basis. Also, it is important that any validation will have an impact on social recognition of skills and not only document the acquainted skills. It is equally important, that the validation of skills have value for the employees both for professional development, finding a job and participation to continuous training. Towards these aims the experience of the Cyprus Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA)on the development of Professional Standard System (PEP) is considered important and could serve as an example for the establishment of the Mechanism for VNFIL since it aligns training skills with their certification (HRDA 2015). Until today about 802 professional qualification standards have been developed at various levels which cover a wide range of professions in the following areas: hotel / food industry, wholesale and retail trade, building industry, manufacturing, vehicle repair, communication systems and networks /computers, hairdressing and vocational training.

The Mechanism should adopt the principles of: a) the inclusiveness of all and especially young people not in Education and Training (NEETs); b) the development of programmes adopting the philosophy of E - learning, namely developing skills through the use of Technology; c) the philosophy of employability as described at the Oslo Summit and is provided by the Diploma Supplement.

The preconditions that can support the development of the national Mechanism for validation of NFIL are:

1. The cooperation of institutions to ensure the scientific approach, the objectivity, the impartiality and integrity of the accreditation and certification procedures.
2. The development of a legal framework that describes the responsibilities of all bodies. The usage of objective evaluation methods that will describe not only the title of qualification but also the substance of skills, knowledge and qualifications.
3. The design of tools for identifying and recording skills.
4. The linkage of educational qualifications with the labour market.
5. Education and counselling should familiarize individual from a very early age in the identification of skills that they acquire.
6. The philosophy of the system should be outlined.
7. The recruitment of qualified staff in the Mechanism of VNFIL to provide high quality services.
8. The formation of criteria and standards for development and accreditation of education and training programmes.
9. The formation of criteria by which individuals will participate in the validation process.
10. The formation of the programmes in the form of learning outcomes.
11. The establishment of a metric credit system such as ECTS and ECVET for units and modules.
12. The formation of a complementary transcript that describes the skills that acquired in a variety of fields of work and/or study.

In general, validation of NFIL is considered a very important process for its impact on the outcomes for labour market and education (i.e. the acceptance of degrees, the reliability of the process and results of the recognition). According to the answers of the participants, the main effort for the establishment of the Mechanism should focuses on the validation of knowledge gained from programmes they cover specific parameters (qualitative and quantitative). For the

certification phase to be effective, the participants stress the need to develop standardized training programmes by defining the learning outcomes (purpose, objectives, results).

Then the examination, as a method of certification, will be done through questionnaires or case studies to enable an evaluator (internal or external) to ascertain/ certify the degree of acquisition of relevant knowledge. As per the skills' mapping stage, all actors need to develop standards for the identification and accreditation of skills. Likewise, the accreditation of education and training programmes is also an action that should be developed in order to standardize the input in skills development. There is already a certification process for the accreditation of NGOs in terms of techno-economic transparency which runs under the auspice of the Ministry of Finance, that can serve as a case for accreditation of training institutions in the Mechanism for VNFIL.

The necessity of the accreditation of educational and training programmes is highlighted by the participants. There is a diverse picture of the education and training institution captured through the interviews as many institutions are accredited, their programmes provide certificates or titles of completion, but most institutions do not certify the acquisition of knowledge. With minimal exceptions the completion of NFIL programmes does not require examinations or any other assessment method, and consequently the completion certificates do not provide any credits and/or exception from attendance of modules. Also, most existing NFIL programmes are not structured on the approach of learning outcomes and are not assessing the learning process. However, there are programmes which are accredited by the HRDA, but the Authority does not enforce any procedure for the certification of individuals' knowledge and skills. A common practice though in training is the evaluation of training programmes by the trainees-participants using a questionnaire with items for trainers, training sites, subjects e.t.c. (European Commission 2018, Eurydice 2019).

The Mechanism should also address the accreditation of NFIL programmes and the assessment of the education outcomes. Thus, the programmes should be formed in Credits, i.e. ECVET/ECTS, and adopt the learning outcomes approach. A key point for the Mechanism of validation of NFIL is the full activation of ECVET/ECTS credit methodology with the aim to enhance the value of mobility in education and training. The Mechanism should in the first phase create an inventory that systematizes the NFIL programmes and the bodies that provide them. The Mechanism shall also set the design and assessment requirements for programmes in order to be assigned with credits. Then the educational institutions should recognize the credits and validate outcomes in full or partial qualification. This means that the Mechanism should connect educational outcomes with occupational standards and the obtainment of professional qualifications in the system of HRDA (Government of Cyprus 2016).

For its feasibility the Mechanism for VNFIL, must be funded by the state resources on a cost-benefit logic and gradually be co-financed from private participation, for example individual fees for participation in the validation process. In addition, extra resources can be utilized by the European Union and by the companies for industrial training.

