



**Eva Anslinger, Bodil Lomholt Husted, Franziska Laudenbach,
Aleksandra Lis, Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı (Eds.)**

Dimensions of validation of prior learning in Europe

**Empirical insights from Denmark, Poland,
Turkey and Germany**

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Series “Vocational Education, Work and Innovation”

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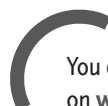
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Vocational training, work and innovation –
Main series, volume 63

2022 wbv Publikation
a business division
wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG, Bielefeld

Overall production:
wbv Media GmbH & Co. KG, Bielefeld
wbv.de

Cover design: 1expert, 123rf

Order number: 6004749
ISBN (Print): 978-3-7639-7058-2
ISBN (E-Book): 978-3-7639-7179-4
DOI: 10.3278/6004749w

Printed in Germany

This publication is freely available for download at
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Bibliographic information of the German National Library

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography;
detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

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Preface

BERND GÖSSLING

Prior learning concerns the sensitive issue of assessing what type of human activity counts as learning. In particular, learning that is integrated in everyday life outside educational curricula and correction is regularly met with suspicion, resulting in learning outcomes not being recognised. The lack of recognition of informal learning relates primarily to the formal education and qualification systems. Sometimes resistance to the validation of prior learning (VPL) is maintained even if it complies with the same standards that apply to award qualifications in the formal system. This does not mean that informal learning could replace formal learning or is the 'better' type of learning. Instead, the shift from input- to outcome-based approaches to education, of which VPL is a part, emphasises that the value of learning should not depend on the context in which it took place. This is in light of a great number of scientific studies stressing the significance of non-formal and informal learning. When prior learning is to include "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective", then it is to be considered that most learning takes place informally over the course of life.

In an effort to strengthen lifelong learning in all forms and areas, European educational policy has fought the actual denial of informal and non-formal learning for a long time. Member states of the European Union are therefore encouraged to offer "individuals the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned outside formal education and training – including through mobility experiences – and to make use of that learning for their careers and further learning, and [...] have in place, no later than 2018 [...] arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning ...".

These recommended validation arrangements are generally endorsed, but not yet well established. Even after several decades of piloting validation procedures, far too many have still not gained recognition for their prior learning results. There are multiple reasons for this, including issues with professionalising assessors and validators in many countries in which VPL is still new, the limited effect of validation, which relies on recognition by institutions of the formal education system and the labour market that it cannot produce solely on its own, and also national VPL policies that are overly guided by compliance with European regulation, rather than focusing on the individual's biography, requirements, aspirations and environment.

Fortunately, the Erasmus+ project "Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes – Individual and Employer Perspectives" (EffectVPL) addressed these issues during the project period from 2017 to 2019. It brought together partners from universities and schools, state authorities and employers as well as numerous participants testing the innovative approaches to VPL. These partners represented four countries,

sharing the common cause to make VPL work in their respective cultural and societal backgrounds in Denmark, Poland, Turkey and Germany.

At the end of the project, the results are being published in this book. I trust that this book, and the project output on which it is based, garners broad attention for the benefit of those who want to see VPL get working in the diverse cases, sectors and regions in Europe for which it was proposed.

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Introduction: The political relevance and practical implications of VPL in Europe

EDITORIAL TEAM

For more than a decade, the European Union (EU) has fostered harmonisation processes in the context of education and employment policies. Within this context, lifelong learning and labour market mobility are closely linked and aim to encourage the effective use of potential, especially among low-skilled and unskilled workers. Of particular interest for this book is the focus on the validation of non-formal and informal competencies gained over the course of a lifetime, which is seen as a means to uncover hidden talents and competencies which are, at best, recognised on the labour market.

The concept of lifelong learning has a decisive influence on the importance attached to learning over the lifespan and the qualifications thereby acquired, which facilitate access to the labour market but also exclude those learning experiences that are not sufficiently recognised. This understanding is reflected in international and national education policies of EU member states and beyond. Lifelong learning promotes the idea that an individual learns throughout their lifetime and in every context of life. Learning is thus no longer limited to formal educational institutions but takes place in a broad, multidimensional context. The question arises as to how informally and non-formally acquired competencies can be made visible. Especially for those with lower formal qualifications, it seems to be of particular importance to record and document all acquired competencies, as – it may be assumed – access to the labour market can be hereby enabled. The EU also sees this validation approach as an opportunity to open up the different education systems of the participating countries and foster mobility in Europe.

Along with European harmonisation processes, existing national approaches to the validation of formal, non-formal and informal competencies are now to be differentiated and, if necessary, new procedures developed and aligned with European standards in the EU member states. The EU Commission in particular is promoting these strategies politically, supported by several recommendations for action, which are ultimately relevant for the member states. The Erasmus+ project “Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility – Individual and Employer Perspectives” (EffectVPL) also belongs to this context. The project evaluated the advancement and effectiveness of VPL policies and practice in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey in terms of how VPL initiatives benefit the individual. It assessed how the VPL procedures available in the four countries support individuals’ labour market inclusion, their employability and further learning pathways. By introducing biographical perspectives into the validation process and identifying the role of employers for VPL, the project aimed to enhance the effectiveness of VPL practice.

The empirical results led to the development of a training module to help transfer the findings to practitioners in Europe (see also <https://blogs.uni-bremen.de/effectvpl/>).

In the course of this project, the consortium of researchers and practitioners from Denmark, Poland, Turkey and Germany gathered data and mapped findings that might be of interest to other researchers and practitioners in the field. Therefore, we decided to bring together the varying perspectives from the project as well as further VPL experts in order to map dimensions of VPL in Europe. These dimensions are naturally limited to the countries analysed in this book and hence not generalisable. Likewise, the implementation and effect of VPL is always context-related and therefore not easily transferable to other countries. However, the findings described in this book may serve as an inspiration for other countries, policymakers and practitioners alike. To understand the context of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning in European countries, it is necessary to take the political context of the European Union into account, including its ideas for shaping the landscape of employment and education throughout the member states. This will be described in the following sections.

The European context: VPL guidelines and implications

In the context of promoting lifelong learning, which has significantly influenced international and national education policies over the past decades, we can observe a change in how learning and its key processes and elements are understood. The concept of lifelong learning thereby strengthens the idea that an individual continues to learn throughout their lifetime and in every context of life. To take account of this multidimensionality, education policies started to incorporate strategies, programmes and qualification frameworks to support the validation and recognition of competences obtained throughout the lifespan (Bohlinger & Münchhausen, 2011).

In 2008, the European Council and the parliament of the European Union defined recommendations for establishing a European Qualification Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning. This can be regarded as the first step towards promoting non-formal and informal learning more prominently in European policies and at the national level. By emphasising on knowledge, skills and competences, rather than on qualifications, the EQF shifts the focus to learning outcomes. This perspective underpins the idea that qualifications should reflect learning outcomes instead of learning pathways and education programmes (Mikulec, 2017). To advance the coordination of education and training across European countries and make the EU the most competitive and dynamic economic area of the world (as stated in the Lisbon Strategy), one starting point was developing and adopting the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning in 2008. Conceptualised as a translation tool, the EQF seeks to make qualifications obtained in the different European countries comparable to enhance labour market mobility across Europe. Accordingly, the member states are required to develop and adjust their National Qualifications Framework (NQF), thereby observing the eight qualification levels set out by the EQF in terms of the spe-

cific knowledge, skills and competences in relation to the defined learning outcomes for each level (EU, 2008).

In 2009, the Council passed a conclusion that established a strategic framework for the cooperation of the European member states in the field of education, vocational education and training. In this document, lifelong learning also serves as a fundamental principle for learning that takes place in non-formal and informal contexts (European Commission, 2009). As a follow-up, the Council passed a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012, requiring all European member states to implement procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accordance with their national education systems by 2018. This means that, in all EU member states, individuals should have the possibility of having their competences, skills and abilities validated that were gained through non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, this validation must be the basis for full or partial recognition of a qualification (European Commission, 2012).

The EU's understanding of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning

At the European level, lifelong learning is defined along a threefold division: formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. Formal learning takes place in an organised, structured educational environment, usually leading to a certificate or diploma. Non-formal learning takes place in similar contexts, without resulting in a formal qualification certificate. Contrasting the former two, informal learning is based on an open, typically non-structured learning process that takes place in relation to practical activities, including work practice. Informal learning is not thereby understood as a single process, but rather as multiple ways of informal learning. Rogers (2014), for example, defines three kinds of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning and unintentional learning. While self-directed learning is organised by the learner, constituting a conscious way of learning, incidental learning takes place while completing a specific task. The learner typically is not aware of such task-related learning as they focus, in the first place, on successfully completing the task. The related learning occurs as a side effect. Unintentional learning is unplanned and comes about through every day experiences (Rogers, 2014). The challenge for the EU member states lies in finding mechanisms that visualise these three types of learning across education institutions and countries, and giving them a value on the labour market which is generally recognized. To provide such a general understanding of VPL and a coherent strategy that is applicable across European countries, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) developed guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. According to these guidelines, VPL can be defined as a major tool to make “visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals” that “frequently takes place outside formal education and training [...] and is frequently overlooked and ignored” (Cedefop, 2015, p. 14). Based on the Coun-

cil's recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 2012, the guidelines furthermore set out four phases of validation, covering the identification of learning outcomes, the documentation of learning outcomes, the assessment of learning outcomes and finally the certification of the assessed learning outcomes. These phases can appear in varying intensity across the different approaches in the different countries, sectors or settings. Nevertheless, Cedefop recommends these phases as indispensable for a comprehensive and sustainable validation process. In addition, Cedefop urges the member states to implement validation procedures that are transparent and clear to facilitate the allocation of the individual's demands to the suitable validation procedure (Cedefop, 2015, p. 15). Accordingly, the guidelines underline the necessity of placing the individual and their needs at the centre of validation procedures (Cedefop, 2015, p. 19).

This anthology comprises two broader parts, each including several chapters: part one is devoted to theoretical dimensions of VPL, whereas the second part addresses empirical dimensions of VPL. Each article will be introduced briefly, allowing the reader to choose and read individual contributions according to their interest.

The first contribution by **Henning Salling Olesen, Bodil Lomholt Husted and Kirsten Aagaard** provides an introduction to the connections between life experience, competence development and (lifelong) learning. The authors address the contradiction between a normal biographical understanding of learning and the demands of accelerating social development. At the same time, however, they criticise the narrowing of the concept of lifelong learning to an individual's working life and assume that learning is an important component for all areas of life. They therefore advocate a broader concept of individual competency development, which involves every kind of learning during the lifetime. The basis of this concept is life history experience, which is to be used as a starting point for competency assessment and subsequently expanded through targeted learning opportunities. The authors then take up a more theoretical, psychosocial understanding of learning processes as reconfigurations of life experience. In doing so, they emphasise the need to develop methods of identifying all learning processes that contribute to promoting competence development based on subjective needs.

The article by **Franziska Laudenbach** comprises a comparative analysis of validation policies in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. The author focuses on the socio-economic context of each of the four countries and analyses their varying approaches to validating prior learning. On this account, the author outlines the context of the institutional setting of the skill formation system in each country as well as structuring mechanisms of the respective education systems. Overall, the author systematises the four countries' validation of prior learning systems in relation to the institutional settings and education systems as a shaping factor and underlines each country's governance of lifelong learning.

Eva Anslinger's paper examines factors of inclusion and exclusion on the labour market for target groups participating in a validation procedure. The results of the qualitative interviews conducted in the four countries during the EffectVPL project are

placed in an intersectional, multilevel model. This reveals inequality dimensions at the individual, structural and representative levels, and opens up the possibility of examining processes of inclusion and exclusion in the (regional) labour market before and after validation processes. The author finds that individuals without certificates from the formal education system experience particular difficulties in entering the labour market. However, if the competencies acquired over their lifetimes are visualised through VPL processes, new opportunities arise for them to participate in the education system and the labour market. The analysis identified further factors that can either promote or limit labour market access.

One of the most important project results of EffectVPL is counselling people interested in a validation process. **Bodil Lomholt Husted** discusses the instrument of guidance counselling as one of the key elements in the VPL process and uses examples to show how counselling could work.

Adult learning and VPL by **Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı** summarises the relevant theoretical approaches. Based on adult learning theories, such as andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning and transformative learning, the paper also explores the ways in which VPL can benefit from each of these theories or whether it has the potential to do so.

The final article in the first section focuses on career guidance. **Ewa Bodzińska-Guzik and Aleksandra Lis** show how the individual perspective is especially important regarding further educational opportunities and chances on the labour market. The article describes the project Kierunek Kariera (Direction Career), which relies on the skills audit method and is implemented by the Regional Labour Office in the Malopolska region in Poland. On the basis of biographical, in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who participated in the skills audit, the authors demonstrate the method to illustrate the impact of guidance on individual lives. Thus, the paper may appear as a source of inspiration for career guidance practitioners or as an information tool.

The second part sheds light on empirical dimensions of VPL. The individual level, and the role of employers and trade unions, are considered from different perspectives in the participating project countries.

Aleksandra Lis and **Joanna Łuszczki** consider the role of employers in VPL processes. Based on the interviews, the main benefits of employers are elaborated, but also the lessons learned for the future in the course of VPL processes. They are relevant self-assessment approaches for employers and the range of potential positive outcomes gained from solutions offered by validation, as well as a guide to VPL solutions in domestic and European law. This paper presents a set of issues in the area of human resources management and human resources development faced by employers in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey.

The article by **Mario Patuzzi** offers deeper insight into the German VPL landscape. Patuzzi contextualises the validation of prior learning in the German VET system. Furthermore, he presents the different approaches in Germany to validating non-formal and informal learning, before outlining suggestions by German trade unions for simplifying this current, sometimes conflicting, variety of VPL approaches.

Since VPL is central to the EU's approach of lifelong learning, the article by **Aleksandra Lis, Franziska Laudenbach, Bodil Lomholt Husted and Özlem Ünlühisarcıklı** presents and conceptualises VPL as a tool for enhancing social inclusion and labour market mobility for individuals of all age groups. The paper links institutional VPL practice based on the national validation policy with the concrete benefits to the individuals who have started or completed a validation process. This comparative analysis of different regions and socio-cultural contexts in the four European countries shows the distinctions between national understandings and practices of VPL and their impact on individuals.

In a concluding summary, **Grażyna Prawelska-Skrzypek** acknowledges the central findings of the anthology and provides an outlook.

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Part one: Theoretical dimensions of VPL

Validation of prior learning as a lever for lifelong learning – life experience and competence development

HENNING SALLING OLESEN, BODIL LOMHOLT HUSTED, KIRSTEN AAGAARD

Abstract

This article places the validation of prior learning (VPL) as a tool for a general implementation of lifelong learning. It points out the contradiction between a normal biographical understanding of learning and the demands of accelerating societal development, while criticising the tendency towards conceptual instrumentalisation in this context, narrowing to the significance for the individual's working life. Instead, a broader concept is defined for the learner's development of competencies in all areas of life, based on life experience. A more theoretical psychosocial understanding of learning processes as reconfigurations of life experience is then reviewed. Finally, it highlights the need to develop methods of recognising all learning processes that help to promote competence development, based on subjective needs.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, lifelong learning, life experience, life cycle, recognition regimes, learning processes.

Lifelong learning as a mobilisation of the learning reserves

Lifelong learning has once again become a central concept in the public debate. Where 30 to 40 years ago it was primarily a slogan for a democratisation of adults' access to education (UNESCO), today it is a far more comprehensive – but also more down-to-earth – programme: learning must be an integral part of all areas of community life and we must all learn throughout our lives. Lifelong learning has become a key concept in mobilising and adapting human resources for employment, economic growth and competition. At the same time, the prevailing justifications have changed: they are not primarily human wellbeing and development but competitiveness, both at the national and continental level (Europe versus North America versus the Far East). This may seem ironic, and worrying to some, but it is also logical: the fact that the economy and working life need human resources, and that subjective involvement is becoming a vocational qualification, makes lifelong learning a societal programme, driven by market economy and competitive society (Pedersen, 2011).

The transition from an industrial society to a knowledge and information society seems to have created a new awareness of the importance of human resources and

learning. The idea of lifelong learning implies a vision that every individual should not only have access to education and training throughout life, but also take advantage of all the informal learning opportunities in everyday life – in the workplace, with family and friends, during leisure time and cultural activities. The original idealistic and optimistic pursuit of lifelong learning as equal access to educational resources has slowly worn down over the course of three or four decades because it was not put into practice, but this endeavour seems to have gained a very different tailwind. Lifelong learning is now supported by both political and economic power elites throughout the capitalist world. At the same time, however, the concept has shifted its accent from ‘soft value’ to ‘hard currency’. The driving force in this interest is the desire to mobilise human resources and competencies to strengthen competitiveness – accompanied by a growing sense that these needs cannot be met through formal education and training initiatives alone. Most recently, the European Skills Agenda 2020, with a five-year plan, expresses the need for a skills adjustment for individuals and businesses. Global challenges such as the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and changes in work, learning and lifestyles together form the framework that is addressed with the new agenda for the acquisition of competencies.

At first glance, this means an increased political and economic commitment to education at all levels; this development also involves some challenges and counter-demands, however. The old humanities project of lifelong learning was part of educational optimism, the belief that the expansion of and open access to education was in itself the path to social justice, democratisation and enlightenment. Now the concept’s built-in institution-critical point becomes clearer: learning is not restricted to education. In fact, educational institutions have their limitations when it comes to covering requests for learning.

Although it is still the task of the family and the education system to ensure basic socialisation and competence development in childhood, the individual must increasingly learn throughout life – both new professional qualifications and general competencies that may promote the will and ability to cooperate with and learn from others. It may be more difficult to develop new and relevant ways of thinking about learning and pedagogy. ‘Lifelong learning’ and ‘competence development’, which are prevalent in the public debate, are still fairly fluid slogans and the horizon for relevant issues is being expanded considerably.

This development calls for new ways of looking at education policy. Perceiving learning only in institutional education becomes too narrow. We must instead (once again) extend the horizon of policy to include the learning processes that take place in contexts other than formal education and in phases other than childhood and adolescence. We therefore need to broaden both the perspective to include the wider social and cultural context, and we must theoretically revise the understanding of learning processes. The concept of learning must include both intended education and training as well as the learning that takes place or could take place in activities with another primary purpose. Moreover, education and training are described in (expected) learning outcomes and results in relation to business use.

