



Outils Pratiques Inter-Régionaux (OPIR)

Final report - abstract

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The partnership of the OPIR project

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- Rectorat de l'académie de Grenoble- <http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/admin/spip/index.php> (FR),
- Generalitat De Catalunya – Departament d'Educació - <http://www20.gencat.cat/portal/site/ensenyament> (ES),
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List of OPIR products available to be downloaded from the site:

<http://www.freref.eu/opir/index.php>

- Product n°1 – Instruction manual for the presentation of certificates acquired from learning
- Product n°4 – Synthetic statement of the different learning programs
- Product n°7 – Instruction manual for the design of learning acquisition units
- Product n°8 -11 – Recapitulative table of certifications taken into account by the consortium (stage 2) – Statement of units acquired from learning acquired common to the network and evaluation standards
- Product n°9 – Memorandum of Understanding
- Product n°10 – Learning Agreement
- Product n°14 – Final report

1. The OPIR project: aims and objectives

The OPIR project (Practical inter-regional tools for ECVET) is part of 10 projects financed by the European commission to experiment with developing the system of learning credits in teaching and professional training (ECVET).

OPIR is a two year project, running from March 2009 to February 2011, coordinated by the French Community in Belgium, developed in partnership alongside the FREREF, and which has involved French partners (Rhône-Alpes), Spanish partners (Catalonia and Andalusia), Italian partners (Lombardy), along with Romanian and Swiss partners, making up a consortium.

This project is registered in both a European and regional and national context.

Fundamentally, it is an experimental platform of European goodwill which is orientated towards two objectives to produce a European area for education and training on the one side and a European area for certification on the other side, where it is a question of framing and guaranteeing the legibility and recognition of certifications and competences.

These two objectives, which are aimed at favouring the mobility of those who are trained and the transparency between the different national systems are expressed by means of a process of cooperation (Bruges 2001, Copenhagen 2002, Maastricht 2004, Helsinki 2006, Bordeaux 2008) enclenching the constitution of common instruments and their implementation.

The work embarked on by the project also rests on several recommendations from the Union in the areas of the certification of competences, their transparency and their recognition in the educational and training process throughout life, namely that bearing on the European system of learning credits for the VET (ECVET)¹.

On a more local level, the OPIR project has had as an objective to respond directly to a school, social and economic situation which imposes the putting into place of a concrete action to give to technical and professional training a useful scope in terms of professional insertion, and to reinforce the opportunities of mobility of those trained, geographic mobility without doubt, but above all mobility between training operators also known as learning providers.

One of the partners of the project, the FREREF, has very clearly enounced the project's objective, common to all its partners: ***being mobile is a true added value in the training program for the qualification of the young.***

This project did not have as its aim the creation of common certifications, in the sense where the totality of a training defined in a common way for a profession were to find itself automatically certified in each of the partner countries, nor a harmonisation of training systems and professional teaching but rather an increase in the transparency of certifications organised by the partners revealing the common elements. These common elements are "learning units" on which the mobility of those learning should depend on.

Also, so as to experiment with the validity of the model developed within the frame of the project, the partners have organised mobilities for the young for a three week period in one of the consortium countries.

It has been decided to work on two different trades (hairdresser and "automatician", short for automated manufacturing systems technician). These trades have been chosen to reflect very different areas of competences, public areas and learning programmes, thus opening up the possibility of the transfer of devices developed in respect of other jobs. This option would also offer the opportunity to mobilise teaching and training operators dealing directly with young people who have left school prematurely.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_fr.htm

The activities of the OPIR project are therefore concentrated on the experimental development of a system of credit units relating to two trades (hairdresser and “automatician”) assuring learners at the heart of the network made up of project partners, the transfer and accumulation of acquired learning units.

The purpose was neither to develop a common certification system nor to make comparisons between various certification systems (and certainly not to evaluate or analyse them). The primary purpose is to communicate with partners to ensure transparency of information.

The objective was to reveal, at one and the same time, areas of differences and of resemblance to these referentials without, as such, entering into the detail of their comparison.

