OPENING RECOGNITION: FROM CONCEPT TO PRACTICE

Validation of the Open Recognition Framework, developed for the Erasmus+ project MIRVA: Making Informal Recognition Visible and Actionable
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1 VALIDATING OPEN RECOGNITION AS A CONCEPT AND IN PRACTICE: INTRODUCTION

The present document intends to briefly summarize the results of the last stage of the MIRVA project, which consisted in validating the assumptions put forward in IO1: The Open Recognition Framework. When relevant, the document discusses also how some of the guidelines on how to put open recognition into practice have been validated on the local level.

MIRVA: Making Informal Recognition Visible and Actionable is an Erasmus+ project that has run between 2017 and 2020, with active participation of partners representing diverse profiles and countries. Aiming to conceptualize what Open Recognition (OR) could mean for a variety of stakeholders – from communities, to education or technology providers – the project has used Open Badges as one of the main vehicles of Open Recognition, one that can make competences, achievements and values visible and shareable.

While Open Badges have been used by various education providers (although mainly in the formal education system as microcredentials), the concept of Open Recognition has not yet gained much traction in non-formal or informal education, nor has it been used extensively in the labour market. As one expert consulted for the purpose of this review commented, “it is still fairly unknown”. Understood as more horizontal process of recognizing competences, achievements and values, Open Recognition can complement (or, if needed, replace) more top-down validation processes, in which an organization or awarding body grants a diploma or certificate to the learner following a lengthy process of identification and documentation. It encourages the learner to take ownership of their own learning process, also one that took place outside of formal or non-formal education, to reflect on their achievements and values, and to make these visible to a wider community. By this token, Open Recognition can bring a myriad of benefits to everyone involved: the learner, the teacher or educator, the learning provider, the employer, and ultimately the community and the wider ecosystem.

The main hypothesis validated in this document, described more thoroughly above, could be summarized as follows: Open Recognition can successfully improve the recognition of competences and achievements of adult learners, and bring benefits to the adult learning sector as a whole. To validate the hypothesis and possible implementation of Open Recognition on a wider scale, the European Association for the Education of Adults has invited several adult education experts to form a working group and to carefully analyse the framework and its implications. The experts were asked to base themselves on their in-depth knowledge of the sector, taking into account the diversity stakeholders involved in adult learning policy and practice, adult learning theories, and the
fragmentation of structures and traditions that exist across the continent.

The three key experts who contributed to the present document with their insights were as follows:

- **Dr. Andre Schläffi**, former Director of the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning, former member of the Executive Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults, regular consultant for various international bodies such as OECD, inducted to the International Adult Education Hall of Fame

- **Sturla Bjerkaker**, former Secretary General of the Norwegian Association for Adult Learning, former member of the Executive Committee of the International Council for Adult Learning, former member of the Executive Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults, inducted to the Adult Education Hall of Fame

- **Pirkko Ruuskanen-Parrukoski**, former Chief Executive Officer of the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation, former member of the Executive Board of the European Association for the Education of Adults.

The experts were selected based on their longstanding expertise in adult learning, their knowledge of the European and international context, and their implication nationally in countries that were not part of the project consortium, therefore providing a different geographical perspective.

In addition to the core expert group, five other adult learning specialists were briefly consulted in a more ad-hoc manner, at the initiative of the expert group itself or of EAEA. EAEA’s exchange with the expert group was carried out in writing (via a questionnaire); some additional discussions with other persons consulted were held via video interviews. The results of these focused consultations are described in the first section of the document.

Some partners of the MIRVA consortium have also carried out testing activities in their organizations, putting the concept into practice by working directly with learners, teachers and educators as well as various community partners. While this was originally planned as a wide-scale activity, due to the emergency measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic (which coincided with the last stage of the project), testing was scaled down and instead incorporated into core activities of some partner organisations to the degree to which it was possible. Three case studies will be described in the second section of the present document.

The document closes with a set of recommendations that not only reference the Open Recognition Framework, but – perhaps more importantly – look at its possible implementation in the adult learning sector and the wider ecosystem.
2 VALIDATING THE CONCEPT: CAN IT WORK?

