

# Centres d'Innovació i Formació Ocupacional (CIFO) network and the promotion of equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship in Catalonia (Spain)

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*Abstract: The promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship is the third objective of the Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020, of the European Union. The objective of this article is to analyse how is the CIFO network in Catalonia advancing towards this European objective<sup>1</sup>. After explaining creation and evolution of the CIFO network, which is part of the CVET policy and, thus, of the lifelong learning policy in Catalonia, we analyse two of the main tools -related in the scientific literature with social justice and social cohesion-, which all CIFO develop within their activity: the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and the professional certificates. Using secondary and published data from European, Spanish and Catalan institutions, in addition to the scientific literature, legislative and document analyses, and direct observation, we explore this relationship between the European objective of promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship and the activity of the CIFO network. Preliminary data shows that CIFO are advancing towards this European objective by developing RPL and professional certificates, targeting people from disadvantaged*

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*groups and by providing education in issues related to employability, gender equality and environmental protection.*

*Key words: CIFO, CVET, recognition of prior learning, professional certificates, Catalonia*

LA RED DE LOS CENTROS DE INNOVACIÓN y Formación Ocupacional y la promoción de la equidad, la cohesión social y la ciudadanía activa en Cataluña (España)

*Resumen: La promoción de la equidad, la cohesión social y la ciudadanía activa es el tercer objetivo del marco Estratégico - Educación y Formación 2020, de la Unión Europea. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo avanza la red CIFO en Cataluña hacia este objetivo europeo. Después de explicar la creación y evolución de la red CIFO, que forma parte de la política de la formación profesional para la ocupación y, por lo tanto, de la política de aprendizaje permanente en Cataluña, analizamos dos de las principales herramientas -relacionadas en la literatura científica con justicia social y cohesión social-, que todos los CIFO desarrollan dentro de su actividad: el reconocimiento del aprendizaje previo (RPL, por sus siglas en inglés) y los certificados profesionales. Utilizando datos secundarios y datos publicados de las instituciones europeas, españolas y catalanas, el análisis de la literatura científica, legislativo y de documentos, y la observación directa, exploramos esta relación entre el objetivo europeo de promover la equidad, la cohesión social y la ciudadanía activa y la actividad de la red CIFO. Los datos preliminares muestran que los CIFO están avanzando hacia este objetivo europeo desarrollando RPL y certificados profesionales, dirigidos a personas de grupos desfavorecidos y proporcionando educación en temas de inserción laboral, igualdad de género y protección ambiental.*

*Palabras clave: CIFO, formación profesional para la ocupación, reconocimiento del aprendizaje previo (RPL), certificados profesionales, Cataluña.*

## Introduction

Lifelong learning is an increasingly significant strategy for being competitive in the knowledge-based economy in many parts of the world, and the €7 billion invested by the EU in its 2007-2013 Lifelong Learning Program is a proof of it (Tan, 2017). Under this economic perspective, the European Union had it easier to justify its politics and transmit it to the member states in order to make them adapt their educational systems (Clain, 2016; Kleibrink, 2011; Regmi, 2015). A brief review of the most significant pieces of EU legislation in this field gives an idea of the evolution of lifelong learning in the Union. First, in 2000, the European Commission issued a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning because it understood that a Europe of knowledge had implications for the fields of education and training and because it wanted to provide a 'response to the Lisbon and Feira European Councils to make lifelong learning available to everyone' (European Commission, 2000). The stated objective of this Memorandum was to 'open a debate and lay the foundations for a lifelong learning strategy' (European Commission, 2000). A second important step was taken in 2006, with DECISION No 1720/2006/EC of both the European Parliament and the Council, **which** established an action program in the field of lifelong learning. The general objective of the 'Lifelong Learning Program' is to advance to a knowledge-based society through lifelong learning.

The 2009 Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020 ('ET 2020') emphasizes that in order to achieve that knowledge-based society there is a need to invest efficiently in human capital development. Many authors have criticized what they have perceived as this shift of lifelong learning from 'idealistic and elusive social justice reform model to a more utilitarian, human capital-based model' (Tan, 2017, p. 279). For instance, the ET 2020 (EC, 2009) establishes four strategic objectives: *making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.* In these objectives, we see a mix of the two perspectives, where the third objective of *promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship* relates the most to the principle of social justice and is precisely where we will focus in our analysis. There are also authors who think that the two models of lifelong learning –humanistic model and human capital model (Regmi, 2015)-, are compatible with each other. One example of that is the "triadic nature" of the lifelong learning described by Aspin and Chapman (2000, p. 17), which serves for economic progress and development; for personal development and fulfilment; for social inclusiveness and democratic understanding and activity'.