Within this work perspective, the tools and devices to be developed should respect the criteria of the following qualities:

- legibility, facility of access and use for the learners,
- minimization of implementation costs for the training operators,
- total transparency of the devices for the learners, operators and future employers,
- taking into account regional cultural specificities and the diversity of languages used.

2. The methodology implemented in OPIR

From the outset of the commission’s assignment, the temptation was great to compare certifications based on standardised references for “trades” of each of the partners. But the comparison of standard references as the point of departure assumes a heavy workload, even though it may be rational and applied as a consequence in each system. However, such a comparison would have been time consuming and would have ruffled national sensitivities and was in fact not applicable in the case of the OPIR project. The first reason was due to the disparity of EQF levels and the age groups of the learners, as the tables below show and in the specific case of the two trades chosen for the project.

Table 1 – Certifications of the “Automatician” trade in the partner countries

Countries/ Regions	Name of the certification	EQF Level	Full Time / Work Study	Theoretical age of entry of learners
BE	CQ6T Automation electrician	4	FT & WS	16 years
BE	Certificate of qualification of “Maintenance agent en electro-mechanics”, specific to higher secondary education of upward mobility	4	Ft & WS	> 18 years
FR	Maintenance of Industrial Equipment	4	WS	17 – 18 years
FR	Piloting of automated production systems	4	WS	17 – 18 years
ES	Technical Installation and electromechanical maintenance of machinery and management of lines	3 - 4	FT	16 years
RO	Technician in automatisisation	4	FT	15 years
IT	Electromechanical operator of Automation	?	FT & WS	13 – 14 years
IT	Automation electro-word processing operator	?	FT & WS	13 – 14 years
CH	Federal certificate of “automatician” capability (CFC)	5?	FT & WS	15 – 17 years

Table 2 – Certifications of the «Hairdresser» trade in partner countries²

Countries/ Regions	Name of the certification	EQF Level	Full time/ Work Study	Theoretical age of entry of learners
BE	CQ6P Hairdresser	4	FT	16 years
BE	Hairdresser apprenticeship certificate	4	WS	15 years
BE	Company head diploma for «Hairdressing Salon Manager»	5	WS	18 years
BE	Competency titles : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hairdresser 1: man’s cut • Hairdresser 2: lady’s cut • Hairdresser 3: Tint • Hairdresser 4: perm 	4 4 4 3	Validation	> 18 years
FR	Certificate of professional aptitude: Hairstyle	3	FT	14 – 16 years
ES	Technique in Hairdressing	3 - 4	FT	16 years
ES	Technique in Hairdressing	3 - 4	FT	16 years
RO	Hair stylist	3 - 4	FT	15 years
IT	Operator of Beauty therapy treatments - Hairdresser	2-3?	FT	13 years
CH	CFC Hairdresser	5?	WS	15 years

Rather than passing through some sort of comparison in respect of the standard trade references of each of the partners, the step developed has privileged such passage per trade by using the key-activity concept. This concept, proper to the OPIR step, avoids having to take into account the totality of the trade and offers the possibility of being focused on a shared vision in respect of the exercise of a profession, by reducing the mass of information to be handled.

For each trade, a working group made up of at least one representative of each of the consortium’s partners was constituted to confront the visions of each of the trades and disengage the common axes by means of the identification of key activities.

For the key activity concept, the definition proposed here below has been subject to approval since the very first working meeting.

Key activity = declared as being made up from one or several integrated and indispensable professional activities to fulfil the mission entrusted to the worker within the framework of his or her duties.

In the area of hairdressing, activities such as those initially described leave the door open to multiple interpretations often linked to different learning programs and leading to levels of varied certification. For example, carrying out a haircut, in accordance with the context can only mean cutting hair or imagining a cut appropriate to the expectations and characteristics of the client and then implementing it.

It therefore appeared important to disassociate the definition of key activities, from their levels of certification and their implications relative to the content of the learning program.

