



Evidence Submission - Public Consultation *European Area of Skills and Qualifications*

About the Reading & Writing Foundation

Stichting Lezen & Schrijven (the Reading & Writing Foundation) was founded in May 2004 by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands. After a decade of campaigning in support of the fundamental principle that literacy is an essential requirement for healthy and sustainable societies, the Foundation has recently expanded its work around raising awareness of the crucial role played by public libraries in promoting community access to information, lifelong learning, digital skills and pathways to further education, training and employment.

About Public Libraries 2020

Public Libraries 2020 is an initiative which brings together library organisations and advocates from across the European Union to raise awareness of the value of public libraries as partners for social and economic development under the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Introduction

Until comparatively recently, the socio-economic impacts of Europe's 65,000 community-based public libraries have been largely overlooked by EU policy makers. In the collective minds public libraries have been exclusively associated with books and culture. Whilst nostalgic memories of childhood visits to libraries often make EU decision makers positively disposed towards them – [there is a](#) lack of awareness and understanding of the modern role of public libraries in European communities.

Indeed, in the context of our increasingly hyper-connected information society and economy – today's public libraries provide ICT-enabled, outcome-focused and staff-assisted learning environments which offer a digital lifeline to disadvantaged groups and communities. They offer free access to non-formal and informal lifelong learning opportunities, basic digital skills and online open education resources in non-threatening and welcoming community spaces. Ultimately, public libraries represent a pre-existing, pan-European network of community-based staff, buildings,

information resources and digital infrastructure which maximise positive outcomes in the fields of lifelong learning, social inclusion, digital inclusion and successful pathways to employability and employment.

As evidenced by the responses to the consultation questions below, there is a pressing need for the European Commission and Member States to take a more joined-up and coordinated approach in relation to education and skills policy. This imperative to implement a more cross-cutting and interconnected methodology applies both to the range of different tools and policies which support the transparency and validation of learning outcomes, but also to the role of key community stakeholders such as public libraries.

It is worth drawing attention here to the [Survey on eInclusion Actors in the EU27, which estimates that there are about 250,000 eInclusion organizations in the EU27 and public libraries account for 30 percent of them all, leaving the next 2 largest categories of 14 percent each \(NGOs as one category and Associations, Charitable Organizations & Foundations as another category\). The eInclusion intermediary actor is here defined as a “Public, private or third sector organization which intentionally address social inclusion goals through ICTs or promote the use of ICTs to enhance the socio-economic inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged groups and of people and risk of exclusion.](#)

With a prevailing climate of budgetary restraint continuing to characterize the European public sector spending outlook, the need to leverage existing networks and resources, and to deliver greater coordination across all policy instruments and mechanisms, is no longer optional – but a necessity. In the last five years, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the Commission’s Institute for Prospective Technological Studies and the European Parliament have all produced resolutions, declarations, reports and policy studies which identify and highlight the role of public libraries in delivering better community learning outcomes. And yet, European policy implementation still lacks an integrated and coordinated approach, which recognises the value of public libraries in unlocking the dormant potential and unrecognised human capital of excluded and hard to reach groups in communities across Europe. This evidence submission seeks to assist the European Commission with the task of building and implementing such an approach.

Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1: the European Commission needs to recognise that the first step towards building higher level skills for the 21st century is the successful provision of basic skills to all European communities – and that 65,000 public libraries are key community providers of gateway skills delivered through lifelong learning and adult learning opportunities.

Recommendation 2: the European Commission needs to take full account of the current evidence which indicates cohesive links between lifelong learning and transitions to employment; and between e-inclusion, access to digital skills/ICT and employability – and design approaches and policies which recognise the essential contribution of public libraries in the provision of these opportunities to excluded and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 3: new European transparency tools which recognise non-formal and informal learning (Europass Experience and the Europass self-assessed ICT module) should be vigorously promoted across all EU Member states. The Commission should also engage with all Member State

library associations to leverage their national public library networks to drive coordinated adoption and engagement with these tools among library learners.

Recommendation 4: the Commission should recognise the role public libraries to serve as digital intermediaries and catalysts for community online learning through the provision of both remote services and physical collaboration facilities. European transparency tools and recognitions systems need to be updated to accommodate new online learning pathways, whilst recognising that public libraries represent a primary point of access for these opportunities for many disadvantaged individuals and marginalised groups.

Recommendation 5: the Commission should engage with key stakeholders₂ which support non-formal and informal learning including public libraries to develop interoperable quality assurance principles for these types of learning. The Commission should also consider developing an inventory of approved open education resources and courses₂ which are compatible with existing transparency tools and qualifications recognition systems broken down by subject area and skill level. The Commission should work with Member State library associations to support librarians in signposting library learners towards the most suitable online education resources according to their needs.

Recommendation 6: the Commission should establish a single online access point for European transparency, skills, training and mobility resources, and engage with Member State library associations to ensure librarians can direct library learners to the most appropriate and relevant services according to their specific needs.

