

***EU-CERT:
European Certificates and Accreditation for European Projects***

Policy Paper

Unlocking of the Quality Management and Accreditation for the Adult Education Sector

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# Introduction-Short Executive Summary

In recent years, the EU has developed policies and guidelines to strengthen sustainable competitiveness across the member states. To build trust and flexibility among member states and enable individuals to acquire, update and improve competences and skills the EU has laid a number of recommendations for adult education providers and the individuals. (Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) 2021/C 66/01)

A number of studies underline the benefits of adult lifelong learning. Following a path of lifelong learning has shown; personal, social and economic returns. Participation of adults in lifelong learning varies across Europe. With a diverse population and demographics, in some countries, participation varies widely. (Learning and Skills for Adults, EAEA Policy Paper, 2018/01).

The EU-CERT project focuses on Adult Education across the EU via an accreditation and certification programme. The Erasmus+ supported project dovetails a number of initiatives developed by the EU. A needs analysis across the EU-CERT consortium (organisations from Germany, Croatia, Cyprus, France and Portugal) revealed that there was a need for transparency to manage the EU’s vision of European Education Area 2025 (Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, Council of the European Union, 25 May 2022, proposal adopted 16 June 2022)

Ensuring common standards and quality this proposal provides a flexible, inclusive learning opportunities for all individuals. The EU-CERT consortium’s needs analysis (among 200 trainers across 50 adult education providers within the partnership) indicated that 87% users craved for a transparent accreditation process to enhance their adult education provisions and competitiveness across the EU and beyond. The EU-CERT accreditation system is based on clear criteria and a solid, jointly developed accreditation and certification procedure. Thus, EU-CERT supports EU standards and common shared values in adult education. Moreover, it fosters the participation of European adult educators in a high-quality, adult education network improving and maintaining EU quality and standards. As an OER system, EU-CERT Tool further offers transparency and visibility across Europe and beyond.

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#  Short Overview of EU-CERT

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## EU-CERT Project

The EU-CERT (European Certificates and Accreditation for European Projects) is funded by the European Union under the Erasmus Plus Key Action 2 for Strategic Partnerships for the Adult sector EU-CERT consortium comprises the following organisations: Universitat Paderborn (Germany as the coordinator), and partners from Croatia, TIR Consulting Group j.d.o.o , Cyprus, STANDO Ltd, France, ESquare, Portugal RUTIS - Associação Rede de Universidades da Terceira Idade plus the technical partner from Germany, Ingenious Knowledge GmBH.

The project EU-CERT covers the 8 principles of Adult Education 1) Self-directing 2) Learning by Doing 3) Relevance 4) Experience 5) Using all senses 6) Practise 7) Personal Development 8) Involvement as mentioned by Sarah Cordiner (<https://sarahcordiner.com/the-8-fundamental-principles-of-adu/>)

EU-CERT has focused on developing a robust accreditation system that can be used by several stakeholders. Based on the Creative Commons Sharealike 4.0 licence the EU-CERT Tool is a robust tool for Adult Education providers to use with the following features:

* **Openness:** OER should be freely accessible, available for use, reuse, and redistribution by anyone, without any restrictions or costs.
* **Accuracy:** OER should be accurate, up-to-date, and based on reliable sources of information.
* **Clarity:** OER should be clearly written and well-organized, with clear learning objectives and outcomes.
* **Pedagogical effectiveness**: OER should be designed to promote effective learning, using appropriate teaching strategies and assessment methods.
* **Interactivity**: OER should be interactive, engaging, and designed to promote active learning.
* **Accessibility:** OER should be designed to be accessible to all learners or a specific focused target group, including those with disabilities or different learning styles.
* **Technical quality:** OER should be technically sound, with good design, functionality, and usability.
* **Legal compliance:** OER should comply with copyright and other legal requirements, including proper attribution of sources.
* **Sustainability:** OER should be designed to be sustainable, with a plan for ongoing maintenance and updating.
* **Community engagement**: OER should be developed in collaboration with educators, learners, and other stakeholders, to ensure that they meet the needs of the community they serve.

