

# Recognition for Climate Change: A EU-PacTVET initiative to recognize informal and non-formal learning in the Pacific region

## Authors

Martin T.<sup>2</sup>, Hemstock S.H.<sup>1</sup>, Jacot Des Combes H.<sup>2</sup>, Buliruarua L.-A.<sup>2</sup>, Satiki V.<sup>3</sup>, Kua N.<sup>1</sup>,

1: Economic Development Division, The Pacific Community, 3rd Floor, Lotus Building, SPC – Private Mail Bag, Nabua, Fiji

2: The Pacific Centre of Environment and Sustainable Development, The University of the South Pacific, Laudala Bay, Private Mail Bag, Suva, Fiji

3: Fiji National University, Kings Road, Nasinu, P.O.Box 7222, Fiji

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Due to a lack of appropriate qualifications, a large proportion of people face severe disadvantage in getting decent jobs, migrating to other countries and regions, and accessing further education, even though they might have the necessary knowledge, skills and competence. The recognition process or what is also known as RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) can help such persons acquire a formal qualification that matches their knowledge and skills, and thus contribute to improving employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem.

At the same time, it is contended that one of the key barriers to improving Pacific island countries' energy security status and resilience to climate change impacts is the lack of local and regional capacity and expertise (Jordon, Huitema, Van Asselt, Rayner, & Berkhout, 2010). This, it is claimed, is due to the absence of relevant outcomes-based curriculum, trained personnel and well-resourced and equipped training institutions to deliver on the required formal training programmes.<sup>1</sup> It is also argued that current education and training systems in the Pacific region do not facilitate recognition of the large amount of informal and non-formal learning that has occurred in the past. This is particularly relevant in the areas of climate change and sustainable energy that have received a vast amount of ad-hoc training through substantial ongoing support from donor agencies.

UNESCO states that RPL is important for poverty reduction, job-creation and decent employment (2012). A World Bank report on lifelong learning for global knowledge economy also emphasises the importance of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, particularly in developing countries with limited provision of formal education and training (The World Bank, 2003). The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is considered highly suited to the Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (TVET) sector which is outcomes-based referenced to standards of performance in the workplace.

Supported by the European Union, the Pacific Technical and Vocational Education and Training on Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Adaptation (EU-PacTVET) project aims to enhance Pacific – African, Caribbean and Pacific's (P-ACPs) regional and national capacity and technical expertise to respond to climate change adaptation (CCA) and sustainable energy (SE). The project was designed to address the issues that it is argued have arisen due to the vast amount of reactive and ad-hoc training in these areas which has been provided by NGO's, industry associations, private industry and donors. Furthermore although some of the education policies in the Pacific region reflect the importance of recognition, it is argued this remains a notion with little practical application. The design of the EU-PacTVET project facilitates progressing development towards a recognition process to be introduced at a regional level which will provide a leading role.

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1. European Commissioner for Climate Action and Energy Miguel Arias Cañete; Pacific Islands Leaders Forum Conference PNG, September 2015

The Educational Quality and Assessment Programme (EQAP) is responsible for addressing regional education matters in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> It is a program under the Director General's Office of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). The discussion in this paper is descriptive and analytical of the current work being undertaken by the EU-PacTVET project in collaboration with EQAP and other regional stakeholders to develop and implement new regional TVET qualifications in CCA and SE. This work is informed by the many recognition (RPL) policies and practices around the world. In particular, the Australian RPL system more commonly referred to as 'Skills Recognition' is considered to be one that reflects good practice. The authors of this paper are the cross-disciplinary team involved in the implementation of the EU-PacTVET project.

## **Definitions and Terminology**

Confusing language and differing definitions hinder effective discussions and act as a barrier to the effective implementation of RPL (Bowman, et al., 2003).

### Types of Learning

The definitions on formal, informal and non-formal learning adopted by this paper are derived from the meanings conveyed by UNESCO and The Council of the European Union. These are expressed as:

Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, is recognized by relevant national authorities, and leads to qualifications. 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 it is more flexible. It usually takes place in community-based settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations. Informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through the interests and activities of individuals (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015, p. 19).

Most learning in an individual's life takes place through non-formal and informal means, whether at work, home, or elsewhere. In fact, in many developing countries such as those in the Pacific region where there are high school dropout rates, the majority of young people, especially informal apprentices, acquire workplace skills by informal means. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal and non-formal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications and other opportunities.