Luengo (2016) presents a very gloomy and contradictory image of the Spanish workforce regarding its levels of qualifications: on the one hand, the percentage of people in their working-age that have low or no qualification is over 22% higher than the EU-27 (including Norway and Switzerland) average. Furthermore, in what concerns people with intermediate qualifications, their percentage is less than a half compared to that in the EU-27. On the other hand, the percentage of people with higher education is superior in Spain by 3% with respect to the EU-27. In Luengo's (2016) view, this is a problem because the projections say that half of the jobs that will be created in Europe in the next 10 years will require intermediate qualifications, therefore, existing Spanish workforce is not in a good position to occupy these future jobs. One of the goals of this article is to explore how Catalonia is tackling this issue within the framework of its lifelong learning policy, while at the same time influenced by EU and Spanish policy. The particular attention of this article is given to a government-run CVET program addressed to unemployed in Catalonia, analysing two of its main tools: recognition of prior learning (RPL) and professional certificates.

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training defines lifelong learning as 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons' (Cedefop, 2014, p. 171). CVET is regarded

as education or training after initial education and training – or after entry into working life aimed at helping individuals to: improve or update their knowledge and/or skills; acquire new skills for a career move or retraining; continue their personal or professional development (2014, p. 51).

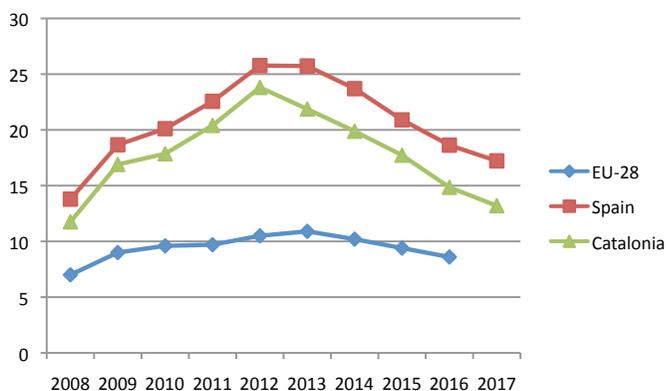
Moreover, CVET 'is part of lifelong learning and may encompass any kind of education (general, specialised or vocational, formal or non-formal, etc.). It is crucial for employability of individuals' (Cedefop, 2014, p. 51). In this article we study the development of the Catalan CVET system (*formació professional per l'ocupació*) and discuss some of its most recent legislative developments.

The field of adult education is a contested terrain and open to change over time (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). In the scientific literature, there are many critiques to approaches that see lifelong learning as the solution to the problems raised by the rapidly changing world, 'a great tale of salvation through learning and knowing in a risk society tinted with threats and continuous change' (Jauhiainen & Alho-Malmelin, 2004, p. 463). In this line, Siivonen (2016) argues that lifelong learning policy and discourse have been very convincing in sending the message of equal learning opportunities for all and that everybody has the possibility and

capacity to learn according to their needs and desires. Nonetheless, participation in lifelong learning is inferior to the benchmark established by the EU and unemployment rates are still high, at least in Spain and Catalonia, although we cannot blame lifelong learning policies for the raise in the unemployment.

Table 1 shows that the unemployment rate was inferior in Catalonia in comparison with the Spanish average. During the worst years of the economic crisis in Spain, the unemployment rate has been constantly above 20%, with its peak in 2012 when it reached 25.77%, while in Catalonia the peak of the unemployment rate was reached in 2012 at 23.81% (INE, 2017). In contrast, at the European level and during the same period, the peak of the unemployment rate in the EU was 10.9%, in 2013, and with the exception of the period 2012-2014, it has remained below 10%, which is less than half compared to the Spanish and Catalan averages.

**Table 1. Unemployment rate in EU (28 countries), Spain and Catalonia, 2008-2017**



*Note:* Source is the Spanish *National Institute of Statistics* (2017) and *Eurostat* (2017). Data for 2017 for Catalonia and Spain is from the second trimester and it was released in July, and for the EU-28 was not available for the same period.

Regarding the participation in lifelong learning, the data from the Eurostat (2017) shows that participation has stagnated for three years at 10.8% in 2016 (except for 2015 when it dropped at 10.7%), which is far from the 15% that was the objective for 2020 (EC, 2009). The scientific literature has shown interest in exploring which are the factors that have an influence in the participation of adults in lifelong learning. These factors go from positive learning attitudes and learning dispositions (Tikkanen & Nissinen, 2016), or self-actualization, to those adults who do it because they are forced to do it by the threat of unemployment (Zhao

& Biesta, 2012). In order to continue exploring how to increase this participation of adults in lifelong learning it is relevant the question that Steffens (2015, p. 44) asks: 'how can education help individuals to develop their personality and prepare them for life in society?' This question raises important issues even in adult learning, such as the relevance of the courses that are on offer, who gets to decide them, and the utility that adults can see in them.

