
With Equity in Mind: A Systematic Review of Recognition Practices for Migrants and Refugees in the European Context

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Abstract

The attention deserved to the recognition of qualifications (degrees) and competencies acquired elsewhere, as a means for equity and inclusion in education has progressively influenced educational research and also educational policy and decision-making. Different European countries, agreeing with the importance of valorising informal learning, have expressed the need to make learning ‘beyond the classroom’ visible and to assess it in a more responsive and effective way. Despite the common educational policy framework, in the European area, students with a migratory background (i.e., migrants and/or refugees) continue to struggle in accessing university paths. Given the persistent difficulties in ensuring migrants and refugees equal access to education and training opportunities, this article reports a systematic review study focused on recognition practices realized, over the last 5 years, in the European higher education context. Against the backdrop of the learning recognition debate, the results of this literature review study show a scattered landscape of local practices, sometimes, misaligned with the educational policies defined at the European level. The present study represents a useful step in reflecting on what actions are expected to be designed and implemented by higher education institutions in order to ensure a culturally responsive and equitable education for all.

Keywords

Recognition of previous learning, migrants, refugees, higher education, equity

Introduction

The epistemological, social and policy implications of the concept of lifelong learning have been widely scrutinised and recognised over the last 20 years (Field et al., 2015; Jarvis, 2011; Maruyama, 2020; Oliver, 2020). Lifelong learning has been on the policy agenda of the European Union for decades. In this perspective, the principles of human dignity, autonomy, active citizenship, personal self-attainment, social inclusion and employability linked to lifelong learning have represented a strategic lever for the economic growth, social stability and redress of structural inequalities of a racially minorized target of people (Knight, 2008).

The different conceptualisations of lifelong learning (including the identification of the non-formal and informal learning) have led to a wide variety of validation and recognition practices, in the education and labour fields, for different target groups across the European area. As pointed out by Pfeffer and Skrivanek (2018), the combining phenomena of the expansion of the educated population and the growth of migration, determined a careful consideration of the processes of qualifications validation and recognition. The first EU attempts to define and implement a common framework across member states (in terms of regulations and directives) have been, over the years, affected by practical, institutional, individual and social problems. Not surprisingly, it is still somewhat unclear which factors facilitate or inhibit the implementation of these processes. An aspect that has currently become more urgent due to the new immigration waves (OECD/EU, 2018; UNHCR, 2018), as well as the recent Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Amid growing concerns and unprecedented events, the pandemic significantly reduced learning opportunities for the most fragile and disadvantaged people, like migrants and refugees and clearly showed the inefficacy of existing practices in the university context. Moreover, the spotlight on the Ukraine war showed how challenging is to deal with the issues of support, integration and education across Europe. If, on the one hand, this post-pandemic period will give the opportunity to reimagine what universities are for, on the other hand, it is crucial to reflect on and review past policies, practices and processes in order to redress persistent disparities (Thomas & Arday, 2021).

While the literature includes several definitions of lifelong learning, as well as different practices of recognition and valorisation of prior and informal learning each having different strategies for using evidence of learning, limited is sound scientific evidence that these practices have a positive effect on target groups of individuals. The existing body of literature on the recognition of migrants' and refugees' learning (i.e., qualifications and/or competencies elsewhere acquired) is generally considered extensive in terms of principles and practices (UNESCO, 2019). However, despite the policy recognition of the importance of recognition practices, it has to be noted that this broad field of research shows scant effects (or sometimes ineffective implementations) in the European higher education contexts: students with a migrant background continue to face barriers when trying to access higher education. If, on the one hand, The Lisbon Recognition Convention states that all countries should develop procedures to assess whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements for access to

higher education or employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence; on the other hand, higher education institutions have the autonomy to organize the inflow of third-country nationals and to decide on the program of this group of lateral entrants. However, given also the current practices more spread throughout the EU area (e.g., the procedure defined by the ENIC-NARIC network, or the NOKUT' Qualifications Passport for Refugees within the Norwegian Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning) any cross-national or inter-institutional structure in terms of recognition of qualifications and competences acquired elsewhere is still lacking for third-country nationals who wish to continue their studies in Europe after they have already made their way into higher education outside Europe. There is no proper tool to enable universities to effectively scale up the qualifications and competencies of third-country nationals acquired elsewhere. Moreover, no systematic analysis has been conducted on evidence gathered from previous studies on recognition practices for migrant and refugee students at university.