Especially over the last twenty years, great interest has become apparent in enhancing approaches to competence development from the perspective of an expanded understanding of learning where education, working life and activities in the third sector are recognised as a basis. Many perspectives and opportunities are uncovered so that the efforts of lifelong learning can serve both a societal interest, especially in terms of policy, and as an individual learning outcome, described and analysed through numerous development projects (Duvekot et al., 2017; Cedefop, 2015). For example, there is a strong policy interest in the EU, where large grant programmes have been established over the last 20 years to translate the above approach to lifelong learning into the member countries' strategies and practices for lifelong learning. However, there is a great deal of inertia in translating the intentions from policy to practice (Villalba & Bjørnåvold, 2017). This inertia may be due to the fact that, at the national level, the time is not ripe for a real policy development, whereas organisations and institutions still regard learning primarily as the task of educational institutions.

Heartbeat and the pulse of history: life cycle and careers

Let us begin with the important triviality that is attached to the rhythmic relationship between human life and the development of society. Before the modernisation process took off 150 to 200 years ago, society was relatively stable from generation to generation – its location, the technical and procedural content of work, the division of labour, and so on – was all approximately present as framework conditions in which individuals had to become functional members as they grew up. The culture, the normative orientations were similarly framework-setting and therefore so secure that they could not be significantly shaken. Furthermore, they did not change much in the individual's lifetime.

In such a society, upbringing has the nature of adaptation and education that of disseminating familiar practices and knowledge. Competence development was a lifelong progression within a known framework. The growing importance of the education system can be seen in the first instance as a response to the need to ensure universal dissemination and to a requirement for temporal compression of this dissemination.

Meanwhile, the relationship between individual life cycle and societal change has unequivocally and fundamentally changed: the relationship between cycles is almost the opposite. Now there are several societal constellations during the individual human life. What constitutes societal epochs in relation to qualification and competence requirements is open to discussion – It is hardly every new technical innovation that can be seen in this way, although many of them require re-qualification – but most adults today will probably admit that there have been several epoch-making shifts within an ordinary human lifespan. In the authors' generation, it can be claimed that the shift from rural life and agriculture to urban life and industrial society was the first, and the shift to post-industrial society (knowledge society, service society) the

second major shift during our lives. We may be experiencing another, who knows? Human life is still rooted in a biological life course but the learning of our lives cannot follow this organic principle. The structure of education systems, the product of the modernisation process, is caught up in this dilemma.

In addition, a number of cultural and social changes give education and work new *subjective* meanings. Not only is lifelong learning an objective societal requirement, it has also become the dominant framework of people's everyday lives. The cultural consequences of the modernisation process have dissolved the life worlds of social milieus and locations, referred to as a cultural release (Ziehe et al., 1989). Although the obvious social normativity and the established cultural horizon that fundamentally characterised pre-modern society have been eroded during modernisation, they have nevertheless partly survived in individuals as class and gender orientation patterns. However, the obvious coherence with a social life world is gone and the individual must construct and reconstruct their cultural universes of meaning throughout their adult life. This is a learning process; it does not take place exclusively or primarily in educational contexts but is a component of all learning processes that relate more than superficially to the individual's identity development and life strategies.

The normal biography is disintegrating. The individual life course no longer consists of one professional career with prior education and subsequent retirement, and one accompanying family career that is tailored to the professional career, that is, mediated through the gender division of labour. Both careers go through shifts and 'loops', while business and personal needs are intertwined in a new way.

Women increasingly have paid employment almost all their adult lives, interruptions in connection with childbirth are quite short-lived. Both sexes are gradually gaining a working 'career' to almost the same extent – in other words, a content-specific relationship to employment work, which means that women are not just a buffer in the husband's geographical and practical working conditions.

Nonetheless, the individual's entire working life is no longer linked to the same profession or line of work; people increasingly switch business areas in a way that either involves new qualifications or a transformation of their existing qualifications.

Where historically, in pre-modern times, each phase of social renewal lasted several generations, modernisation has necessitated an accelerated transfer of competencies between the generations. We are now at a stage where several societal technology and business shifts take place over an individual working lifetime and people must try to keep up by retraining, adjusting and reorienting their goals. Career shifts have become a condition of life.

Another factor has come to the fore as a result of the modernisation processes: the growing societal interest in human resources corresponds to an increasing interweaving between 'profession' and 'person' in a new way. In the past, a profession was a given way of life that characterised a person completely. Now a profession is chosen and performed, but business identity is formed by business choices and actual management – not freely, far from it, but in a dynamic reproduction. This is particularly evident for professions. 'Professionalisation' is a basic form of the development of

division of labour and specialisation, which differentiates the workforce and involves the individual personally in the vocational qualification at the same time. Professionalisation is in quotation marks because it raises a theoretical question as to when, with a strict use of the professional category, it can be said that professionalisation is actually taking place. At any rate, developments in a large number of business areas imply an approximation to some of the qualifications that are characteristic of the professions: knowledge-based work, specialisation, personal identity building, following the general shift in the business structure from the manufacturing to service industries. In general, this also means a shift to professions where personal involvement is part of the professional qualification.

In a broad sense, these development trends blur the boundary between professional qualification and personal development, giving it many more variable forms than before, both between different individuals, generations and genders, and across the individual adult life course.

If we compare the two tendencies towards fundamental changes in professional career and family life once or several times over the course of adult life and the increased entanglement between professional identity and personal development, the learning of basic identity development and identity work processes that are preconditions for, or a result of, career change become more widespread. It also means that an individual's personal development increasingly has consequences for their work identity and learning in connection with employment.

Experience shows that the complicated switches are both the cause of and sometimes the result of extensive, in-depth learning processes, sometimes due to participation in education. Continuing education in adulthood often in precisely these stages of transition and education often proves to have more complicated implications than just its purported purpose. Lifelong learning is thus far more radical than an ongoing refuelling exercise.

Competence and recognition regimes

We can thus predict a future pattern where the individual's 'learning career' no longer consists of definitive formal schooling and vocational education in adolescence, followed by the 'school of life'. Instead, formal education and training alternate to a greater extent over the adult life course and are bound up with the informal learning processes that take place outside the institutional context. If the interaction between the formal, the non-formal and the informal learning arenas is to succeed and perhaps even be actively supported, new coordination tools are needed. This is where recognition of prior learning takes on great significance, not as a shortcut for a few but eventually as a fairly normal occurrence.

Recognition of prior learning is on the agenda in most European countries and globally, this applies to countries such as the US, South Africa, Canada and Australia. More than 20 different terms are used such as VPL, validation of prior learning, RPL,

recognition of prior learning and the French VAE (validation des acquis de l'expérience) corresponding to the Danish recognition of prior learning (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Harris et al., 2014). With different weighting, the concepts cover clarification, documentation, assessment and recognition of competencies acquired during an individual's working life, leisure and other contexts. Criteria for documentation and assessment are very different, just as their purpose is different, and depend on what an assessment of competencies is to serve. In general, there are two recognition regimes: working life skills used by industry and business – mainly references from previous employment that are used when hiring for a new job – and academic knowledge and intellectual skills that are considered relevant in skills assessment, acquired in formal education.

Recognition in industry and business has an elementary instrumental perspective on the competencies of the workforce and is based on the individual's observable ability to function in the work situation. In recruitment procedures and HRD functions, attempts are made to assess competencies in relation to specific jobs and with an awareness of the requirements shaped by the labour market structures and economic dynamics. Although simple in principle, it is complicated in practice. It could well be argued that the short-term courses of action in the industry (hire-and-fire) simply reflect this complexity, combined with the relatively low cost of specific, on-the-job training. Conversely, an HRD policy based on high internal investment in the labour force and relatively long-term employment relationships is conditioned by the labour force's enormous adaptability to changing requirements, which, incidentally, has not been theoretically elucidated in depth. In recent decades, and with great variations, company-internal labour markets and not least skills development have come to play a greater role. This means that the business community is increasingly recognising that the skills of the workforce are a developable resource. However, even with these variations and development trends, the dominant rationale in the business world is still to look at specific jobs and seek to place employees who already have relevant qualifications.

In principle, recognition in the education system is based on documented completion of formal education courses and descriptions of their content. The background is a centuries-old view of education. This kind of recognition more or less directly presupposes a linear educational structure in which each element stands on the shoulders of the previous one. In recent decades, this rationale has opened a number of new access paths. However, the impression is that this type of access is still largely granted despite the main rationale of the system, driven by liberal educators and helpful study guidance, and still with effect for limited percentages of pupils and students. The main rationale remains. Last but not least, entry criteria are most often defined by the fact that the result of prior learning is equivalent to the core curriculum or at least the observable potential to meet these criteria in education. It is not assessments of alternative competencies that could be useful for the professional aim of the education in question. In other words, we are looking for what can be inserted into the formula for equivalent – formal – entry requirements and competence requirements. The re-

sult of the individual's total learning process, which may constitute and be recognised by that person as a meaningful continuity in their biography, is usually accorded no real significance.

Competence as a main concept

It can thus be said that the labour market and professions make demands on the formal education system as regards job relevance ('employability') and the education system makes demands on applicants for admission on the basis of their own curricular standards. In relation to this dichotomous situation, there is an obvious need to develop a new conceptual framework, a new language (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2011), which describes human resources in a way that is independent of the two dominant recognition regimes outlined here.

In this context, the new descriptive category for human capacity is 'competence' (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2013a). Originally, the concept of competence had a legal meaning associated with legitimacy, a combination of functional and psychological thinking. It has been used differently and the emphasis between these two aspects varies slightly. Nevertheless, there is a fairly common meaning in practice today: competence is a person's ability to use knowledge for appropriate action in everyday situations, primarily in a work context. This meaning can be pinpointed in the following four attributes (Rychen & Salganik, 2001):

- the ability to act successfully
- in a complex context
- by mobilising psychosocial preconditions (cognitive and non-cognitive)
- with results that correspond to the needs of a professional role or in a personal project.

In this understanding, which is representative of the political and economic use of the term, competence is a functional, performative and pragmatic phenomenon defined by external social requirements that must be met. It involves a problematisation of past notions of applied knowledge, where knowledge is something that can be possessed, and where rational practice is the application of general abstract knowledge. 'Competences' address practices that have not been determined and known in advance. In 'competent practice', knowledge must be mobilised and transformed to achieve a successful result. Therefore, competence is inextricably linked to a potentially acting subject who can mobilise different resources in a way that is relevant in the present situation.

In connection with the question of recognition, 'competence' is intended to play a crucial role as a general equivalent for human ability, replacing dominant systems with diplomas that have legitimacy in the recognition regime of the formal education system but are not in themselves designed to create a new knowledge and skill canon.

It is also conceivable to be able to gain legitimacy in other recognition regimes, such as those that dominate business and the labour market.

Nevertheless, the practical application of the term as a general equivalent between different recognition regimes has given rise to significant theoretical and practical problems that have been observed in the efforts to identify key competencies, in other words, the generic qualities of the workforce that are seen as crucial for economics and competitiveness, and which could serve as a guide for competence development over time.

In the political use of concepts, it appears in an idea of competencies as immutable qualities that can be acquired and possessed. This realisation is a direct result of the desire to be able to measure and compare but is also characterised by market economy thinking. The definition and description of key competencies seem to be driven by a dream of a universally flexible workforce in an era where the industrial (Taylorist) form of complexity reduction is becoming obsolete, due to developments in work processes.

In the above summary of competence, the first two items are clearly related to a future work situation. The third item draws attention to the need to mobilise ‘cognitive and non-cognitive preconditions’. This attempt at a psychological demarcation revolves around the relationship between the cognitive, which seems well-defined, and a whole number of other aspects that can only be defined negatively as ‘non-cognitive’, but seem to include motivational and other emotional factors. This point seeks to meet the challenge of a cognitivist understanding of thinking and learning – generally the starting point – that relates to the relationship between universality (abstraction) and specificity (concretisation): a challenge to concept formation because practical problem-solving and action involve more than knowledge. One of the experts in the OECD project DeSeCo [Definition and Selection of Competences], psychologist Weinert also refers to empirical data to show that the solution to difficult problems always requires context-specific knowledge and skills (Weinert, 1998, 2001). In his psychological contribution to the DeSeCo project’s initial clarification of concepts, Weinert emphasises that competence in solving a task implies and presupposes a combination of “cognitive and (in many cases) motivational, ethical, wilful and/or social components” (Rychen & Salganik, 2001, p. 62, our translation). The concept of competence thus has a loose end that seems to escape the pursuit of measurability and comparability.

This leads us to the second problem in the prevailing discourse of competence, namely that it does not take the subjective nature of competences seriously. Instead, it is assumed that practice is unpredictable and requires more and different assumptions than the cognitive one. However, this is regarded as a factor that increases the complexity of the tasks to be dealt with competently. It is seen as a quality of the task and not as a subjective dimension of practice. In this way, competence is viewed as independent of the specific subject, losing sight of the subject’s relation to the tasks or practices in question. The opportunity to spot the potential resources of this particular relationship is immediately lost, invariably making the task more difficult. More generally, this fails to establish a framework for understanding the real point of the con-

cept of competence, namely the mobilisation of resources of the competent practitioner.

It is disastrous to the understanding of competence and, in particular, of the dynamics of competence development, that is: learning. Although the requirements or success criteria for competent practice are determined externally, competent practices are fundamentally subjective processes, based on the interpretations and emotions with which the subjects meet tasks and perform practices. It is first and foremost about the relationship between task or practice and the contexts in which the subject's resources – cognitive and non-cognitive – are based. These contexts are life experiences and learning from previous practice in other situations. Competence and competence development must be understood as a personal, culturally rooted and experience-based capacity to interpret situations and engage in them, and thus also as a tool for new learning. We must seek to understand the 'subjective productive forces' that lead to learning and practice development, including those related to the emotional and cognitive work of detaching oneself from or reconfiguring one's experiences. We must be able to analyse the interweaving of rationality and defence mechanisms that are rooted in life experiences from family interaction, leadership of groups and communities, and so on, understanding when, how and why they may take on new meaning in the context of professional knowledge and professional work and yet still be rooted in personal experiences. Recognising the subjective dimension in practice enables an empirical study of the relationship between the aspects of competence that, according to DeSeCo's definition, could only be defined negatively: the 'non-cognitive, psychosocial preconditions' and the practitioner's life experience and learning, which are individual, situational and changeable. However, this will also require us to abandon the reification of competencies that is a consequence of the political use of the term. There is still, at the analytical level, a conceptual challenge and the need for adequate language use. Nonetheless, at the analytical level, this challenge actually also comes from the fact that analytical concepts must embrace opposing interests and perspectives. This applies to the bureaucratic interest in legal control and measurability, and the interest of the learner subjects.

The German sociologist Oskar Negt has formulated an alternative concept of competence that aims precisely at the constitution of people as subjects in their own lives through experiences and learning processes that are extensively communicated, while at the same time having their starting point in the learners' experiences and life context. This means that all forms of learning, in addition to targeting specific subject areas, must always try to connect such a concrete dimension, anchoring it with a fundamental question: "What do people need to know and master in order to orient themselves in the world today?" In response, Negt has formulated a constellation of basic competencies that relate to vital tasks and include issues of identity, a balanced approach to technology, a sense of justice, equality and inequality, a caring approach to people, nature and the world around us, understanding that there are different forms of economics, and finally a memory and utopia ability that makes it possible to imagine something else. In their interplay, the development of these competencies creates

coherence and orientation knowledge (Salling Olesen, 2009; Zeuner, 2013). Where the discussion on prior learning assessment has generally been conducted as if it referred only to working life and to the exchange between the labour market and formal education, Oskar Negt's concept of competence is relevant for all spheres of life and all areas of education. Oskar Negt's concept of competence embraces the whole person and competencies in all areas of life, not least competence for democratic participation. An essential point in this conception is connecting the individual competence development with a collective process. We shall return to it later on.

Life experience and competence development: learning processes

How can learning processes be theorised in a way that corresponds to the concept of competence? It is clearly not just a matter of knowledge transfer. Not only must the theory relate to the variability of the object ('reality') and the fact that problems and practices are always contextual, it must also include the specificity of life history and the psychodynamic nature of life experience.

In recent years, learning research has developed beyond a psychological and pedagogical framework. Several more or less independent processes in other disciplines and across disciplines have contributed to learning process research and have thus also redefined the subject of the research. These developments include several radical changes, which move beyond the previous view of learning as an individual process of acquisition that takes place on the basis of more or less intentionally stimulating activities (teaching). Firstly, a basic constructivist thinking dominates: learning is a constructive activity that is interactive but never merely modelling or guided by the encounter with the environment. Secondly, the notion of an individually coherent subject for learning and knowledge is challenged by different ideas about a decentralised subject or collective subjects. Thirdly, the notion that learning (and knowledge) are entirely mental processes is challenged by different ideas of materiality, both in relation to the bodily nature of learning and knowing, and in terms of seeing learning and knowledge as social practice. Getting around the usual dichotomy between the individual and the societal level is a key challenge for the learning process theory.

This theoretical issue has gained new momentum with the lifelong learning agenda. If learning is viewed as a ubiquitous dimension in the experiences of everyday life, this assumes a theorising of a relationship between subjective agency, the identity process and the subject's social situation. The political ambition to engage the entire population in lifelong learning has strengthened the awareness of understanding adult learning processes and subjective engagement as independent dynamics that cannot just be derived without any changes from the demands of work or similar.

This is the background for the development of life history research into adults' educational participation, motivation and their actual learning processes. The importance of class, gender, ethnicity and previous life course as subjective life experience

have become central themes in understanding both work identity and life orientation, and in relation to specific learning processes (Salling Olesen, 2004, 2016, 2020b).

Initially, the focus has largely been on those who show no interest in education and do not relate explicitly to learning processes but since then has become more general (Kondrup, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2016). This approach has proven to be a productive framework for illuminating the interweaving between the professional content of education/work and personal experiences, not least in connection with work areas with a special significance of subjective commitment. In subjects that deal with people as clients/patients/users, it offers an opportunity to understand the interweaving – and often also the tensions – between personal life experiences (characterised by gender, class and ethnicity) and the culturally shaped experience conveyed in the form of formal professional knowledge and collectively codified practice. In many subjects, learning clearly involves not just acquiring knowledge but also participating in a bodily practice that is shaped by technologies, work organisation and so on. Learning from a particular subject and learning processes in vocational education appear as the result of an interaction between relatively different dynamics, namely the individual's life history, societal and structural transformations of the working framework and professional knowledge development in the field.