² Product n°8-11 – “Recapitulative table of certifications taken into account by the consortium (stage 2) – Statement of acquired learning units common to the network and standards of evaluation”

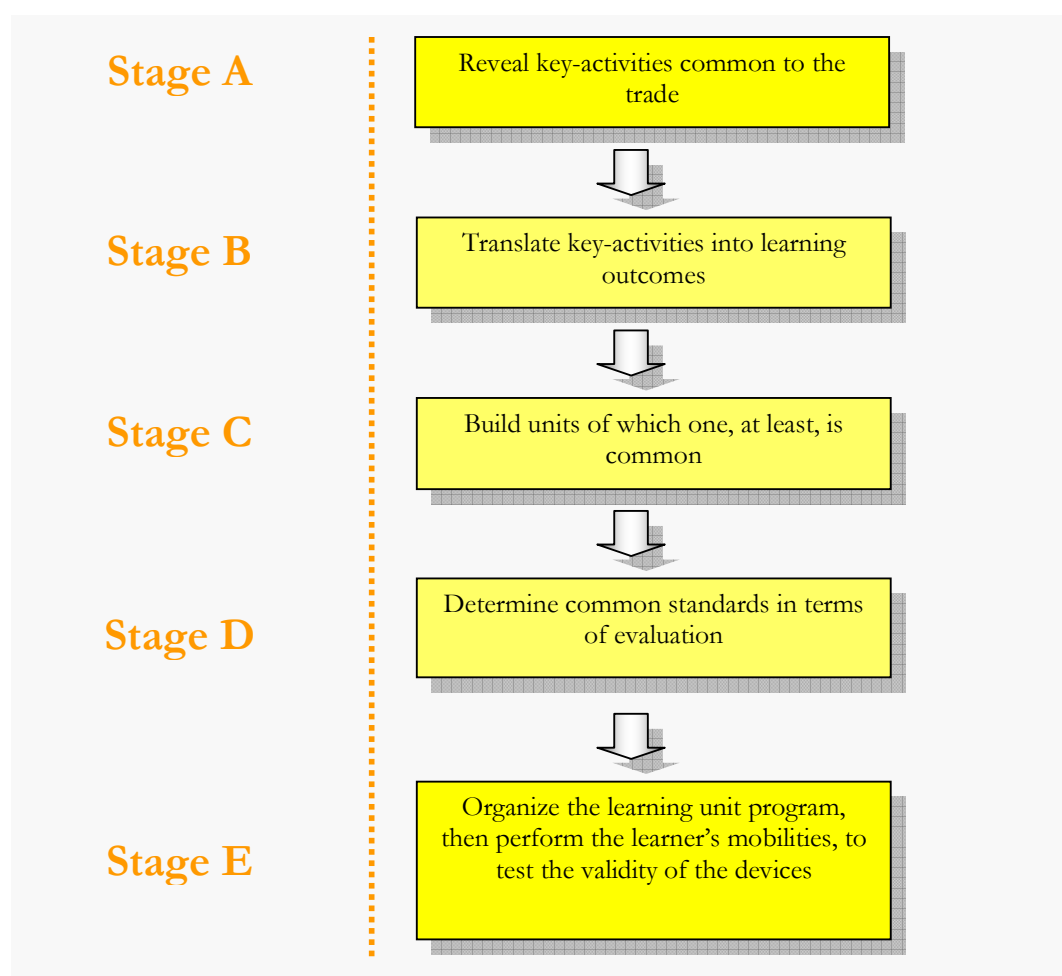
In the area of automation, on the other hand, the plethora of key-activities proper to the different certifications has necessitated their classification by family (for example: assembly, measuring, maintenance...).

It was then necessary to translate these key-activities into learning acquisitions. To reach this objective, a collective piece of work was brought about to build a writing method. That consisted of a translation of key-activities in knowledge, skills and competences.

This written piece of work directly ended up in the creation of key activities in learning units, one of which needed to be common to the network of partners, which would be the one to be used in the mobilities. The choice of this latter should have been effectuated by taking into account the final objective of the project, namely the mobility of learners. Therefore, the selection criteria have been :

- the possibility of ensuring learning apprenticeship in a company;
- the positioning in due time of this type of learning in relation to worldwide training ;
- the appropriateness between the duration required for learning and the duration of the mobility.