Consultation Questions

1 How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills?

1.1 The role of lifelong learning and maintaining relevant skills

Digital information and communication technologies, fuelled by cheaper, faster computing power and an increasingly hyper-connected global network of people, machines, infrastructure and devices are continuing to have a transformative impact on the concept of education and skills. As this new hyper-connected information environment continues to unleash recurring waves of innovation and creative destruction creating radical new business models, industries and jobs – the role of education has increasingly become a double-edged sword.¹

As our societies and economies become progressively more knowledge-based the polarisation of opportunity between skilled and un-skilled individuals is set to grow exponentially, with rich rewards for those with the right aptitudes and skills and stiff penalties for those who find themselves without those attributes. In **an** environment of permanent and accelerating innovation and invention, the days when schools and universities offered learners a portfolio of knowledge and skills which remained relatively up to date and relevant for the remainder of their lives are long gone. Instead the requirement for all individuals to continuously and iteratively update their skills and experience from “cradle-to-grave”² has become an ever more pressing and urgent necessity, which formal education systems have struggled to metabolise.

1.2 EU-wide levels of participation in lifelong learning remain insufficient

Since the concept of lifelong learning was originally developed in the 1960s, its importance has been steadily and cumulatively recognised in EU and international policy making.³ And yet the European Commission’s background document to this consultation acknowledges that progress towards promoting the key competences for lifelong learning set out in the 2006 European Parliament and Council Recommendation which are “*crucial for both employment and social inclusion*” have been “*disappointing*”:⁴

“One in five European adults has only basic skills in literacy, one in four has basic numeracy skills and lacks the skills to effectively make use of ICT. This further stresses the need for lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways, which – at any point in time – would enable individuals to update and upgrade their skills.”

Furthermore, the European Commission’s November 2012 Communication: Rethinking Education notes that EU-wide participation in lifelong learning is only 8.9% (significantly below the 2015 target of 15%), while 73 million adults have only a low level of education and nearly 15% of 15 year olds

¹ [OECD Observer, Lifelong learning for all, No 225, March 2001](#)

² [The Times, Higher Education, Vision of lifelong learning put at the heart of OECD target, 6th April 2001](#)

³ 1996 meeting of OECD Education Ministers, “lifelong learning for all”; European Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, [SEC\(2000\) 1832](#); Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council on key competencies for lifelong learning, 18th December 2006, [\(2006/962/EC\)](#)

⁴ [European Commission, Stakeholder Consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications, background document, page 4](#)

lack sufficient skills in reading.⁵ Commission Staff Working Document 373 which accompanied the Rethinking Education Communication suggests that “*adult lifelong learning is still far from a reality*” and that “*participation in adult learning is stagnating and must be urgently addressed.*”⁶ In Section 2 of its Rethinking Education Communication which sets out key challenges to be addressed by Member States in building skills for the 21st century, the Commission emphasises that “*the first step must be that foundation or basic skills are achieved by all*” as they represent “*a gateway to employment and social inclusion.*”⁷ In a Resolution responding to the Commission’s Communication on Rethinking Education, the European Parliament confirmed that it:

*“Shares the Commission’s concerns about the alarming low levels of adult learning in most Member States, with the average rate of uptake for the EU standing at 8.9%; stresses therefore, the need to focus on low-skilled adults and on the role played by adult education and training in reaching out to these groups . . .”*⁸

1.3 Public libraries are key community providers of gateway skills through lifelong learning and adult learning opportunities

The European Parliament and Commission’s recognition that empowering individuals with opportunities to acquire basic skills through flexible lifelong learning pathways is a crucial first step in building higher level skills for the 21st century is particularly relevant to public libraries as key community providers of gateway skills through lifelong learning. [An independent](#) Pan-European [study](#) published in March 2013 by TNS revealed that nearly 100 million Europeans visited their local public library in 2012 and 25% of those did so to engage in lifelong learning (24 million adults), particularly the elderly, Roma, ethnic minorities and those from rural areas.⁹ Chapter 5 of the TNS study identified that:

*“Public libraries are key players in the delivery . . . of the European Commission’s lifelong learning policy, particularly with regard to inclusive delivery. They provide a range of non-formal/informal learning opportunities, such as workshops, lectures and laboratory exercises. They also provide services to support formal learning and homework, language courses, story-telling and reading clubs for children and adults, support to job seekers and business information.”*¹⁰

With an estimated 65,000 public libraries operating across all EU Member States,¹¹ this community-based network represents an essential resource in the inclusive delivery of lifelong learning opportunities to all EU citizens, as well as marginalised and excluded target groups. Indeed, in the overall context of lifelong learning, the Council of the European Union has previously emphasised “*the major role which adult learning can play in achieving the Europe 2020 goals, by enabling adults*

⁵ [European Commission, Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, November 2012, page 2](#)

⁶ [European Commission, SWD \(2012\) 373, page 4](#)

⁷ [European Commission, Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, November 2012, page 4](#)

⁸ [European Parliament Resolution of 22nd October 2013 on Rethinking Education 2013/2041\(INI\)](#)

⁹ [TNS, Cross-European survey to measure users’ perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, Final Report, March 2013, page 34](#)

¹⁰ [Ibid, page 34](#)

¹¹ [Ibid, page 13](#)

– in particular low-skilled and older workers – to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society.”¹²

