



United Nations  
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International Centre  
for Technical and Vocational  
Education and Training

## New Opportunities, Portugal

### PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

**Implementing Organization:** National Qualifications Agency, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity

**Funding Organizations:** Portugal government, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, the European Social Fund

### CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

In Portugal, the education level is relatively low. The average schooling years of the adult Portuguese populations is 8.2, the lowest in the EU. Only 20% of the adult population (25-64 years) completed upper secondary education, while the OECD average is 70%. Of the 5 million active workers, 50% did not finish compulsory education. As a consequence, Portugal is significantly behind other EU countries in terms of ICT skills (according to Information Society statistics 2004-2007); while 40% of the overall population (16-74) use the Internet regularly. The lack of qualifications and weaknesses of the Portuguese schooling culture has been recognized as the barrier for this modernization. Upper secondary school completion is a crucial threshold to enable lifelong learning in a knowledge-rich world. This Initiative represents a national strategy in further investment in education and training with the will to overcome the existing organizational barriers in upgrading qualifications of the population.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAMME

The New Opportunities Initiative, which was officially launched in December 2005 and implemented during initial the period 2006-2010, is the largest governmental programme in recent decades to massively upgrade the qualifications of the Portuguese population. It is the first example of a formal recognition of informal and non-formal qualifications within the Portuguese national education system. It aims to open possibilities for low-qualified workers to build on their professional experience and skills developed though their working lives to obtain a secondary diploma. This is carried

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out by motivating low-skilled adults to embark in a system of informal and non-formal skills recognition, accreditation and certification, with complements of formal learning of 4th, 9th and 12th grades education or/and a vocational certification.

To implement the programme, a whole new framework of recognition, validation and certification of competences was developed that totally differed from the traditional curricula. It is to lead to the introduction of a new service from both the public and private sector, and to be a true contribution to a second chance of many low-skilled workers in the modern competitive market.

### DESCRIPTION AND AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME

The programme aims at bringing the general schooling up to the upper secondary education level and raising the basic qualification levels of the adult population to overcome the low qualification levels of the Portuguese population, in line with the renewed Lisbon Strategy and the European Agenda for economic growth and social cohesion.

Defining the completion of secondary education as the minimum qualification level will allow young people and professionals to play a role in today's knowledge economy. The programme addresses secondary education for both adults and youth. For youth qualification, it is designed to curb the high rates of failure and drop-outs in the initial education and training system. For adults, it seeks to improve access and encourage participation of the labour force in the training programmes and vocational education.

A few other undertakings of the programme are:

- to raise national awareness on lifelong learning,
- to develop a quality certification system,
- to create an information and management system for the both.

### IMPLEMENTATION: APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Initiative has a decentralized approach, implemented by a network of public and private teaching and providers. It was built on two pillars. The first pillar is a reinforcement of professional courses as a viable alternative to traditional curricula in secondary education. The second pillar is the enhancement of qualifications of the active population through a system for the recognition, validation and certification of the competences and skills gained during their professional lives and the attribution to the equivalences to secondary education diploma.

The new national qualifications system aims at integrating all qualifications access, progression and quality to the labour market and the civil society. This carried out by adopting the European Qualifications Framework principles to the national qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and following the descriptors connected to each qualification level. The programme structures the supply of vocational education and training courses to cover a growing number of people in qualifying paths, recognizes competences and stimulating demand, and mobilizes the Portuguese population to the challenge of lifelong learning. At higher education level, the national strategy is to revise the national qualifications systems and sectors in order to integrate them all in the National Qualifications Catalogue, as a device to qualification management for both competitiveness and updating personal and social development.

### Funding

The European Social Fund supports the widening of the skills recognition, validation and certification system and the corresponding institutional effort for an increase in the number of NOC and other training options for adults. Up to 2007, the National Network of New Opportunities was financed by the Portuguese State and the European Commission at the rate of 100%, with 75% of the funding being covered by the European Social Fund and the remaining 25% by national public contributions.

### Participants

Central management of the programme is jointly entrusted to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and coordinated by the 'National Qualifications Agency'. There is also a significant cooperation with other public training institutions, such as the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training, the Tourism

of Portugal, and the National Institute of Civil Aviation. The cooperation with companies has been established to actively engage employees to have proper qualifications. In all, 91 collaborative company protocols have been active, involving more than 42,000 enrolled and 13,000 successfully certified adults by 2011.