Fig. 1 – The "OPIR" process



As regards the hairdresser's trade, eleven key-activities have thus been determined by the working group. It freed itself of one, from which the learning unit for mobilities has been defined.

“Ladies’ hairstyling (putting into folds, blow-drying, shaping, drying and styling)”

For the “Automation” group, it is a unit relating to the area of maintenance which is relinquished:

“Ensure the corrective maintenance of a simple automated installation in the area of electro-mechanics”

The units have then themselves been broken down into know-how, aptitudes and competences.

The specialist trades have begun in this respect by determining the aptitudes which they have reassembled into coherent groups in relation to the trade so as to facilitate their subsequent development (regrouping known as “block”); they have listed the knowledge sub-handling the skills by interrogating themselves on their level of precision, so as to ensure having the same one-to-one comprehension of knowledge taken up within the unit, they have then composed the competences.

This last stage was the most difficult and the comprehension of this particularly discussed concept, each partner having to abandon the definition of competence proper to its system so as to appropriate itself to the general European definition.

Each trade group is then employed itself in determining common evaluation standards by dividing up the definition of criteria and indicators per «block».

This work phase has been brought in a very distinct way from the one that followed which consisted in the attribution of “ECVET points”. It was a question here, not to allow the assignment of points in terms of evaluation of performances or of the level of success of the learner, but to “calibrate” in some way the weight of the unit in the certification journey of each system.

The approaches of the partners have proved to be diverse and can be categorised hereafter.

1. A **linked to the trade** approach: the ECVET points are attributed to the units in terms of the importance relative to the trade, key-activities to which they correspond (e.g. in French speaking Belgium).
2. A **linked to training** approach, this approach itself being multiple. The ECVET points, in effect, are functionally assigned as being:
 - a. in respect of the complexity of knowledge- – skills – competences,
 - b. in respect of learning time,
 - c. in respect of work load.
3. A **mixed** approach integrating both trade approach and training approach (e.g. in Catalonia).

Lastly, a learner's mobility has been put into place between the partner countries in at least one school or training centre for each country or region.

The learners who have taken part in this action of mobility have been engaged in practical activities (theoretical activities having been reduced to the minimum), this being explained in part by the choice of organizing mobilities in the language of teaching of the welcoming country.

The mobility of the learners has been organized on a bilateral basis (the country of dispatch has been at the same time a welcoming country for the same trade) and has had a duration understood to be between 2 and 3 weeks.

Memorandum of Understanding³ agreement and Learning Agreements⁴ models have been developed to allow everything to roll along accordingly.

3. Learning from the Project

3.1 Validation of working hypothesis

Even if they were not explicitly expressed in the candidature form, the OPIR project objectives rested on a certain number of hypotheses which have been validated. It is thus that the following affirmations can be put forward:

- The comparison of certifications and learning programs is not a good path for the implementation of ECVET.

The trade approach is an effective means for developing the ECVET system.

- To implement ECVET, it is not necessary to reproduce a classical process of the design of a certification⁵ as when a certification is constructed, the impact on the culture and organization of systems is too great.

The concept of key activities of a trade easily allows different partners to communicate and to disengage a space shared so as to construct common units.

- To implement ECVET, it is not necessary to study in detail the trade profiles, certifications and learning journeys of the learning partners and finally envisage the conception of common European certifications.

The methodology implemented in the OPIR project allows a simple and pragmatic implementation of the ECVET system respectful of the competent authorities.

3.2 Effectiveness of the trade approach and key activity concept

At the end of the day, the OPIR project has allowed to show that:

- ECVET can be implemented without the implementation of common European certifications,
- the ECVET system will not reduce the interest of certifications to an eventual European minimum standard,
- ECVET can be implemented and respect the principle of subsidiarity,
- the ECVET system is organizable by all the systems which simply accept the principle of validating and recognizing learning acquisitions implemented and evaluated by others.

If one takes into account the fact that the OPIR project makes up a part of the generation of project of pilot projects designed to test the ECVET system and prepare an eventual revision in 2014 of the European recommendation, we recommend that the trade approach and the design of shared trade references be integrated in the new text version.