The December 2011 Council Resolution on a Renewed Agenda for Adult Learning already identified libraries as cultural organisations which offer “creative and innovative settings” for adult learning,¹³ as well as calling upon Member States to adopt measures for “improving access to adult learning for migrants, Roma and disadvantaged groups . . . as means of strengthening social inclusion and active participation in society”¹⁴ The Resolution also urged Member States to recognise the importance of “enhancing learning opportunities for older adults . . . to exploit the knowledge and skills and competencies of older people for the benefit of society as a whole.”¹⁵ It is worth noting that these are precisely the key target groups (older citizens, migrants, Roma and disadvantaged groups) that the TNS research has identified as being likely to engage in lifelong learning activities using their local public library. Furthermore, in October 2012 the European Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee amended the Erasmus for All Programme (the Commission’s key 2014-2020 legislative package on education and skills) to include “the objectives of the renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning”.¹⁶

1.4 Public libraries offer access to transversal digital skills and online resources

In the context of lifelong learning and adult learning access to online resources and digital skills have become increasingly essential ingredients for success. In 2012 an estimated 84 million Europeans aged 16-74 across the EU have never used the Internet, and yet by 2015 the European Commission anticipates that 90% of jobs will require at least basic computer skills.¹⁷ The Commission also sees basic digital skills as a key requirement for enabling European consumers to fully engage with the Digital Single Market as a route towards unlocking future innovation, economic growth and competitiveness.¹⁸

In March 2013 the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS) published a technical report which highlighted the function of public libraries in providing community access to online resources whilst playing a key role as e-inclusion intermediaries and in the provision of digital gateway skills:

“digital inclusion and social inclusion actors such as . . . public libraries . . . play a crucial role, both in providing digital literacy to excluded groups as well as using ICT to support to support social inclusion of groups at risk of exclusion . . .”¹⁹

Recommendation 1: *the European Commission needs to recognise that the first step towards building higher level skills for the 21st century is the successful provision of basic skills to all European communities – and that 65,000 public libraries are key community providers of gateway skills delivered through lifelong learning and adult learning opportunities.*

2 Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market

2.1 Links between lifelong learning and transitions into employment

Community access to lifelong learning opportunities in public libraries are not just valuable because they promote social and digital inclusion - but because they offer flexible learning pathways, which can [help](#) disadvantaged individuals re-enter the labour market. In February 2013 the European Commission published a Staff Working Document reviewing “Evidence on Demographic and Social Trends – Social Policies’ Contribution to Inclusion, Employment and the Economy”. Based on data from Eurostat the report confirmed that:

“The results suggest that participation in lifelong learning can increase the frequency of positive transitions (from unemployment or inactivity to employment) and reduce the frequency of negative transitions (staying in unemployment or in inactivity). In particular, the transition rate out of unemployment to employment is 6 points higher for those having had some lifelong learning opportunities (37 % vs. 31 %), as also mirrored in a lower persistence rate in unemployment (44 % vs. 49 %).”²⁰

This research clearly demonstrates a cohesive and positive link between the availability of lifelong learning opportunities in public libraries and the potential for these activities to help the inactive and unemployed enter the labour market. This correlation was also recognised by a European Parliament Resolution produced in response to the European Commission’s Social Investment Package proposals on the 12th June 2013 which “stresses the importance of lifelong learning in strengthening people’s capacity to participate in society and the labour market, up to the legal retirement age, and if desired even longer . . .” and called “on the Commission to raise awareness concerning lifelong learning opportunities.”²¹

2.2 Links between e-inclusion, access to ICT and employability

Free access to online resources and basic digital skills training in public libraries also offer disadvantaged individuals enhanced opportunities to increase their employability. This correlation is emphasised in the European Commission’s March 2013 Joint Research Centre Report on ICT and employability:

“. . . e-inclusion intermediaries play an important role in supporting those at risk of exclusion develop their digital literacy and employability . . . ICT skills can be seen as ‘gateway skills’ without which a person’s likelihood of finding employment would be significantly reduced. Moreover, ICT skills can also serve to enhance a person’s employability profile, particularly when combined with other skills and attributes, or as a catalyst for further skills development.”²²

Indeed ICT skills are valuable not just because they improve future chances of employment, but also because they help increase the self-confidence of individuals, as well as expanding their opportunities to search and apply for suitable job vacancies online. As the European Commission’s Staff Working Document on demographic and social trends published in February 2013 illustrates:

²⁰ [European Commission, SWD \(2013\) 38 final, Part II – Evidence on Demographic and Social Trends, Social Policies’ contribution to Inclusion, Employment and the Economy, 20th February 2013, page 62](#)

²¹ [European Parliament Resolution 2013/2607\(RSP\), 12 June 2013](#)

²² [European Commission, JRC Technical Report, ICT and Employability, March 2013, page 7](#)

“ICT skills have become crucial for the employability of individuals, supporting individual empowerment (development of self-confidence and self-efficacy) and the development of other skills, such as transversal skills (social networking, collaboration, problem-solving, language skills), job search skills, and e-learning skills. . . Moreover, ICT skills facilitate access to the labour market as they help people search for jobs more effectively and can reduce the duration of unemployment.”²³

A further Commission Staff Working Document focused on confronting homelessness in the European Union in 2013 noted the value of IT literacy and employment search workshops offered to the homeless in the libraries of Zagreb in Croatia and their role in enhancing employability.²⁴

2.3 Public libraries offer flexible learning pathways which enhance employability

Drawing upon the correlations identified in the two previous sections between access to lifelong learning opportunities, access to online resources and digital skills, and employability – it is perhaps unsurprising that recent research evidence confirms a direct link between public libraries and employment. Chapter 6 of the TNS Cross-country survey on perceptions and usage of ICT in public libraries determined that in 2012-13 4.1 million European adults used public library computers to support employment related activity.²⁵ These individuals were most frequently aged 25-54, and particularly likely to come from ethnic minority, migrant or Roma community groups.