The present study aims to fill this gap by providing an updated overview of validation and recognition practices for students with a migratory background within the EU area. To this aim first, we briefly recall the rationale of learning recognition, as well as the challenges in practice highlighted by educational research when the target group is represented by students with a migratory background; then we report the main results of a literature review study focused on the practices of recognition of refugees' and migrants' previous learning across the EU higher education area. Finally, we discuss implications for educational research, as well as for more inclusive educational practices in the higher education field.

Qualifications Recognition: From the Educational Policy Rationale to the Educational Practices

Within the lifelong and life-wide learning perspective, the learning that takes place anywhere and anytime in the life of individuals has to be identified and made visible. This assumption, in the European policy documents (Council of the European Commission, 2012), represents a key aspect in order to:

- Ensure the principle of the equivalence of learning of individuals;
- Integrate broader sections of populations into education and training systems;
- Build more inclusive societies (Andersson, 2021; European Commission [EC], 2019; Harris et al., 2014).

In this perspective, 'fair recognition is now acknowledged to be the cornerstone of the internationalisation of higher education and of student mobility' (Nuffic, 2020, p. 8).

Broadly speaking, the recognition of qualifications is a formal procedure that may take place in a variety of legal procedures for a variety of purposes. In this

vein, the attention deserved to recognition of foreign qualifications and competencies, as a mean for equity and social inclusion has deeply influenced educational research, educational policy (at national and local levels) and educational practices purposed to provide evidence and information on qualifications (e.g., diploma or degrees) for the evaluation and valorisation of education paths, mobility schemes and academy awards.

The EU area has experienced a significant shift in population demographics migration over the past decades (e.g., the 2015 migrant and asylum seekers through the Mediterranean Sea, or the economic migration from newer member states in Eastern and Central Europe to western states in the decade before) (Favell, 2018; Osler, 2020). Diversity has been, therefore, a common trait of EU countries but also one of the migration patterns which impacted educational provision emphasising, for example, the positive contribution that migration can bring to every society and stressing the values of acceptance and inclusion.

Different European countries, agreeing with the importance of validating and recognising informal learning, have expressed the need to make learning 'beyond the classroom' visible and to value it in a more responsive and effective way. On the backdrop of *The European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning*, the CEDEFOP (2009, 2014) different approaches have been developed over the years (e.g., first in France and UK and then in Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark) with a focus on different contexts (e.g., workplace, vocational education and training, higher education) for different targets (e.g., migrants, women, NEETs) and different aims. In 2012 the European Council issued the *Recommendations for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, asking all member nations to define 'necessary arrangements for validation'. However, given the upsurge of methodologies and strategies designed to recognize, validate and certificate competencies, a concern has been expressed that 'solutions are looking for problems' highlighting an overproduction of methods and devices in comparison to the real needs of certification. Different studies (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Andersson et al., 2013; Bjornåvold, 2000; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Fenwick & Parsons, 2009) pointed out how complex and problematic recognition of informal learning appears to be, especially for target groups like students, with a migratory background: for these students, institutional barriers, lack of financial support and problems with partial or incomplete education documentation continue to serve as gatekeepers. Not surprisingly, the participation and completion rates of students with a migratory background in higher education lay behind those of domestic student. Furthermore, the UNHCR, in 2018, estimated that only 1% of refugees were enrolled in higher education courses or programs. Moreover, these studies showed how informal learning, even within the consistent legislative framework, had not sufficient recognition. Pitman (2009), for example, reported the difficulties in the implementation of recognition/validation especially when this process is related to social inclusion. Other studies, instead, highlighted how the power of recognition in terms of liberty, social justice and equity may be underestimated. The comparative analysis realized by the EU Commission in 2010 confirms how weak, across the EU countries, the processes of recognition may be. A latent

paradox becomes evident here: some people may be made despondent by the process of recognition and, as a negative consequence, social exclusion may grow. Furthermore, what is clear is the difficulty of integrating recognition and certification practices into formal education systems. In their comparative study, Slowey and Schuetze (2012) addressed which factors may constrain or facilitate access to recognition practices:

- The need to differentiate between the grade awarded, in horizontal (meaning the progress through the system) and vertical (meaning consistent grades when changing from one institution to another) terms, within an education system;
- The level of autonomy and flexibility that education institutions have over assessment arrangements;
- The accessibility to lifelong learning programs;
- The organization of learning paths;
- The financial supports;
- The identification of concrete chances of continuous learning.

Werquin (2010, 2014) underlined, instead, the main critical issues in recognition/validation:

- The limited opportunities for individuals to access these practices;
- The lack of coherence between different recognition approaches, and
- The lack of a unique definition in terms of educational policy.

