

# UNESCO GUIDELINES

for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation  
of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



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UNESCO has played an important role in developing a vision of lifelong learning for all. In the knowledge-based global economy, future prosperity and security as well as peace, social harmony and environmental sustainability will depend on people's capacity to make informed choices, to adapt to rapid change and to find sustainable solutions to pressing challenges. Today, more than ever, we must strive to offer learning opportunities for all, throughout life, to improve the quality of life, to promote a more just society, and to equip people to anticipate and tackle the challenges they face. Lifelong learning is the essential organising principle for reaching this goal.

Lifelong learning covers the full range of provision of learning opportunities, from early childhood through schools to further and higher education. However, it extends beyond formal education to non-formal and informal learning for out-of-school youth and adult citizens. In recent years, in addition to traditional qualifications systems which mostly acknowledge learning in formal education, some Member States have developed mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, and many more are in the process of doing so. The RVA of non-formal and informal learning is indeed gaining relevance with regard to education and training policy. However, it is also of increasing importance in relation to themes such as poverty reduction, job creation and employment, and social inclusion.

In 2009, the *Belém Framework for Action*, adopted by 144 delegations of UNESCO Member States at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in Brazil, reaffirmed the role of lifelong learning in addressing development issues globally, and explicitly mandated UNESCO to develop guidelines to recognise, validate and accredit all learning outcomes, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning. It called on Member States to develop or improve structures and mechanisms for the recognition of all forms of learning by establishing equivalency frameworks.

To move the *Belém Framework for Action* forward, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), on behalf of the UNESCO Education Sector, has taken the initiative to work with Member States to develop the UNESCO Guidelines on the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning. These Guidelines were developed through a participatory process involving consultation with Member States to reflect their experience and diverse needs. They follow the professional advice of an Experts' Group comprising representatives of each of the regions and of leading international agencies. The preparation of these Guidelines also reflects insights from studies on RVA policy and practice that were entrusted to UIL by 33C/Resolution 10 of the 2005 UNESCO General Conference.

The overall aim of these Guidelines is to propose principles and mechanisms that can assist Member States in developing or improving structures and procedures to recognise all forms of learning, particularly the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. While the Guidelines are not legally binding, Member States' authorities are expected to make efforts to implement the Guidelines as appropriate to their specific national context.

As these Guidelines demonstrate, UNESCO's Education Sector remains committed to providing technical assistance and capacity building, facilitating policy dialogue, networking and sharing of experiences between Member States, and further developing collaborative international research activity with the aim of realising lifelong learning for all.

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Assistant Director-General for Education  
UNESCO

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As a priority to follow up the *Belém Framework for Action* adopted at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in 2009, on behalf of UNESCO Secretariat, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has taken the initiative to develop the *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*.

The development of the UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning has been a truly participatory process, and all suggestions on key areas of action are based on the results of an extensive consultation with Member States. We express our sincere gratitude to the national authorities of 42 Member States which provided valuable feedback and vital information to a set of consultation questions on policy and practice in the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of learning outcomes.

UIL is most grateful to a remarkable group of international experts who met at UIL in October 2011 to share their insights and experiences in creating this work. They include Sabine Seidel, Expert of the Institute of Development Planning and Research, Germany; Abdalla Ababenh, Director of National Centre for Human Resources Development, Jordan; Kaylash Allgoo, Director of Mauritius Qualifications Authority, Mauritius; Juan de Dios Castro, General Director and Sara Elena Mendoza, Deputy Director of Diversified Contents of the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), Mexico; Sombat Suwanpitak, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Thailand; Jens Bjørnåvold, Senior Expert of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop); Richard Walther, Coordinator of the Association for Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) 2012 Triennale Conference; Michel Aribaud, Specialist in Qualifications System of European Training Foundation (ETF); and Marie-Odile Paulet, Expert of the National Commission for UNESCO, France.

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The UIL Task Force for this initiative consisted of Carolyn Medel-Añonuevo, Deputy Director; Madhu Singh, Senior Programme Specialist; Raúl Valdés-Cotera, Programme Specialist; and Jin Yang, Senior Programme Specialist. The copy-editing was undertaken by Virman Man, Head of UIL Publications.

With the launching of the *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, my colleagues and I will do all we can to facilitate collaborative research and provide technical assistance and capacity-building to Member States in their construction and implementation of the RVA systems.

Arne Carlsen  
Director  
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

# UNESCO GUIDELINES

## for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning

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### **Introduction**

Lifelong learning has been central to UNESCO's mission to promote every individual's right to education. The Faure Report – Learning to Be (1972) – and the Delors Report – Learning: the Treasure Within (1996) – have contributed to the development of policy and practice in lifelong learning and to the creation of learning societies in UNESCO Member States. Encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning, lifelong learning emphasises the integration of learning and living – in life-wide contexts across family and community settings, in study, work and leisure, and throughout an individual's life.