Furthermore, the TNS study revealed that last year 1.5 million European adults used public library computer and Internet facilities to apply for jobs – and 250,000 of those adults were successful in securing employment through this means.²⁶ The significance of this figure can be helpfully contextualised by examining parallel results for employment support activities financed by the European Social Fund. According to performance figures published by the European Commission in 2013, the European Social fund helped an average of 480,000 participants in its employment programmes find jobs each year from 2007-2011 (out of 12.5 million participants over five years).²⁷ Given that the estimated annual cost of sustaining the entire EU public library network amounts to €2 billion, and the annual cost of the European Social Fund programmes is above €10 billion²⁸ – the contribution and return on investment for public libraries in this arena is clearly worthy of consideration.

What differentiates public library support for employment related activities from simple access to a computer with an Internet connection (although this in itself constitutes an important resource for many library users) is the staff assisted component of public library services. The TNS survey shows that 1.5 million public library users reported that they had been shown or helped to use a library computer for employment related activity by a librarian in 2012-13.²⁹ Typical library staff-assisted employment related activities included finding information, searching for or applying for jobs;

²³ [European Commission, SWD \(2013\) 28 final, Part I – Evidence on Demographic and Social Trends, Social Policies’ contribution to Inclusion, Employment and the Economy, 20th February 2013, page 14](#)

²⁴ [European Commission, SWD \(2013\) 42, Confronting Homelessness in the European Union, 20th February 2013, page 18](#)

²⁵ [TNS, Cross-European survey to measure users’ perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, Final Report, March 2013, page 40](#)

²⁶ [Ibid, page 40](#)

²⁷ [European Commission, The European Social Fund at work – Getting people into jobs, 18th November 2013, page 1](#)

²⁸ [European Commission, The European Social Fund – investing in people, 26th October 2012, page 8](#)

²⁹ [TNS, Cross-European survey to measure users’ perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, Final Report, March 2013, page 42](#)

writing CVs/covering letters; and improving job related skills.³⁰ The research also indicated that partnerships between public libraries and employment agencies were becoming increasingly common in several EU Member States (including Romania, Portugal, Lithuania, Germany, France, Czech Republic and the UK).³¹ In some instances libraries are setting aside dedicated spaces which contain computers which are exclusively for staff-assisted employment activities.³²

***Recommendation 2:** the European Commission needs to take full account of the current evidence which indicates cohesive links between lifelong learning and transitions to employment; and between e-inclusion, access to digital skills/ICT and employability – and design approaches and policies which recognise the essential contribution of public libraries in the provision of these opportunities to excluded and disadvantaged communities.*

3 Adapting to internationalisation trends

The EU already has a broad range of transparency tools, skills passports and qualifications frameworks which apply to formal education (tertiary and secondary education), vocational training, and (to an increasing extent) non-formal and informal learning. Enhancing the coherence, interoperability and compatibility of these individual tools and frameworks and driving higher levels of adoption and implementation at Member State level represents the most effective way to incentivise their internationalisation and acceptance by third countries. In other words, a skills recognition and qualifications ecosystem which is working well across 28 Member States will present an extremely attractive model for third countries seeking to empower their citizens to seek education, training and employment opportunities within the EU.

4 Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach

4.1 A rising focus on learning outcomes and the importance of non-formal and informal learning pathways

Since a high level meeting of OECD Education Ministers in 1996 which focused on the importance of developing strategies for “lifelong learning for all”, the importance of the non-formal and informal

³⁰ [Ibid, page 41](#)

³¹ [Ibid, page 43](#)

³² [Ibid, page 43](#)

dimension of lifelong learning has steadily risen up the international education policy agenda.³³ This is largely based upon the OECD's realisation that:

*"People are constantly learning everywhere and at all times. Not a single day goes by that does not lead to additional skills, knowledge and/or competences for all individuals. For people outside the initial education and training system, adults in particular, it is very likely that this learning, taking place at home, at the workplace or elsewhere, is a lot more important, relevant and significant than the kind of learning that occurs in formal settings."*³⁴

Indeed, for those outside the formal education system or for those no longer participating in formal education, such as disadvantaged groups (including early school leavers, the unemployed, ethnic minorities, adults not in formal education or training or the elderly) the recognition of non-formal and informal learning pathways is of critical importance as they represent an opportunity to harness skills and abilities which might otherwise lie dormant or underutilised.