Recently Andersson (2021), discussing problems and opportunities in the recognition of prior learning of highly skilled refugees, signalled how the prior learning of migrants, assumed higher education as a pivotal force in the integration process, ‘should be central in determining the demand, inclusion and integration of such refugees and their skills and competences into a new workplace, labour market and society’ (Andersson, 2021, p. 13).

Although the European Union has defined a common framework and developed a common policy, there are many differences between the several initiatives taken, in policy and practice, to facilitate integration and inclusion; as pointed out by Castles (2004) a gap between rhetoric and action aroused. Sometimes these differences are substantial among European countries. Taking account of the complex validation and recognition landscape *The European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (CEDEFOP, 2014) gave a detailed snapshot of the state of the art. This *Inventory* underlined how the gap is relevant in the development of recognition and certification systems: while great attention has been reserved to the effects of recognition, few efforts have been made in theoretical (what recognition is and what it can accomplish) and methodological terms (approaches and practices of recognition).

The scenario is not coherent and cohesive (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Berg et al., 2021; Sandberg & Andersson, 2011; Tibajev & Hellgren, 2019). If, on the one hand, there are consistent signs of progress in the definition of achievable aims, on the other hand, there are some unresolved assessment dilemmas (e.g. who is

responsible for the recognition? Which criteria have to be considered in this assessment process?). Considering the impact that the results of recognition of migrants' and refugees' learning have as expanding practices in the higher education context, these processes have to be regarded more carefully. The Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997)–signed and ratified by almost all European countries–stipulates:

Each party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously whether refugees, displaced persons and persons in a refugee-like situation.

Universities have to fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programs or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

Given this assumption, the present article reports a systematic literature review of practices of recognition of students with a migratory background in the European higher education area. This study is part of a broad research project (*Maximizing previously acquired competences at European Universities – MaxiPAC*) under the Erasmus^{plus} sponsorship aimed to streamline the recognition of competencies and qualifications acquired elsewhere for refugees and other non-European immigrants at university and colleges and to develop a procedure that is analogous to all colleges and universities.

The Systematic Review Study

The present study moves from the following research questions:

- How is realized the process of recognition of refugees' and migrants' previous learning across the EU higher education institutions? (RQ1);
- What are the main practices used for recognition of refugees' and migrants' previous learning? (RQ2);
- What are the characteristics of the research studies exploring recognition of refugees' and migrants' previous learning? (RQ3).

Method and Data Collection

The present literature review study followed the Petticrew and Roberts (2006) guide of systematic review in the social sciences. This method has multiple steps, including formulating research questions, defining research terms; selecting databases; conducting the literature search; formulating inclusion criteria, and applying inclusion criteria to select relevant literature (Figure 1).

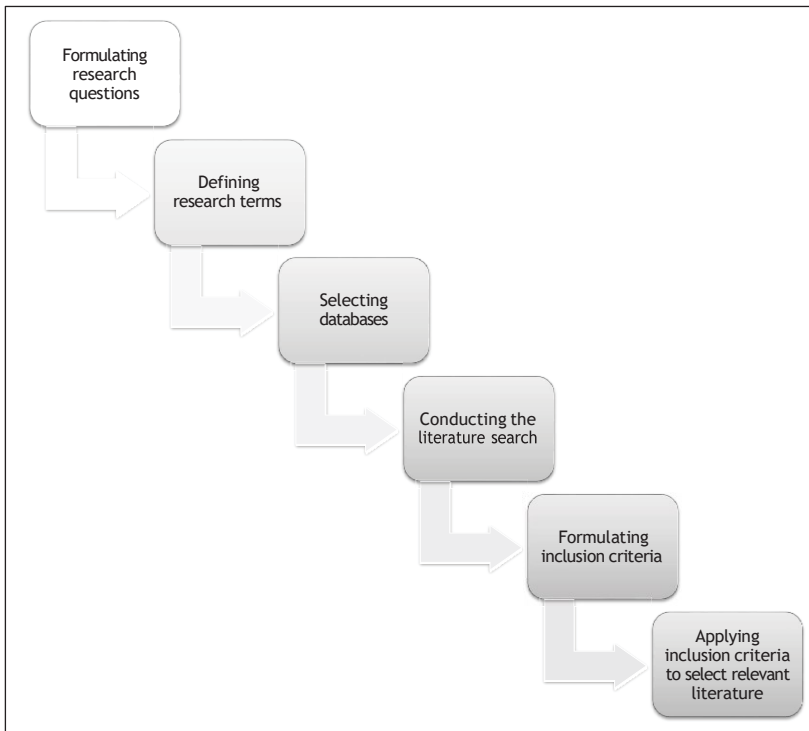


Figure 1. Systematic Review Process.