The development of work-related learning can thus be seen as an interplay of three relatively independent dynamics:

- Societal dynamics: technology, culture, socio-economic development, division of labour: family structure, media
- The constitution of knowledge and practice (material history of knowledge: professions, knowledge and skills)
- Individual subjective involvement in professional practice: challenges, learning processes, defence mechanisms, vulnerability (Salling Olesen, 2012b; Weber & Salling Olesen, 2001, 2002).

The individual development of professional competencies and work identity takes place as a mediation between these dynamics, which is at once a personal identity process and the shaping of a professional identity (Larsen, 2003). This connection has been built into a heuristic model for the empirical analysis of vocational learning and subject identity:

Of course, these conditions also apply – but in a special way – to the cases where a person changes career path, begins a new training course, develops a new work or professional identity, translates previous experiences into the new context in a new way; this occurs in connection with prior learning assessment.

Some theoretical issues are clarified in the following as they can be viewed from the life-historical framework understanding for competence development.

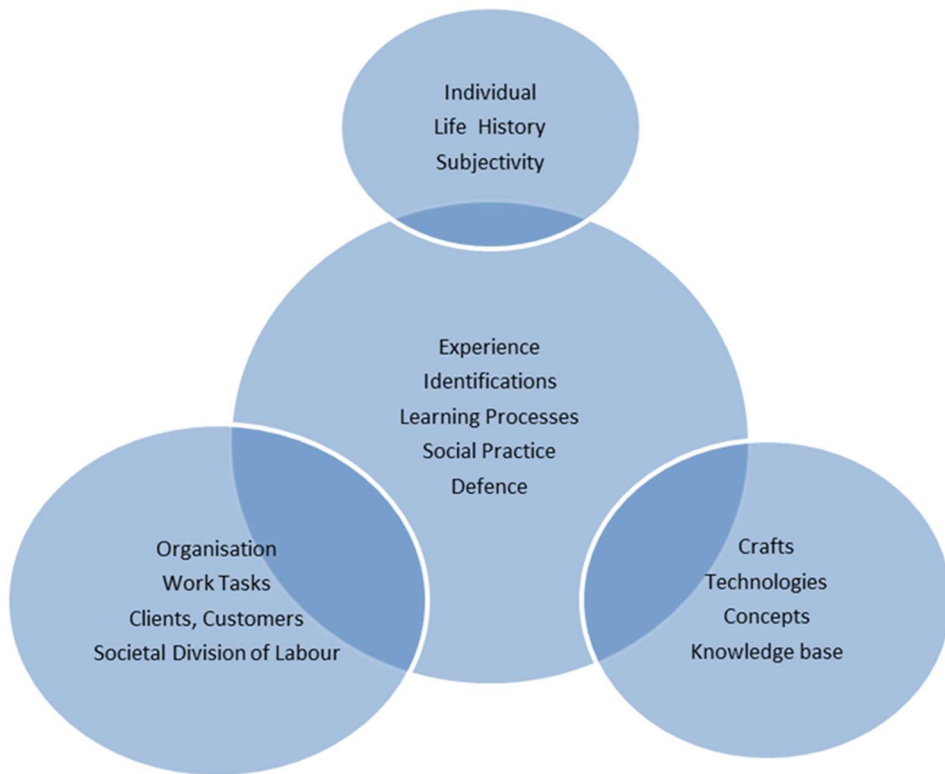


Figure 1: Interacting dynamics in learning – a heuristic model

Everyday life, experience and learning

Learning takes place in any space in which human beings develop and interact with the social or natural world. This refers to life contexts, the workplace, local communities, cultural communities, sports clubs, political organisations, professional communities, and indeed schools. For the individual, it is a lifelong build-up of experiences and competencies, which is an integral part of moving in socially defined spaces. Of themselves, these socially defined spaces do not enable this. They only become learning spaces to the extent that people define the spaces as their life context individually and collectively, that is, become involved in them.

This takes place through the special treatment of the social space(s), which we will call experience (Salling Olesen, 2007). Experience is more than a collection of experiences, as in the everyday language meaning of suspended and materialised products of lived life, and also more than immediate perception(s) and action(s). In this context, experience means establishing a connection between an individual immediate sensory experience and a culturally/linguistically processed insight, which co-

structures the understanding of the immediate experience. It is a collective process. The individual is constituted as a social subject through this formation of experience, that is, by acting reflexively in relation to the outside world and participating in the reproduction and transformation of cultural insights and practices. There is hardly any immediate, completely unmediated experience in the real sense. Conversely, virtually all knowledge is situated and practically embedded, or mediated, through specific individuals. Cultural knowledge and consciousness is reproduced and changed through the individual sensory experience and communication. The concrete processes of experience that connect the individual life story with a societal and historical process are a result of that person's (attempt at) self-regulation.

Dealing with the real, social reality is part of the basic life process in a biological and anthropological sense. Experience and learning enable the development of this self-regulation. Although the concept of biological self-regulation refers to the biological capacity for organic life and environmental adaptation, it is interesting to look at how this capacity for self-regulation develops through evolution and social learning into a force that potentially makes human society and the larger collective, humanity, able to regulate their own lives. When we act, we enter into a dialectical exchange relationship with the outside world, both the material and the social, and thus also make it the object of reflection and learning. From this perspective, what we describe in other contexts as social structures and the historical changes in them are effects of socialised self-regulation, which is objectified and given an independent reality, yet transformed through social life in the next moment. In this material exchange between people and social and natural objectivity, the subject constitutes itself partly as an individual and partly as a social collective. Learning is a dynamic aspect of this exchange. Subjectivity is a prerequisite for learning and learning is a prerequisite for subjectivity. The key here is that both the transformation of the capacity for self-regulation into individual conscious intention and the development of the capacity for self-regulation at a level corresponding to current social life presupposes learning (Negt & Kluge, 2014; Salling Olesen & Fragoso, 2017).

Today, even individual actions are socially organised of necessity. The individual consciousness and intention are woven into the collective practice and reflection. The individual learning process and the cultural/societal framework for consciousness cannot be viewed independently. It is also through learning participation in societal practice – as we experience it – that we sometimes develop notions that it offers more possibilities and can be transformed. Utopia must be found in the societal reality. However, it only exists if someone thinks it through. Those who would like to read more about the theoretical background of the concept of experience are referred to Henning Salling Olesen's book "Adult Education and Everyday Life" and a few follow-up articles (Olesen, 2017; Salling Olesen, 1989, 2007; Weber, 2020).

Therefore, a learning human being cannot just be regarded as an abstract individual: they are historically specific, produced by a life-historical subject-object dialectic, that is to say, shaped in interaction with the social spaces in which they move. The individual is invariably a social being but gradually becomes a subject by gradually and

using some of the cultural tools for experience formation. Therefore, we have to understand learning processes in the light of this overall process of socialisation and its contradictions and possibilities. The specific subject lives in a series of social spaces that are pre-structured by other conditions.

These social spaces (here and now) must be seen as historical places whose meaning is structurally specific and historically changeable. This applies both to school and any other social spaces that come into play in a learning context. Social interrelations, such as power relations, inside these social spaces is also (co)determined by this structural context; it cannot be ignored or changed by the power of the will alone but neither can it be dissolved without talk and the will to realise. Therefore, we must view learning processes not only in the immediate social practice context, in the social spaces themselves and individually, such as the workplace, but in the wider societal context and in the light of the other social practice contexts the individual is or has been part of. Everyday life in each of the situations we go through is educational – filled with experiences, problems and challenges that may require us to learn new things, learn, use our experience. To find out when someone learns what and with what meaning, we need to understand the subjective significance of these situations in their lives for certain people. Likewise, we must understand that there is often no learning and it is in fact at least as relevant in the light of the same process of life-historical experience.

We regard the social spaces that offer an opportunity for learning as life worlds, places where everyday life is lived. The different social spaces, each of which has the potential to be a learning space, are first created by a learning subject, who joins them together. How this happens is determined by the learner's life situation and everyday life practice but also by their specific life-historical experience. By talking about everyday life, we view these spaces in the learner's subjective context and emphasise that it does not have to be *defined* as a learning process or as a learning space to actually be one.

Conversely, this does not exclude living spaces that are defined as learning processes – for example, a school – actually become so; then again, they are conveyed through the individual experience and through the place the educational situation in question plays in the learner's subjective life context. This may sound formalistic, like a game of words, but it is not. It is the very basis for understanding learning as an integral aspect of real life, that is, for taking the living subject as a whole, for whom learning is often a prerequisite for, and effect of, something important: accomplishing something, relating to other people, having fun and so on. Learning can be a goal in itself but it rarely is. It may be a conscious endeavour but, in this case, it is most often associated with further purposes of a life-practical nature (e.g. simply achieving formal merits).

Learning and identity development – a psychosocial perspective

Until now, we have touched only briefly on life processes and the exchange between individual people and the outside world. In this understanding, learning processes are linked to life practice and practice is social. We call it learning when the individual increases their practical and reflective capacity by this means – in other words, their power of action and insight into the objective world they inhabit – but also their understanding of themselves and thereby their ability to develop their own needs and impulses. Learning is by nature linked to practice.

In anthropologically inspired theories and concepts about practical learning, which are gradually dominating learning theory outside formal school didactics, for example in working life-related and professional learning, this way of thinking is generalised and operationalised (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Learning is defined as acculturation in relation to a specific practice, such as a work process/place or profession, where the individual acquires both knowledge and skills, actually becoming part of a community defined by this practice. It is a way of thinking that, in a very decisive way, goes beyond the binding of pedagogy to the institutional and professionally controlled learning, and is thus innovative in relation to the thinking of formal education. It is a flexible concept that makes it possible to establish plausible models for very limited learning processes, which emphasise that learning takes place by solving problems in everyday life (quite close to a cognitivist learning theory) or through imitation, but learning is also a concept for very broad processes that equate in reality to socialisation, inclusion in an overall cultural context. However, this flexibility also implies a blurred distinction between specific local communities and the broader societal/cultural community so that a given practice as learned is taken out of its societal framework, together with its functionality, power relations and cultural logics.

The theoretical problem is that this conceptualisation will emphasise the specific subjective assumptions and commitment of the learning subjects. This may not be a necessary consequence in terms of logic – in fact, the character of acculturation is emphasised by mutual ‘negotiation’, which potentially changes depending on both the field of practice and the identity of the learner – but, in practice, conflicts and times of changes and upheavals are generally overlooked, particularly those originating in the relationship between the current social field and the learners’ subjective assumptions. It can also be said that the longitudinal or lifelong coherence in the learner(s)’s participation in negotiations is fading. A conceptualisation of a learning process that is only or primarily based on an identification of the immediate field of practice or the community that structures the learning process does not grasp the subjective complexity of the alleged ‘negotiation’ of identity and practice.

Subjectivity is a life-historically produced, individual variant of the conscious and intentional, as well as unconscious, processing of social and cultural living conditions. It is never an empty vessel that enters the current learning space. Throughout their life history, subjects have incorporated the meanings and contradictions of the culture,

literally embedded in their body and language, our most crucial social medium, but also because they have developed their own individual variant and direction. As individuals, they are a complex interplay of practice, emotion and consciousness, with rational as well as less rational components; at all times, the situation and its possibilities for development are recognised by this subjective presupposition.

The dynamics of learning processes are not purely cognitive: their complexity, unpredictability and diversity are linked to emotional engagements, resistances and entrenchments that give them a certain direction, sometimes prevent them, etc.. Knowledge, skills as well as learning are at the same time socially and bodily mediated. Which new experiences and challenges give rise to learning and which do not depends on a concrete interplay between the social framework of everyday life and life-historical experiences, mediated through the individual learning body and consciousness.

The longitudinal dimension – and its unpredictability and individual specificity – is completely crucial for the theme here: how do learning processes and identity formation in a new career build on previous life-historical experiences and resources? However, we are not looking for causal explanations or regularities. The goal is not to predict who can and will achieve something but to understand what specific people actually do or have done, in light of their past experiences and living conditions. To expand and enrich this understanding of how past life-historical experiences are mediated in contemporary subjective meanings and identifications, we have drawn on concepts from socialisation theory and social psychology (Leithäuser, 1976; Olesen, 2007; Salling Olesen, 2016; Weber, 2020; Weber & Salling Olesen, 2002).

This understanding of subjectivity as a result of life-historical interaction experiences problematises the notion of a delimited and coherent subject, corresponding to the described development of learning theories. It also required a new development in life-historical interpretive methods. Inspired by 'depth-hermeneutic interpretation', which is basically a psychoanalytic method of interpretation transferred to cultural symbols and activities, we developed a psychosocial (Olesen, 2020) interpretation of subjective dimensions in everyday life interactions, including work and work-related learning processes. This method of interpretation opens up a new psychodynamic understanding of learning processes (and also offers a reflection of the researchers' subjective involvement in interpretation) (Salling Olesen, 2012a, 2016, 2017). Emotional and cognitive processes are seen as dimensions of the same process and as closely intertwined with the bodily and social practices that constitute cultural significance and societal conditions. By examining the subjects in which emotional and cognitive processes are intertwined (life history), attention is drawn to the anchoring of the symbolic activity in the life-historical experience and in current ongoing practice. Moreover, it is central to understanding learning and identity formation.

The psycho-societal interpretation is thus a way of examining the connection between the individual's concrete sensory experience in everyday life – present and past – and the cultural symbolisations that constitute knowledge and competencies. Therefore, to understand the transformations of skills and professional knowledge, and the formation of professional identities, we must study the change of significance of con-

crete experiences that may take place in conjunction with (continuing) education or a new work experience.

The connection between the societal level, codified as knowledge and subject, and the life history experience and identity is crucial to our understanding of career change and the special learning processes involved. We have tried to avoid the concept of transfer because this concept indicates that some units – knowledge, skills and so on – may be moved from one context to another, as it were, without changing in themselves. Furthermore, we wanted an understanding that looked not only at what is being transferred but also at the context that makes it possible or impossible and may mean that it must change in the process. Instead, we adopted the concept of re-configuration, which at least indicates a subjectively driven change. Views, it refers to the material theory of socialisation propounded by Alfred Lorenzer, which formed the background for his development of the deep hermeneutic interpretation of cultural meanings (Lorenzer & König, 1986). Like other ‘modern’, psychoanalytically inspired theories, it is interactional in the sense that it views the psyche as a result of the individual’s social interaction. In the child’s early experience, the ‘mother’ (or primary caregiver) is the corporal representative of ‘the social’ as the central protection of the dependent child’s wellbeing and the relationship with ‘her’ leaves a trace of forms of interaction, that is, practice experiences. Lorenzer’s theory attaches particular importance to language acquisition in an ongoing differentiation of the interaction experience. Symbolising practice experiences establishes a connection between the sensory experience and linguistic expression that is meaningful in the societal context, in a form shaped by the particular social milieu in which the child is growing up. It must be noted that sensory experience is “scenic”, with a concept from psychoanalysis. It means that it is a completely holistic perception that includes the sensory experiences of the world, relationships and the child’s bodily involvement (dependency). None of these elements are independent of the whole and the child’s experience is thus in this sense a scenic experience.

With language acquisition, the child enters the social world, conceptualised by means of Wittgenstein’s concept of language game (Habermas, 1970; Wittgenstein & Anscombe, 1953). The child establishes symbols, or connections, between the forms of interaction at the core of the previous sensory experience and linguistic expressions whose meaning is established through the social interaction context that forms the language game. Initially, language acquisition is holistic and non-differentiated but meanings gradually become more differentiated. The scenic sensory memory (emotions, relationships, observations and, actions), and on the other hand a linguistic expression, which in turn has a core of meaning that is fairly socially well-defined in social terms but also contains additional meanings, that individual language users associate with, based on their individual experience background.

This extremely simplified presentation aims to show the psychosocial complexity of the learning processes connected with transitions and disruptions in adult careers, and its connection to life history. Essential is the symbolisation link between the scenic experience and the language use. This provides a framework – *mutatis muta-*

ndis, with relevant adaptations – for an understanding of the interplay between the relational and emotional aspects of practical experience and the linguistic cognition that is central to most learning processes and most forms of professional knowledge. On the one hand, we see it as an indication of how the various aspects of learning processes and identity formation are intertwined in the subjective development process while, on the other, Lorenzer's tangible materialism offers a suggestion of how "society enters the body" and shapes dynamics that remain active. At the same time, this materialism frames an appreciation of how social interaction later in life enables very deep and sometimes seemingly disruptive reconfigurations of past life experiences. Neither general nor determined, these changes can only be understood retrospectively. Career change is an intricate interplay of breaks and continuities. Moreover, it is an important prerequisite for understanding that competence development does not take place as a straight line or a cumulative process, borne out by the difficulties in defining 'key competencies' in theoretical terms.

The following outlines more generally how these concepts of experience and learning, and concrete analyses of life history processes, can help in understanding competence development. They thus contribute to the basis for competence assessment in the guidance and formal validation of prior learning.

We need to perceive competence in the context of life experience and competence development as a change within a largely stabilised identity or as a moment in the development of this identity. When categorising life experiences, we can first include fundamental social experience backgrounds, such as social class, gender and ethnicity, which are summed up in a cultural identity, but also the subject's understanding of their own role in life as indicated by patterns in autobiographical narration. They perceive themselves as the governing body in their life or as a product of certain factors in their environment, even as a victim of fate (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Schütze, 1984). Instead of viewing identity as a cultural imprint of social influence, it is crucial to conceptualise identity as an agency – a process of identification – and to recognise the procedural and probably ambivalent nature of identity (Weber, 1998; Weber & Salling Olesen, 2001). However, it is also important to achieve a more concrete differentiation of the societal relations of class, gender and ethnicity, and their actual interweaving (intersectionality). Becker-Schmidt contributed the concept of women's dual socialisation (Becker-Schmidt, 1991; Becker-Schmidt & Knapp, 1987), Martin Baethge uses the notion of life concept to differentiate between work orientation, family orientation and leisure orientation. In a larger empirical study of young people's form of work orientation, he distinguishes between the significance of work as a concrete life activity, subdivided into self-realisation through the content of work or a primary orientation towards the social relations in the workplace. On the other hand, he regards work as an instrumental activity, subdivided between orientation towards income and employment security and an orientation towards career and status (Baethge, 1990). These empirical categories can be used to specify class and gender identities, thereby helping to spot the small changes and ambivalences in the overall categories. Furthermore, we can try to establish specific work activities and forms of engagement in work identity.