## Catalan CVET system

Catalan CVET system has been developed and shaped under the influence of three institutional forces. Two processes in Spain, namely decentralization and EU integration, have had a major role in the implementation and shaping of the Catalan CVET system. The transfer of powers from the central government to Catalonia has marked the evolution of the system, although it has not always been a smooth process. Recently, the Catalan Employment Service has rejected the Royal Decree 694/2017 because it considers that it reduces its autonomy in the area of CVET and because the central government has not made a previous consultation with the Autonomous Communities nor with the social and economic agents before approving it<sup>2</sup>. Nowadays, CVET in Catalonia is part of the Active Labour Market Policies, and it focuses on two aspects: for the people, making possible updating their skills and knowledge and thus increasing their value in the labour market and their employability; and for the enterprises, attending their needs of qualified people, in order to carry out their projects (Garau, 2016). In other words, CVET is the set of training activities that are developed in the labour context and whose purpose is to improve the professional qualification and the ability to enter or reintegrate labour through the achievement and improvement of professional competencies; therefore, CVET initiatives are aimed at the acquisition, improvement and permanent updating of professional competencies and qualifications, in order to promote the lifelong learning of the active population and combine the needs of people, businesses, territories and productive sectors (Rodríguez, 2017a, p. 4).

CVET's institutional origin in Spain is marked by the Basic Employment Act of 1980, which introduced with its article 14.1 a yearly program of free *Occupational Vocational Training* for those who want to join the labor market, or for those who are already in it (Spain, 1980). The Organic Law 5/2002 sets up a National System of Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training,

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2 For more information (in Catalan): <<http://www.catformacio.com/el-soc-rebutja-per-unanimitat-el-decret-del-ministerio-de-empleo-que-desenvolupa-la-llei-reguladora-del-sistema-de-formacio-professional-per-locupacio-a-lambit-laboral/>>.

including a National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications, which is the basis of the VET and CVET systems, or the accreditation of the professional qualifications, with the objective to enhance personal and social development of the people and the necessities of the economy (Spain, 2002). The Decree 395/2007 merges the two existing types of vocational training for employment at that date, the *occupational* (i.e. for unemployed) and the *continuous* (i.e. for the employed) in one: CVET (*formació professional per l'ocupació*, in Catalan), therefore, allowing all workers to participate in CVET no matter what is their situation (Spain, 2007). Notwithstanding, this distinction still exists in the functioning of the CVET system and the funding for the two models is separated. Lastly, the Royal Decree 229/2008 (Spain, 2008a) creates the network of National Reference Centres in vocational education and training, two of which are in Catalonia (CIFO L'Hospitalet de Llobregat and CIFO Sant Feliu de Llobregat).

On its part, Catalonia received from the Spanish government the management of the Occupational Vocational Training (at that time), through the Royal Decree 1577/1991 (Spain, 1991). The CIFO network was created by the *Generalitat* (Catalan government) in eight of the public centres that had assumed from the Spanish government. First, with the Decree 288/1995 it establishes six CIFO: CIFO La Violeta (Barcelona), CIFO Sabadell Mancom. (Terrassa), CIFO Santa Coloma de Gramenet (Santa Coloma de Gramenet), CIFO Salt (Salt), CIFO Lleida (Lleida) and CIFO Tarragona (Tarragona) (Catalonia, 1995). Second, in 2001 it established the two remaining centres of the network: CIFO Sant Feliu de Llobregat and CIFO L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (Catalonia, 2001). The Law 17/2002 created: the *Servei d'Ocupació de Catalunya* (Catalan Employment Service) responsible with the coordination of the employment policies in Catalonia; the Catalan Institute of Professional Qualifications, responsible for define, identify and update the professional qualifications needed in Catalonia; and the Consortium for Continuing Education of Catalonia, with the objective of developing continuous vocational training as an essential instrument to guarantee lifelong learning and the adaptation and maintenance of the professional qualification of the workers (Catalonia, 2002). Later on, the Decree 182/2010 defines CVET as being one of the subsystems of vocational education and training (VET), thus VET consists of the initial vocational education and training (IVET) and the CVET subsystems. CVET is integrated by the set of instruments and actions that are aimed at promoting and extending among companies and workers, both unemployed and employed, a training that responds to their needs for qualification and competitiveness and contributes to economic development and social cohesion (Catalonia, 2010, p.

86694). Additionally, the Decree 28/2010 creates the Professional Qualifications Catalogue of Catalonia and the Integrated Modular Catalogue of vocational education and training, which establishes the skills that are significant in Catalonia (Catalonia, 2010, p. 86692).

Finally, three more important features have a big impact on the present and future activity of the CVET system in Catalonia. **First**, the Spanish Government has approved two Royal Decrees that regulate the professional certificates and the recognition of prior learning, the two instruments that CIFO develop: Royal Decree 34/2008 (Spain, 2008b) for the professional certificates and Royal Decree 1224/2009 for the recognition of prior learning (Spain, 2009). **Second**, the year 2015 has been very important because of three legislative developments: the approval of the Decree 71/2015 (Catalonia 2015a), of Law 10/2015 (Catalonia, 2015b), and the approval of the first Professional accreditation and qualification plan for Catalonia, for 2016-2018<sup>3</sup>. The Decree 71/2015 aims to adjust the Catalan Employment Service to the requirements of the EU 2020 strategy and it has a direct impact in the CIFO network because it creates a unit of direction and coordination of the centres.