Today, in a complex and fast-changing world, it is necessary for individuals to acquire and adapt competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) through all forms of learning to cope with various challenges. However, qualifications systems in many societies still focus on formal learning in educational institutions. As a result, a large part of individuals' learning remains unrecognised, and many individuals' motivation and confidence to continue learning is not well promoted. This leads to a huge under-utilisation of human talent and resources in society. Therefore, the learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their life in non-formal and informal settings need to be made visible, assessed and accredited.

The demand for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning with a focus on non-formal and informal learning outcomes was expressed through the Belém Framework for Action, adopted by 144 Delegations of UNESCO Member States at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in Brazil in December 2009. It called on UNESCO to develop Guidelines on all learning outcomes, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, so that these may be recognised and validated. At the same time, Member States committed themselves to developing or improving structures and mechanisms for the recognition of all forms of learning by establishing equivalency frameworks.

### **Vision**

The RVA of non-formal and informal learning is a key lever in making lifelong learning a reality. It renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognised competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives. Valuing and recognising these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning, and strengthen their labour market opportunities. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies.

### **Purposes**

The overall aim of these Guidelines is to propose principles and mechanisms that can assist Member States in developing or improving structures and procedures to recognise the outcomes of all forms of learning, particularly those of non-formal and informal learning.

More specifically, the purposes are:

- to advocate for the importance of recognising the value of non-formal and informal learning;
- to develop a common understanding of RVA and outline the major considerations in developing a national RVA system;
- to assist Member States in developing tools, standards and mechanisms to identify, document, validate and recognise the learning outcomes of non-formal and informal learning; and
- to create an international platform to facilitate and ensure continuous dialogue on RVA among Member States.

## Principles

- Ensuring equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities. Every individual should have the right to access and engage in any form of learning suited to his/ her needs, and have their learning outcomes made visible and valued.
- Promoting the equal value of learning outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Competences that every individual has accumulated through non-formal and informal learning should be treated on a par with those that are obtained through formal learning.
- Ensuring the centrality of individuals in the RVA process. The process should respect and reflect individuals' needs, and their participation should be on a voluntary basis.
- Improving flexibility and openness of formal education and training. Education and training systems should consider diverse forms of learning, taking into account learners' needs and experiences.
- Promoting quality assurance in the entire RVA process. It is imperative that criteria and procedures for assessing and validating non-formal and informal learning are relevant, reliable, fair and transparent.
- Strengthening partnerships among all stakeholders. It is important to emphasise a shared responsibility from design through to implementation and evaluation of the RVA system.

## Key areas of action at national level

### 1. Establishing RVA as a key component of a national lifelong learning strategy

Lifelong learning goes beyond formal education and training. It includes learning at work, in the family and community, and in leisure time. A national lifelong learning strategy aims to facilitate individuals' access to competences enabling them to continue learning, enter the labour market and to attain professional and social mobility. Such a strategy would be incomplete if it did not include the RVA of competences or outcomes gained in all learning settings.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) develop a national lifelong learning strategy, with RVA of non-formal and informal learning as a key pillar and as a means to improving personal fulfilment, access to and mobility within education and in the labour market;
- (2) facilitate the development of national references or standards that integrate the RVA of non-formal and informal learning, and, based on the national context, establish a national qualifications framework (NQF); and
- (3) develop equivalencies between the outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning in the national reference, standards or NQFs through a shared understanding of learning outcomes.

## **2. Developing RVA systems that are accessible to all**

When available and accessible, RVA processes should allow broad groups of populations to have their learning outcomes assessed, validated and recognised, whether acquired non-formally or informally. This gives individuals an incentive to continue to learn, empowers them and enables them to become more active in the labour market and in society in general. For disadvantaged groups particularly, it can create a more level playing-field in education and training.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) develop procedures that identify, document, assess, validate and accredit learning outcomes, giving due consideration to those from experiential learning, self-directed learning and other forms of non-standardised learning outside of formal education and training institutions;
- (2) make use of both formative assessment (which draws more attention to identification, documentation, advice and counselling) and summative assessment (which aims explicitly to validate and recognise learning outcomes, leading to accreditation);
- (3) offer information, guidance and counselling services to clarify RVA procedures so that individuals become more aware of their own competences and more motivated to learn further and to have their learning recognised, and
- (4) provide special support through flexible arrangements for early school-leavers, adults with special learning needs, people and workers with low levels of education and those excluded from the labour market.

## **3. Making RVA integral to education and training systems**

In most cases, traditional qualifications of formal education and learning have been defined with reference to fixed durations, subject, levels and location of study. The integration of RVA into formal systems stresses the importance of what learners actually know, are able to do and understand. This integration is crucial to creating alternative pathways in open and flexible education and training systems, meeting individuals' diverse needs.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) develop a mechanism for the formal education and training system that pays more attention to the quality of learning outcomes;
- (2) create awareness and acceptance in formal education and training systems of the learning outcomes gained in non-traditional settings;
- (3) use RVA to build bridges between the different education and training sectors and to promote the integration of formal, non-formal and informal learning; and
- (4) develop approaches to increase interaction between educational institutions, enterprises and voluntary organisations to translate learning outcomes from working and life experiences into credits and/or qualifications.