The concept of Open Recognition, as described in the Open Recognition Framework, has gained considerable interest and praise of the adult education experts who formed the working group. Most of the experts were not familiar with the concept per se, but they recognized a certain connection to Open Educational Resources (OERs). “At first sight, the concept is quite complex,” commented one expert, adding that a more in-depth inquiry into the document and its resources has helped him understand it better and appreciate it more. “Adult education can benefit from such partly interdisciplinary cases,” he commented. “The concept primarily reinforces informal learning; if you look at the concept mainly from this perspective, it becomes much more understandable.”

Building synergies bottom-up

Asked to list strengths of Open Recognition, experts had several positive impressions to share, most of which recall the foundations of adult learning. “The procedure is exciting: for once we are dealing with a bottom up approach and not a straight top down approach,” said one expert. “This approach enables completely new proceedings, as work colleagues can issue a badge, for example. Companies, associations, providers, universities, certain employees and experts are involved in this procedure.”

Such a bottom-up approach means that new partnerships can spring up when needed, therefore keeping different stakeholders from working in silos. “It allows people who tend to be located only in the digital area to come closer to the education sector,” commented the expert. The potential to bridge various links has also been mentioned by other experts.

The philosophy behind Open Recognition has also been described as one that has potential for innovation, as it not only looks at the past, but most importantly into the future. One expert commented that it also allows to take into consideration short-term activities, giving the example of its use for applications in the likes of Tiki-Taxi or Uber.

Empowering the learner

Non-formal adult education has been a long-time advocate for approaches that put the learner in the heart of any learning activity. Instead of being passive recipients of

“For once we are dealing with a bottom-up approach and not a straight top down approach”

(one of the experts validating the project results)
learning, which was criticized by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and described by him as a “banking” model of education\(^1\), adult learners should be able to take ownership of the process, to contest the reality around them and transform it. Today many non-formal adult education providers encourage such learner-centredness in many ways; it frequently means involving the learner in the course design, delivery and evaluation. More participatory approaches can prove to be drivers of change-oriented education.

As emphasized by one of the experts, the Open Recognition Framework provides space for participatory and learner-led approaches to recognition. “These include involving learners in the design of their own educational resources and encouraging cooperative work with other learners,” commented one expert. Another expert added that the process of visualizing one’s achievements, for example through the use of Open Badges, also greatly increase learner’s engagement. If done by the learner herself or himself, developing a badge can be a creative task.

Active participation and learner-centredness are closely linked to empowerment, also the backbone of non-formal adult learning. One expert commented that empowerment was clearly visible in the practice of Open Recognition (it is perhaps worth adding here that empowerment has been specifically singled out as one of the key outcomes of recognition in the guidelines produced as other outputs). “There is wide research today on agency in the academia,” commented one expert. “I have a feeling that each person’s or organisation’s agency is greatly appreciated [in the concept of Open Recognition].”

Adaptability was another key word used by the experts. “O(E)R allows educators to revise and adapt educational resources to the specific learning environment. It is expected that these features will lead to higher engagement and more frequent cooperation between trainers and adult learners,” commented one expert.

**Connecting to broader EU policies**

While the experts consulted have worked many years in the area of non-formal adult learning, they have also appreciated the close connection to informal learning. They have also noted that Open Recognition can be particularly beneficial for workplace learning, another area that has been long neglected and gaining importance in recent years, especially with the emergence of EU

\[^{1}\text{Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum, 2007.}\]
policies such as Upskilling Pathways and renewed attention to upskilling and reskilling.

More traditional uses of Open Badges have also been highlighted by the experts and described as beneficial for learners or the sector as a whole. When used as micro-credentials, as this is frequently the case, Open Badges can motivate adults to continue their learning journey in spite of the pitfalls. One adult educator who provided feedback on the concept of Open Recognition has brought the example of her earlier experiences with Open Badges through a European project. “We were told that learners were actually more motivated, because they could see their regular progress throughout the course; sometimes the certificate at the end seems very far away”. Another specialist consulted here has made similar observations, singling out Open Badges as “good to store progress”.