The Law 10/2015 equips the two departments that promote the VET [i.e. Departments of Education and of Labour] with a tool for prospection, analysis, detection of the needs and evaluation that should improve the adjustment to the policies they develop with the needs of the citizens and of the companies. In relation to the planning of the CVET programs, these are tools that allow to better adjust the programming to the real needs of companies and of people, which will lead to a more valuable and useful training (Garau, 2016, p. 18). This law has the purpose of establishing a regulation of lifelong vocational training, adapted to the needs of the people and companies, and establishes the institutions that will govern the VET system and the collaboration with social agents, the official chambers of commerce of Catalonia and the local Administrations. The first Professional accreditation and qualification plan for Catalonia builds upon calls. These 'calls for validation are limited to certain sectors, depending on the moment, availability of financial resources and sector needs' (Boeren, Whittaker & Riddell, 2017, p. 205). **Third**, all the political developments after 2000 that we have discussed in this article, include in their preamble their convergence with the goals of the European Politics, such as those of the Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010), the EU 2020 Strategy (2010-2020) or the Lifelong Learning Program (2007-2013), as well as the lifelong learning policy in general.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information (in Catalan) see: <<http://consellfp.gencat.cat/ca/arees-actuacio/primer-pla-acreditacio-2016-2018/>>.

More generally, adult education in Catalonia is regulated by articles 69 to 71 of the Education Act (Catalonia, 2009). According to this law, adult education in Catalonia is concerned with promoting the right to lifelong learning; preparing students in and for the general or special systems of education; enabling all people to develop their personal and professional projects and facilitating social participation; recognizing skills acquired through other training paths, and the Catalan provisions do not differ significantly from those identified in the Spanish national legislation by other studies (Lucio-Villegas, 2012; Iñiguez & Marcaletti, 2016).

The public CVET program that we study is taught at the eight CIFO of the network, covering the four provinces of Catalonia. The courses offered at the CIFO are designed in accordance with the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications, some of them include the possibility of work experience placements (these are compulsory for the courses that lead to the attainment of professional certificates), and for most of them students can obtain professional certificates in an occupation in the respective professional area. The professional areas offered in the CIFO courses differ from one province to another as one of the guiding principles of the CIFO is to cater for the main industries or perceived needs in their respective territories. Moreover, the two CIFO that are National Reference Centres contribute directly to the development of the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications, from their respective areas: CIFO L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in Graphic Arts, and CIFO Sant Feliu de Llobregat in Mechanical Manufacture and Transportation and Maintenance of Vehicles. The National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications is the base of the entire VET system (IVET and CVET subsystems), and of the professional certificates that result from the vocational and education training.

## **RPL, Professional certificates and social justice**

RPL, sometimes called PLAR (Prior learning assessment and recognition) is a topic that has raised the attention of the researchers in lifelong learning. In the literature we find the main features of this process that is carried out in different countries: is the process of reviewing, evaluating, and acknowledging a person's knowledge and skills gained through life and work experience, which is rather informal learning, in order to be formally recognized by the national qualification systems (Hamer, 2010; Miguel, Ornelas & Maroco, 2016; Wihak, 2011); it is a tool for social justice and equity in education strategies for disadvantaged groups (Hamer, 2010, 2011); it contributes to supporting lifelong and life-wide learning (Miguel, Ornelas & Maroco, 2016; Wihak, 2011); the knowledge and skills

involved in this recognition process comes from diverse learning experiences and cultural locations and is considered to have the ability to bring people in the learning system which otherwise would not engage (Hamer, 2011); finally, is a way to 'sort, fix and normalise learning and skills in ways that are understandable to the academy and lead to a select group being privileged over others, in terms of social status, confidence and agency' (Hamer, 2013, p. 497).

The study of the RPL has been done from different epistemological positions. One of this positions championed by authors such as Andersson (Anderson & Fejes, 2005; Andersson & Osman, 2008; Andersson, 2008) sees RPL as a technique for governing and fabricating the adult subject that nowadays is focused on evaluating the subject's experience through the concept of competence (Anderson & Fejes, 2005). Therefore, the adult is constructed by the means of the experiences that have to be evaluated (Andersson & Osman, 2008). At a systemic level, adult education is governed and organised following the "salvation narrative" of the RPL (Andersson, 2008). Another approach is that of Sandberg (2012), who applies the theory of communicative action of Habermas to RPL, and he argues that 'RPL process could probably be enhanced if it focused on mutual understanding between teacher and student' (Sandberg, 2012, p. 366), where the student does not understand the process of transformation from experience to credits and do not know how to present it. He identified that one important problem in the RPL process is the lack of understanding between the students/candidate and teacher/assessor in the assessment (Sandberg, 2012; and also Hamer, 2010), therefore a communicative relation must be established between them. Another perspective stems from Honneth's theory of recognition, which sustains that 'contemporary pluralistic societies should provide undistorted and unrestricted recognition for its citizens' (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013, p. 353). The last perspective that we have identified in the literature on RPL is one that we can call humanistic, which is focused on human value (Hamer, 2011) and love-based recognition (Hamer, 2013).