### Recognition

There is no standard terminology for what is often referred to as RPL. The European Commission uses the phrase 'validation of non-formal and informal learning', UNESCO talks about the 'recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning'. The OECD uses the one word 'recognition' to describe the complete process. In Australia the terms Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Recognition of Current Competency (RCC) and Skills Recognition (SR) are used to describe the same recognition and validation process. Each of these phrases emphasizes specific aspects although all approaches have in common a process of some sort whereby an authorized body verifies that certain learning outcomes have been acquired. These differences in definition are more of form than substance. This paper will use the term 'recognition' throughout. Furthermore the words 'skills' and 'competences' are used interchangeably facilitating a broad interpretation and approach.

## **DRIVERS FOR RECOGNITION**

Regardless of the terminology there is agreement on the multi-dimensional purposes of recognition: as a means of accessing formal qualifications and entering the formal education and

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2. <http://www.eqap.org.fj/>

training system, and as a means to make existing competences and learning visible. Both perspectives imply an integrated approach with the potential to draw together the various sectors (education, work and society) and purposes of personal, social and economic development (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015). It is this integrated view that the PacTVET project is adopting in work to develop an effective recognition system in the fields of CCA (including Disaster Risk Management, DRM) and SE. This development work is informed by existing practices in recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes which are driven by the labour market, human capital development and formal education and training systems.

An ILO study on recognition states that its outcomes were generally positive for workers: they gained self-esteem, improved employability and, in most cases, it was either part of, or led to, further education and training. The study also mentions that it was sometimes undertaken to address specific challenges faced by various industries, for example, overall decline in business or quality related issues (Dyson & Keating, 2005). Although the recognition work by the EU-PacTVET project is addressing specific sectoral issues in the field of Climate Change (including SE and DRM) it is envisaged that this work will lead to developing a model that will have a broader application. Some of the key influences are described in the next section of this paper.

### ***The Labour Market***

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes should be towards skills in short supply on the market in order to match supply and demand, whilst at the same time offering employment opportunities to disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, recognition is also an effective process often used to meet regulatory requirements for some sectors in terms of employing 'qualified' persons.

The link between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and the labour market is simply that knowledge, skills and competences are often present but are not visible without recognition. Interestingly, in Australia, the extensive availability of formal vocational education closely linked to the labour market has meant that the system for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes has not become quickly operational.

However in the Pacific region there is a recognized absence of formal vocational training in the fields of CCA and SE (Buliruarua, Hemstock, Jacot Des Combes, Kua, Martin, & Satiki, 2014). Thus, it is argued that this absence combined with the increasing demand for such expertise has created a skills shortage. In particular, the EU-PacTVET project is addressing this issue at certificate levels which provide opportunities for people who are often disadvantaged in the Pacific region, such as those with minimal schooling and living in remote outer island areas.

### ***Human Capital Development***

Unfortunately, most formal education systems are not geared to recognize non-formal and informal learning. This not only hinders the development of human capital, but is also a cause of its under-utilization. There is general agreement that recognition is one approach to address the problems faced by certain groups likely to be especially vulnerable to work or social exclusion because they lack significant knowledge, skills and competences or, more precisely, recognised knowledge, skills and competences (Werquin, 2010).

Additionally, the presence of groups at risk is central to the lifelong learning strategy. Encouraging lifelong learning in order to create a competent and adaptable workforce is a key to building human capital and being innovative and competitive in a globalized, fast-changing world. The main groups in the Pacific region that are likely to gain most from the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes are considered to be young people, the long-term unemployed, lowly ranked workers and persons at risk of social exclusion, such as those living in remote areas.

The aim of the PacTVET project is to develop human resources in the broad field of climate change. The Pacific Island leaders continue to reiterate that people are it's most valuable resource and thus building human capital is a focus for all developments. In particular, the revised Pacific

Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change<sup>3</sup> (2006-2015) recognises the need for concerted efforts to be undertaken to enhance human capacity in the context of sustainable development. The EU-PacTVET project proposes that an effective system for the recognition of informal and formal learning will provide one means to contribute towards achieving a vast range of holistic and specific development objectives.

### ***The formal education and training system***

The formal system of education and training constitutes an essential contextual element in understanding the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. It is a reference point – most notably in terms of its standards and assessment methods. In order for recognition to be based on standards it is necessary that the learning is described in terms of outcomes. TVET is the global leading education and training sector in developing and applying the concept of learning outcomes. TVET traditionally refers to a range of learning experiences relevant to the world of work. These learning experiences involve the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life and to specific work tasks. Thus, TVET comprises formal, non-formal, and informal learning for the world of work.