Professional identification can be seen as a subjective identification that presupposes autonomy and responsibility at work and, in Baethge's sociological categories, as a cross matrix between engagement in the content of work and status/career category as a social category.

The primary intention is to show the need to integrate categories for the societal dimensions of life experiences with the idea of the subjective experience process as theorised in the section on learning processes and experience. Once again, it is crucial to examine the complex nature of competence development and careers at the specific level of everyday life, including individuals' previous life experiences seen in relation to the overall social categories.

In the interpretation procedure of the life history approach, we obtained a framework understanding for this concrete complexity in the concept of the 'scenic' nature of life experience (Salling Olesen, 2012a; Salling Olesen & Weber, 2012). The wealth of knowledge, skills and attitudes we carry with us are embodied combinations of emotional, cognitive and agentic practices, linked in the scene that experience captures and processes. Learning is very much experimental and reflective reconfigurations of elements from these life experiences, which detach them more or less from one subjective configuration and establish them in another. Competence in the sense intended here is a potential for situational mobilisation of mental and bodily resources, which can result in a learning process that produces a new competence; in other words, it stabilises the immediate availability of these resources, thereby increasing the potential in other new situations.

Prior learning validation and competence assessment is a mapping and prognostic procedure that anticipates – by means of reflective, indicative or legal effects – to what extent and in which directions a person can develop their potential for mobilising certain resources. The idea is that psychosocial integration, characterised by categories of the kind outlined above, can contribute to a language that can deal with (not solve) the contradictions that arise by using the concept of competence in political discourses, such as that of lifelong learning. This sums up competence recognition and assessment in a nutshell.

Competence assessment as a right – and a catalyst

As mentioned above, lifelong learning combines formal and informal education and training with informal learning from work and/or everyday life: in general, this raises the problem of a general language or common denominator for legal reasons of access, accreditation and formal comparison and, in the more advanced sense, also for communication between different actors. The procedures of prior learning validation and competence assessment immediately appear to presuppose a language that can provide a 'general equivalent' of human capability, describing the available learning resources and the potential outcome in both formal education and other areas of everyday life, particularly working life.

For the individual, the challenge is also much more than a language issue in a narrow sense: it is a *discourse issue*. Discourse is a language use that is closely interwoven with and reflects societal practices and realities that cannot be handled merely by inventing a new terminology. For the individual, it is a deeper question about self-recognition, combining and connecting experiences, and formulating their own life perspectives. If they are to navigate different societal discourses, they require a language that does not just formally translate between existing regimes of recognition but transcends them, enabling them to anticipate new social practices and, on the individual level, new work and work relations.

Such innovative ways of thinking can hardly be promoted top-down, by defining a new language of regulation. It requires real changes in the practices and power relations that appear in the two dominant regimes of recognition: the academic one and the labour market one (Salling Olesen, 2014). Validation of prior learning can only improve the autonomy of working people if it enables, or is accompanied by, a dynamic transformation of practices and power relations from below. Validation of prior learning can help individuals advance their career by means of formal education and may flexibilize individual learning trajectories that involve both formal and informal moments of learning. With respect to the notion of competence, this means that the individual assessment procedure must be connected with a real process of learning, articulating the competences people already possess or are able to elaborate during the process. Competence development must be related to their real-life situation and career opportunities. The sad facts of resistance to education and training are well-known and only overcome in cases where people see immediate social relevance to their existing life situation. If competence assessment and validation of prior learning are to be effective in promoting lifelong learning, they must be based on opportunities for people to develop their individual life perspective in their existing life context, that is, in processes of guidance and career planning. However, the realisation of such opportunities will frequently also be dependent on developments of work, technology and organisation.

In conceptual terms, this is the question related to the subjective nature of competence (see the critique above of the DeSeCo definition: What would (have to) happen with work if you take the subjective experience of potential learners as the defining point of departure for competence development?) Oskar Negt's concepts for alternative competencies form a horizon for the understanding of diverse forms of exemplary experiential learning, which are based on people's life experience and knowledge but which, at the same time, must be developed in relation to concrete dimensions of central societal practice and areas of societal challenge/crisis. Therefore, these learning processes are not only deliberative but invariably also object-oriented. Learning becomes exemplary when people develop a concrete understanding of general conditions and contexts, based on their interests and knowledge, and thus move from and beyond the individual subjective towards a notion of something collectively binding. They then begin to see themselves and their situation as socially mediated and, conversely, also comprehend the societal objectivity that meets them as a 'power of reali-

ty', mediated by different interests and logics, and therefore probably massive, but not an unbreakable law of nature. It can be changed. Moreover, exemplary learning is about developing discernment and judgment to create coherence in an otherwise often incomprehensible and inaccessible objectivity. Such competencies are at once general and individually specific. They are not something you can possess' once and for all; they must be renewed, developed and put to the test in relevant practice contexts. In relation to learning and work, competence development means: factual rationality and qualification in dealing with people, circumstances and material objects and the creation of a basic orientation knowledge that can form the subjective basis for a thorough democratisation.

When the question arises as to how the learning processes and competence development that have been applied in contemporary work can be further elaborated into such a political formation process, it must go beyond the horizon of the concrete work, both in terms of content and organisation/institution. Concepts and methods must match this transcendence in order to examine how the actual learning processes that take place in living work can be recognised and unfolded into a competence development that is both productive in relation to work (vocational qualification) and to individual and collective identity development, at the same time contributing to culture creation and democratising work. For guidance and competence assessment, it means distinguishing those learning processes and potentials in individual lives that may advance within realistic and individually valid social contexts. One distinctive question is the relation between individual assessment and learning on the one hand, and the transformation of workplaces and societal power relations on the other. If competence assessment is an exploration of individual experiences and subjective potentials, it might lead to individual learning processes that are coupled with the collective formation of worker interests. In that case, lifelong learning might appear not as a new obligation but as a fresh opportunity for workers and for a reform of work.

Validation of prior learning as a lever for lifelong learning

Over more than five decades, (the paradigm of) lifelong learning has moved gradually, in line with developments in society and sectors, nationally and internationally, from an initial statement of the right to lifelong learning (UNESCO) – with a strong focus on individuals' equal right for and access to education – gradually and in line with developments in society and sectors, nationally and internationally – towards a more comprehensive understanding of learning as an almost unlimited potential in diverse contexts and, not least, a condition of life with both the possibility and necessity character.

In this interpretation lifelong learning is addressed in changing supranational agendas and political associations, such as the OECD and the EU. In and across countries and continents, the assessment and recognition of prior learning, as non-formal

and informal learning, is an essential element of lifelong learning, albeit with major differences in policy and practice. Similar to the UNESCO agenda's emphasis on equality and the right to education, the subsequent agendas for assessing non-formal and informal learning also pay special attention to groups of populations at risk of marginalisation in terms of access to education, jobs and careers. Here, the potential for validation is seen as encouraging their integration in labour markets and society (Villalba & Bjørnåvold, 2017).

Nonetheless, there are major challenges to developing the recognition of prior learning in theory and practice, both globally and at national levels, and not least in implementing these in national laws and systems. It is thought-provoking that there has been a focus on a stronger use of recognition of prior learning at policy level that is not reflected correspondingly in efforts to develop a dynamic use of recognition of prior learning as a lever for lifelong learning.

Challenges for education and training institutions

A rethinking of frameworks is required to be able to meet demands from users and stakeholders for new educational formats that are characterised, for example, by a higher degree of individualisation, modulation and perhaps also digitalisation of forms of learning. To a greater extent, these education and learning formats will be offered by other than the formal educational institutions, which is thus exposed to a great deal of pressure for change.

Access to formal education based on recognised prior learning appears with increasing political priority when looking at EU competency strategies, such as the *European Skills Agenda 2025* and the strategy for more basic upskilling with a focus on individual tracks, *Upskilling Pathways* of 2018. The strategies of education policies and programmes are implemented to varying degrees and at different speeds in each member state. Common to these currently dominant strategies is a framework of the learning that the individual has acquired in the diverse learning contexts of society and everyday life.

However, admitting mature students on the basis of prior learning assessment is an interesting approach because it represents the new challenge facing educational institutions as societal changes have given tailwind to roll out the lifelong learning policy. Teachers and institutions must realise that the overall educational courses for young people are no longer the norm, perhaps not even the most significant. A major overhaul and a new framework for teaching are required.

It will be necessary to deal specifically with new tasks: new types of education, the external framework and, not least, new target groups with different prerequisites. However, it is important not just to see them as single factors that need to be considered. In fact, these new tasks are prototypical of a more comprehensive change in the education system and forms of learning in our society. As a result, they also constitute an opportunity for the institutions: here they can 'practise' strategically on the educa-

tion system of the future. The validation of prior learning is thus a kind of laboratory experiment to determine the future role of education in competence development.

The education system is a central institution in the societal modernisation process. In the first instance, it has helped increase mobility, enable a faster change in the division of labour and detach the qualification from existing practices, which are invariably already obsolete or on the way to becoming so. Remarkably, despite having this accelerating function, the education system is also linked to the organic life course in that it still presupposes a normal biography, consisting of socialisation, vocational education, adult working life and old age. Our education system assumes that the basic educational process of childhood and adolescence in itself provides a basis for the rest of our lives. In principle, subsequent training courses are intended to supplement and update skills, while the programmes do not take other significant sources of learning and experience into account.

Therefore, there is also a need for a new view of learning and competence development that includes both education and a number of other social interactions. Education thus has a different function, more fluid and more comprehensive than the traditional understanding of up-to-date, continuing education and specifically complementing vocational competence through further education. Two contrasting processes can now be found in adult education: a continued institutionalisation that formalises and systematises continuing and further education, and many forms of leisure education that extend the institutional education system both in length and breadth. On the other hand, a de-institutionalisation is emerging which consists both in applying a broader concept of learning and in being more systematically interested in learning processes in many contexts other than education.

These contradictory tendencies mean that school boundaries have become far more fluid and debatable than before: another challenge for the institutions.

Nonetheless, for adults, this also means that learning and educational needs have become a self-administered responsibility and requirement for the individual. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that teachers, researchers and institutions focus their attention and broaden their perspective to understand who educational participants actually are, to appreciate their life situation and their motives for learning.

Challenges for working life

There is a growing interest in working life, expressed by working life organisations, for the recognition of working life learning in systems that are able to function more autonomously, detached from the supremacy of formal education. With the qualifications framework as a value-adding, national and transnational accreditation tool, work is under way in various countries to build a recognised platform for categorising working life learning and learning outcomes with their own valuation and not merely as an exchange rate for fulfilment in the ordinary education system.

Every second year, researchers and practitioners worldwide attend the VPL Biennale for the Validation of Prior Learning for Education and the Labour Market. The most recent Biennale was held in Berlin in 2019 under the heading of “Making policy work” and with the general understanding that, despite the best of intentions, the realisation of policy is not reflected in similar development and implementation of VPL practices.

As a recurring VPL Biennale event, award winners are nominated for examples of best practice in the development of concrete efforts for policy, principles, methods and practice development. One of the prize winners of the VPL Biennale 2019 was the Norwegian project “A Balancing Act”, acclaimed for the achievement of describing skills acquired in the workplace. The award-winning project was implemented from 2017 to 2019 by VIRKE, the trade association for retail chains in Norway. The goal was to create transparency between competencies acquired in working life and education. A language has been developed in the form of categories and standards for competencies, which can be transferred and applied between the education system and working life. The model thus contributes to mitigating the general challenge that lies in validation systems, where the meeting of practice logic and academic logic is challenged by a lack of communication, partly due to a lack of transparency between two essentially different competence perceptions.

Both companies and trade unions were involved in the project to create credibility and trust in the standards and thus their application. The project is a shining example of thorough development work, signposting the way forward in the use of VPL but also showing that a great deal of new thinking and cooperation is needed between key players before the recognition of prior learning can become a lever for lifelong learning.

Implementing lifelong learning is a multifaceted process. The critical discussion of concepts, the political organising of learner’s interests and rights, and the practical development of the tools for the validation of prior learning are interrelated aspects of this process.

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How does the EU's idea of validation of prior learning fit into national educational governance? A comparative analysis of Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey

FRANZISKA LAUDENBACH

Abstract

The European Council passed a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VPL) that urged the member states to have implemented structures in accordance with the respective national contexts by 2018. Accordingly, there is no general approach to VPL across EU member states, but many different concepts. This paper analyses comparatively how this recommendation is implemented and reflected in the national context of Germany, Denmark, Poland and Turkey. Due to their different national contexts, the four countries follow varying approaches in terms of implementation. Therefore, I examine how the institutional setting of the skill formation system and decisive mechanisms structuring the education system shape the outcome of the respective national approach to cover VPL arrangements. The paper hereby outlines the varieties of VPL systems, their links to the formal education system and emphasis regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, skill formation systems, comparative policy analysis, adult education, educational governance

Introduction

In 2012, the European Council passed a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This recommendation must be perceived in the broader context of lifelong learning, which has been promoted by the European Union (EU) as one approach to coping with the challenge of social inequality for more than a decade (Jarvis, 2007). Validation of non-formal and informal learning¹ is perceived as a concrete tool to overcome inequalities by visualising the knowledge and skills that European citizens have at their disposal and giving them a value on the European labour market. The recommendation can also be seen as a proof of increased political commitment to foster validation of non-formal and informal learning among the EU

1 Hereafter referred to as validation of prior learning or VPL.

member states (Villalba et al., 2014). It specifically targets adults who have gained working-related experiences outside the formal education system. Low-skilled and unskilled workers are often at a disadvantage on European labour markets (Oesch, 2010). However, in many cases, they have gained extensive work experience, which could be useful in terms of their individual labour market position.

Besides these context-related claims, the recommendation comprised the request that all EU member states should have implemented validation procedures according to their respective education system by the end of 2018. It “recognises the key role played by education and training institutions in taking forward validation” (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, point 4b). This aspect is of special importance for this analysis. The validation of prior learning is governed by the mechanism of the open method of co-ordination, which focuses on the promotion of guidelines and the regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation (Ure, 2015; Lange & Alexiadou, 2007). It is not legally binding for the member states nor does it predefine a strict structure for all member states. Thus, it is worth zooming into different validation systems across Europe to outline implementation variants as a comparison.

Therefore, this paper scrutinises the four countries – Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. It is worth analysing these four countries as they represent different regional foci and traditions of education. Denmark stands for the Scandinavian region with a more inclusive and lifelong learning perspective. Germany is a central European country with a long tradition of strictly regulated skill formation. Poland represents Eastern Europe and a rather ‘new’ member of the European Union. Finally, as a candidate country of the EU, Turkey complies with EU regulation in the context of education policy (Onursal-Besgöl, 2016, analysing the field of higher education). Furthermore, at the beginning of the period during which much of the analysed data in this paper was gathered, the four countries varied with regard to the degree of their implementation of validation of informal learning approaches. Denmark had already followed a very broad definition of validation including informal learning, Germany and Poland had launched projects with the aim of piloting validation of informal learning approaches on a broader level, whereas Turkey had adapted legislation covering the validation of prior learning in 2015, to date focusing on specific sectors. Consequently, in this paper, I analyse how the four countries implemented the EU Council’s recommendation in their national education context. In particular, I focus on the question of how the validation approach of the respective country can be set into the broader educational governance context.

To answer these research questions, I proceed as follows. In the next section, I will define the politico-economic landscape that is shaping the macro level of the four countries’ education systems. This serves as a first theoretical step for the classification of the four countries. In the subsequent section, I will outline characteristics that shape education systems at the systemic level. Here, I will refer to the question of standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity as key mechanisms within education systems. Afterwards, I will introduce the theoretical understanding and principles of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. In light of these

theoretical classifications, I will then analyse and systematise the four countries and show how they vary with regard to their approach and emphasis of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. Finally, based on this analysis and systematisation, I will draw conclusions concerning the educational governance of the existing validation systems in the four countries.

Defining the politico-economic landscape – a variety of skill formation systems

When comparatively analysing educational systems and their institutional setting, it is necessary to consider their politico-economic structure and organisation. The institutional context of political economies strongly influences “the development and availability of skills” (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). Furthermore, since education systems are based on path dependencies that shape or impede changes in the institutional setting (Busemeyer, 2015), it is highly relevant to consider their structure and organisation. I argue that this institutional setting has consequences for the implementation of validation approaches in the four countries. Moreover, I contend that validation of prior learning is a concept that can be situated at the intersection of education systems and labour markets. The education system usually serves as a framework or reference point for the validation procedure, whereas the labour market serves as the target arena for individuals who have completed a validation. Therefore, I consider it important to focus on a politico-economic emphasis within the skill formation system. In this context, the skill formation system comprises the institutional set-up characterising the education and training systems with a focus on post-secondary education levels. At the same time, it takes account of its close “connection to labour market institutions such as collective wage bargaining and labour market policies” (Busemeyer & Vossiek, 2016, p. 151). The literature on skill formation systems provides a variety of frameworks or models for comparative analyses. Ashton et al., (2000) provide an excellent overview on the different perspectives and emphases in the history of educational research.

In this paper, I refer to the more recent definition of skill formation systems by Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012). Accordingly, comparative political economy research distinguishes four skill formation systems: collective skill formation systems, liberal skill formation systems, segmentalist skill formation systems and statist skill formation systems.² Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012, p. 12) define two dimensions that structure these different skill regimes:

- the degree of firm involvement
- the degree of public commitment to vocational training.

2 A more detailed overview on different typologies in the research of skill formation systems can be found at Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012: 8 ff.

According to their categorisation, an ideal-typical *collective skill formation system* is characterised by three features:

- Employees and their associations are strongly involved in the administration and financing of the vocational education and training (VET) system.
- Skills and competencies that are trained within the collective skill formation system are certified and transferable professional competencies.
- Collective skill formation systems have a dual structure that combines school education with company-based training (Trampusch, 2010, p. 545/546).