Finally, experts made note of the encouraging potential for easier transferability, also across borders. “The ability to easily distribute OER can break down these barriers and thus facilitate access to quality educational resources. The process may build bridges between countries and between informal learning and formal education and facilitates lifelong learning for all worldwide,” commented one expert. In a similar vein, another expert noted the possible connection of Open Recognition to existing validation systems and competence frameworks. “It not only takes part of the discussion about basic skills and key competences etc. but is seen as a part of the work to enhance inclusion, empowerment and equality – like adult education does at its best,” she reflected.

Trust versus quality

While most of the feedback has been positive, some aspects of Open Recognition have been described as needing reinforcement for the concept to become systemic. The strong emphasis on trust, while inherent in the concept and described as a key precondition for Open Recognition to

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work, has been brought to attention by a few experts. As explained by one of them, some concerns stem from the fact that considerable work has been done in recent years to improve quality in non-formal adult education; quality is also one of the key issues tied to validation of non-formal and informal learning. Many countries in Europe have established functioning quality assurance systems. “If the badges are not controlled by a central body, the buyer must be sure that the information transmitted to him or her is also unquestionably trustworthy,” commented one expert.

Whether Open Badges can mutually be recognized and understandable between learners, employers, organisations or across borders has also been slightly questioned, with one expert expressing his doubts over the significance of holograms that are used. Another person consulted for the purpose of this review has also commented that the security of using Open Badges – issuing and storing them – might cause concern long-term.

Open Recognition might also fall back on one key problem that has hindered the support for non-formal adult education for decades. “For this trend to succeed at all, the support of politics, civil society, social partners is needed”, has commented one expert. The Open Recognition Framework indeed references an “ecosystem” with various levels: micro, meso and macro. For adults to be able to have their competences or achievements recognized horizontally, the system needs to be supported – and inspire trust – at different levels.

3 VALIDATING THE PRACTICE: CASE STUDIES

In addition to the in-depth analysis carried out by experts, the potential benefits of Open Recognition and the use of Open Badges have been explored in practice by two of the project partners. EPL EFPA EURE (France) and Gear Up (Netherlands) participated in opening up recognition processes to see the impact on their learners or clients, and to gauge the interest of other stakeholders. It needs to be stated that these activities became part of the core business or a concurrent project; no funding from the present project has been claimed. The overall results are however included here as they demonstrate synergies between different European programmes on the one hand, and the applicability of the Open Recognition process in various settings on the other. They are described to confirm the hypothesis that Open Recognition can bring diverse benefits to adult learners, and to illustrate how the process can be carried out step by step.
Case study 1: Alternative routes to learning and employment, Netherlands

Opening recognition: why and how

In the region many organisations were already involved in a recognition process in an inclusive learning and developing approach, but this was implicit. The municipality of Breda is the facilitator in this approach led by the ComPas project while they recognise the need for alternative routes to work and learning/development. For example, school dropouts are offered an adjacent development option that is delivered parallel to the schooling system, as a substitute for school. Many of these (mostly young) people will never fit in the school systems, but do have many talents that are valuable for them and society. The adjacent learning and development options offered in the region help them to learn in a different way and make a meaningful difference in the society. To make this more explicit to all involved stakeholders in the region, like educators, Public Employment Services (PES) and employers, micro credentials in the form of Open Badges were introduced.

Target group

The key target group included the unemployed, refugees and school dropouts. While all stakeholders were involved, the process started with the end users and their mentors. Other stakeholders like employers and PES were involved from the beginning, but more as a sounding board during the testing and development phase.

Results and impact

When the project started in 2018, 15 organisations in the social domain were involved. At the end of 2019, ComPas was integrated in the new Approach Learning while Working of the municipality of Breda. Now, in 2020 after the lockdown there are 20 organisations in the social domain involved with approximately 500 end users. In the second half of 2020 also vocational education and training providers are connected (VET’s) which is bound to increase the number of participants even more.

The testing activities had a positive result for many involved. Some organisations were more hesitant while they did not see the immediate need for making implicit recognition processes more explicit. This might change when the PES will join in the recognition process in September 2020. Then the micro credentialing will become integrated in the process of job application. When a person is in an adjacent route and has the required skills for a given job (work fit skills) then this person is asked to apply for a job with guidance from a PES mentor.