Also, an important element of the Mechanism for VNFIL is the access to information for all individuals. In order to disseminate the information regarding the benefits of participating in the validation of NFIL a numerous of actions are proposed such as informative workshops in schools, dissemination of information through websites and through social networking in non-formal learning organizations e.t.c..

Compared to other Member States, the review of good practices highlights the risk of restraining the VNFIL through school-traditional assessment methods and tools, such as the use of tests and examinations in Cyprus (practice followed for example in the validation/ certification of its knowledge Greek language). Herein lies the risk of no participation in validation procedures of individuals with low level of educational qualifications and/or unemployed and/or special needs.

Recognition of previous professional experience through the Mechanism of VNFIL will lead to the opening of access especially in subjects such as Music and the Arts that too many individuals have diplomas from Conservatories or Technical Schools or Patents. For the recognition of prior learning a Portfolio for Exemption from Courses should be created and, in this case, a necessary condition is the change of legislation.

An example for the development of the Mechanism for VNFIL can be the Multicenters (Polykentra) as they include training topics that are not provided in the standard non-formal learning and involve people with poverty and children of immigrants who are not part of formal education. The strengths of these programmes are their big demand, their easiness of access, their low cost and the methods of the courses. Validation procedures should also be developed for the certification of the trainees in Multicenter and the mentors-trainers. There is also need to develop tools for

professional development of the career counselors in order to enable them to identify and record the skills of individuals.

Furthermore, informal learning in Cyprus is a wide field for validation, which includes training seminars, summer schools, education for entrepreneurship, start-up actions. However, there is no study to record the incentives to participate in these learning activities. Especially in the case of informal learning, i.e. volunteer activities, the validation requires reliability, which in turn requires a thorough methodology and an examination procedure for the assessment of the acquired knowledge and skills.

The Mechanism of VNFIL shall be also recognise working experience beyond existing training programmes. The HRDA system of professional qualifications validates - through an assessment process - the experience from work by awarding a qualification of a certain level to those who succeed in the certification procedure. This certification is connected to the system of professional qualifications and the National Qualification Systemin any of its eight levels.

In order to provide the right for mobility in different education levels and career paths, the Mechanism for VNFIL should link the inputs with outputs from education and training and network Social Partners, Universities and VET bodies in the process of validation and recognition of skills. Field experts should be included in the validation committees as well as Civil society organizations, NGOs and Youth Organizations.

For the governance of the Mechanism for VNFIL a cooperated model is proposed under the auspices of Ministry of Education and HRDA. For the administration of the Mechanism for VNFIL at the strategic level an Independent Authority is suggested to be established with representatives of: a. Employers' associations (OEB and KEVE), b. Guilds, c. The Synod of Rectors, d. Ministry of Education, e. Ministry of Employment. f. Ministry of Finance. The Agency should be supervised by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Below the strategic level and for the administration of the Mechanism of VNFIL an independent body shall be established and supervised by the Ministry of Education or the Ministries Education and Labour, maintaining the principles of integrity and reliability.

5. Conclusions

The imperative of recognition and validation of knowledge and learning and the promotion of lifelong learning is seen as a priority for enabling individuals to shape their own careers and education pathways, access social goods and improve their economic prospects. To this extent, the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning focuses strongly on increasing participation in education and in the labour market and constitute a high importance policy domain in agendas for education and employment.

In Cyprus today, there is the Mechanism of the Professional Qualifications System (SEP), implemented by HRDA, where the certification of professional qualifications concerns the recognition of formal and partially non-formal learning, the recognition of previous work experience or a combination of both. In this sense, in Cyprus there is an exemplary case for Mechanism of VNFIL.

However, the validation of non-formal and informal learning should not be limited to the granting of professional qualifications but should also concern the acquisition of educational qualifications (e.g. through the acquisition of credits), a possibility which will allow mobility in the field of vocational education and training and consequently the labour market.

This paper highlights the importance of insight constructivism as an approach for policy formation in the case of the constitution of the Mechanism for NFIL in Cyprus and thus constitutes an exemplary case for a bottom up model for policy development. Stakeholders and policymakers' views and experiences analysed through the interviews underline key challenges for the effective constitution of the Mechanism.

These challenges cover the following fields for future policy development: a) the need to frame VNFIL in the national employment policy, and make it a priority in education and training policy; b) the need to integrate VNFIL into existing qualifications frameworks, as well as in policies and strategies for recognition of skills and qualifications (such as credit systems);c) the need to develop sectoral approaches relevant to VNFIL and integrate NVFIL into relevant sectoral, economic and development policy, including migration policy; d) the need to match occupational and qualification standards; e) the need to define the institutions that are responsible for planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all VNFIL processes, including awareness raising, guidance and counselling to applicants, and assessment; f) the need to build capacity of NFIL professionals and ensure that they will be regularly

retrained, and last; g) the need to keep social dialogue to ensure that VNFIL potential benefits to employers and workers and support tripartite cooperation and collaborative approaches between the state and stakeholders.

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