By contrast, a *liberal skill formation system* is basically organised through markets, focusing for the most part on general education. In this skill formation system, students acquire general skills and qualifications. General education is complemented by internships and on-the-job training after leaving school. The existing vocational tracks play a minor role in the overall skill formation system. The *segmentalist skill formation system* has a similar general education system. It can be differentiated with regard to companies' commitment to invest in the skill formation of their employees, which is higher than the liberal system (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 13). Finally, *statist skill formation systems* can be characterised by a higher commitment to the VET system of public policymakers. Vocational education and training is a generally accepted alternative to academic education. In these skill formation systems, the employer's involvement in the skill formation tends to be limited (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 13/14). Table 2 shows an overview of the different skill formation systems in terms of the degree of public commitment to vocational training and the degree of company involvement in vocational training. It becomes clear that the four skill formation systems have different priorities in terms of vocational and/or general education, and different levels of employer involvement in vocational education and training. Thus, the governance of skill formation varies in the four systems in terms of which actor is involved in the coordination and whether the state plays a key role in the provision of skill formation.

Table 1: The variety of skill formation systems in advanced industrial democracies (Source: Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 12)

| | | | |
|--|-------------|---|---|
| Public commitment to vocational training | <i>High</i> | Statist skill formation system (Sweden, France) | Collective skill formation system (Germany) |
| | <i>Low</i> | Liberal skill formation system (United States of America) | Segmentalist skill formation system (Japan) |
| | | <i>Low</i> | <i>High</i> |
| | | Involvement of firms in initial vocational training | |

Research shows that the different skill formation systems entail various (dis)advantages for low-skilled and unskilled workers, for instance, with regard to the transition from training to employment. According to Busemeyer and Thelen (2015, p. 404), col-

lective skill formation systems facilitate an easier transition from training to employment and minimise youth unemployment, compared to other skill formation systems. At the same time, precarious employment of workers with low skills or a lack of certified skills is more likely in these skill formation systems (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2015, p. 407). Therefore, workers without qualification training – the target group of validation approaches – might rather be at a disadvantage in these skill formation systems. By contrast, liberal skill formation systems tend to increase the “polarization of skills and income” by favouring academic education and privatising education spending (Busemeyer, 2015, p. 7). In segmentalist skill formation systems the focus lies on in-company training. Thus, workers are trained with the specific needs and competencies of the respective firm. Mobility across companies is more difficult and employment focuses on longterm perspectives (Liu-Farrer & Shire, 2020). By contrast, the education of general and transferable skills characterize statist skill formation systems (Eichhorst et al., 2015). Hence, mobility across companies seems to be easier.

As I contend that validation of prior learning is fundamentally shaped by the respective skill formation system, this system variety will be used as one dimension in the comparative analysis of Germany, Denmark, Poland and Turkey in chapter five. I hypothesise that the degree of public commitment and/or company involvement in VET influences the outcome of the respective validation of prior learning system in the four countries.

However, it is necessary to consider more than the politico-economic structure of skill formation systems to fully analyse the implementation of the European idea of validation of prior learning in the four countries. Therefore, I refer to further mechanisms that are usually researched by educational studies scholars. The question of how mechanisms such as stratification, standardisation and vocational specificity can shape a certain education system will be discussed in the following section.

Stratification, standardisation and vocational specificity – key mechanisms structuring education systems

When zooming into different skill formation systems, it is likewise necessary to consider relevant mechanisms that structure education systems. For instance, the information content of a formal qualification is a relevant allocation mechanism for employers and their decision with regard to possible recruitment. In 1989, Allmendinger structured the (vocational) education (and training) system along the dimensions of stratification and standardisation:

Standardisation refers to the expectation that the quality of vocational education and training meets the same standards nationwide. Kerckhoff argues that the degree of “standardization is generally higher the more the system is controlled by the central government” (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 5). Whereas *stratification* comprises “the degree to which systems have clearly differentiated kinds of schools whose curricula are defined as ‘higher’ and ‘lower’” (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 4). Stratification not only embraces the

education programmes that can be completed but also the question of how these programmes lead to further learning opportunities (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 5). This is closely linked with the idea of permeability of the (vocational) education (and training) system. More precisely, it refers to the cohort that reaches the highest possible educational level (Allmendinger, 1989, p. 233; Groß, 2000, p. 381/382). According to Allmendinger (1989, p. 240), stratification of the schooling system is persistent in the occupational system and thus allocates individuals along the differentiated and predefined pathways. It furthermore shapes the realisable possibilities for individuals within a certain education system (Kerckhoff, 2000, p. 456). I argue that this also affects the implementation of validation of prior learning systems.

Kerckhoff complements these two dimensions with the aspect of *vocational specificity* that is also shaping educational systems. This comprises the degree to which an educational system prepares students for specific vocations, while awarding “credentials that are vocationally specific”. This implies curricula that are especially designed for specific vocations, for example (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 5).

To sum up, according to Kerckhoff (2001, p. 4), it is necessary to consider the three influencing factors – stratification, standardisation and vocational specificity – when comparing educational systems. He argues that highly stratified educational systems often award credentials that are more specific in vocational terms (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 6). Based on these assumptions, I contend that these factors influence the understanding of (non-formal, informal and formal) education in the four countries, thereby shaping the respective outcome of the validation system. I hypothesise that the outcome of the validation systems in the four countries is related to their degree of stratification, standardisation and/or vocational specificity. Thus, they will serve as analytical categories for the comparative analysis of validation approaches in the four countries.

Validation of prior learning – making skills and competencies visible

In order to relate skill formation and questions of standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity to validation of prior learning, it is necessary to briefly introduce the latter concept. It has been diffused across the EU member states as part of the EU's agenda on training and education and its promotion of lifelong learning. In this context, the European Union promotes a threefold understanding of learning: formal, non-formal and informal education. Formal learning takes place in an organised, structured setting and results in a formal qualification (such as a high school diploma, a vocational qualification or a university degree). Non-formal learning takes place in a similar learning context but does not lead to a formal qualification (e. g. further education or professional training). By contrast, informal learning comprises an open, unstructured learning process that is often related to practical work. It does not comprise

one single process but manifold processes, which may take place in different contexts (Cedefop, 2015)³.

Based on this threefold definition of learning, the EU aims to increase the value of non-formal and informal learning experiences in particular, and fosters the implementation of validation systems in the respective education systems of its member states. Validation is defined as a process in which an authorised body confirms learning outcomes achieved by an individual in relation to defined standards (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 5). As the European agency handling the implementation of vocational training across the EU, Cedefop developed European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. According to these guidelines, “validation is, first, about making visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals. [...] Validation is, second, about attributing value to the learning of individuals, irrespective of the context in which this learning took place” (Cedefop, 2015, p. 14).

Considering scholarly debates about validation of prior learning, it is necessary to define validation in more precise terms. Different terms such as validation, recognition or accreditation⁴ are used by scholars and practitioners around the globe to designate similar processes. Salling Olesen (2020), for instance, defines two dominant regimes of competence recognition. He describes recognition that is implemented in the context of business and industry, and focuses on the abilities a worker needs in a working situation. This means that the respective human resource department assesses a worker’s competences in reference to a specific job position. Furthermore, he describes recognition in the context of an educational system that focuses on the validation of skills and knowledge, and is framed by the structures of the respective formal education system (Salling Olesen, 2020, p. 77). In the following, focusing on the latter definition of validation of prior learning, I thus scrutinise the institutional embeddedness of validation of prior learning in the respective education system.

When examining validation of prior learning from this perspective, three ideal typical validation approaches can be defined. These approaches correspond to the abovementioned threefold definition of learning as formal, non-formal and informal. Schneeberger et al. (2009) present three types of procedures to assess non-formally and informally acquired competences in relation to the specific objectives of recognition and the formal system. They differentiate between:

- procedures that lead to awarding a certificate of the formal system
- procedures that lead to awarding a certificate that does not form part of the formal system
- assessment of competences to support further professional development and learning.

Furthermore, across Europe, we find two different validation approaches to recognising prior learning: the system-based approach and the competence-based approach. The system-based approach adopted in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, for exam-

3 See Straka, 2004, Rogers, 2014, etc. for a comprehensive discussion of the threefold definition of learning.

4 Singh, 2014 (p. 28 onwards) provides an in-depth discussion of these terms.

ple, seeks to base validation on existing procedures and methods that are available in the education system. Validation is then linked to the formal system.

By contrast, the competence-based approach develops specific procedures and assessment methods in line with defined competence standards, which are more flexibly linked to the education system. This approach is pursued in Denmark, Finland, France and the UK, for example. Both approaches entail a similar, three-step process: first, individuals compile their portfolio of qualifications, skills, competences and relevant experience. The competences and skills are then compared with qualification demands. The third step is formulating further competence requirements and upskilling needs (Geldermann et al., 2009).

For the analysis of the four countries' approaches to validation of prior learning, emphasis will be placed on the question of whether the validation systems are *system-based* or *competence based*. I will categorise the four countries accordingly.

Zooming into the four countries – a systematisation of validation, education and skill formation

The analysis conducted in this chapter is based on comparative research using qualitative data taken from policy reports on the state of validation of prior learning in the four countries, which were compiled in the course of an Erasmus+ project⁵. Furthermore, the analysis is based on studies and reports on skill formation and vocational education and training prepared by other scholars and policy institutes.

The four countries represent different approaches of validation systems that were implemented after the adoption of the EU Council's Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. They vary in terms of scope, approach and emphasis placed on the respective validation system. Based on the above characteristics that influence the education system, I will systematise and analyse the four countries' education and validation systems. To depict the overall context, I will classify the skill formation system of each country. I will then systematise the role played by standardisation and stratification in the respective country, defining whether it can be described as high or low. Furthermore, I will present the characteristics of vocational specificity in each of the countries and whether it is strong or weak. Finally, I will describe the validation system in each of the four countries and outline whether they are implemented with a focus on the validation of qualifications related to the existing education system (system-based) or on validation of competences beyond the formal education system (competence-based).

⁵ The Policy Evaluation Reports were compiled and updated twice during the project period (2016 to 2019). They are based on secondary literature, national legislation, expert interviews and key policy documents in the field of validation of prior non-formal and informal learning in the four countries.

Denmark

Skill formation system:

Denmark has a collective skill formation system in which the organisation is based on regular interaction between social partners and state authorities. In this context, they regularly communicate their preferences with regard to training opportunities and adapt them to the current needs of the labour market (Madsen & Larsen, 1998, p. 161; Nelson, 2012, p. 179). Denmark's collectively organised skill formation system provides portable and certified occupational skills. Furthermore, skill formation is divided into school-based and work-based training (Nelson, 2012, p. 179; Rolls, 2014, p. 21). The governance of the skill formation system is implemented at the national level where the state has the overall supervision (Culpepper & Thelen, 2009, p. 42). At the same time, social partners and other stakeholders, such as vocational colleges, teachers and students, are involved in the organisation and content-related design of VET qualifications (Rolls, 2014, p. 35).

Standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity:

Vocational education and training in Denmark is centralised, providing nationally recognised qualifications and thereby maintaining a high degree of *standardisation* across the country. At the same time, VET in Denmark includes decentralised aspects where VET providers act autonomously in relation to the respective local needs and demands (Rolls, 2014, p. 35). The Danish skill formation system has a low degree of *stratification*, as pupils attend the same school for nine years and then have to decide where to continue. After nine years they can choose one of three options: general university-preparatory education, technical or commercial schools, or vocational upper secondary education. For instance, students who decide to complete vocational education choose one of twelve possible introductory routes, which are structured along rather broad categories. At a later stage, they can then specialise within these categories (Nelson, 2012, p. 182/183). Based on these explanations, the *vocational specificity* in the Danish skill formation system can be characterised as rather low. Instead, Denmark "empower[s] workers to govern their training decisions and thereby supplement their skill sets in order to move across occupational and industrial lines" (Nelson, 2012, p. 181). This is reflected in the overall strategy of lifelong learning that shapes the general understanding of education in Denmark (Nelson, 2012, p. 181).

Validation of prior learning approach:

In Denmark, VPL has been on the agenda for more than 20 years and a legal framework was implemented in 2007. The VPL system is an important part of the general strategy for lifelong learning in Denmark (Aargaard, 2015, p. 147). Overall, the Danish approach to VPL is decentralised but based on common principles. Every educational institution must offer an opportunity to complete a validation of prior learning at the

beginning of each study/education programme. In general, validation of prior learning in Denmark provides three pathways:

- It enables access to formal education.
- A tailored study programme can be provided or credits awarded for certain classes up to master's level.
- A Competence Certificate can be awarded if the participant meets the requirements of fulfilling parts of an education programme (Policy Evaluation Report).

The validation procedures consider competencies that have been gained in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. Furthermore, the validation process is concentrated on the individual's needs and competencies. It aims to be open and flexible to facilitate a validation procedure for every Danish citizen in line with individual needs (Aargaard, 2015, p. 151).

Germany

Skill formation system:

Although research confirms a minor tendency of the German skill formation system towards a segmentalist skill formation regime (Thelen, 2007; Thelen & Busemeyer, 2012; Busemeyer & Vossiek, 2016), Germany can be characterised as a collective skill formation system that dominates the German labour market. Germany's collective skill formation system consists of a vocational education and training system that is organised by public and private stakeholders (the government, employers' associations, trade unions and chambers) (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012, p. 4). With a long tradition, it has been structured by the relevant stakeholders in the context of vocational education and training for more than a century (Thelen, 2008). The German skill formation system is mainly a dual system where school-based and work-based training complement each other (Busemeyer & Thelen, 2015, p. 404). However, school-based VET programmes are becoming more and more relevant in Germany (Haasler, 2020). Although this skill formation system is based on collectively organised negotiation processes by the different stakeholders, it is framed by uniform national structures (Culpepper & Thelen, 2009, p. 30).

Standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity:

The German skill formation system comprises "strong collective elements", thereby guaranteeing high standards that apply nationwide (Thelen & Busemeyer, 2012, p. 68). This is organised via the cooperation between the federal states, the federal government and the social partnership. Hence, *standardisation* is extremely high in the German skill formation system. As the German education system divides students at a very early stage into two/three different streams leading to different qualifications, the degree of *stratification* is also very high (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 4). Although there is a political will to pave the way for educational upward mobility for all German citizens, per-

meability in Germany tends to be low (Powell et al., 2012, p. 412; Powell & Solga, 2011). Furthermore, *vocational specificity* plays an important role in the German skill formation system. The dual system, which captures the majority of students in Germany, is occupation-specific, awarding credentials certifying that the students are able to perform their duties in the respective occupation (Kerckhoff, 2001, p. 5). This concept structures the German skill formation system and can be described as a leitmotif of German education (Ertl, 2002, p. 56).

Validation of prior learning approach:

In Germany, although VPL is increasingly receiving attention, the overall impression is that validation is not widely promoted and usually geared to support specific target groups, which may include migrants, volunteers and those returning after career break. The German system covers three official VPL pathways:

- obtaining permission to take a standard, but external examination
- obtaining access to different learning pathways
- the recognition of equivalence of prior learning in reference to existing education standards (Laudenbach & Lis, 2019, p. 13).

Besides these official approaches, Germany covers a range of rather uncoordinated regulations, programmes, processes and projects led by different authorities, mainly due to the challenges of a highly regulated education system focusing on formal qualifications and highly formalised links between school-based and work-based learning (Policy Evaluation Report). Overall, the German VPL system places emphasis on a system-based validation approach. At the same time, first attempts to give more attention to competence-based approaches can be identified.

Poland

Skill formation system:

The Polish education system was reformed by the Polish government in 2016. Its structure and content are organised and managed on different state levels (national, regional and county level) (Chłóń-Domińczak, 2019, p. 26). Social partners serve as consultants with regard to adapting vocational education and training to labour market needs. The skill formation system is financed by the Polish state. Funding is distributed centrally, according to a specific algorithm, and can be spent on the ground in line with the local government's needs (Chłóń-Domińczak, 2019, p. 29/30). Referring to the variety of skill formation systems presented in section two, Poland can be defined as a statist skill formation system.

Standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity:

Poland's recently reformed education system comprises eight years of schooling in one institution. After eight years of general education, students can choose between

four streams of general or vocational education. These programmes vary between two and five years' duration and with regard to their share of work-based learning of between 50 % and 60 %. At the same time, the various educational streams can complement each other as they offer progression routes as well as different access points to tertiary education (Chłóń-Domińczak, 2019, p.15/16). The degree of *stratification* is thus rather low compared to Germany, whereas the permeability of the education system is high.

The degree of *standardisation* seems to be rather high. Poland has a central examination board, which is responsible for the governance of vocational certificates (Chłóń-Domińczak, 2019, p. 22). However, the examination of selected crafts qualifications is governed by the Chambers of Crafts. This facilitates equal standards across the country and the different occupations. A vocational qualification can only be attained on successfully passing the general state vocational examination. As this examination certifies a qualification in a specific occupation, *vocational specificity* is of relevance in Poland.

Validation of prior learning approach:

In Poland, tremendous effort has been put into introducing an Integrated Qualification System and related Register to integrate validation into the education system in a systemic way since 2015. The aim of the Integrated Qualification System is to coordinate existing approaches to create more coherence. At the same time, the Integrated Qualification Register comprises all qualifications and degrees in Poland, explicitly covering learning outcomes and not only formal certificates. Due to these structures, the validation system is closely linked with the Polish Qualification Framework. Furthermore, vocational education and training generally shapes the validation system (Silvestru & Silvestru, 2019, p. 160). Overall, the Polish state aims to build a consistent system of VPL with coherent and nationally defined procedures. This seeks to facilitate the recognition of competencies acquired by individuals in different learning settings and through different forms of learning. Poland's validation system is currently based on:

- vocational extramural examinations, which are conducted by Regional Examination Commissions (OKE)
- Chambers of Crafts examinations
- special professional qualifications (for example in the field of civil engineering).

Furthermore, since 2015, several pilot projects have been testing new validation approaches by focusing on individual and learning outcomes instead of the educational system (Laudenbach & Lis, 2019, p. 14). Hence, the overall emphasis in the Polish VPL system is on a system-based validation approach. Likewise, first attempts to give more attention to competence-based approaches can be identified.