Indeed the OECD recognises that for societies (like the European Union) which are currently experiencing demographic decline in the number of young people of working age, the importance of new "strategies for creating and identifying human capital", such as the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes for adults and the elderly will continue to rise.³⁵ In its March 2010 report, Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Pointers for Policy Development³⁶, the OECD identified four key benefits:

- **economic benefits** - by reducing the direct and opportunity costs of formal learning and allowing human capital to be used more productively
- **educational benefits** - that can underpin lifelong learning and career development
- **social benefits** - by improving equity and strengthening access to both further education and the labour market, for disadvantaged groups, disaffected youth and older workers
- **psychological benefits** - by making individuals aware of their capabilities and validating their worth

It is perhaps unsurprising that the OECD sees the recognition of non-formal and informal learning pathways as a central part of delivering lifelong learning for all and reshaping learning to better match the needs of 21st century knowledge economies.³⁷

4.2 EU policy makers have taken some positive steps towards recognising the value of non-formal and informal learning outcomes

Since 2000 the European policy makers have taken a series of encouraging cumulative steps to enhance the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.³⁸ In November 2012, a

³³ [OECD website, Skills beyond Schools, accessed on 5th April 2014](#)

³⁴ [OECD website, Skills beyond Schools, accessed on 5th April 2014](#)

³⁵ [OECD, Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices, Patrick Werquin, February 2010, page 5](#)

³⁶ [OECD, Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Pointers for Policy Development, March 2010, page 1](#)

³⁷ [OECD website, Skills beyond Schools, accessed on 5th April 2014](#)

³⁸ European Commission, Common European Principles for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (DG EAC B1 JBJ D(2004)); Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal

Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Rethinking Education Communication reinforced these previous commitments stating that *“it is vital to recognise and validate non-formal and informal learning.”*³⁹ December 2012 the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning which called for Member States to put in place arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning no later than 2018, whilst noting that:

*“disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed or at the risk of unemployment, are particularly likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, since validation can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market.”*⁴⁰

In October 2013, the European Parliament adopted an own-initiative Resolution text in response to the European Commission’s Communication on Rethinking Education which:

*“urges further support for the acquisition and recognition of competences based on non-formal and informal learning, and highlights the role of such learning as part of an overall lifelong learning strategy aimed at a socially inclusive knowledge society with strong individuals and active citizens...”*⁴¹

However, despite growing recognition of the value of validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes, the European Commission’s Staff Working Document and Impact Assessment accompanying its proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, published in September 2012, noted that progress on validation has thus far been *“uneven, irregular and slow at times where a lack of skills is becoming a bottleneck for economic growth and job creation.”*⁴²

4.3 The role of public libraries as key community providers of non-formal and informal learning opportunities

Public libraries are key community providers of non-formal and informal learning opportunities. The 2012 Council Resolution on a Renewed Agenda for Adult Learning noted that whilst non-formal and informal learning activities represent the majority of adult learning, the take up of validation opportunities is still too low.⁴³ This Resolution also identified the importance of enhancing the role of cultural stakeholders including libraries as *“creative and innovative settings for non-formal and informal adult learning.”*⁴⁴

In March 2013, the TNS Cross-European Survey on the use of ICT in public libraries reported that the study had demonstrated very widespread evidence of non-formal and informal learning activity in public libraries *“which contributes significantly to the EU’s agenda on non-formal and informal learning, particularly concerning inclusive delivery.”*⁴⁵ The report also determined that 24 million

learning within the European youth field [[Official Journal C 168, 20.7.2006](#)]; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP): [European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, 2009](#)

³⁹ [European Commission, SWD\(2012\) 376 final, 20th November 2012, page 20](#)

⁴⁰ [Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, December 2012, page 3](#)

⁴¹ [European Parliament Resolution on Rethinking Education, 2013/2041\(INI\), 22nd October 2013](#)

⁴² [European Commission, SWD\(2012\) 252 final, 5th September 2012, page 8](#)

⁴³ [Council Resolution on a renewed agenda for adult learning, 20th December 2011, \(2011/C 372/01\), page 2](#)

⁴⁴ [Ibid, page 6](#)

⁴⁵ [TNS, Cross-European survey to measure users’ perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, Final Report, March 2013, page 34](#)

adults across the EU (1 in 4 library users) had taken part in non-formal/informal learning activities during the last 12 months, and that in particular those aged 65 and over; those from rural areas; and those from Roma and ethnic minority communities were most likely to have participated.⁴⁶

Indeed, what differentiates a public library from a mere series of shelves stacked with books or a high speed internet connection is the role its staff play as essential intermediaries for assisted, guided and signposted access to information, technology and helpful resources. The 2013 TNS survey referenced above also confirmed that around 50% of public library computer users engaged in staff-assisted non-formal and informal learning activities, and that the elderly and members of Roma and ethnic minority communities were “particularly likely to benefit from such assistance – a resource they might struggle to find elsewhere.”⁴⁷

Public libraries provide a wide range of **non-formal learning** services in the form of workshops, lectures, laboratory exercises, self-paced tutorials and sometimes fully fledged information literacy packages. These services include activities to support formal learning and homework assistance (such as through homework clubs), language courses, story-telling and reading clubs for children and adults, support to job seekers and those seeking careers guidance, meetings/debates on a range of different topics (such as politics or health), and business information which may include market research, sessions on starting your own business and information on patents.