³ Product 9 – Memorandum of Understanding

⁴ Product 10 – Learning Agreement

⁵ See Chapter 2

3.3 Some points of attention

3.3.1 The learning outcomes: is this a guarantee for the transparency of certifications?

The question of learning acquisitions is imposed, as the recommendation proposes a definition; however this is not sufficient for a common working relationship between partners emanating from different countries and systems. As from a same definition, various working documents about learning acquisitions can be envisaged however supposed they may be in reflecting a same reality.

It is for this reason that the OPIR partnership has developed a manual⁶ which specifies the rules of working documents and presentation of knowledge, skills and competences of a given trade.

But it is very possible, however, that each ECVET project is developing more or less formally this type of tool. How to guarantee then a minimum of coherence and compatibility to the documents and tools developed in the field of ECVET implementation?

Learning acquisition written documents will only allow the transparency of certifications and the mobility of learners if these acquisitions are drawn up in an intelligible way for the players in each of the VET systems.

3.3.2 The learning acquisition units: definition and conception

The criteria for the creation of units used within the framework of a European project are not necessarily those which prevail at the time of the organization of a complete system of certification by units.

Given the time constraints (2 years in total) and the means available, the partners in the OPIR project have only created one common unit. The construction methodology of this unit has been validated by all the partners⁷, but no certainty on its concrete use in each system can be supplied to this day.

In point of fact, only time will allow us to measure to what extent each competent authority partner of the OPIR Consortium has really contributed the one or other to this project. But the exchanges gathered together during the preparatory day of the final conference and the remarks made by the different speakers incite us to think that other parameters than those taken into account in the project should be integrated into a future methodology for the design of the units.

We have developed a methodology within the framework of the OPIR project which gives every satisfaction but which is a lot too dependent on the very same characteristics of the organization of European projects and of the «laboratory» character of the devices implemented.

3.3.2.1 Impact of the European financings on developed methodologies

Within the framework of a project brought under an experimental heading within a limited time period, it is clear that the precautions taken retain a character very much aligned to the project and which does not easily allow its transposition within a widened context. If the OPIR project has been able to, focusing itself exclusively on the direct needs of the project, envisage the taking into account of a unit without passing through the analysis of certifications, it is totally manifest that the extension of the step on the European level cannot be taken without undertaking a revision of certifications proper to each partner, which may take several months if not several years.

In the same order of ideas, the determination of the size of the unit is founded on a certain number of criteria, including that of being «reasonable in relation to the duration of mobilities».

As the majority of partners of the OPIR Consortium should resort to the Leonardo “Mobilities” program to finance learners mobilities, the tendency has been to privilege this criteria and to thus produce small units. However this criteria is of course not pertinent in a context where the slicing up into units of the certifications should be carried out on bases which are solely pedagogic. So as to be

⁶ Product n°1 - Instruction manual for the presentation of learning acquisition certifications

⁷ Product n°7 – Instruction manual for the design of learning acquisition units

able to conciliate the constraints relative to the financing of learner's mobilities and those which are linked to the implementation of a certification per unit device, to be able to combine the advantages of small and large units, it would without doubt be useful to study the introduction of the concept of a sub-unit in ECVET's technical specifications.

3.3.2.2 The validity of the "brick wall" model

When the concept of the unit is represented, generally one imagines some type of a brick, the accumulation of which allows the construction of a wall which features a complete certification. It is a question of a simple and effective visual representation but which induces the idea that the same learning outcomes cannot be found in two different units. This image is very coherent with the spirit of ECVET technical specifications and clearly manifests that an apprenticeship should be able to make up an acquisition which cannot, therefore, be evaluated several times.

However, when one analyses the on the ground organization of a learning program, it often appears that new clarity requires a return to certain acquisitions which is translated by a different level of different mastership. The analysis of on the ground practices thus imposes the review of the "brick wall" model for a model which is more spiral where learning outcomes could be the object of successive learning programs each implying a specific evaluation. This implies that one can envisage, within the ECVET recommendation, a modification of the definition of the unit by also defining the level of mastership associated to it.