Turkey

Skill formation system:

The Turkish skill formation system can be described as centralised, yet also includes some decentralised elements or bodies. Taşlı (2018) defines its structure based on the approach of “centralized multilevel governance” (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1683). The overall authority lies with the Ministry of National Education, which stipulates the general framework of education policy (secondary, tertiary and vocational education) and is the main decision-making body in the context of education policy. At the same time, other stakeholders, including the social partners, maintain the exchange between the labour market and the education system. This facilitates the coordination of vocational education and training in line with the needs of the local labour market. Education is largely state-funded (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1683–4). Despite the state’s dominance and a predominantly school-based vocational education and training system, the Turkish education system also offers dual training opportunities with greater support of firms (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1685, e.g. Tasli-Karabulut & Keizer, 2020, for the example of multinational corporations in Turkey). At the same time, general education plays a more prominent role in Turkey than vocational education, which overall only represented 35 % of secondary-level students in the academic year 2017/2018 (MoNE, 2018, p. 22; Ozer, 2019, p. 456). The existing firm-centred VET programmes show a slight tendency towards a segmentalist skill formation system. However, given the dominance of the Turkish state in the skill formation system, Turkey can be described as a statist skill formation system.

Standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity:

The Turkish education system has well-defined authorities who are tasked with regulating the *standardisation* of the education system. The vocational qualification system (VQS) lays down standards, according to which vocational education and training is implemented and certificates are awarded (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1689–90). The VQS is governed on the basis of a “consensus-led model”, which includes social partners in decision-making processes. They are involved in defining standards and qualifications, and use their proximity to the labour market to develop curricula according to the needs of the labour market. At the same time, the VQS entails certification of vocational qualifications. This serves as the official recognition of skills that were obtained during VET (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1689).

Turkey’s education system comprises 12 years of compulsory schooling. At the age of 13.5, pupils are divided into different educational pathways (OECD, 2019). The system organising the transition from elementary to secondary school was recently reformed. To address inequalities and relieve the pressure on students, the traditional Secondary Schools Examination was removed. Instead, students can now choose upper secondary study programmes, based on their preferences and place of residence. However, around 10 % of school places are allocated through a centralised, optional examination (OECD, 2020, p. 11). The degree of *stratification* is lower than that of Ger-

many, for example, as pupils are separated at a later age. Nevertheless, the education system is highly selective at this juncture. General and vocational education exist in parallel and lateral entry seems to be relatively difficult.

VET takes place in vocational high schools, colleges and public training centres. Students can either complete their training in laboratories or in state-sponsored classes. Laboratories are company-sponsored and training is organised in a dual way, with training in schools in addition to workplace training for three days a week in the final year (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1685–6). Furthermore, the dual VET system offers training, most of which takes place in enterprises. Over three years, students are trained for two days a week at the dual centre and three days a week in the workplace. They sign a three-year contract and are trained with a strong practical orientation by an enterprise, which usually intends to employ the student afterwards. Hence, this model enhances students' employability. Nevertheless, these two options are rather selective and firms only recruit a limited number of students each year (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1686). Students who complete their training in a laboratory receive a high school diploma as well as firm-specific certificates. Those completing training in the dual system obtain a journeyman's certificate, which enables them to train as a master craftsman at a later stage (Taşlı, 2018, p. 1687). Students graduating in the general education system receive general certificates, attesting to their successful completion of the study programme.

Validation of prior learning approach:

Although Turkey has a Vocational Qualification Authority (VQA) that has coordinated all VPL-related matters since 2006, the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning governance is at a fairly early stage. The VQA was responsible for developing validation procedures. It oversees the complete validation structure, examining and certifying validation processes that are carried out by authorised organisations. These organisations must be accredited in the designated national qualifications system and authorised by the VQA to carry out validation procedures (Policy Evaluation Report).

Overall, Turkey aims to offer validation procedures that facilitate access to programmes and examinations, allows for exemptions in the study programme, certifies study units as well as credit accumulation and transfer, and finally facilitates the recognition of qualifications. In general, validation procedures in Turkey are based on the demonstration of learning outcomes rather than documented evidence (Akkök, 2019, p. 4). Validation comprises individual assessment, based on theoretical and practical examinations. The respective methods are chosen in accordance with occupational standards (Akkök, 2019, p. 15). The formal education system serves as the reference point in terms of validation. Existing non-formal learning programmes are adapted to accepted occupational standards (Akkök, 2019, p. 6).

Overall, current validation procedures of non-formal and informal learning outcomes focus on assessment and certification. Until now, there have been neither approaches nor tools for the identification and documentation of learning outcomes (Akkök, 2019, p. 0). The VET sector is prioritised due to the lack of skilled workers. To date, Turkey has placed emphasis on the sector of automotive, metal, energy and construc-

tion (Akkök, 2019, p. 2). Hence, Turkey remains far from reaching the abovementioned optimistic objective of using validation to ensure a variety of opportunities. Nevertheless, official strategy papers indicate a political willingness to extend the existing validation system to include the abovementioned validation options opportunities (e. g. Turkey National Lifelong Learning Strategy, 2014–2018).

Interim conclusion

By analysing the structure of the four countries' validation of prior learning system in the context of their skill formation system and their scope of standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity, several conclusions can be drawn and are summarised in Table 2:

1. Skill formation systems

The four countries represent two different skill formation systems. Due to their governance structure, Germany and Denmark can be defined as collective skill formation systems. Developments and change processes in the context of educational policies are decided by a complex system of coordinated actors with different, potentially opposing positions on the implementation of EU recommendations. By contrast, Poland and Turkey's skill formation systems are shaped by a strong state that centrally defines the overall framework. However, they both incorporate other levels of governance (local and regional) as well as additional relevant actors (social partners, chambers) into their actions to address the demands of the labour markets appropriately.

2. Standardisation, stratification and vocational specificity

All four countries show a high degree of standardisation, regulated by the state, together with collectively organised institutions shaping the skill formation system. With reference to Kerckhoff's argument that the degree of standardisation is higher in education systems with a centrally controlled government, the four countries in this analysis do not bear out this assumption.

In terms of stratification, the four countries vary. In Germany and Turkey, there is a high degree of stratification as pupils are separated early (in Germany) and strictly (in Turkey) on different educational pathways. Although both countries officially offer educational progression routes and upskilling pathways, the selectivity of the two education systems strongly influences inequalities. Poland and Denmark, by contrast, have a low degree of stratification. Their education comprises eight (Poland) or nine (Denmark) years of compulsory schooling in one institution. Afterwards, pupils can choose from several options of general or vocational education in both countries. Overall, permeability seems to be stronger in these two countries, resulting in lower inequality.

Vocational specificity is strong in Poland and Germany. In both countries, the education system offers programmes that are vocationally specific and lead to qualifi-

cations in clearly defined occupations. On the contrary, Denmark and Turkey place emphasis on competence-oriented learning. General education dominates the overall education system, while certificates attest to competences rather than occupations. The two varying priorities of education reflect general rationales: on the one hand, the focus is on documented evidence and qualifications, which can be summarised under the German 'Berufskonzept' (occupational concept). On the other hand, the focus lies on learning outcomes and competencies, which represents key principles of lifelong learning.

3. Validation of prior non-formal and informal learning

Not all countries have implemented new VPL approaches in response to the 2012 EU Council's recommendation. Denmark, for instance, has already had a long tradition of validation of prior learning approaches and had largely implemented its validation system before the 2012 EU recommendation. Germany basically reframed existing approaches under the umbrella of validation of prior learning. Only Poland's and Turkey's approaches can be seen as a direct reaction to the EU Council's recommendation. Given the above description of the validation systems, the system-based approach of validation dominates in Germany, Poland and Turkey. However, all three countries show tendencies towards the enhancement of competence-based approaches. Denmark, by contrast, adopts a competence-based approach of validation. Given its long tradition of learning at all ages and its focus on general education, this result seems plausible.

The most comprehensive understanding of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the meaning of a mere assessment of competencies can be found in all four countries. However, they vary with regard to the institutionalisation of the validation approaches in the respective education system. The Danish education system was revised legally in 2001 and explicitly regulates competence-oriented steps towards validation. Turkey has developed a similar competence-oriented approach that currently only applies in specific professions and sectors. Likewise, Germany and Poland facilitate similar validation procedures that are not legally binding and do not have a direct impact on the labour market.

Table 2: Varieties of governance of lifelong learning

| | Skill formation system | Standardisation | Stratification | Vocational specificity | Validation: system or competence-based |
|---------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|--|
| Germany | Collective | High | High | Strong | System-based |
| Poland | Statist | High | Low | Strong | System-based |
| Denmark | Collective | High | Low | Weak | Competence-based |
| Turkey | Statist | High | High | Weak | System-based |

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the case studies of the four countries illustrated above lead to implications on different levels. With regard to the overall governance of the education system in the four countries, two concepts are present here: Germany and Denmark represent the structure of coordinated collective governance, whereas Poland and Turkey represent a structure of centralised multilevel governance. In these two governance structures, the distribution of power between the state and other relevant education and labour market actors varies. The coordinated collective governance comprises a fairly balanced process of negotiations in terms of policy changes or adaptations. The centralised multilevel governance has a dominant state providing the general educational strategy, at the same time including relevant education and labour market actors at different levels and when necessary. The two countries with centralised multilevel governance show that, once there is a political will to implement European education policies, adaptations of the educational system seem to be feasible. In the case of the two countries with coordinated collective governance, it is not possible to draw comprehensive conclusions focusing on the governance structure only. Instead, other aspects seem to be more pertinent.

For instance, we can perceive contradicting or concurring rationales of education in the four countries. The two differing traditions of either the occupational concept (*Berufskonzept*) or the lifelong learning approach lead to different understandings of what learning constitutes. It is a question of whether it is necessary to have documented evidence and formal qualifications of (occupational) knowledge or whether it is more important to prove that a person has skills and competencies in a certain profession. It turns out that this is closely intertwined with the question of how validation of prior learning is implemented in the respective country. In Germany, Poland and Turkey, the formal education system mostly defines the standards of the validation system. Those approaches that lead towards a competence-based understanding of validation of prior learning are implemented on a project level only and are thus not legally binding and/or do not have official value on the labour market.

To be able to draw more general conclusions on the relationship between educational governance and validation of prior learning systems, it is necessary to broaden the scope of cases. For instance, future research projects could conduct a comparative analysis of all European countries that comply with EU educational governance. Bearing in mind the idea of the European Education Area⁶, which was recently communicated by the European Commission, it seems to be worth analysing the effectiveness of EU educational governance on the ground in all its member states.

6 For more information on the European Education Area, see: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0625> (14.10.2020)

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Mechanisms of inclusion in and exclusion from the labour market through VPL

EVA ANSLINGER

Abstract

The paper sheds light on the opportunities of obtaining access to the labour market through validation processes, focusing on the perspectives of individuals who have undergone a VPL process. The analysis is based on qualitative interviews that were conducted in the four project countries, which are classified by means of the intersectional multilevel model developed by Winker and Degele (2009). This method uncovers inequality dimensions on both an individual and a structural level, making it possible to explore processes of inclusion in and exclusion from the (regional) labour market before and after validation processes.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, labour market mobility, intersectionality

Validation of competencies in the context of transformation processes

Work and qualified employment are central prerequisites for social participation. At the same time, our social system is exposed to a multitude of transformation processes that are expressed on an economic, political, institutional and social level and in which the participation structures of different groups are unevenly distributed (Bieling, 2006). The social positioning of groups and, in particular, the interwoven power structures and opportunities in life can be determined by the categories class, gender and ethnicity, as well as other distinguishing attributes such as age and health (Becker-Schmidt, 2007). Linked to temporal and cultural change, these dimensions of inequality are discussed differently against the background of social and economic, but also political and societal transformation processes.

For example, transformation processes in the world of work are closely linked to new aims of digitizing the workplace. With increasing digitalisation, radical changes can be expected on the labour market (Dengler & Matthes, 2015), although it is not yet possible to predict which activities will change or be replaced in the 'future of work'. Semi-skilled and unskilled workers, as well as employees with a low level of qualifications, are likely to experience difficulties in finding suitable jobs on the forthcoming labour market (Mattes & Weber, 2017). The European labour market requires highly qualified specialists in some branches of industry and technology, in the trades and in

the education and health sector. This indicates that the current and future labour market depends on many qualified specialists. Different strategies are being pursued at the political level to develop a more sustainable labour market. One political strategy in Europe is recruiting specialists from abroad, as well as opening the educational and employment system to new (often underprivileged) groups. This strategy addresses target groups such as migrants and, in particular, refugees but also different groups with a lack of vocational training or generally low level of education.

The assessment and subsequent recognition of skills and qualifications, acquired in the course of life, are necessary to integrate people with a migration background into the labour market as quickly as possible. In Germany, for instance, this principle is supported by the Recognition Act (BQFG), which was newly regulated in 2012. This law is intended to recognise the competencies and learning experiences of those who have obtained educational and professional qualifications abroad. For the recognition of competencies it is of paramount importance that they can be confirmed by a certificate. At the same time, the law opens up the possibility of having informal and non-formally acquired competencies recognised that have not yet been confirmed by a certificate.

In many European countries, and especially in Germany, certification/validation of competencies and learning experiences (prior learning) plays an important role in terms of integration in the professional labour market (Schöpf, 2015). In many cases, a recognition procedure based on the German Recognition Act (BQFG) determines access to the German labour market (Brücker et al., 2021) and, from a broader perspective, the social integration of individuals with a migration background. Generally speaking, the labour market offers semi-skilled or unskilled employment, even without a certificate. These jobs are generally simple working activities in the low-wage sector. If an employee ends up in this kind of work, mobility on the labour market, occupational safety and customs-based employment are almost impossible, especially for migrant workers (Anslinger & Laudenbach, 2020), as well as an extremely unfavourable long-term employment perspective.

Effective integration into the labour market seems to be possible when the individual's formal, non-formal or informal competences are documented and validated enabling them to find a good position on the labour market. In principle, it is difficult to transfer skills acquired abroad into professions. It is therefore important to consider not only formal qualifications but also non-formal and informal competencies in validation processes. For this reason, the importance of validation programmes in the non-formal and informal area is increasing steadily in Germany (Severing, 2015) or in Europe in general. This can be seen in a large number of projects that test the design of validation procedures to take all skills and competencies into account. In addition to the need to provide information about the legal framework, it is crucial to advise individuals and multipliers what to expect from the process and about the tools to visualise competencies.

In particular, the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences can help gain access to the labour market or overcome precarious jobs, especially for low-

skilled workers whose formal skills are not fully certified. Furthermore, validating the individual's qualifications and competencies can help shorten educational paths since partial competences that have already been certified can be recognised in further education programmes (Dobischat & Schurgatz, 2015, p. 34). However, this requires connectable further training programmes that are not yet systematically linked to validation procedures. A comprehensive validation and training strategy for individuals would be instrumental in fostering the recognition of prior learning, which can promote social integration in turn.

Other European countries have already applied the validation or recognition of partial competencies and their integration into further education programmes for the target groups. One example is the partner country Denmark. Here, procedures that link the validation of prior learning with further education programmes have already been developed, tested and implemented.

Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in light of VPL

It has already been shown that systematic integration into the labour market is a precondition for successful participation in society. Vice versa, exclusion from the labour market means the exclusion of individuals or groups from the system, based on certain characteristics (Böhnke, 2006, p. 67). On the individual level, inclusion and exclusion mechanisms can be operationalised in various ways to make them accessible for research. From the perspective of inequality research, the education system and the labour market are central subsystems that select the inclusion or exclusion of individuals or groups in the social system. At the same time, the two subsystems are interdependent and relate to reference categories. Participation in the labour market is an important requirement for income, professional prestige, positions of power, but also identity, self-efficacy and social contact (Hradil, 1999, p. 177).

For the analysis of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in the context of validation procedures, the concept of intersectionality (Knapp, 2005) provides, in my opinion, a suitable multi-level analysis tool (Winker & Degele, 2009) to uncover the interaction of different dimensions of inequality during access to the labour market by individuals without formal (recognised) qualifications. For the intersectional analysis, the categories of ethnicity, class and gender are central anchor points (see above). In this concept, these categories are interwoven, conceptualised to be mutually reinforcing or weakening, and could be expanded to include the categories of sexuality, religious affiliation, nationality, body or age (Becker-Schmidt, 2007). The starting point of the intersectional research can be seen in the criticism by the so-called 'black feminism' of the theory and policy formation of feminism, which focused on white, middle-class women. The researchers pointed out that the central inequality categories of ethnicity, class and gender "should be understood as interconnected structures of oppression" (Hill Collins, quoted in Knapp, 2005, p. 69). Accordingly, the power relations established in inequality theories become apparent not only when visualising the in-

terdependencies between the categories but when inequality categories themselves are understood as interdependent (Walgenbach, 2012).

To analyse the interrelation of social inequality categories, Winker and Degele (2009) developed a methodology based on the concept of intersectionality. The instrument aims to relate interactions in social structures and practices with symbolic representations and identity constructions, making them accessible for empirical research. At the structural level, unequal access to education and the labour market is considered, as well as the unequal distribution of wages and salaries. At the identity level, the actions of subjects manifest social and institutional structures that are characterised by social inequalities. At this level, the aim is to raise awareness of the fact that social attributions can create identity. At the representation level, social norms or group norms, values and ideologies are consolidated, conveyed through media, laws and political agreements or through proverbs (Winker & Degele, 2009).

To categorise the structural level, the authors propose the categories of ethnicity, class and gender as well as body and age (Winker & Degele, 2009, p. 42 ff.). In the first category, they distinguish between different possibilities and forms of promoting the workforce, based on the criteria of origin, education and profession, and the associated unequal positioning in the social structure. In the concept of intersectionality, the gender category is also understood as a social attribution in which ideas about sexuality and sexual orientation are interwoven (*ibid.*, p. 44). These interwoven categories may have a negative impact for individuals on the labour market. With the category of ethnicity, it is possible to uncover racial discrimination and marginalisation of groups with a different skin colour, ethnicity, religion or belief.

The attribution of ethnicity triggers exclusion mechanisms that can have a negative impact, particularly in the context of education and access to the labour market. Last but not least, the category 'body' diversifies the individual's position in the work process and access to the labour market. Physical characteristics such as age, attractiveness, generativity and level of fitness have a positive or negative impact on access to the education system and to the labour market. Discrimination based on disabilities or appearance also falls into this category (*ibid.*, p. 51). In intersectional analysis, it is essential that the interactions on the three levels and between the categories be reconstructed and that social inequalities become obvious for their interdependency.