In relation to digital literacy training programmes, these will usually cover areas such as digital photography and computer graphics, blogging, email, Skype, social networking (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter...etc), searching the internet, messenger/chat services, as well as courses or advice on how to use online facilities such as e-banking or e-government services. Some public libraries offer more advanced training on issues such as internet safety, copyright and online information retrieval techniques, as well as website creation, image processing and cloud technology services.⁴⁸

Public libraries also provide an environment which supports and fosters **informal learning** in terms of providing unstructured access to a wide range of information and learning resources (both online and offline) which users can investigate and explore on a voluntary basis. Library staff also serve a signposting/assisted access function by providing ad hoc advice and support based on individual user enquiries.

4.4 The need for greater coherence and coordination across transparency tools and policies to recognise non-formal and informal learning outcomes

The background document for this consultation recognises that a broad range of sectoral skills and qualification passports which exist which are not currently coordinated with existing transparency and recognition tools.⁴⁹ In relation to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, there are several key existing transparency tools which currently leading the way forward. Europass - the single European framework for the transparency of qualifications, was established by Decision 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 December 2004.⁵⁰ The framework

⁴⁶ [Ibid, page 34](#)

⁴⁷ [Ibid, page 60](#)

⁴⁸ [Ibid, page 59](#)

⁴⁹ [European Commission, Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications, Background document, page 6](#)

⁵⁰ [Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, 15th December 2004](#)

currently comprises two online documents - the Europass Curriculum Vitae and Europass Language Passport which can be downloaded or completed online by any European citizen. In December 2012, Europass launched a new European Skills Passport which is designed to serve as a user-friendly electronic folder to help students, workers or job seekers build up a personal inventory of skills and qualifications.

In 2014, Europass plans to introduce two new elements:⁵¹

- **Europass Experience** - a template enabling citizens to describe and record skills acquired at the workplace or during other non-formal and informal learning experiences such as traineeships and volunteering
- **Europass ICT self-assessment Module** - allowing individuals that are not ICT professionals to describe their skills in using information and communication technologies, applying a set of descriptors of competences recognized at European level. This new ICT module, currently under construction, will most probably be integrated in the Europass CV online tool.

According to the December 2013 Europass Newsletter efforts are already underway to integrate European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels within all Europass documentation.⁵² There are also plans to explore the capacity of the new Europass Experience module to record European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) units.⁵³

These certainly represent encouraging developments, although many of these plans are still awaiting implementation. In relation to Europass Experience, it is strongly recommended that this component be designed to maximise opportunities to recognise skills and experiences gained in the context of non-formal and informal learning activities in public libraries. Previous discussions with DG Education and Culture officials suggested that the planned Europass Experience documentation may offer a section where librarians (as representatives of an organisation providing non-formal and informal learning opportunities) can stamp or soft-certify specific skills and experience acquired through library learning activities. This recognition would allow individuals to better capitalise on skills and experience gained through learning in public libraries, which in turn would facilitate their progression either back into formal education or training, or in securing employment.

Similarly, the planned self-assessed ICT module should be configured such that it supports effective recognition of basic digital skills and competencies gained in non-formal and informal library learning settings. A recommended approach would be structure this module based on the DIGCOMP⁵⁴ Framework for Digital Competence which has been designed benchmark key components of basic digital competence for EU-wide validation (including those gained through informal and non-formal learning). Based on a report published in June 2013,⁵⁵ the DIGOMP initiative has avoided overly focusing on technical skills, and instead primarily concerns itself with thematic areas around knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness. Indeed at during an early presentation at the start of the DIGCOMP initiative in October 2012, project leader Anusca Ferrari

⁵¹ [Europass Newsletter, 20th December 2013, page 1](#)

⁵² [Ibid, page 3](#)

⁵³ [Ibid, page 3](#)

⁵⁴ [European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies - DIGCOMP](#)

⁵⁵ [European Commission, JRC Scientific and Policy Reports, DIGCOMP: A Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe, June 2013, page 2](#)

emphasised that “learning that takes place outside formal settings should be appreciated and constitutes the basis for real-life, context based, and learner-centred activities.”⁵⁶

The proposed DIGCOMP self-assessment grid⁵⁷ covers five key areas of digital competence (information, communication, content creation, safety and problem solving) across three levels of proficiency, going from A (foundation level), B (intermediate level) to C (advanced level). From examination of this grid, it is clear that librarian-assisted ICT learning experiences in public libraries have the capacity to provide library users with all five of these competences at foundation and intermediate level (and potentially some of the advanced level competences). It is therefore recommended that the new Europass self-assessed ICT module adopts documentation which facilitates the ability of library users to validate digital skills and experiences gained through non-formal and informal learning outcomes in public libraries.

Once these two new Europass elements are implemented (Europass Experience and the Europass self-assessed ICT module) a critical factor for success will lie in a) persuading organisations active in the non-formal and informal learning sector to promote it; and b) raising awareness among learners of the availability of these new tools to encourage uptake and engagement. Alongside existing efforts to promote these new transparency tools across EU Member States – it is recommended that the European Commission engages directly with all 28 EU National Library Associations to encourage their public library networks to drive coordinated adoption and engagement from learners.