Additionally, the EU-CERT Tool has gone through an intense quality process both within the consortium partnership and in collaboration with experts from each country contributing to this development. In a nutshell, EU-CERT Tool with a comprehensive accreditation process and a quality

certification focuses on individuals, recognising learners’ skills, knowledge and competences acquired.

## EU-CERT Importance

Attempting to harmonise ECVET and ECTS concepts and addressing the huge literacy and skills gap in the EU (OECD (2013) “Skills Outlook 2013 First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills”), EU-CERT offers adult educators, trainers, institutions, policy makers, and even learners a possibility of improved accreditation and certification system. With EU-CERT Individuals can confidently straddle their career path, while educators are confidently able to manage the issues of Quality, Transparency, Learner-centred Needs, Portability, Relevance, Authenticity and Recognition dovetailing the drive by the EU towards a more sustainable and competitive region. EU-CERT therefore, also addresses the EU Adult Education Agenda (2021-2030) which strives for an increased adult education participation via five pillars:

* governance of adult learning – with a strong focus on whole-of-government national strategies and stakeholder partnerships
* supply and take-up of lifelong learning opportunities with sustainable funding
* accessibility and flexibility – to adapt to the needs of adult
* quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – emphasising the professional development of adult learning staff, the mobility of both learners and staff, quality assurance and active support to disadvantaged groups
* the green and digital transitions and related skill needs

Further, EU-CERT raises awareness among adult learners, adult educators, adult education providers and policy makers of the quality and types of certified courses and institutions available within partner countries and across Europe. Creating and enhancing a learning culture among adults, EU-CERT further motivates adult learners through the visibility of accredited and certified courses and adult education providers.

With a learner-centred approach, the EU-CERT Tool also provides both learners and adult education providers, confidence in engaging with each other via a number of methods; distance learning, online learning, workplace delivery, part-time courses and face-to-face learning within the adult education provider.

Engaging more adults in the learning process benefits individuals, learning & teaching institutions, other work-place organisations and society in general. Adults who continue to learn more, are more employable, enjoy better health and are more active citizens. Using EU-CERT Accreditation and Certification Tool, allows for more effective, targeted outreach strategies at local, national and regional levels. For partner countries and across the EU, EU-CERT Tool provides high quality, well-targeted opportunities, generating demand for formal, non-formal and informal teaching and learning. By refining their strategies, EU-CERT Tool offers both the provider and the learner a win-win

situation through a better quality, standardised accreditation and certification process. In turn, partner countries and across the EU, nations and adult education providers can develop initial, formative and summative assessment strategies that will motivate adults and support their learning for years.

In summary, the EU-CERT Tool for Accreditation and Certification is important for the following reasons:

* Such reviews show what is already going well and where improvements are needed in the processes or materials (as the case may be)
* Stakeholders know about the state of their organisation
* Staff in the organization know about the state of their organisation
* Saving time and money in the long run
* Certification builds a positive image to the outside world
* Signals seriousness and willingness to improve
* Helps to stand out
* The institution can prove that it complies with (inter/national) standards
* Provide commitment to quality
* Enhances organisational resilience and adaptability.
* Fosters better communication and alignment among departments.
* Contributes to sustainable development.
* Improves internal processes and efficiency.
* Provides a framework for consistent evaluation and benchmarking.

## EU-CERT Project Achievements

Having examined the education systems across five EU member states, the EU-CERT consortium developed and established guidelines for EU-wide transparent and usable accreditation process across the adult education sector. Following a thorough and intense plan the EU-CERT consortium Identified the following areas for development of a robust working EU-CERT tool among partner countries and the EU:

| **Project Results** | **Activity Title** | **Leading Organisation** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Project Result 1 | EU-CERT - Research on Quality criteria, Accreditation and Certificate Structures | University of Paderborn – Germany  |
| Project Result 2 | EU-CERT - Concept Design for Accreditation and Certification Processes | STANDO - Cyprus  |
| Project Result  3 | EU-CERT - Accreditation Website and Data-base Design and Programming | Ingenious Knowledge GmbH - Germany |
| Project Result 4  | EU-CERT - Accreditation Handbook | University of Paderborn - Germany |
| Project Result 5 | EU-CERT - Accreditation and Certification - Roll-out to adult education providers | Esquare - France |
| Project Result  6 | EU-CERT - Policy paper | Associação Rede de Universidades da Terceira Idade - Portugal |
| Project Result 7 | EU-CERT - Layman ́s report | TIR Consulting Group j.d.o.o - Croatia |