The next chapter explains how validation procedures can influence inequalities in access to the labour market.

Inclusion through the validation of competences and skills?

According to the paradigm of intersectionality, exclusions from the education system and labour market can be found at the level of structure, identity and representation, and can lead to an accumulation of disadvantageous factors. In particular, people with a refugee or migration background but also (female) workers who are in an unskilled job on account of their origin, their social position, their educational experience and

their possible devaluation, as well as other factors such as ethnicity and religious affiliation, residence status, gender or age, have difficulties in achieving success in the education system or the labour market. Several of the factors mentioned play an important role in exclusion from the system. The factors are mutually dependent and only become an exclusion paradigm when they are interwoven. Due to the resulting complexity, reasons for the lack of integration cannot be understood mono causally but must be analysed with regard to their integration. Only then it does seem possible to address the reasons for exclusion.

The European Union and its member states developed an approach to reduce the abovementioned exclusion mechanisms by implementing validation procedures that recognise educational and professional experience, as well as other non-formal or informal skills. These measures aim to facilitate access to the labour market. Based on the individual's education and professional experience, tailored educational programmes should be made available. These measures enable quick and targeted integration into the labour market. This goal is not aimed at specific groups but at all those who have acquired informal or non-formal skills and wish to use them in the education system or on the job market. The procedures should generally help reduce unequal access to the education and labour market and increase mobility in and on the labour market. This is one approach to counteract the shortage of skilled workers. While the offer is aimed at everyone, activities tend to focus on certain target groups. Especially individuals with a migration background have an increased need for recognition of their educational and professional experience, most of which is acquired abroad. Other target groups are people with limited access to the education and training system because of their living situation. This group are mostly in employment or would like to return but are unable to take up regular work due to the lack of certification of their competencies.

To avoid experiences of exclusion on the labour market or to identify qualified specialists, it is necessary to develop suitable recognition procedures with the aim of mapping existing skills in validation procedures. Furthermore, the extent to which the validation of competencies helps them return to the labour market must be examined from the perspective of the individual. This perspective represents a relevant reference category in identifying subjectively perceived exclusion mechanisms and developing solutions, invariably with a view to upholding the mobility of the labour market as a central factor for the reproduction of inequality mechanisms. However, it is mostly unclear to what extent the recognition of skills affects mobility in the labour market. To counteract this desideratum, the European project EffectVPL examined how validation procedures increase mobility on the labour market at the individual level.

Study design

As part of the Erasmus plus project EffectVPL, it was examined whether the procedures for validation of formal, non-formal and informal skills that are implemented in

Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey help increase labour market mobility. The research focus was on the individual level and their individual learning and working biography. Data was gathered following the approach of the problem-centred interview by Witzel (2000). The communication strategies used in the method aim to provide narrative suggestions in the interview by means of dialogue orientation. With the help of an interview guideline, the description of the individual problem situation is stimulated for the respondents. The method, organised as an inductive-deductive interplay, makes it possible to take individual aspects from the narrative and specify or reflect on detailed expressions through meaningful inquiries (*ibid.*). The problem-centred interviews help widen the perspective on the procedures through the aspect of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms on the labour market. It is particularly relevant whether, in addition to formal qualifications provided by certification, non-formal and informal competencies are taken into account in the validation procedures and used on the labour market.

The evaluation of the problem-centred interviews follows the methodical steps of the intersectional analysis according to Winker and Degele (2009, p.79 *ff.*). The authors propose an iterative process in which the identity, structure and representation levels are initially assessed separately. The interactions between the levels are worked out in the next step.

The project partners selected the interview partners in the sense of a theoretical sampling (Kelle & Kluge, 2010, p. 47 *ff.*). Therefore, the analysis can only be based on country-specific individual interviews that map country-specific procedures. The focus lies on the individual assessment of the procedures carried out and on the opportunities achieved by the validation for acceptance on the national labour market. The assignment of interview sequences to the intersectional multilevel analysis uncovers the interweaving of the three levels and identifies reinforcing or weakening categories that foster inclusion or exclusion.

A total of 55 interviews were carried out in the participating countries. The guidelines were drafted by the Danish partners and synchronised with the project partners in a subsequent coordination process. Minor adjustments to the guidelines due to linguistic and cultural peculiarities were mandatory in each country. Based on the method explained above, the interviewees were asked to report on their educational and work experiences in an open question. It was emphasised that work does not exclusively refer to paid employment in the narrow sense, but also includes reproductive activities and voluntary work (Dederig, 1996). The question section of the interview was divided into four parts, with questions about interests, competencies and skills in general, experience with validation procedures, forecasts with regard to learning and career development, and the role of employers throughout the validation procedures. Statements on future prospects and potential job market opportunities were also discussed. Depending on the disposition and competence of the interviewees, the interviews took between 20 and 90 minutes.

It was difficult to reach the target group in all four countries. On the one hand, this was because appropriate procedures are still in the trial phase in Poland, Turkey

and Germany, therefore subjects' willingness to cooperate in data collection was not very pronounced. On the other hand, few people in all three countries have been exposed to the validation procedures. In the fourth partner country Denmark, the procedures were more established but, in some cases, it was difficult to find suitable interview partners due to data protection regulations.

Results

The results of the intersectional multilevel analysis show that, in the four countries, different factors have an impact at the structural, identity and representation level, thereby fostering but also limiting access to the labour market. Therefore, central characteristics have been prepared on the level of identity, structure and representation, along with the categories class, ethnicity, gender and body. The three levels are not always clearly delimited; overlaps are thus possible in a first assignment. The second step of analysis maps the interdependencies in the categories and examines inclusion and exclusion mechanisms.

Identity level

Individual actions and the attitudes of people interacting with institutional structures are examined on the identity level. It is assumed that structural conditions are identity-forming. They are internalised by the individual through different socialisation processes and thus have a system-supporting effect (Degele & Winker, 2007). As already shown, access to the labour market is influenced by categories such as education and skills (on the formal, non-formal and informal level), social networks, but also age, religious affiliation and social origin. Therefore, these structural conditions are of particular importance for access to the labour market.

The analysis of the interviews shows that interviewees see themselves as untrained or unskilled in their respective work areas before the validation process. This self-attribution works regardless of the formal educational or professional qualification achieved but is related to the current work context. Graduates of external examinations in Poland and Germany often have professional training or even an academic degree in another branch or area, as well as several years of professional experience. Most are career changers in the middle of their working life. The reasons for changing include interruption of employment due to family work, illness or fragile school and employment biographies.

An external examination gives the abovementioned target groups the opportunity to have their specialist knowledge acquired during their employment certified. The main target groups are people who already have experience on the labour market. Competencies that were obtained in the context of volunteering, hobbies or further training may also be taken into account in the validation process. Validation of the mostly informally or non-formally acquired competences entitles individuals to participate in an external examination in which both their specialist knowledge and work

samples are assessed. The examinations are usually extremely demanding and require intensive preparation.

German interview partners whose competencies were recognised in an external examination developed greater self-efficacy through access to and participation in the procedure. This is shown above all in the fact that the self-attribution of 'unskilled' is converted into that of 'specialist'. It is reported that being admitted to the external exam, as well as the procedure itself and the certificate obtained, increased their self-confidence. This encouraged individuals to articulate their own interests towards employers, thereby also improving working conditions. In some cases, the certification also enabled them to carry out higher-level tasks, even up to management functions.

"I just had to have this certificate to be able to apply for a kitchen manager position. (...) Yes, and since then I have been a kitchen manager". (Quotation from a participant in the external examination, Germany)

In Poland, the external examination often leads to self-employment. Interviewees in Poland experienced a strengthening of their self-confidence through validation processes, encouraging them to obtain good positions in the labour market.

Participants in validation procedures in Turkey reported similar experiences. The procedure itself and the certificate confirm that participants can regard themselves as specialists in their field, regardless of their (often rather low) school education, origin or lack of vocational training. This strengthens individuals and leads to better self-efficacy on the job market:

"I have been in this sector for almost ten years. I think people I meet in the workplace value me because of the quality service and support I provide. However, they are surprised when they find out that I am only a high school graduate". (Quotation from a participant in the validation process, Turkey)

In Denmark, validation procedures often lead individuals back into the education system. Most applicants have the opportunity to shorten their educational path once their competencies have been validated. The outcome of the validation for two women who had been working as cleaners for years was that they were qualified for education. One of them said that she got "*a boost*" when the woman from the school told her the result. (Quotation from a participant in the validation process, Denmark).

Another factor of central importance for integrating workers with a migration background on the labour market is educational and professional qualifications acquired in their home country. These competences should also be recognised in the host country by means of validation processes. At the same time, the recognition procedures require the applicant to have extensive language skills to be able to assert their interests when accessing the procedure. In addition, it is essential to improve language skills in the desired professional field to be able to act professionally on the labour market.

In all four countries, it is particularly difficult if formal, informal and non-formal skills are not confirmed by a certificate. Depending on the applicant's legal status and

country of origin (EU citizen/non-EU citizen) as well as any qualifications already acquired abroad, necessary professional skills and qualifications can be devalued as they are only partially recognised – or not at all – in the country of destination. This devaluation of skills and qualifications is perceived by those affected as a personal deterioration, with the consequence that applicants are demotivated on entering the labour market. This is particularly evident for validation procedures that only allow access to an examination or to the (vocational) education system. This form of validation process is a particular challenge due to the language barriers and the high formal examination requirements.

In addition, the qualifications and professional experience acquired abroad often do not match the reference professions in the host country, meaning that only partial qualifications can be validated. However, partial validation usually does not give access to the labour market. In Denmark, and more recently in Poland, access to the education and training system is granted following validation, enabling participants to develop any skills they still lack.

Structural level

At the structural level, the exclusions from the labour market are particularly obvious in the categories of class, ethnicity, gender and body. Degele and Winker (2007) emphasise that devaluations in a capitalist organised system serve to recruit inexpensive workers for the market. They lead to “a social reduction of the working population as a whole” (Degele & Winker, 2007) through inclusions in and exclusions from the labour market and the resulting unequal distribution of resources for certain groups such as semi-skilled workers (class), migrants (ethnicity), women (gender) or the elderly (body).

The legal regulations for validation procedures or the recognition of certificates from validation procedures open or close access to the labour market. The interviewees particularly criticise the restrictive access to the job and training market. Since the system has inherent validation procedures, the programmes are based almost exclusively on formal qualifications; non-formal and informal competencies are only insufficiently considered, if at all. Participants, particularly those with a migration background, also criticise the fact that many skills and professional experience acquired abroad are not recognised as equivalent so that internships have to be completed in the host country, for example, despite demonstrating extensive professional experience in the sector. Especially in Germany, this validation practice is perceived as worsening the situation and results in long-term exclusion from the labour market. It is almost impossible neither to develop (vocational) skills nor acquire informal learning experience in the course of a lifetime. Instead, individuals with a migration background are referred to the training system, where they are expected to learn a new profession, regardless of their formal, non-formal and informal skills.

In Denmark, non-formal and informal competencies are considered more relevant and are documented in the validation procedures. However, this does not also

guarantee direct access to the labour market. Here, participants are first referred to the education system to specifically expand and systematically develop their existing skills.

Qualified and unskilled workers in Turkey complain about the recently introduced legal obligation to validate technical skills in regulated, mostly technical, fields. Above all, the validity of the certificate is questioned on the job market since respondents cannot assess the value thereof. The interviewees do not recognise the benefits for mobility in the labour market or the reasons for the implementation of the procedures. At the same time, the implementation of procedures at the structural level seems to be an attempt to connect with other EU countries. However, this political decision appears to be an excluding factor for individuals.

Representation level

Symbolic representations act as ideologies as well as norms and justifications, and can be found both on the individual and on the structural level. In their everyday actions, individuals reproduce these norms and ideologies, and thus support hegemonic power and domination relationships. At the same time, frictions in the form of standards and justifications in the categories become more clear (Degele & Winker, 2007). Using the categories already described above, unequal access to the labour market can also be derived from the interview sequences at this level.

In a strictly stratified education system with a high importance of certificates, low-qualified groups of workers without vocational training experience particular difficulty in accessing the labour market. As a result, the attribution as a low-qualified person shows that only the competencies that are certified through regular training are available. In addition to formal qualifications, qualified training also acquires additional skills in the area of general competences. These include motivation, endurance and classification in corporate structures or resistance to stress. These qualities are not attributed to workers/individuals who are formally unskilled.

The interviews made clear that some of these attributions were assumed by the interviewees. They only believe in certain professional positions if they have been confirmed by validation:

“Management also includes dealing with employees; how do I distribute them, customer reception, customer visits, customer discussions. That was completely new territory for me. [...] I sneaked in out of nowhere so you had to have a look at how you deal with customers”. (Quotation from a participant in external examination, Germany)

But even in less regulated education systems, companies trust state certificates that clearly demonstrate the skills. An interviewee who participated in a validation process in Turkey reported that validation has significantly increased his job opportunities. Recognition of the certificate by the employer confirmed to the applicant that the validation process not only increases employment opportunities but also represents a personal benefit and increases self-confidence.

“A corporate firm where I applied for a position asked me first how long I had been in the sector and whether I had a document to prove it. Showing them my vocational qualification certificate was an answer to their question. This made me feel good and relieved”.
(Quotation from a participant in validation, Turkey)

To evaluate certificates, they not only have to be valid but also to have been issued by institutions that are known and recognised by companies as certification bodies. However, companies are more sceptical about less known certificates, which generally also show non-formal and informal skills. Especially in Germany, but also in Denmark, interviewees reported that companies have doubts about certificates from new or little-known validation procedures. Another aspect that can be observed, particularly in Denmark, concerns the fact that companies are often not interested in validating the skills of their unskilled workers otherwise they would have to pay salaries at the skilled worker level. There are also concerns that employees will be released from work during the validation process, which in turn will incur costs for the employer/company.

Summary of the results: do validation procedures contribute to increasing mobility on the labour market?

At the level of identity, structure and representation, different categories were developed to examine opening and closing processes at the transition to the labour market for individuals lacking formal qualifications. Therefore, certain skills such as language skills or specific professional skills need to be expanded before or after validation processes to gain access to the labour market. Validation processes play a crucial role in professional success. This central finding was revealed on all three levels for the four participating project countries.

An individual's experience of self-efficacy and confidence in their own abilities was improved by preparing for and participating in a recognition process. Another positive effect is shown when the validation process not only considers professional competences but also competences acquired in the context of family and community work. Overall, it can be summarised that the acquisition of a recognised certificate increases mobility on the labour market.

The following figure summarises the categories developed:

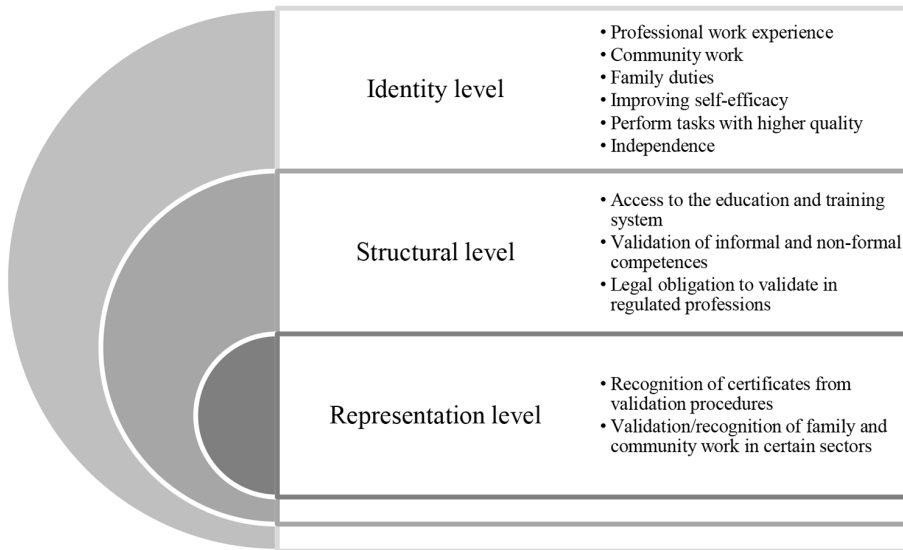


Figure 1: Supporting factors during access to the labour market

Moreover, the interviews proved that the three levels of the intersectional analysis tool also include factors that limit access to validation procedures and/or to the labour market. The following figure gives an overview of the identified factors.

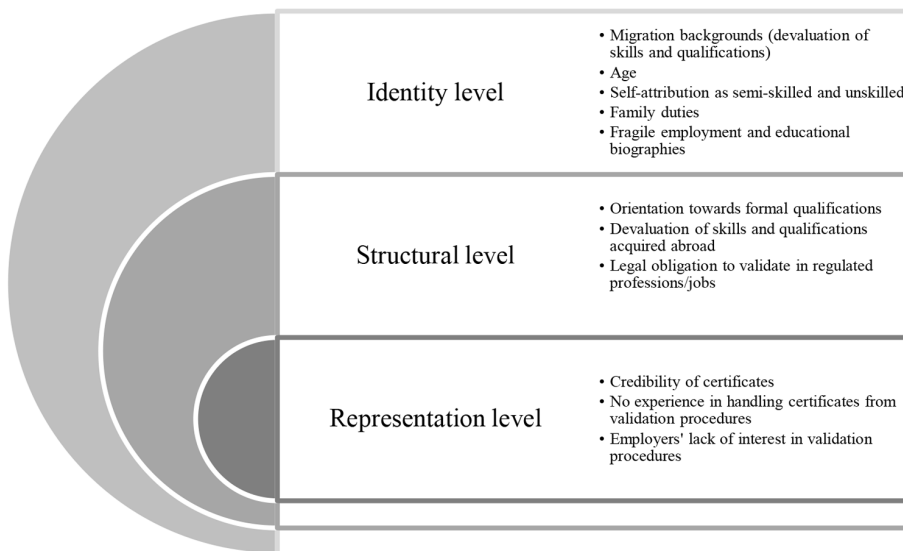


Figure 2: Limiting factors during access to the labour market

The analysis shows supporting and limiting factors that regulate individual access to the labour market. These factors are responsible for inclusion in but also for exclusion from the education system and the labour market. Inclusive factors include fully or partially recognised school and vocational qualifications, extensive work experience, recognition of certificates from validation processes by employers and, last but not least, the high self-efficacy of individuals. Conversely, the following factors are responsible for exclusion from the labour market: long exclusion from the labour market due to migration, family commitments or illness. Self-attribution as unskilled or semi-skilled, the devaluation of qualifications and work experience, and employers' lack of trust in certificates from recognition processes. The exclusion processes described can lead to long-term exclusion from the labour market, which can further devalue formal, non-formal and informal qualifications.