***Recommendation 3:** new European transparency tools which recognise non-formal and informal learning (Europass Experience and the Europass self-assessed ICT module) should be vigorously promoted across all EU Member states. The Commission should also engage with all Member State library associations to leverage their national public library networks to drive coordinated adoption and engagement with these tools among library learners.*

5 Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning

5.1 The absence of European and international level coordination and guidance

The background document for this consultation rightly points out that in relation to adult education there is no European or international coordination or guidance regarding the recognition of

⁵⁶ [DIGCOMP Presentation, Anusca Ferrari, Project Leader, IPTS, December 2012](#)

⁵⁷ [European Commission, JRC Scientific and Policy Reports, DIGCOMP: A Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe, June 2013, page 14](#)

qualifications for further studies, which may represent a barrier for cross-border learning mobility.⁵⁸ In this context ensuring that the new Europass Experience document and the self-assessed ICT module are structured to maximise compatibility with both EQF levels and ECVET units would help support additional recognition of skills and experiences gained via non-formal and informal learning activities in public libraries. Indeed it would potentially allow library learners to flesh out their Europass Skills Passport portfolio with non-formal and informal skills and experiences which might help them engage in further formal or vocational training, or secure employment.

Similarly, the expanding availability of high quality, dynamic and collaborative online Open Education Resources (OER) offer exciting new opportunities for flexible and creative learning approaches where the user also acts as a creator of learning content. In April 2013 the European Commission published a roadmap⁵⁹ to prepare the groundwork for the launch of a pan-European initiative to enhance education and skills development using new technologies including OER. A collection of vision papers published by the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies in April 2013 entitled *Open Education 2030* suggested that:

“In a digital society, the labour ecosystem is very flexible and changes rapidly . . . in this context the learner has to dedicate 20% of his time renewing his skills each year to remain employable . . . he is learning anywhere, anytime, on demand, through any channel.”⁶⁰

5.2 Open Education Resources and public libraries

In a context where Open Education Resources and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are widely predicted to transform the global education landscape within the next five years – there is unique opportunity for digital intermediaries such as public libraries to serve as community catalysts for online learning through the provision of both remote services and physical collaboration facilities. As peer learning, mentoring networks, co-study and informal support (both online and face-to-face) are essential ingredients for maximizing the value of OER through blended learning approaches, public libraries are well-placed to play a key role in the forthcoming education revolution.

In order to capitalize on the benefits of these new resources, European transparency tools and recognition systems such as Europass, the EQF and ECVET need to be updated to accommodate this looming explosion of online education opportunities – whilst recognizing that public libraries will represent the primary point of access to these opportunities for many disadvantaged individuals and marginalized groups.

⁵⁸ [European Commission, Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications, Background document, page 10](#)

⁵⁹ [European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Roadmap, Opening up Education, March 2013](#)

⁶⁰ [Open Education 2030: Contributions to the JRC-IPTS Call for Vision Papers, Part I: Lifelong Learning, 9th April 2013, page 9](#)

It is worth pointing out that the European Parliament has been among the first to recognise the role of public libraries in this new digital context. On the 25th of March 2014 the European Parliament's Education and Culture Committee published its Report⁶¹ on new technologies and open education resources which includes a Motion for a Parliamentary Resolution in response to the European Commission's 2013 Communication on Opening up Education. The text of the motion which was unanimously approved by the Education and Culture Committee "*points out that public libraries and education centres can offer free access to computers and the internet and training on internet resources.*"⁶²

Recommendation 4: *the Commission should recognise the role public libraries to serve as digital intermediaries and catalysts for community online learning through the provision of both remote services and physical collaboration facilities. European transparency tools and recognitions systems need to be updated to accommodate new online learning pathways, whilst recognising that public libraries represent a primary point of access for these opportunities for many disadvantaged individuals and marginalised groups.*

6 Increasing the focus on quality assurance

6.1 The absence of coordinated quality assurance principles in adult learning

The background document to this consultation suggests that while the common quality assurance principles of the EQF are broadly compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG) and the European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) principles – it also notes that:

*"Nevertheless, the principles of the three tools do not provide specific guidance for the quality assurance of the learning outcomes approach, qualifications and qualifications frameworks. Despite the fact that EQF quality assurance principles were to address only vocational education and training and higher education qualifications, they are relevant to other qualifications too. This potential to provide guidance for all levels and all kinds of qualifications in a lifelong learning spectrum should be exploited, especially to support the development of quality assurance mechanisms in other sectors, such as general and adult education, where they are scarcely present."*⁶³

⁶¹ [European Parliament, Committee on Culture and Education, Motion for a Parliamentary Resolution on new technologies and open educational resources, 25th March 2014](#)

⁶² [Ibid, page 9](#)

⁶³ [European Commission, Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications, Background document, page 11](#)