3 https://compas.works/
Case study 2: A web radio recognizing achievements, France

Opening recognition: why and how
Notice a "feeling of exclusion" and "ill-being" which affects part of their public - young people who "struggle to acquire the autonomy and the responsibility which is claimed as the first criterion of integration by local businesses" - the Mission Locale du Center-Manche has chosen to set up a Web Radio, with a specialized partner, the Nature et Culture association. This project is funded by the Regional Council of Normandy.

The project goes far beyond the field of media and information education. It consists of putting online, via the Internet, a Media managed and supplied by young people living in the territory. It allows the broadcasting of reports and programs created, animated, developed by the young people supported. These young people are at the same time reporters, directors, editors and program directors.

To make their achievements visible, the members of the MOB collective have agreed on three principles of action - defined by the collective and validated by each of its members - to guide their action:

- The recognition is anchored on the lived experience and the conditions of realization of this experience (context): we recognize our capacity to act (power to act), we reinforce our identity (personal and professional) and we orient our future (compass).
- Everyone recognizes and values a person's sense of competence and their ability to engage and act in their personal and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Maker: I attended</th>
<th>This badge attests to the wearer's participation in the animations and activities of WEB MEDIA &quot;16:26 Media&quot; as part of the Skills Incubator set up on the territory of the Manche Center.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media Maker: I have experienced</td>
<td>This badge certifies that the wearer has actively participated in the WEB MEDIA &quot;16:26 Media&quot; events or activities as part of the Skills Incubator set up in the Manche Center area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:26 Media: I am an actor</td>
<td>This badge attests that the wearer actively participates in the development of the WEB Media &quot;16:26 Media&quot;.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:26 Media: I support</td>
<td>This badge is issued to all the people and institutional actors who support the WEB Media &quot;16:26 Media&quot; led by young people accompanied by the Local Mission of the Manche Center and the process of recognition within the framework of the &quot;Skills incubator&quot; set up in the Center Manche region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:26 Media: I commit</td>
<td>This badge shows the wish of its beneficiary to participate in the activities and / or workshops of the WEB Media &quot;16:26 Media&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Five badges created for Web Radio)
professional environment. Recognition precedes competence.

- The individual skills identified are then brought together - in a strategic approach built by / with the young person - with the skills expected by organizations in the area, in particular employers.

**Target group**
Young people who take part in the Web Radio initiative, by creating, moderating, editing and developing broadcasts.

**Results and impact**
The main question was, discussed during the first workshop organized in January 2020, was as follows: what badges do we want to issue to people who participate in Web Radio? What do we want to recognize?

This led to the creation of 5 badges, which were offered to participants of events in June 2020, which consisted of setting up a TV platform, with the organization of several round tables, and in parallel workshops dedicated to recognition, co-hosted by CIBC project managers and the two advisers from the Local Mission (these first workshops are also seen as training time for the latter).

In all, 97 young people came to this event, 42 of whom participated in a Recognition workshop. The comments during the workshop are quite positive. Some young people like to use a digital tool: “finally, the digital age is coming.” Others quickly see that this tool will allow them to enhance their skills, without linking it to easier access to a job. Still others make the connection with professional networks like LinkedIn or recommendation practices. The majority are waiting for longer support in putting into practice and understanding the issues.

During workshops, the support badge is the one most requested. 52 people are now carriers. This request is essentially a first experience of using digital badges; this badge is not part of a route, a screening; it is not experienced as recognition.

As a result of the co-creation of Web Radio badges, several reflections were shared, shedding some light on the Web Radio

“I have done stuff. I did theater, I did video editing, I took photos, I did stuff. But in the eyes of many people, I had not especially worked, I was not studying ... So there is a this doubt that sets in. Just to learn about this tool, it was a great improvement in the self-confidence that I was able to have.”

(one of the participants of the Web Radio who received recognition)
initiative as whole. It has primarily given rise to discussions on what brought those present together - a common experience linked to Web Media - than what distinguishes, what sets us apart. The 3 badges created are badges that aim to identify those who are part of the community: who supports the action, who participates in the action.

Web Radio is seen primarily as a tool that brings people together, which breaks for some loneliness and isolation, which allows resources to be pooled, which encourages the sharing of knowledge and allows everyone to learn from the experiences of others.