As we can see from the diversity of approaches existing in the literature, RPL is also a contested terrain within lifelong learning (Brown, 2017) and results presented by these studies vary accordingly. Andersson and Osman (2008, p. 42) argue that RPL acts as 'a dividing practice and a technique for inclusion/exclusion of immigrants in their vocations in Swedish working life' by 'targeting of certain vocations for assessment, the degrading of competence in the process, and the differing opportunities vis-à-vis further training and the labour market'. Brown (2017) claims that RPL can be transformative and have an impact on the self-confidence, awareness and perception of the participants but at the same

time can also lead to negative transformations. Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) found that RPL could support self-realisation and self-awareness and enhance learning and development. On a similar note, Wihak (2011) found that RPL had significant benefits in confidence building and enhancing reflective capacity for the participants. Other studies found benefits in 'learning, increased confidence, realization of prior knowledge and skills, valorization of the life experience, and motivation to further learning, suggesting its empowering potential at the individual level' (Miguel, Ornelas & Maroco, 2016, p. 179), or enhance social justice elements of RPL, bring more diversity to the communities by attracting non-traditional participants and stimulate further learning (Hamer, 2013).

Professional certificates, regulated by the Royal Decree 34/2008, are already a reality in many industrial sectors in Spain. As Lobaco (2017, p. 12) notes, there are economic sectors such as in industrial, energy and water and environment where the professional certificate or the equivalent VET diploma is an indispensable condition for the exercise of the profession. This phenomenon extends to the high-level qualifications, as in the case of the IPR professional certificate for engineers that was introduced by the AIPE (Spanish Association of Professional Engineers) (Agency, 2013). There have been calls made from the research -related to the high-level qualifications-, in the area of engineering ("La certificación profesional. Nuevos métodos para nuevos tiempos", 2012; "La certificación profesional como garantía para la sociedad", 2015). They claim that the professional certificates will guarantee both the training and the professional experience of engineers and thus, will bring more value to the society, among other benefits.

Medical science is the other scientific area that together with engineering, are making a case for the necessity of issues related to professional certificates, such as accreditation processes or competence-based training. Some of the contributions that come from this area are: the transition to competency-based medical education, through the entrustable professional activities (EPAs) in order to reduce the gap between theory and practice (ten Cate, & Scheele, 2007; Carraccio et al., 2017); a systematic research of the scientific literature (Greenfield, & Braithwaite, 2008) found that the accreditation programs lead to development of health professionals; or 'the opportunity for residents to learn in innovative programs, and enhanced resident education in quality, patient safety, and the new competencies' (Nasca, Philibert, Brigham, & Flynn, 2012, p. 1055) with the introduction of the Next Accreditation System (NAS) by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME).

We can find in the scientific literature specific examples related to these broader areas of medicine and engineering. In the area of engineering, Calvo-Amodio, Tercero-Gómez, Ramirez-Galindo and Martínez-Salazar (2014) argue that the certification rates, determined by the trainee performance in the field project, and identifying bottlenecks in a trainee certification process, contribute to the success of the certification programs. In another study, Rosado, Sánchez, Mellado and Medina (2015) recommend the inclusion in the Computer Engineering Degree of content from international professional certificates related to computing security and auditing in order to attend better the professional needs of the engineers. This content should be oriented towards industry and present-day society (Rosado et al., 2015).

In the broader scientific area of medicine, we have the example of the European Respiratory Society International Certificate in Respiratory sleep, developed together with 'the most respected respiratory experts internationally in order to design and deliver educational activities to raise standards of training for our respiratory health practitioners' (Mitchell, Riha, Rohde, & Simonds, 2017, p. 11). Another example is the accredited Elderly Certificate Course, in Canada, which preliminary research found to have a positive impact in 'improvement in participants' self-rated knowledge of and confidence in managing geriatric problems, [and] positive changes in clinical practice' (Lam et al., 2015, p. 135). Another study found an 'increased self-understanding of defined pharmacogenomics competencies. Additionally, pharmacy students, in the role of simulated patients gained knowledge during the live component of the program' during a pharmacogenomics certificate training program (Kisor, Bright, Chen, & Smith, 2015, p. 563). Finally, in a study of an online certificate program for the Employee Assistance Program, the authors include the voice of a participant saying that 'Certification always improves quality of services and makes sure the professionals are doing what they are supposed to do' (Masi & Carlson, 2015, p. 204).