6.2 The benefits of interoperable and understood quality assurance principles for skills and lifelong learning outcomes

It is strongly advised that the opportunity to develop interoperable and mutually understood quality assurance principles in the context skills and learning outcomes achieved through lifelong learning, non-formal learning and informal learning be exploited – and that these principles be harmonised across all Member States. When faced with the challenge of securing greater recognition of these flexible learning pathways and approaches from both formal and vocational education and training institutions, as well as potential employers, the need to establish widely accepted and recognised quality assurance principles is of paramount importance. Such principles would also help support non-formal and informal learners in public libraries in securing wider recognition and acceptance from other institutions and organisations of the broad spectrum of social and human capital, knowledge, skills and experience they accumulate in public library learning environments. It is recommended that in the development of these principles the European Commission (DG Education and Culture and CEDEFOP) work with Member State library associations to ensure this compatibility. Quality assurance and open education resources

In the context of online learning and open education resources, there are also additional gains to be secured through implementing a quality assurance approach. It is recommended that the European Commission consider developing an inventory of approved open education resources and courses which are compatible with existing transparency tools and qualification recognition systems broken down by subject area and skill level. The Commission could then work with Member State library associations to support them in issuing guidance to librarians who could help signpost potential library learners in the direction of the most appropriate/suitable online education resource.

***Recommendation 5:** the Commission should engage with key stakeholders which support non-formal and informal learning including public libraries to develop interoperable quality assurance principles for these types of learning. The Commission should also consider developing an inventory of approved open education resources and courses which are compatible with existing transparency tools and qualifications recognition systems broken down by subject area and skill level. The Commission should work with Member State library associations to support librarians in signposting library learners towards the most suitable online education resources according to their needs.*

7 Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications

7.1 Benefits of a single access point for information and services

The consultation background document acknowledges that a broad range of networks and websites have been created to improve the transparency of skills and the mobility of learners, including Ploteus, EURES, the EQF and Europass online portals.⁶⁴ In addition to these online resources, the Commission has also established physical networks in Member States which offer information and guidance including national Europass centres, Euroguidance centres and Eurodesks.⁶⁵ As the background document duly recognises, this overlapping landscape of online portals and physical networks represents an overly complex, inefficient and duplicated ecosystem of resources which has the capacity to confuse and frustrate learners and job seekers. Maintaining and managing these diverse and largely uncoordinated resources also involves a significant human and financial cost to the European Commission.

In this context there is clear added value in integrating these resources into a single online access point (one access point at European level and targeted access points Member State level with nationally focused resources and services). This would improve visibility and access to the entire spectrum of available resources and facilitate a more user-friendly experience for learners and job seekers engaging with these resources. This would also allow resources and services to be unified under a single online brand which would maximise awareness and engagement from education and training organisations, learners and job seekers across the EU.

7.2 Scope and reach of the EU public library network

Previously referenced research produced by TNS in March 2013 estimated that nearly a quarter of the EU population (97.3 million adults) had visited a public library in the last 12 months,⁶⁶ and that 24 million had engaged in library-based non-formal or informal learning activities during that period.⁶⁷ The study reported that public library computer usage is highest among young people aged 15-24,⁶⁸ whilst also highlighting that library-learners were most frequently aged 65 and over, from a rural area or members of ethnic minority or Roma communities.⁶⁹

In addition, public library computer users reporting that they had no other options for free internet and computer access tended to be from traditionally digitally excluded groups such as those aged 55 and over, the unemployed, the disabled, early school-leavers and members of Roma communities.⁷⁰ This illustrates both the current extent of lifelong learning activity taking place in public libraries –

⁶⁴ [European Commission, Stakeholder consultation on the European area of skills and qualifications, Background document, page 12](#)

⁶⁵ [Ibid, page 12](#)

⁶⁶ [TNS, Cross-European survey to measure users' perceptions of the benefits of ICT in public libraries, Final Report, March 2013, page 4](#)

⁶⁷ [Ibid, page 6](#)

⁶⁸ [Ibid, page 5](#)

⁶⁹ [Ibid, page 6](#)

⁷⁰ [Ibid, page 4](#)

but also gives an indication of the potential size of the library-supported learning sector if existing policies and tools were effectively coordinated to support and encourage its development.

7.3 Partnering with public libraries to promote access to European transparency, training and mobility resources

There are strong incentives and opportunities for added value for the European Commission to work in partnership with Europe's 65,000 public libraries to promote access among disadvantaged and marginalised groups to an integrated online portal providing transparency, training and mobility resources. The Commission should engage directly with Member State library associations to ensure that librarians can direct learners and job seekers to these resources and signpost library users to the most appropriate and relevant service according to their specific needs. This represents a unique opportunity to leverage an existing European-wide network of community-based buildings, staff and digital infrastructure to unlock the potential and human capital of excluded and hard to reach individuals. Indeed such an approach has tremendous benefits in terms of its potential scope and reach, when compared with the investment required to set up and maintain a similar network of physical contact centres starting from scratch. This is not to say that existing centres and contact points should not be leveraged for maximum impact, but ignoring the potential contribution of public libraries in this context would represent an expensive and needlessly missed opportunity.

***Recommendation 6:** the Commission should establish a single online access point for European transparency, skills, training and mobility resources, and engage with Member State library associations to ensure librarians can direct library learners to the most appropriate and relevant services according to their specific needs.*