The media campaigns were used to build positive and strong demand response for the programme. By September 2010, eight major media campaigns were carried out. The first three campaigns were targeted to younger people by addressing misrepresentations in upper secondary education and the social undervaluation of Vocational Education and Training. The adult population was targeted by conveying the value of experience through recognizing individual career pathways. During the period of 2008-2009, four additional national campaigns were launched with messages that emphasized the social value of investment in adult education and lifelong learning with arguments for a positive impact of these for people's lives. The last campaign took place in October 2009 and September 2010. They elicited businesses' social responsibility to stimulate corporate investment and commitments of employers in the training of their employees whose qualifications were below grade 12.

### Learning and Training

Occupational paths were integrated among young people at risk of dropping-out of the education system without completing compulsory schooling. These enabled them to complete 9th grade of schooling. By 2010, 32,192 young students were enrolled in vocational lower secondary level while 94.4% of the secondary public schools offered professional studies in their course supply.

For adults, the New Opportunities Centres provide adult education and training courses that are equivalent to grade 9 and 12. National standard of recognition, validation and certification of skills at upper secondary education as well as adult education has been established in December 2006 as part of a new level in the upper secondary education.

In particular, the New Opportunities Centres integrate three different dimensions to carry out the strategy for qualifying the Portuguese adult populations:

- the phase of adult enrollment,
- the phase of diagnosis (establishment of personal path and guidance through negotiation with the adult and his/her approval),

- the phase of carrying out the plan agreed upon (e.g., development of the recognizing, validating and certifying competences (RVCC) process or the enrollment in adequate education and training pathway).

Each centre has a technical-pedagogical team that consists of the Director, a Pedagogical Coordinator, Counselors for recognizing and validating the competences, and the Trainers.

A specialized training programme is addressed to the pedagogical teams of the New Opportunities Centres at national and regional level. Within the programme, the professionals involved (coordinators, personal counselors, trainers, tutors, external evaluators) reinforce their competence to deal with their own functions in these special offers, initially before beginning to work and continuously reflecting on and sharing good practices. In 2008, a set of public universities with advanced knowledge in the field of adult learning and education developed the training for the New Opportunities Centres' teams, under the scope of a cooperation agreement with the National Qualifications Agency.

### MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A panel of national and international experts has been appointed to perform external monitoring and validation of the Initiative. These are related to the activities of Skills Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres (NOC), enhancement of co- and self-regulation in the field institutions and speeding up decision-making processes. Moreover, a New Opportunity Initiative Monitoring Committee is built to integrate external experts and representatives of stakeholders.

The Portuguese Catholic University commissioned an external evaluation of the Initiative during 2008-2011. The evaluation fueled critical insights for a continuous assessment of the programme and acquirement of timely knowledge that is essential to the critical improvement of the operations.

### IMPACT

The New Opportunities programme set ambitious targets including that of qualifying one million active workers between 2005 and 2010. After five years of its announcement, around 450 New Opportunities Centres were set up in place to operationalize the Initiative at field level. The New opportunities Centres reached 1.6 million enrollments and topped 430,000 certifications (9th and 12th grades). The latest figures from March 2010 show that while the target is far from achieved, the numbers are still considerable.



Over 982,000 active workers have enrolled in one of the 456 New Opportunities Centres created, and out of these 324,320 have been awarded certified qualifications.

For young people, changing education and training paths at the upper secondary education level has already allowed reversing students' losses, reducing failures and preventing early drop-outs. The young people enrollment in double certification courses(2007-2008) at the upper secondary education level is 40% of the total of this level. There are 120.764 young people enrolled in the double certification courses(2007-2008) at the upper secondary education level while in 2006-2007 the figure is 116.008.

For adults, the building of New Opportunities Centres is to improve the quality assurance in the validation of non-formal and informal learning and activities carried by the Network. Started with 6 Centres in December 2000, the network has been progressively launched up to 2006 with 98 centres. In 2006 and 2007, the New Opportunities Initiative covered 352.563 adults, 150.542 of whom demanding an upper secondary level qualification.

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More information:

[www.anqep.gov.pt/](http://www.anqep.gov.pt/)

[www.en.anqep.gov.pt/](http://www.en.anqep.gov.pt/) (English)

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