3.3.3 The painful question of ECVET points

The series of issues surrounding the ECVET points had caused a lot of ink to flow during the consultation process in respect of the ECVET system and then at the moment of the drawing up of the European recommendation. The ECVET points were even being introduced in the Commission's visuals, in the shape of one of the three fundamental pillars of the learning credit system (coursework, transfers and credits).

As to the OPIR project, we have made the methodological choice to strictly respect the text of the European definition, that is to say that the ECVET points assigned to a unit represent its numerical weight in relation to its certification in reference.

It being given that we did not want to create a common certification and that we wanted to test the possibility of an ECVET implementation which can take into account the realities of each of the VET systems, we have chosen not to produce a methodology common relative to the assignment of ECVET points.

Each partner in the Consortium simply had to be transparent⁸ in relation to the method that it has decided to adopt to assign points to the units of certifications it organizes. We ascertain that this work has not been the object of particular difficulties, the debate provoked within the heart of the OPIR project by the assignment of points has been almost nil.

Only the usage in each of the systems will permit the verification of whether the ECVET points are truly a tool of useful transparency for learners and if the benefit which may be drawn therefrom is in relation to production costs.

To this day, we can only act insofar as, with the very limiting reading foreseen in the recommendation, the points constitute neither an opportunity, nor a major difficulty for the ECVET implementation.

⁸ Product n°7 – « Instruction manual for the design of learning acquisition units » and Product n°8 and 11 – Recapitulative table of certifications taken into account by the consortium (stage 2) – Statement of learning outcomes units common to the network and evaluation standards

3.3.4 The question of the top down/bottom up approach

The OPIR Consortium above all reassembled representatives from the competent authorities of the VET systems of the partner countries. It was only a second time round, at the time of the preparation of learners mobilities that representatives of the learning providers and professional training intervened in the work process. The project was therefore clearly a « top down » project.

Insofar as where, firstly, the partnership has involved administration managers, the works have above all been focused on the impacts of the ECVET implementation on each of the VET systems. Questions relating to the involvement of ground players, their motivation, difficulties they may encounter, were rather more secondary in the project. This ascertainment was not negatively lived out by the project partners as it was not possible to take into account all problem areas in a two year project.

However we must underline that, as from the time when we have developed learners mobilities, we should ascertain that it is not because the competent authorities in terms of certification mutually recognize each other and develop devices to promote the mobility of their learners that such mobility naturally then implements itself on the ground. Other difficulties appear at this moment and these are important and legitimate.

In the same order of ideas, it is very possible that a “bottom-up” approach produces other perverse effects.

3.3.5 Towards a durability of European projects

To test out the implementation model of the ECVET system, the partners of the OPIR Consortium have decided to organize learners mobilities. To simplify the management of mobilities, the latter have been designed as from 5 bilateral exchanges which have asked for the writing of 5 Memorandum of Understanding. If there had been a question of extending the organization of mobilities between all the partners, there would have been more than 20 agreements to sign and that for only one trade!

The model as it is thought of in the European recommendation is impossible to uphold. You would very quickly arrive at several thousands of possible partnership agreements which would have to be signed if each competent authority had to sign a partnership agreement with all the other competent authorities for whom there could be a request for a transfer of units for a given certification.

Beyond the fact that this signature process would be very cumbersome to implement, the signed documents would never be valid for very long as, as soon as a competent authority were to update its certification, the agreements would have to be reviewed as a consequence!

If the ambition is merely to implement a learning credit system which is durable and financially viable by all the European competent authorities, it would then be necessary to rethink the model so that its administration could be a lot simpler.

As an outcome to their project, the partners of the OPIR Consortium therefore ask the following questions:

- Is it possible to develop an ECVET system which would outlive a Leonardo project without a minimal European structure?
- Would it not be necessary to implement networks which:
 - manage the references shared by the same trade?
 - manage the partnership agreements?
 - assure the sharing of information?
 - guarantee quality?

And so, as a solution to the OPIR project, it seems to be obvious that we shall need networks to assure the administration of the ECVET system. Research should be undertaken with a view of specifying the shape that these networks could take.