**PR-01**

The results of the initial survey both qualitative and quantitative across the 5 member countries were mixed. 25 experts were engaged, 5 from each partner state. From a nascent, developing accreditation system in Cyprus to somewhat developed accreditation methods in Croatia to the more advanced accreditation processes in France and Germany.

Collaboration and in-depth interviews with experts across the EU-CERT partnership identified the following issues to be considered when developing an Assessment and Certification Tool:

* Germany – need for **Digital Infrastructure** compatible with education providers, **job market** and wider stakeholders; sustainability factors related to current and **future skills**, knowledge and competences acquired by individuals
* Croatia – need for skills, knowledge, competences all addressed together as they are inseparable; **Global Outlook** for the tool to enhance competitiveness nationally and within the EU focusing on **new technology education** such as AI, VR to be incorporated in the assessment process
* France – need for inclusivity while also developing assessment keeping in mind **European Framework**; local, regional and **international assessment** content keeping up with latest trends
* Cyprus – assessment geared towards and measuring needs for the job markets but keeping in mind **SDGs, Civic and Digital** issues as a focus; robust evaluation criteria focusing on **quality** and standards
* Portugal – all experts agreed for the need for an assessment and certification tool incorporating **Digital Skills**; the tool ought to be able to used across the EU for competitiveness and **Sustainability**

From a quantitative perspective, there was an overwhelming support (more than 80%) across all experts wanting an accreditation and certification tool which was sustainable and met current and future needs with the workplace and matching the skills gap. All partner countries also wanted an assessment tool (over 70%) with an international outlook giving both the providers and learners ability to manage their qualifications, at least across the entire EU-27 network

Hence, the EU-CERT Tool incorporates a robust **digital infrastructure** that adheres to **global quality standards within the European framework.** It features Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) concepts and is entirely sustainable.

**PR 02 & 03**

In addition to the needs analysis (200 trainers/50 adult education providers) an in-depth study was carried out within the consortium with 25 experts (5 per partner) in the field of accreditation and those working in the adult sector with several years’ experience in the sector. These experts and trainers engaged with the EU-CERT group in the pilot study to identify the design, content, user experience for the accreditation tool. The EU-CERT Accreditation and Certification Tool is based on two basic concepts:

* System / Institution Accreditation
* Course, Material, OER, Product Accreditation

After the establishment of the criteria for accreditation and certification for EU-CERT a 17-step based accreditation tool was completed. Testing involved a further interaction with all partners and

5 experts from each country. In this way over 300 individuals were involved in the testing and trials of the EU-CERT Accreditation and Certification Tool is now available as an OER.



**PR 04**

A detailed and comprehensive guide that is aimed at both the users and evaluators has been produced. These are step-by-step instructions and also how they can help each user and the evaluator in the accreditation and certification process.

The EU-CERT Accreditation is a rigorous examination of the quality, assessing factors (e.g for a curriculum), faculty, resources and outcomes across EU Adult Education providers. The EU-CERT Certification on the other hand focuses on the individual and the Skills, Knowledge and Competences learners’ acquire during their lifelong learning journeys.

**PR 05**

The roll-out phase is supported by the handbook and also simplified video series. The users and evaluators are put at ease with the animated videos. Users and evaluators are led from the introduction to the EU-CERT project, the online registrations process, filling out the forms for either accreditation (Institutions) or certification (Products – courses, materials OERs) to the final results. Incorporating research and survey results, the EU-CERT Tool facilitates any adult education provider’s need for accreditation or certification based on robust criteria, enhancing the providers competitiveness and sustainability nationally and internationally.