Source: Petticrew and Roberts (2006).

To reach a wider range of studies the terms of *validation of prior learning*, *recognition of prior learning*, as well as synonyms like *validation of competencies* and *recognition of competencies*, were used. After checking preliminary hints, these terms were combined with *migrants & refugees*, *higher education*, *Europe* (EU, European area).

The search was run in March 2021 and the key terms were used to retrieve literature within the following four databases:

- ERIC;
- PsychINFO;
- SocINDEX;
- Sage ILLUMINA.

Therefore, the collected studies for the database were

- 3.266, ERIC;
- 7.128, PsycINFO;
- 464, Soc INDEX;
- 3.263, SAGE Illumina.

All publications (N. 14.121) were exported to Mendeley Data. After removing duplicates, title and abstracts scans were conducted using the following inclusion criteria:

- The study was published in a scientific, peer-reviewed journal (English language). This criterion was aimed to select adequate scientific articles.
- The study reported a research work (i.e., quantitative-QT, qualitative-QL, mixed approach- MA). This criterion was functional to exclude theoretical articles. Case study articles, instead, were considered as they reported practical examples of validation and recognition processes realized in the higher education context.
- The study was conducted in the European context of higher education. This criterion delimited the analysis only to the European higher education institutions.
- The study was published in the last 5 years (2015–2020). This last criterion restricted the selection to the most recent research studies realized in the field.

Data Analysis and Discussion

After the title and abstract scan, only 23 studies responded to the inclusion criteria and were considered for further analysis. The full-text versions of these publications were therefore read and analysed considering the following information:

- General information: author, publication year, title, national context.
- Research design and instruments.
- Recognition practice and instruments.
- Target population (gender, nationality of migrants/refugees, age, etc.).

Information was recorded using a data extraction form that was filled out by two different members of the research team.

The reported data are structured according to the predetermined categories (Table 1):

- Within the EU context, the studies were performed most of the times in Central European countries (e.g. Germany).
- The selected studies had different research designs:
 - Seven studies with a qualitative research design;
 - Two studies with a quantitative research design;
 - One study with a mixed method approach.
- These research instruments were more frequently reported:
 - Five Interviews (Baláž et al., 2021; Bencivenga, 2017; Lambrechts, 2020; Schneider, 2018; Thondhlana, 2020);

Table 1. Overview of the Selected Studies.

Nr	First author	General Information			Research Design and Instruments	Validation/Recognition Practice and Instruments	Target Population
		Publication year	Journal	Country			
1.	Jungblut, J.	2020	Studies in Higher Education	Germany and Flanders	QL Policy documents analysis and–Statistical data provided by governmental statistical offices, refugee agencies or HEIs.	/	/
2.	Souto-Otero, M., and Villalba-Garcia, E.	2015	International Review of Education	EU	QL Literature review	/	/
3.	Bencivenga, R.	2017	Studies in Education of Adults	Italy	QL Interview Ehnographic observation	/	/
4.	Baláz, V., et al.	2021	Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies	Slovakia	MM Quantitative survey Interview	/	/
5.	Reinhardt, F., et al.	2018	Policy Reviews in Higher Education	Germany	MM	/	/
6.	Schneider, L.	2018	Research in Comparative & International Education	Germany	QL Interviews	/	Syrian
7.	Tibajev, A., and Hellgren, E.	2019	European Sociological Review	Sweden	QT Fixed effects regressions,	/	/
8.	Thondhlana	2020	Educational Review	UK	QL Interviews	/	Zimbabwe migrants
9.	Abamosa, J. A., et al.	2019	Policy Futures in Education	Norway	QL Document Analysis	/	/
10.	Lambrechts, A. A.	2020	Higher Education	UK	QL Interviews	/	/

Source: The authors.

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- Three Document analyses (Abamosa et al., 2019; Jungblut et al., 2020; Souto-Outero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015);
 - One literature review (Souto-Outero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015);
 - Two secondary data analyses (Baláz et al., 2021; Tibajev & Hellgren, 2019);
 - One observation (Bencivenga, 2017).

No systematic recognition practices (or instruments) used (and shared) by the higher education institutions to allow the enrolment or an effective inclusion of migrants and refugees have been found in this review.

Despite the widespread recognition of the social desirability and usefulness of recognition of previous learning of students with a migratory background, it is hard to detect a systematic practice in the selected articles (RQ1). The explanation of the process, and therefore, the sharing of the criticalities related to the implementation of recognition of migrants and refugees learning are not reported.