## **4. Creating a coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders**

RVA concerns stakeholders from different sectors (formal education institutions, industry and enterprises, social partners, adult education providers and voluntary organisations) and depends on their commitment to its smooth operation. It is therefore necessary to create a structure that involves all stakeholders through social dialogue and building consensus on principles for developing, implementing and financing national RVA systems.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) ensure all stakeholders have clearly-defined roles and responsibilities in developing a coherent and coordinated national structure to oversee the design, implementation and quality assurance of the RVA system;
- (2) establish mechanisms to adopt credible and quality RVA procedures, standards and instruments, as well as awarding qualifications;
- (3) facilitate RVA implementation by putting in place effective administrative processes for receiving applications, organising assessment and providing feedback on outcomes, recording results, awarding qualifications and designing appeal processes; and
- (4) make efforts to build the RVA infrastructure at local level so that it is available where people live, work and learn, and make RVA a part of existing institutions in communities.

### **5. Building the capacities of RVA personnel**

The quality of RVA hinges significantly on the capability of RVA administrators, assessors, facilitators, counsellors and other practitioners to set up and maintain inclusive RVA practices. The ongoing and continuous training of RVA personnel ensures reliability and trust in RVA practices.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) ensure appropriate qualifications, skills and competences of RVA personnel, allowing them to manage and conduct the assessment and validation processes in their specific socio-economic contexts; and
- (2) establish a system for the training of RVA personnel, and facilitate networks for mutual learning at local and national levels, and across countries, to enhance their competences and to develop best practice.

### **6. Designing sustainable funding mechanisms**

Although RVA has multiple benefits, the cost can be a barrier to its promotion, in particular to meeting the learning needs of the disadvantaged. Developing a sustainable funding mechanism is key to establishing an RVA system. To make RVA available on a broader scale and accessible to more learners, funding has to come from diversified sources.

In this context it is suggested that Member States

- (1) provide sufficient financial resources to build the basic infrastructure of the RVA system.
- (2) develop sustainable cost-sharing mechanisms involving multi-stakeholder partnerships i.e. public, private, community, as well as individual learners. Public funds and private contributions to education institutions, as well as training levies from enterprises, should also be used to fund the implementation of RVA;
- (3) make special provision for access to RVA arrangements at a reduced rate or free of charge for vulnerable groups and individuals; and
- (4) conduct cost-benefit analyses to develop evidence on the benefits of RVA for individuals, enterprises, education institutions and for society as a whole.



# UNESCO COMMITMENTS

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In many Member States, the RVA of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is a new endeavour. Given the complexities in establishing an effective RVA system, there is a need to strengthen international cooperation and capacity-building in the field.

In this context, UNESCO will play an active role in the following areas:

- (1) developing an RVA observatory for collecting and disseminating best practices at different stages in the development of RVA systems;
- (2) facilitating policy dialogue, networking and sharing of experiences between Member States through peer-learning activities and cooperation among key stakeholders in different regions;
- (3) facilitating studies on different RVA systems, mechanisms, instruments and tools through collaborative international research in the field of RVA; and
- (4) responding to the request of Member States to provide technical assistance and capacity-building to key national stakeholders and practitioners to enable them to construct and implement the RVA systems.

**Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA)** of all forms of learning outcomes is a practice that makes visible and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that individuals have obtained in various contexts, and through various means in different phases of their lives.

- **Recognition** is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society.
- **Validation** is the confirmation by an approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies.
- **Accreditation** is a process by which an approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles), or grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, the term accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole.

## **Competences and learning outcomes**

- **Competences** indicate a satisfactory state of knowledge, skills and attitudes and the ability to apply them in a variety of situations.
- **Learning outcomes** are achievements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do as a result of a learning process.

## **Formal, non-formal and informal learning**

- **Formal learning** takes place in education and training institutions, is recognised by relevant national authorities and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching-learning requirements.
- **Non-formal learning** is learning that has been acquired in addition or alternatively to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organisations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.
- **Informal learning** is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. In some cases, the term *experiential learning* is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience

## Qualifications and National Qualification Frameworks

- **Qualification** refers to what an individual is qualified to do. In the *Guidelines*, a qualification is an official record (certificate, diploma, degree) of learning achievement, which recognises the results of all forms of learning, including the satisfactory performance of a set of related tasks. It can also be a condition that must be met or complied with for an individual to enter or progress in an occupation and/or for further learning.
- **National Qualification Frameworks (NQF)** are systems of equivalences and classifications of qualifications relating to a set of nationally agreed standards/criteria developed by competent public authorities. NQFs recognise learning outcomes and competences from all forms of learning.

## Equivalence

- **Equivalence** refers to a state of being of equal value. The term is usually used to give equal value to the competences a learner obtained from outside the formal education and training system with those gained in the formal education and training system.

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