**PR 06**

The present Policy Paper – Unlocking of the Quality Management and Accreditation for the Adult Education Sector

# How does EU-CERT contribute towards an overall EU Framework

The EU-CERT Accreditation and Certification (A&C) Tool significantly contributes to the overall EU Framework by aligning with and supporting various European Union policies and initiatives.

***i) Alignment with EU Policies:*** The EU-CERT Tool’s criteria-based assessment process supports many of the EU's policies, dovetailing with essential concepts and research areas. It enhances the implementation of effective adult learning policies, which are crucial for:

 - *Improving Competitiveness:* By providing citizens with qualifications that match labor market needs, it helps improve the competitiveness of EU countries.

 - *Promoting Social Cohesion:* The tool targets vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, helping to develop social cohesion and reduce barriers to education and employment.

 - *Enhancing Well-being:* By promoting active, social, and democratic engagement, it increases the overall well-being of citizens, fostering a more inclusive and participatory society.

***ii) Supporting Erasmus+ and National Programs:*** The streamlined yet rigorous assessment process of the EU-CERT A&C Tool allows for precise and detailed evaluations, which are essential for maintaining high-quality standards in projects under the Erasmus+ program and other national initiatives. This centralised approach to accreditation and certification enhances the quality and consistency of educational projects across Europe.

***iii) Evidence-Based and Research-Driven:*** Rooted in evidence-based research, the EU-CERT A&C Tool draws from successful factors identified in studies, such as the "Study on Analysis of Adult Learning Policies and their Effectiveness in Europe" (European Commission, 16 June 2014). This foundation ensures that the tool is both effective and aligned with current educational strategies and policies.

***iv) Supporting Lifelong Learning and Employability:*** The tool is designed to support the European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. This approach, adopted on 16 June 2022, aims to increase the skills and competencies of individuals, addressing the skills gap across the EU-27. Continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential for workers to meet the demands of their current jobs or transition to new and expanding sectors.

***v) Flexibility and Learner-Centered Assessments:*** The EU-CERT A&C Tool offers flexible, learner-centered assessments that cater to a wide range of educational products, from full curricula and open educational resources (OERs) to short courses and single modules. This flexibility supports diverse learning pathways and ensures that assessments are tailored to the specific needs and goals of learners.

***vi) Harmonising ECVET and ECTS:*** The tool attempts to harmonise the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) with a robust quality assurance system. This harmonisation facilitates the recognition and transferability of credits across different educational contexts and institutions, promoting mobility and lifelong learning.

***vii) Long-Term Viability and Quality Assurance:*** With meticulously detailed assessment analyses, the EU-CERT A&C Tool provides a solid quality assurance system that ensures the long-term viability and

reliability of educational assessments. This robust system helps institutions and educational providers maintain high standards and deliver targeted, flexible learning outcomes.

***viii) Strengthening the European Education Area:*** The EU-CERT Tool contributes to the realization of the European Education Area by 2025, which aims to create a space where learning, studying, and conducting research are not hampered by borders. The tool supports the recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes across EU member states, facilitating seamless educational experiences.

***ix) Building a Knowledge-Based Economy:*** By enhancing the quality and relevance of education and training, the EU-CERT Tool contributes to the development of a knowledge-based economy. This focus on knowledge and skills supports the EU’s economic growth and competitiveness in the global market.

In conclusion, a sustainable, fit-for-purpose assessment and recognition system such as the EU-CERT A&C Tool ensures **consistent quality assurance across all EU-27 member states, providing a unified approach to educational standards and practices.**

# Support for EU-CERT Accreditation in the EU and beyond

As mentioned earlier, the EU-CERT Accreditation and Certification (A&C) Tool is highly compatible with many policies developed and adopted at the EU level. Beyond the project's lifecycle of 28 months, partners will need to promote the concept of the EU-CERT A&C Tool within their own markets and regions. There are several ways in which partners can advance this concept and enhance their profiles within the adult education sector.