## **THE RECOGNITION PROCESS**

### ***Policy, legal and regulatory frameworks for education and training systems***

A recognition system is an integral part of a country's effective education and training system. It promotes alternate pathways to acquiring qualifications, ensures parity between recognition and formal education; facilitates lifelong learning; and ensures the allocation of sufficient resources so that stakeholders will take it seriously and prioritize its development and implementation. These objectives are facilitated if national policies concerning employment, poverty reduction, development, migration, education and training emphasize the implementation of recognition.

In Australia, RPL is part of the Australian Quality Training Framework and the standards for Registered Training Organisations. Under these standards it is mandatory for RPL to be offered to all applicants on enrolment. However in the Pacific region although there are references in some countries national policies there is minimal application in practice. At a regional level the Pacific quality standards (PQAF) refer to support for the recognition of non-formal learning and prior learning in order to ensure access to learning opportunities and qualifications for all. A requirement includes information on a recognition process must be provided clearly to applicants for any learning programme. Furthermore the application for the accreditation of a programme by EQAP requires the applicant to ensure that there are provisions for industry experts to be engaged in any recognition (SPC, The Pacific Quality Assurance Framework (PQAF), 2015) .

### **National Qualifications Frameworks**

A national qualifications framework is often described as a key component in developing the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. In many countries, including EU countries, these frameworks are still being prepared, although in Ireland, South Africa and Australia, their development is at an advanced stage (Werquin, 2010). The connection between national qualification frameworks and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning derives from the fact that qualifications included in a national qualifications framework are generally recognised and accepted by professionals and other final users. Embedding recognition of non-formal and informal learning within a broader national qualification gives immediate legitimacy. Furthermore, national qualifications provide transparency: people know where they are going in terms of learning, recognition and qualifications, while employers know whom they are recruiting.

Commitment at the national level to improve the quality of post-school education and training has led some of the Pacific countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu) to

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<sup>3</sup> South Pacific Regional Environment Programme: (SPREP), Pacific Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change (2005-2015).

develop national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and establish national accrediting agencies (NAAs). This work is ongoing in the Pacific region and currently supported by different donor and government initiatives, including the work by EQAP. This work is also supported by the EU-PacTVET project and integrated into achieving the overall project objectives. Pacific island countries are encouraged to develop national qualifications and quality assurance systems and to link these national frameworks to the Pacific regional framework.

## **ISSUES**

The preceding discussion in this paper has highlighted the many good reasons for advancing the concept on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Yet existing global systems have experienced difficulties that indicate significant barriers in developing a new system for recognition. Like any new concept, it takes time for stakeholders to fully accept it. Although employers are often supportive of what recognition can achieve, there remains an ongoing reluctance to accept recognition as an equal, for example, many academic institutions refuse the transfer of credits from recognition as a pathway for formal learning (Werquin P. , 2010). The key barriers as well as strategies proposed by the EU-PacTVET project to address some of the barriers are now discussed.

### **Costs**

While the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is often presented as a cheap alternative to training it is not cost-free. Some of the key costs in existing systems are personnel costs, especially in the provision of information and guidance and the cost of assessment. Registration fees represent the share of the costs that are borne by candidates. In Australia, the assessment fee is assumed by the government, with learners covering solely indirect costs such as transport, photocopies and communication. Costs imposed on candidates presents a larger problem in developing countries such as in the Pacific region where resources are scarce and essential needs are prioritized.

A further barrier is the fact that many employers object to making the recognition procedure official because they are reluctant to increase the remuneration of successful candidates (OECD, 2010). Also, it is claimed that it represents an additional burden for those employers who still do not regard training and recognition as an investment but a cost. To address this issue, the EU-PacTVET initiative advocates collaborative development work involving employers and industry to promote an understanding from a cost-benefit perspective.

### **Quality assurance**

The EU-PacTVET project aims to address issues relating to the need for formal demand-driven TVET training and Pacific regional accredited qualifications in the areas of climate change, sustainable energy and disaster risk management. However, although this progress is justified and welcomed, new qualifications are not likely to be trusted or used unless they can be quality assured by known and reputable systems. Furthermore although recognition has the potential to benefit all stakeholders: workers, employers, community, government and education and training providers, the process must be carried out in a credible and transparent manner if the labour market and educational institutions are to value the knowledge, skills and competences of certificate holders. The Pacific Quality Assurance Framework (PQAF) is the Pacific's regional quality assurance framework covering post-secondary education and training, benchmarked against international standards and guidelines. It will be recalled from the discussion earlier in this paper on regulatory frameworks that the PQAF includes some references to recognition processes.