## Methodology

The CIFO study has been carried out within a competitive research project titled: *Vocational training and SMEs: the challenge of innovation in Catalonia*, which lasted from 2015 to 2017. This project was funded by a private foundation in Catalonia. The study on the public CVET program was done in parallel. The research project consisted of working with the VET centres, which are part of formal education and are attached to the Department of Education of Catalonia. In contrast, the CIFO centres that are the object of study in this article are atta-

ched to the Department of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and have a different working perspective and methodology. The overall objective of the CIFO study was to study the best practices that these centres carry out in order to adapt their training strategies to the needs of Catalan businesses. A secondary objective is to analyse of this specific lifelong learning policy development in Catalonia pretends to identify successful actions with evidences of impact of the CIFO network to inform evidence-based policies in CVET, which can be implemented in other contexts.

For this article, we have used legislative analysis regarding CVET issued by the Spanish and Catalan governments. Additionally, we have analysed EU's policy document regarding the Strategic Framework – Education & Training 2020 and lifelong learning. In order to show the impact of the two tools that CIFO centres use in their activity, recognition of prior learning and professional certificates, we have used published statistics of the Catalan Employment Service, in addition to the use of secondary data to analyse employment and participation rates in lifelong learning from Eurostat and INE (Spanish National Institute of Statistics) databases. Regarding the EU objective of *promotion of equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship*, we have analysed data and documentation received from two CIFO centres. Literature review and information coming from direct observation from the visits to the eight CIFO centres complement the methodology used in this article.

## Data analysis

### CIFO and the RPL

As we have mentioned before, the Royal Decree 1224/2009 governs the process and the requirements for the evaluation and recognition of the professional competences acquired by the individuals through work experience or non-formal training, as well as the effects of that assessment and accreditation of competences (Spain, 2009, p. 2). In Catalonia, the RPL is carried out through *Acredita't* (the first Professional accreditation and qualification plan for Catalonia, from 2016-2018). A competence is the set of knowledge, skills, aptitudes and attitudes in order to successfully develop a series of tasks (Rodríguez, 2017b, p. 8).

The process of recognition of prior learning has three phases: *counselling*, where an authorized person accompanies and advises the candidate on whether or not to access the evaluation phase; *evaluation*, where the candidate must demonstrate their professional skills by providing evidence of the training carried out and the professional experience. Likewise, and according to the criterion of

the reviewer, different methods of evaluation are used to finish accreditation of professional competencies: professional interview, simulation of professional situations, observation in the workplace and other tests of different nature; and *accreditation and registration* after successfully completing the evaluation the candidate receives the accreditation of those competences, and when he completes all the modules of a specific professional certificate he can claim it at the Catalan Employment Service (Rodríguez, 2017b, p. 9). In figure 3 we can see the requirements that the successful candidates must meet in order to apply for the RPL, depending on the level of the qualifications they want to apply for.

**Figure 3. Requirements of the candidates.**

<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2 and 3</i>
Age: 18+ year-old	Age: 20+ years-old
2 years and 1200 hours of work experience	3 years and 2000 hours of work experience
200 hours of training in the last 10 years	300 hours of training in the last 10 years

Note: Authors' own in base of the information from Rodríguez (2017b, p. 8).

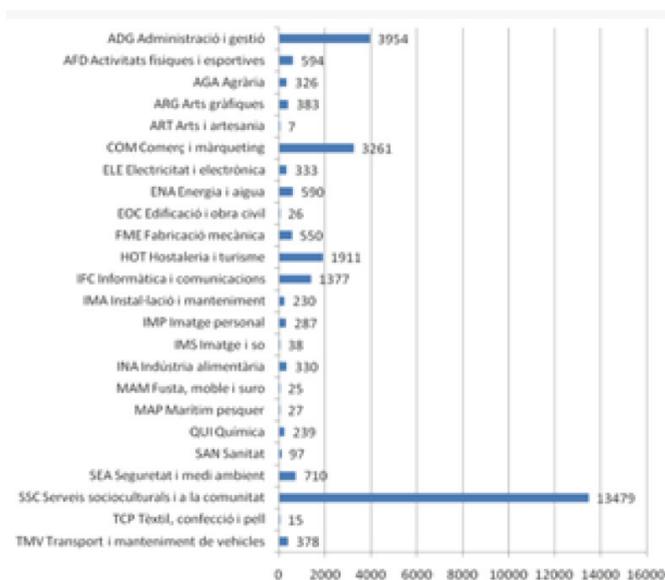
Finally, it is important to mention that there are three possible ways to obtain a professional certificate in the actual system. If we look at the data available since the beginning of the accreditation of the professional certificates through the Office of Professional Accreditation (*Oficina de Certificació Professional*) in Catalonia, so far, the most important way for achieving a professional certificate is through CVET training (24530 or 84.10% of the total), followed by the attainment through the recognition of prior learning, the *Acredita't* program (4561 or 15.63%). The third and last possibility, the attainment through VET (Department of Education), is so far very little used (76 or 0.26%) (Gutiérrez, 2017b, p. 9).