The perspective of the research studies in this review is local (case study): only the articles with a document analysis (Abamosa et al., 2019) and a literature review (Jungblut et al., 2020; Souto-Outero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015) have a broad, international perspective. The other articles, instead, appear slightly aligned with the national or transnational educational policy requirements and orientations.

It is not possible to identify the main practices used for the recognition of migrants' and refugees' previous learning (RQ2).

The results of the present literature review show that most studies were based on small-scale, qualitative research design (Bencivenga, 2017; Lambrechts, 2020; Schneider, 2018; Thondhlana, 2020): this raises some concerns not only in terms of the research quality but also in terms of dissemination of good practices among university and administrative staff involved in the process of validation and recognition of migrants' and refugees' learning (RQ3).

Therefore, the time has come to invest on large-scale quantitative studies investigating the factors that enable or hinder the recognition of migrants' and refugees' competencies. More comparative research, in this vein, should open further research streams as they contribute to a better understanding of the multiple aspects (in terms of educational policy and practice) that need to be considered when implementing the recognition of migrants' and refugees' competencies.

Limitations

Of all the articles initially found, few of them satisfied the inclusion criteria and therefore were pertinent to the aims of this review. As with every systematic review, it was impossible to include all relevant studies: these limitations have to be considered in the interpretation of the present study results. Further, the potential bias of the quality of this review was monitored and addressed: to reduce author and publication bias, for example, the clear inclusion criteria have been useful in the selecting literature phase. If, on the one hand, the use of strict criteria,

probably, affected the collection of articles; on the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that this research choice has ensured to gather only high-level scientific articles: the overproduction of methods and strategies within the recognition practices that support third national countries students to access higher education programs risk to be counterproductive, not really effective and misaligned with educational policies purposed to inclusion.

Despite its limitations, the present study provides current evidence that recognition practices are not uniform. This raises different issues in terms of equity as well as in terms of efficacy and transparency of these practices across the EU board.

Conclusion

Of all the articles initially found, very few of them reported shared practices and instruments used for the recognition of migrants' and refugees' competencies in the higher education context which satisfied the inclusion criteria and therefore were pertinent to the aims of this review: the university enrolment of third nationals country students still represents a difficult challenge in terms of embedded practices and systemic processes within the European universities (Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005). This result contrasts with the cornucopia of educational policies recommendations and orientations in order to avoid social stigma, isolation, or discrimination and define a common strategy purposed to help students throughout their academic trajectories. It is clear, as recently pointed out by Sontang (2021), that migration and education systems still present structural inconsistencies: the oxymoron of higher education persists and, despite 'all its lofty ideals, it remains a space where inequity and inequality collide' (Arday, 2021, p. 348). In this perspective, the problems of access faced by third nationals country students, despite the advocated massification of higher education, continue to exist and raise concerns in terms of real inclusion and responsive education practice purposed to improve access to higher education and benefit from higher education programs/courses (Mangan & Winter, 2017; Oliver & O'Reilly, 2010; Thondhlana, 2020). At individual, institutional and system levels, inequality, misrecognition, disadvantages in society, negative attitudes towards the student with a migrant background continue to occur, demonstrating how these particular social groups are not treated as equals (Fraser, 2001). A considerable body of literature has documented the factors (at institutional, structural and personal levels) which affect inclusion and participation (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Berg et al., 2021), as well as those aspects that impact on learning performances of students with a migratory background. However, few solid evidence exists on effective and systematic practices of inclusion. Moreover, sometimes these practices are scattered and misaligned among the higher education systems and, sometimes, also among higher education institutions in the same country. Further research should be more concentrated on avoiding

duplication and working on an effective and scaling-up recognition procedure. Working at the interplay of opportunity structures of host societies (and therefore of higher education institutions) with individual needs, resources and preferences represent a strategic lever to properly and responsively reply to the equity instances. The awareness that there is still not an easy formula for integration and inclusion leads to the following questions:

- How is it possible to ensure a sound, sustainable and equity-minded process of recognition of qualifications and competencies of students with a migratory background?
- How are university educational policies transferred into practice?
- What are the main criticalities, hindrances and inefficacies that affect the implementation of the recognition process?
- What are the good practices of university recognition that can be shared and used to shape third countries' national's student education paths?

These questions should outline future debate and further educational research studies in order to redress the persistent structural inequalities in the higher education systems. Academic inclusion is a policy that recognises diversity as a standard and creates conditions so that everyone can participate in the higher education community. It is linked to democratic participation within and beyond education. To achieve inclusion, it is necessary to increase the capacity of settings and systems to respond to diversity in ways that value everyone equally. First and foremost, an inclusive university requires a new way of thinking. This is important for the attitude of stakeholders such as fellow students, teachers, or management.

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