**Strategies for Promoting EU-CERT Accreditation & Certification Tool**

* **Internal Strategy Development:**

**-**Partners should revisit their internal working documents and develop new strategies to promote both the EU-CERT Tool and their own organization. This requires:

-Internal staff training to improve skills.

-Developing and entering new products (curricula, OERs, mini/micro credentials) into the system.

* **Utilising Social Media:**

-While social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn are useful, they should not be the sole route for promotion. A diversified approach is essential.

* **Educational Resources:**

**-**Utilise the simplified user guide (a set of 5 videos available at [link](https://bit.ly/3wJYhZ8)) within the partner organisation and during dissemination events to boost awareness about the EU-CERT A&C Tool.

* **Networking and Collaboration:**

**-**Build a cooperative network at the end of the project’s lifecycle, where each partner can take a role based on their resources, such as time available, human factors, and current strategy within the adult education sector.

**Further support and promotion of the EU-CERT A&C Tool within the context of Eramus+ Programme and Projects could include:**

* **Expanding User Base:**

**-**Invite additional users at the national level to fill out the EU-CERT Tool and apply for accreditation of their institutions and certification of their courses and other products.

* **Recruiting Evaluators:**

-Invite additional evaluators from partner countries to use the tool, ensuring a wide pool of evaluators.

* **Language Accessibility:**

-Promote the availability of the EU-CERT Tool in all partner languages (Croatian, German, Greek, French, Portuguese, and English) to encourage use by participants who prefer to work in their own language. To further enhance language accessibility, we can include additional languages by collaborating with international partners.

* **Utilising Databases and Networks:**

-Partners should leverage their internal databases and social media contacts to add additional users and evaluators. For instance, if each partner has 1,000 contacts in its database and social media network, and just 5% are converted to using the EU-CERT Tool, this would result in 50 new users per partner, totaling 300 new users added to the EU-CERT network across six partners.

* **Certification Programs:**

-Develop certification programs for professionals who are proficient in using the EU-CERT A&C Tool. These certifications can add value to the profiles of educators and administrators, this also ensures that they remain up-to-date with the latest best practices and advancements in the field of adult education.

* **Integration with Other Platforms:**

-Explore opportunities to integrate the EU-CERT Tool with other educational platforms and learning management systems (LMS). This can streamline the process of accreditation, user experience and increase adoption

# Conclusion

Over the past 28 months' project cycle, the EU-CERT consortium, comprising organizations from Germany (coordinator), Croatia, Cyprus, France, and Portugal, has successfully identified quality standards and implemented a robust digital assessment tool for the accreditation and certification of Erasmus+ projects.

Acknowledging and addressing issues and concerns in partner countries, the EU-CERT group has established and implemented a rigorous yet timely method to accredit and certify Erasmus+ projects' results. In alignment with various EU initiatives, guidelines, and policies, these results can serve to further develop the adult education sector based on:

**Quality:** Ensuring that educational initiatives meet high-quality standards set by the EU, fostering excellence in adult education.

**Transparency and Visibility:** Enhancing transparency and visibility within the adult education sector, facilitating informed decision-making and accountability.

**Learner-Centered Needs and Portability:** Prioritising the needs of learners and promoting the portability of skills and qualifications across borders, supporting lifelong learning and mobility.

**Authenticity and Recognition:** Ensuring the authenticity of educational outcomes and promoting their recognition both within the EU and internationally.

The EU-CERT Tool grants various stakeholders, including adult educators, trainers, institutions, policymakers, and learners, a sustainable competitive advantage across the EU27 and beyond. By promoting the adoption of high-quality standards and providing a reliable assessment mechanism, the EU-CERT initiative aligns with and supports EU efforts in adult education, particularly within the Erasmus+ program.

Through its commitment to quality, transparency, learner-centeredness, and recognition, the EU-CERT project contributes to the overarching goals of the EU in fostering a more inclusive, innovative, and globally competitive adult education sector. As the project concludes, its impact will continue to resonate, driving further advancements and improvements in adult education practices across Europe and beyond.