### **CIFO and the professional certificates**

According to the 2016 data, for all CVET programs in Catalonia, the training was distributed as follows: 670 different specialties, from 72 professional families and 79 leading to professional certificates. Furthermore, 51.07% of the training promoted by the Consortium for Continuing Education of Catalonia leads to professional certificates or other types of professional accreditation. Finally, the training actions were done mostly in the classroom (88.37%), followed by telelearning (11.06%) and mixed (0.57%) (Rodríguez, 2017a, p. 5). The Office of Professional Accreditation (*Oficina de Certificació Professional*), which belongs

to the Catalan Employment Service, has granted so far 29167 professional certificates (Gutiérrez, 2017, p. 8). Figure 1 shows that the professional families with most applications for professional certificates are: Sociocultural Services and to the Community with 13479, followed at great distance by Administration and Management with 3954, and Trade and Marketing with 3261. The least demanded professional families are: Wood, furniture and cork with 25, Textile, clothing and leather with 15, and Arts and Crafts with 7. Figure 2 shows that the professional families with most centres that offer training for professional certificates are: Administration and Management with 328, Sociocultural Services and to the Community with 245 and Trade and Marketing with 221. The professional families where there are less centres are: Arts and Crafts with 1, while Glass and Ceramics and Extractive industries have none. In Wood, furniture and cork there are eight centres while in Textile, clothing and leather there are 4. We can see that the three professional families where there have been more professional certificates applications coincide with the professional families where there are more centres that offer training for professional certificates, although the first and second places are inverted. As for the professional families with less professional certificates applications, we see that there is a mismatch, although the differences are not significant.

**Figure 1. Professional certificates applications handled, by professional families.**



Note: Source of this graphic Gutiérrez (2017, p. 9)

Figure 2. Number of centres that offer training for professional certificates, by professional families.



Note: Source of this graphic Gutiérrez (2017, p. 8)

### CIFO and the ET 2020 strategic framework

‘Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship’ (EC, 2009, p. 4) is the third objective of the strategic framework for Education & Training 2020. The focus is placed on promoting inclusive education, ‘ensure that all learners — including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs and migrants — complete their education,’ ‘promote intercultural competences, democratic values and respect for fundamental rights and the environment, as well as combat all forms of discrimination, equipping all young people to interact positively with their peers from diverse backgrounds’ (EC, 2009, p. 4). In this sense, some advances have been made. CIFO have introduced modules of employability, gender equality -using material on harassment and gender issues prepared by the Catalan Department of Labor, Social Affairs and Family, on which CIFO depend administratively-, and environment protection related to each respective professional area, and migrants do participate at these courses offered by the CIFO. These modules are transversal to all of their courses and they were introduced because it was requested by the EU.

In Table 2 we can see a socio-demographic profile of 590 students who participated at courses offered at one of the CIFO centres, in 2014. As we have seen before, the courses offered at the CIFO target especially unemployed people, people who are in a vulnerable position in society. In this case, 75.76% of the students were unemployed, 19.66% where employed and 4.58% in other situation, at the time they began the course. Also, 6.95% of the students were immigrants. Furthermore, there is heterogeneity in terms of education level that students have achieved: 4.75% of the students had achieved Primary Education; 55.08% had some type of secondary or Pre-University level; 35.42% had a Tertiary education degree; 4.41% had Master's degree and 0.34% had Doctoral or equivalent studies (one immigrant female and one not immigrant male). Regarding the age of the students, 43.39% were between 16 and 36 years old, 38.64% were between 36 and 45 years old and 17.97% were above 45 years old. There are more students male (61.35%) than female (38.65%), and if we cross variables of gender and age, we find that both immigrant and not immigrant women that participate more are in the 26-35 age group, and the same is valid for immigrant men. Not immigrant men that participate more are those from the 36-45 age group. Finally, of these students, 33.70% of men had achieved tertiary education and above, compared to 50.44% of women. Looking at the global data in this sample, we can point out that women who participate tend to have more education level than men, and that the majority of students have high level of education: Tertiary education and above, plus the Upper-Level Training Cycles (*Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior*, in Spanish) represent 67.29% of the sample. The higher level of education is important because all courses have different entry level requirement, and many courses at this CIFO demand a higher level, which can lead to obtaining a professional certificate. The professional area they work at this CIFO contributes to explain why there is a relatively high number of women compared to other professional areas at other CIFO, traditionally dominated by men.

Table 2. Participation in one CIFO centre, by academic level, group age and legal status, in 2014.