Case study 3: Digital transitions at an apprenticeship centres network, France

Opening recognition: why and how
The approach has been a partnership from the outset of the “Norman digital ATC Label” project = recognizing the digital advances of the Norman apprentice training centers. The challenge of encouraging and recognising the digital transformation of ATCs was a priority shared with the ATCs gathered in the Assembly of Norman ATCs in 2016. It is with a collective of ATCs, during dialogues as well as a day dedicated to Badges and the digital ATC Label that the reflection has advanced on the right way to recognize, encourage, share without the impetus from the Region, a major financier of ATCs, biasing. The meeting with Badgeons la Normandie and the DRAAF made it possible to discover the potential of OBs and then accelerate the process. The process has been reflected on with a first circle of ATC pilots as well as the DRAAF and the Communotic network. It was quickly agreed (consensus) to have a collective peer approach to designing badges and then validating requests. Concerning the animation and management of the “centralized” badge creation and issuance / delivery platform, from the start, the group preferred centralization by the Region, Direction of learning.

The external consultation links for badge requests are sent upstream to the peers. Each then refers to a selection grid containing the criteria and evidence expected for each badge in order to calibrate and make the examination of badges objective.

Target group
All participating organisations are ATCs (apprentice training centres). The pilot group consists of employees ATC, taking the role of peers vis-à-vis other ATC: 14 ATC are "represented" and DRAAF and District Directorates-learning + Communotic, totaling 14 people.

Results and impact
It was a real plus, since the peer ATCs were able to invest without worrying about the impact, for the Region, without fear of doing so. It was possible for ATCs to test their degree of digital transformation with a winning logic of continuous improvement, never losing, even if the badge was not obtained.
This experimental aspect and flexible also helped to change the nature of relations between the ATC and the region at least on this digital component, since no subsidy issue was related to obtaining or not the label and badges.

### Norman Digital ATC labels project, in numbers

- 14 peers
- 37 ATCs requesting badges
- 197 badges issued
- 9 complete collections (“Norman digital ATC labels”) produced

### 4 THE WAY AHEAD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING OPEN RECOGNITION

As seen from previous sections, validation of the Open Recognition Framework has brought predominantly positive results. Yet to make Open Recognition happen, several steps need to be taken. The experts consulted and authors of the case studies provided their recommendations, which can be summarized as follows:

1. **Learning is a holistic process.** While offering Open Badges as micro-credentials might have some advantages – such as motivating learners to progress, or helping them monitor their achievements step-by-step – it is not always possible to compartmentalize knowledge into small chunks. The holistic perspective on learning should never be lost when designing or issuing an Open Badge.

2. **The learner needs to be in the centre of the process.** Open Recognition clearly offers a number of opportunities to involve the learner: they could not only claim a badge, but also endorse someone else; they could ask for a badge to be issued, but also issue or even design it themselves. The learner-led perspective should remain key to ensure that Open Recognition is indeed a bottom-up process.

3. **In the end, a tool is just a tool:** without sufficient training and support, learners and other partners in recognition will quickly lose interest. Especially those who might need recognition most, such as adults with lower formal qualifications or with limited digital skills, might need support to use Open Badges, to see themselves in a wider Open
Recognition continuum or to set an objective and work towards achieving it.

4. Informal learning is key to the concept of Open Recognition, and as such should be given acknowledgement in its implementation. While informal learning has long been neglected in the wider education sector, it is a valuable part of the learning continuum; through their life and work experiences adults gain personal and professional achievements and develop a valuable skill set. For Open Recognition to become a reality, informal learning needs to be an equal part of a larger ecosystem.

5. Like learning, recognition cannot exist in a vacuum: it needs a support system. This includes not only learners, teachers, educators and learning providers, but also technology providers, employers, policymakers, communities. Cooperation between different stakeholders and on different levels should be encouraged for recognition to happen, and it needs to be on equal terms to be accountable and to foster trust, which is a precondition of any recognition.

6. Be patient, but active. Advocacy is an inherent part of any transformative process: policies, laws and mindsets do not change on their own. Anyone who has a stake in Open Recognition – learners, job-seekers, employers or education providers – can voice their support and help remove systemic barriers that keep recognition top-down, or that lose the perspective of those who need recognition most. While it might take considerable time and effort, it can also prove to bring long-lasting change.