Some of the frequently cited quality assurance mechanisms for recognition are: establishing common standards, "ensuring the availability of competent assessors, collaborating with employers' and workers' organizations and other relevant stakeholders", developing flexible assessment tools and methodologies, and independent auditing of the entire recognition process. Countries also prescribe an appeal process so that candidates can ask for a review of the decision made at any stage of the recognition process (Werquin P. , 2010).

## ***Practical implementation***

Although RPL processes and nomenclature vary among countries, the core of any recognition process involves two key components: counseling and facilitation, and assessment and certification. These are supported by mechanisms such as awareness and publicity, quality assurance, stakeholder engagement, and appeal systems.

### *Counseling and facilitation*

For many countries, the recognition methodology for assessing the knowledge and skills of persons is fairly complex, and the candidates applying for recognition require significant support and counseling during the various stages.

The process requires facilitators to assess candidates' suitability for a specific qualification (full or part), provide information about learning outcomes and competency standards/skillsets needed for the qualification and the nature of evidence required. The facilitator and the information should help a candidate in deciding whether to apply for recognition. In Queensland, Australia, individuals first visit a Skilling Solutions Centre (often in a local shopping centre) and use a web-based self-evaluation tool to match their skills, knowledge and experience to a relevant qualification. They are then provided with a list of preferred providers where they can undergo the recognition process (Queensland Government, 2014). The Australian government's website is very user-friendly and provides complete information as well as tips and hints. Such a comprehensive system is costly although a model worthy of influencing any new developments for a recognition process.

The approach proposed by the EU-PacTVET project for providing information, counseling and guidance is to target groups rather than individuals which will minimize costs whilst at the same time allow support for possible literacy and language barriers. The likely candidates for the recognition of qualifications and competencies/skillsets in TVET certificates in CCA and SE are considered to be mainly community based and living in remote island regions.

### *Assessment*

A tried and tested assessment methodology is a critical factor in the successful implementation of any recognition system. Credibility and confidence in a recognition system, to a great extent, depends on the use of quality assured means of assessment. Ideally, to ensure parity of qualifications, the same assessment tools and methodologies should be used for formal as well as non-formal and informal learning, but the differences in learning contexts and learners' characteristics makes this difficult. While quality assurance in a formal system is carried out at all stages (input, the learning process and outcome) the recognition system cannot do this for the first two stages as the system has no control over them. To resolve this, a much more rigorous assessment methodology is used to ensure that only competent candidates are awarded certificates. However, this results in a complex, time-consuming methodology that acts as a barrier for accessing recognition. The most widely used approach in recognition, namely the portfolio method, can be very demanding in relation to collecting evidence and completing documentation particularly for individuals in the informal sector or those having a limited formal education. Bowman et al. (2003) also lament the fact that the existing recognition (RPL) evidence guides and processes remain too academic and jargon-ridden for many potential applicants (Aggarwal, 2015).

Furthermore In many countries, having an inadequate number of competent recognition assessors/evaluators is a barrier to implementing a recognition process. An effective system requires professionals to perform the key functions including the development of assessment tools and implementation of the assessment process. The proposed strategy by the EU-PacTVET project requires assessors to be trained and qualified as 'trainers and assessors'. In addition they must be registered with national agencies and the regional agency EQAP. The EQAP website will provide a list of accepted qualifications for these professional assessors.

### *Certification*

Among matters to have generated global controversy is whether the 'transcript' awarded to

successful candidates should include an indication to the effect that their qualification was obtained through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. A 2010 study by the OECD identified some countries<sup>4</sup> indicate on the actual transcript that the assessment was taken in accordance with legislation on the recognition of learning outcomes. Australia and other countries do not do this, as they claim it would be viewed as stigmatising the learners concerned (Werquin P. , 2010). It is also noteworthy that some countries do not award full or partial qualifications based on recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. The approach advocated by the EU-PacTVET project is to follow the Australian system which supports the aim to provide equity for all.

### **Stakeholder involvement**

Many stakeholders consider that qualifications obtained by recognition lack the quality and currency of those awarded in the formal system (Aggarwal, 2015). European guidelines for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning observe that there is a high level of trust in formal learning and resentment towards non-traditional awarding of qualifications (European Centre of Development of Vocational Education (CEDEFOP), 2009). Some employers and education institutions consider recognition processes as inferior to the formal learning pathway. It is argued that such bias may be reduced by emphasizing a stringent adherence to quality and ensuring stakeholder participation.