Education level (ISCED 2011)	NOT IMMIGRANT						IMMIGRANT												
	Male			Female			Male			Female									
	16-25	26-35	36-45	>45	16-25	26-35	36-45	>45	16-25	26-35	36-45	>45							
1		0.17	0.85	0.17			0.34	0.34	0.17	0.68	0.85	0.17				0.68	0.34		
2	0.85	1.35	1.69	0.51		0.34	0.34	0.34											
3	0.51	4.58	6.78	4.24	0.85	1.69	1.02	0.85	0.51	0.17	0.17	0.17				0.85	0.17	0.17	
4	2.03	4.58	6.95	2.54	0.68	5.25	3.73	0.85	0.34							0.17			
5		1.52	2.2	0.85	0.17	1.69	1.19	0.85				0.17							
6	0.68	3.9	6.44	2.37	1.35	4.58	4.07	2.37	0.34							0.17	0.17		
7	0.17	1.02	0.34	0.17	0.34	0.85	0.68	0.68									0.17		
8				0.17												0.17			

Note: Source of the data is CIFO L'Hospitalet, for 590 students. The academic level grouping has been done by the authors in base of the International Standard Classification of Education<sup>4</sup> (ISCED). Level 1 is represented by those who have Primary Education and level 8 is for those who have Doctoral or equivalent studies. The results of the calculations were rounded in base of the millesimal, if it was 6 or above.

<sup>4</sup> For more details of how ISCED is calculated refer to: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International\\_Standard\\_Classification\\_of\\_Education\\_\(ISCED\)>](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED)>).

In what concerns the partnership with enterprises and collaborations with other stakeholders, which are mentioned in the ET 2020 framework, we have some specific examples. One of the CIFO centres reported two collaboration agreements, one with the *Gremi d'Editors de Catalunya* (Publishers' Guild of Catalonia) and another with the *Institut Català de l'Indústria Cultural* (Catalan Institute of Cultural Industries). CIFO offer the opportunity to realize internships in enterprises from the sector, organise visits to enterprises and invite enterprises to make presentations at its courses. The same CIFO reported agreements with 37 enterprises in 2014 and 33 in 2015 for internships, and organised 4 visits in 2014 and 9 in 2015 to enterprises from the sector. For the same period, another CIFO reported agreements with 7 enterprises in 2014 and 66 in 2015 for internships, organised 56 visits in 2014 and 62 in 2015, and scheduled 20 sessions in 2014 and 22 in 2015, with enterprises from the sector. All these activities are carried out at all the CIFO from the network, although in different scale, depending on factors such as budget constraints, legal barriers, staff, territorial networks, leadership of the centre, economic agents and industry. Besides, the latest policy developments have been very recent, 2015, so most of the centres from the network were just starting to experience these legal changes.

Mobility of the CVET students is another important element of the ET 2020 framework. Spain has yet to make effective its Spanish Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (*Marco Español de Cualificaciones* – MECU) (Cedefop, 2017). However, the CIFO students have the possibilities to go abroad with *Erasmus+* and other similar programs, and CIFO L'Hospitalet reported that in 2015 they sent 11 students to do internships at enterprises in Wales, Italy, Netherlands, and eight of those students received a job offer of which seven accepted it. As noted by the CIFO, the most important obstacle for this internationalization remains the English language requirement. Finally, all the CIFO have an ISO 9001 quality assurance system certification, which is displayed at the entry in each centre, which is another element related to the ET 2020 framework.

## Conclusions

This is an exploratory study of one of the dimensions of the CVET system in Catalonia: the public CIFO network. The research on the CVET is very scarce so one of the pretensions of this article is to contribute to fill in the gap and incite for more research within this scientific discipline. We have explored elements of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship that are specific to the activity of the CIFO network. We have seen that CIFO serve vulnerable groups in society like unemployed and immigrants, people with different levels of educational

achievement, and they offer education in aspects related to employability, gender and environment protection, all these aspects under the ET 2020 objective mentioned above. However, it can be argued that there is more work to be done in the area of social inclusiveness and democratization.

As an educational and training strategy to improve employability, CIFO offer courses leading to professional certificates and they also participate in the process of recognition of prior learning, a process related to social justice in the scientific literature, as is the case in other countries and as promoted by UNESCO (2015) or by the EU in its lifelong learning policy. Instruments such as recognition of prior learning –widening access to the education and training system, and even to the higher education for many people who have abandoned school at some point without holding a credential or for those who want to continue their studies, or giving training and skills that are useful and help individuals to find a job, improving people employability (Celaya, 2017), can contribute to individual empowerment and help in other area of their lives. As Miguel, Ornelas and Maroco (2016, p. 191) conclude that

despite the predominance of the economic perspective of lifelong learning, in times of crisis, such as we have experienced in recent years, and the predominantly economic expectations of participants, the results suggest that the impact of recognition of prior learning is primarily in terms of personal development. Personal development and empowerment are important as catalysts of individual liberties, allowing the individual to understand the options he or she can make and, therefore, promoting better choices and opportunities.

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