Furthermore, the effective participation of stakeholders, especially employers' and industry organisations, in education and training systems is essential to ensuring that training matches the needs of the labour market. The EU-PacTVET project is using Industry Advisory Groups to develop qualifications in CCA and SE and to inform developing an effective recognition system endorsed by regional industry, community and employer groups.

## **THE EU-PacTVET APPROACH**

The PacTVET project considers the development of an effective 'recognition' system will provide a pathway to formal training for many who may have been previously disadvantaged in the education and training system. At the same time it will enhance decent employment opportunities, build community and individual capacity and resilience and contribute to improving the economic and social situation for Pacific island countries and the region.

The EU-PacTVET project activities since late 2014 have included a Training Needs and Gap Analysis (TNGA) of the fifteen P-ACPs (Buliruarua, Hemstock, Jacot Des Combes, Kua, Martin, & Satiki, 2014). This work assessed national training needs in SE, CCA and DRM and reviewed existing non-formal and formal TVET training courses thus identifying the gaps. Through this process common training needs across the region were identified in addition to specific country needs. These common needs have been the focus of development for the initial certificate level regional qualifications.

At the same time the TNGA recognized that many people in the Pacific region possess skills, knowledge and competences in the field of CCA and SE obtained from non-formal and informal training that are not recognized. It is contended that this situation has arisen due to the absence of appropriate and accessible formal training in CCA and SE and the large amount of non-formal training in these areas. Furthermore this non-formal training has targeted people in communities and villages in remote areas/outer islands who are considered disadvantaged and in need of skills development. The planning and development of a recognition system is a work-in-progress and it is envisaged that alongside the development of formal qualifications it will be implemented in 2017. The process has commenced through discussions with industry groups to create awareness and build positive attitudes towards a recognition process..

### **Work-In-Progress**

Since late 2015 the EU-PacTVET project has been working jointly with the Fiji Higher Education Commission (FHEC) to develop competency standards, skillsets and qualifications. The FHEC

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<sup>4</sup> Korea and Czech Republic

provides an advisory role to the development of Fiji's tertiary education sector. The commission is a national standards agency. Specifically the EU-PacTVET project work with FHEC aims to develop national (Fiji) qualifications at levels I to IV for (i) Climate Change Adaptation (including Disaster Risk Management) and (ii) Sustainable/Renewable Energy. These certificate level qualifications will develop courses for technician level rather than professional levels of work and are targeting those who work in the villages and communities.

At the same time through collaborative work with EQAP these qualifications will be recognized regionally through processes established to facilitate regional endorsement such as representation from the fifteen P-ACPs on the Industry Standards Advisory Committees (ISACs). An ISAC sets the unit standards and learning outcomes within each TVET qualification. These standards are the mechanism for the recognition process as they define the 'performance' to be evaluated. The ISAC groups also recommend learning and assessment methods including processes on the off-the-job.

Thus, the EU-PacTVET project has commenced the development of an industry and regionally endorsed recognition system through these ISAC groups. The EU-PacTVET project team is advocating a need to focus on simplification in the recognition process. In particular flexible assessment methods which use interviews, context-based observation, 360 degree assessment and questionnaires are proposed as preferable methods to the more commonly used portfolios of evidence.

The EU-PacTVET recognition system is only targeting those who meet the competencies in Certificates I to IV in CCA and SE, thus it is sectoral specific. Although there is a recognized need to develop a practical recognition system in the Pacific region for TVET and Higher Education, this is not within the scope of the EU-PacTVET project. Nevertheless, it is likely that this work will provide a platform for building a comprehensive recognition system to meet broader needs.

## **CONCLUSION.**

The discussion in this paper indicates that many countries, including those in the Pacific region, have initiated steps in establishing a recognition system, but often face challenges when it comes to implementation. The key challenges identified for the Pacific region for introducing a recognition system include developing a simple, cost and time effective methodology applicable in particular for people who are disadvantaged, and at the same time gaining endorsement from national and regional employers, education institutions and other stakeholders.

The EU-PacTVET project offers a unique opportunity to advance recognition processes in the Pacific region through integration with the project work to build the capacity of the Pacific region in SE and CCA. The work to date indicates strong affiliations with EQAP and other regional partners that will support this initiative.

Additionally there is a scarcity of data globally on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Although there are some data on non-formal and informal learning, data on recognition of the resultant outcomes are very uncommon. It is hoped this EU-PacTVET project initiative will generate research activity to address this deficit and in particular inform further developments in the Pacific region and across the world.

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