Conclusions

Overall, the intersectional multilevel analysis shows that validation procedures can improve the labour market opportunities and labour market mobility of low-skilled individuals. When it comes to recognising competences, it is crucial that non-formal and informal competences be taken into account during the validation process, in addition to formal competences. Furthermore, other factors can be established at the level of identity, structure and representation that restrict access to the labour market, despite the recognition of skills.

In particular, for employees who have already acquired qualifications abroad and in the recipient country, compatible validation procedures are needed and, if applicable, adaptive qualifications in the form of further training modules. Procedures should visualise all prior learning experience. Certificates must be recognised on the labour market as this is the only way of ensuring mobility on a rapidly changing labour market. In addition to mobility on the labour market, it is important that – especially in a biographical sense – prior learning achievements not be devalued; instead, informal learning experiences should be integrated into the recognition procedures in order to make them visible and usable for the labour market. Suitable validation procedures can be used to shorten the qualification track in the overall perspective and to strengthen the self-efficacy of people with low formal qualification profiles.

The different sorting mechanisms at institutional transitions impressively show that the education system should be more oriented towards biographical courses to counteract complex exclusion mechanisms. Theoretical approaches from the context of diversity and heterogeneity research, such as the intersectionality theory used here, offer suggestions for this. The theory enables the investigation of interwoven experiences of discrimination by taking into account central categories such as ethnicity, class, gender and body. The investigation of the complex interplay leads to a multi-perspective approach. Group attributions should not be generalised and thus manifested, but the individual in their complexity must be made the focus of consideration.

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Guidance counselling, a key instrument in VPL

BODIL LOMHOLT HUSTED

Abstract

Radical changes in society and on the labour market require citizens to be able to cope with rapidly changing competence demands. Lifelong learning and validation of prior learning bear the potential for utilising prior learning when there is a relevant orientation towards a job or career shift. However, guidance resources for VPL must be available to enable the individual to identify and become aware of their own competences and capabilities for change. Although highly prioritised in VPL recommendations, in European Validation Policy, the VPL pre-phases for identification and mapping of competences are often seen to be low priorities in VPL guidance resources. This article discusses how guidance approach and methods throughout the VPL process and within a lifelong guidance (LLG) perspective would increase the benefits of VPL for both the individual and society. The ongoing rationale of the article is that a learning imperative forms a main key requirements for the inclusive society.

The learning imperative

While recent decades have brought major changes in society, even more extensive changes are expected in the years to come. Societal challenges range from the individual to the global impact; they cross borders, disciplines and other man-made lines of division, and they emphasise the requirement for a maximum exploitation of all potential skills transformation at the labour market, decisively influenced by globalisation, demography and technology, require attention to the necessity of securing labour market inclusion and retention for employees through lifelong and life-wide learning. The learning of current and future citizens of Europe should be encouraged and facilitated in formal, non-formal and informal settings, and we need to conceptualise learning in innovative ways, go beyond the constraints of the classroom and school into actual businesses, actual organisations and civil society. Societal challenges and their complex and dynamic nature require the development of new, more flexible ways of assuring the continued upskilling of citizens. This necessitates an interdisciplinary collaboration spanning multiple sectors and perspectives.

While these challenges in general apply to all current and future employees, low-skilled employees are especially vulnerable to upheavals caused by business close-downs, outsourcing due to globalisation and, not least, to the increasing replacement of the human workforce with automation and robot technology.

To cope with these conditions, validation of prior learning is widely recognised as the key component of lifelong learning to assist citizens' life transitions and career changes. Labour market and societal analysis predict that, over their entire lifespan, each individual can expect several radical career shifts involving major changes in their professional identity.

Closely linked to the paradigm of lifelong learning, the widely anchored acknowledgement of the importance of 'validation of prior learning' has now been on the EU agenda for more than two decades. To various degrees, EU member states have taken up EU recommendations for establishment and further development of national structures and legal framework for the provision of VPL. National Qualification Frameworks are in place in most member states in line with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) to support mobility through recognition across European formal education programmes. However, more inclusive VPL systems are required to enable all individuals, regardless of their pre-conditions, to benefit from formal education and training or to have their prior learning validated and valued as relevant and useful competences *per se*. Not everybody is equally motivated for formal education, especially not when education and training seems far removed from what has been – or still is – the individual's current, well-known job. Furthermore, depending of course on the national VET system, the cost of attending formal education is also a barrier, thereby reinforcing a negative attitude towards 'going back to school'. From a societal perspective, formal education is expensive; moreover, the educational systems often respond too slowly in providing new, demand-driven programmes.

For these reasons, the priorities and efforts building on individuals' prior learning for further training and upskilling are increasingly highlighted within the policies governing the labour market, employment and education.

To provide a more explicit focus on the consequences of this dilemma, a short presentation of the structure and principles of the recommended VPL process is necessary to follow the wider exploration of how to cope with the challenges and requirements for VPL.

Validation of prior learning – recommended phases and resources

To promote the development and implementation of national arrangements for validation of prior learning, various European recommendations provide a conceptual understanding and framework of how to develop coherent VPL arrangements. The following references form key recommendations and guidelines for VPL within an EU and European context.

The **European Council Recommendation** on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012) encourages member states to implement appropriate national arrangements by 2018, allowing individuals to have their prior learning validated.

To clarify the basic features of validation, the Council Recommendation identifies four distinct phases of a coherent VPL process for the individual (either separately or in combination).

The four phases are:

- **Identification/mapping:** identification of the individual's relevant learning outcome acquired through non-formal and informal learning
- **Documentation:** documentation of the individual's learning outcome acquired through non-formal and informal learning
- **Assessment:** assessment of the individual's learning outcome acquired through non-formal and informal learning
- **Certification:** certification of the results of the assessment acquired through non-formal and informal learning as qualifications or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.

Among numerous recommendations, though interrelated, due to the focus of this article, it is specifically relevant to highlight the recommended provision of the following:

“Information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for validation, as well as on the relevant procedures, are available to individuals and organisations”.

“Individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment have the opportunity, in accordance with national legislation and specificities, to undergo a ‘skills audit’ aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences within a reasonable period of time, ideally within six months of an identified need”.

“The validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible”.

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

While the European Recommendation on VPL (2012) mainly addresses a policy level – European and national – the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning refer to the level of practitioners, individuals and institutions that are responsible for the initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation (Cedefop, 2015). As the European guidelines acknowledge the diversity of VPL arrangements and present stages due to contexts for VPL (public, private, voluntary sectors; education and training and in labour market services), it is stressed that the purpose of the guidelines is *“not to promote a single ‘correct solution’ but strive to identify relevant actions to create sustainable solutions”*. (Cedefop, 2015).

Within the perspective of contributing to VPL systems and arrangements for the benefit of the individual and society, the recommendation and the guidelines strive to support a common VPL effort of decision makers, stakeholders and VPL providers to establish coherent, accessible VPL arrangements, suitable and equivalent to users, regardless of their preconditions, interests and purpose.

As already stated in this article, VPL is a key instrument for learning and qualification in the light of rapidly changing society and labour market demands. Validation of prior learning (VPL) and lifelong guidance (LLG) form a strongly interrelated paradigm to achieve the benefits of VPL lifelong learning (LLL). However, it needs to be established in the national context.

VPL and lifelong learning in the Nordic region

Validation and adult learning are high on the agenda in the Nordic region. Since 2005, the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL), under the authority of the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research has formed a community to develop policy and practice in many aspects of adult learning. The development takes place in a number of networks under the umbrella of NVL. One of these networks is the Expert Network for Validation of Prior Learning. The network comprises national validation experts representing the Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland, together with the three self-governing regions of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Aaland.

Since 2005, the Nordic Expert Network on Validation has closely followed the national validation work and supported the development of both policy and practice of validation in the Nordic region. Tools for practitioners and a knowledge base for decision makers have been developed in response to the needs of the Nordic countries, connecting the Nordic work to the European policy-making and guidelines, especially the Council Recommendation of 2012.

Validation guidance in the Nordic region

One development project is the 2015 report, prepared by NVL through the combined efforts of the Guidance and Validation networks. A working group of representatives from both networks was established to provide information on how guidance is carried out in the Nordic region in the process of validating prior learning (NVL 2015).

The main products of this work are the key challenges identified and recommendations linked to guidance in validation in the Nordic region.

For these recommendations, it is stressed that “The Nordic Countries should develop a set of common principles or guidelines for guidance in validation related to the different phases in the process, aiming at increasing the quality of guidance services and the VPL process” (Nordic Network for Adult Learning, 2015).

The European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Since 2004, and especially after the Council Recommendation in 2012, European inventories on validation of non-formal and informal learning have been conducted with biannual updates. The aim of the updates is to follow the progression of member states' establishment of validation arrangements. Moreover, the updates are closely linked to the perspectives of the European guidelines on validation. Under the authority of Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, the updates are carried out by the development of national reports. Results of the biannual inventories are provided in terms of national reports, synthesis reports and thematic reports.

The 2018 inventory update (published in 2020) sums up a European state of the art in terms of achievements due to the 2012 Council Recommendation. Among these results, measured in terms of *principles for VPL*, it appears that *availability* to VPL arrangements counts for 35 countries, while obviously more effort needs to be invested in to the principle of *professional competences of validation practitioners* – here, only 15 countries meet the recommendation. Some 26 countries provide a *skills audit* as part of the VPL arrangement. The inventories provide results from 36 country reports (EU member states, EFTA countries and Turkey).

I will now move on from this brief presentation of principles and results for the development of VPL framework and policy in Europe to the article's focus on the requirements of VPL and the learning imperative to assist both individuals and societies in coping with labour market changes and competence demands.

Motivational factors are potentially in conflict

To recap the theme of changes/transitions in career and professional identity, together with the societal learning imperative as presented in the introduction above, it is necessary to further examine the question of motivation for upskilling, education and training, especially for a group of low-skilled employees.

While motivational factors ideally form a shared incentive from both a societal and individual perspective, *in reality*, aspects of incentive and motivation often differ widely. The individual might be strongly concerned about the insecurity of managing a required career transition, perhaps involving new learning in terms of education and training, potential loss of professional identity and perhaps the memory of negative school experience. The approach of society is widely based on an economic rationale for securing the growth and competitiveness of the labour market within a cost-benefit perspective of various indicators. Thus, two types of rationales for the use and benefit of VPL, and further learning and upskilling, are clearly in play: *empowerment and employability*.

Although defined as singular concepts, perhaps with contradictory perspectives of interest and rationale, a more comprehensive understanding would be to conceive the two concepts in combination as a dual concept. Regarding the essence of empowerment and employability as a dual concept, it can be taken for granted that the individual's *empowerment* and self-confidence due to their acknowledgement of their own competences and capabilities potentially paves the way for also developing the competence of *employability*. In this sense, this could increase their personal motivation for job seeking and a career shift, together with their acceptance of a possible new professional identity. Within this understanding, the empowerment and employability components of the dual concept form a competence, closely related to the *New Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, addressed by the EU Commission, which would here especially relate to the key competence of *Personal, social and learning to learn competence* (December 2019).

The prerequisite for this empowerment/employability competence would be that the person has achieved an understanding of their wide potential for career change (either by single phases or by an entire VPL process) as a benefit of the VPL, from which their choices would be based on motivation.

Empowerment

The rationale of VPL that leads to the individual's empowerment and capability of realising career decisions would be strongly connected to the process of *valuation* of the person's prior learning. It should be noted that valuation here signals another aspect of validation, thus stressing that validation should not be limited to the understanding of an 'exchange rate' for the recognised prior learning competences to be used for access to formal education and training. VPL also includes the understanding of a *value* to build on when the individual has made their choice for this and maybe within a wider perspective than formal learning.

Employability

The other rationale – more focused on the employability part of the dual concept – is a dominating reasoning rationale in VPL processes, which are driven by the primary principle of assessing competences in relation to specific education and training. Here, the person's prior learning is addressed in a more narrow, convergent perspective and with a controlling approach to ensure the equivalence value. The exchange rate is applied within the understanding of identifying equivalence between the person's competences and the learning objectives of the education or training programme. The employability perspective is thus linked to the understanding that the educational objectives, when achieved, enhance the person's employability.

It could be argued that, for all of us, to cope with the future perspectives of several major and radical changes in professional identity and competences, the competence and capability of *performing transitions* in jobs, career and life require a *transition-competence* as a key element of employability – a key competence-element for adapting to change. This is advocated as the new key competence of personal, social and learning to learn at this juncture.

The learning imperative – how does it relate to VPL?

Now, based on the examination of empowerment and employability perspectives above, the learning imperative for adapting to changes appears as a determining focus for validation of prior learning: as the learning imperative is equally woven into the overall learning discourse, this has developed and expanded throughout European member states for several decades.

To ensure the individual's awareness of their lifelong and life-wide learning, and to accumulate their prior learning outcome for coping with changes and insecurity, a structured and systematic mapping of prior learning bears the potential for the individual to list and realise aspects and dimensions of lifespan learning with unprecedented potential for their further learning and qualification.

Why and how is mapping of prior learning so important for the individual's further benefit of VPL?

To accumulate learning for both empowerment and employability, prior learning needs to be made visible (Bjørnavold, 2000). There are two reasons for this:

Firstly, in terms of the *empowerment* perspective, it is crucial that the individual becomes aware of their entire prior learning outcome.

Secondly, for the documentation, to have their prior learning assessed and, where adequate, also recognised. Thus, the strong coherence of mapping and documentation phases provides the potentially higher benefit for the individual, within the *combined empowerment and employability perspective*. This process is complex and difficult for most people. Therefore, it calls for specific prerequisites to develop a valid, legitimate documentation, based on the analysis of prior learning, so that the documented competences are provided in a structured and transparent form, based on the application of conceptual terminology.

Identification and mapping of competences form the basic VPL phase, which specifically bears the empowerment potential for individuals to strengthen a learning identity and build the bridge for direction and decisions for further learning when facing a radical change in their working life. Although recommended in the EU's validation policy and guidelines, and implemented in most national VPL measures as well, *in reality*, the identification/mapping phase is often neglected in the VPL ar-

rangement or accorded a low priority in terms of guidance and other means of support resources. The omission of mapping prior learning entails the risk that the individual's subsequent documentation for assessment and recognition, if not based on a structured mapping process, appears vague and incomplete. Thus, the potential for having a more comprehensive set of competences recognised is impaired, no matter whether the VPL purpose is for a concrete education or employment or to serve as the background for career guidance.

The learning dimension of VPL

As argued above, learning is high on the agenda of rapidly changing societies to secure inclusion, growth and sustainability. For the individual, it places strong demands on their ability to cope with the personal implications of changes. This is obviously reflected in the abovementioned key competence: *Personal, social and learning to learn competence*. In the accompanying text, it is explained that:

“Personal, social and learning to learn competence is the ability to reflect upon oneself, effectively manage time and information, work with others in a constructive way, remain resilient and manage one's own learning and career. It includes the ability to cope with uncertainty and complexity, learn to learn [2019]”.

Accordingly, an approach to the learning potential of VPL – to assist realisation of this potential for a career or job – would require an increase in the availability of guidance resources throughout the entire VPL process. Moreover, these guidance resources would have to be provided in various forms and perspectives that are adjusted to individual needs. Furthermore, to widen the perspectives on future demands on the individual, lifelong guidance is indispensable in assisting the individual by visualising prior learning, facilitating learning in the VPL process and in securing direction for further learning – the post validation pathways.

The learning potential of VPL is explored further in the following section.

Learning by participation in the validation process – learning outcome from VPL

How does it make sense to consider validation as learning? Learning in validation can be distinguished in two forms, either as participation in validation and/or in terms of the learning outcome due to the validation process. Andersson (2017) lists three dimensions of validation to be considered in terms of a learning process:

- to learn what you know – achieving awareness of prior learning
- to learn what is required in the validation process
- to learn how to present your knowledge in the validation process.

(1) To learn what you know – achieving awareness of prior learning

As the primary focus in this article is the frequently overlooked empowerment potential of the mapping process, I will investigate each of the three dimensions to identify guidance approaches and methods required to facilitate learning in VPL.

The systematic identification and mapping process, assisted by professional guidance, could be organised in the following steps:

1. List jobs and work tasks or other activities, including voluntary work and interests
2. Determine the level of independence carried out due to the listed work tasks and activities
3. Extract professional and general competences, based on the list
4. Ascertain the level of general and generic work competences by the frequency of the competences used in work tasks
5. Plan further learning or upskilling.

In the Scandinavian Interreg project Yggdrasil on labour market mobility (Duvekot et al., 2020, p. 115), this systematic structure and a guidance tool were developed and tested by the individual and a guidance counsellor. A structured interview formed the mapping process as this was furthermore supported by filling in a competence certificate as part of the process. In general, the mapping processes found that the individual attained an increased awareness of their competences, as one subject stated, “I have just been driving a truck for 20 years”. From this and similar examples, it became clear how the structured mapping process helped the person acknowledge accompanying competences, which he had, till then, not been aware of.

There is clearly a learning potential when noticing and becoming conscious of structures, iterations, preferences for work tasks and methods, choices of jobs and so on within a lifespan perspective. When the learning outcome appears as acknowledgement and awareness of an individual's competences, it implies their potential to reinforce decisions and choices concerning their occupation, education, training and career. However, the most important learning outcome might be that of the new language acquired to communicate about learning. Deriving from informal learning, the learning outcome is likely to have the form of *tacit knowledge* as defined by Polanyi (Polanyi, 1966). This means that the process of mapping prior learning for the documentation is not just about visualising prior learning: it is also about making prior learning ‘*speakable*’ or *explicit*, as Polanyi says, in contrast to *implicit*, tacit knowledge. The *speakable* dimension should be facilitated in the guided mapping conversation between the professional and the individual, and by the use of a step-by-step analysis. The steps of the analysis span from work task descriptions, “*what did you do, how did you do it, who did you cooperate with?*” and from here on to the conceptual definition of learning outcome, distinguished in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. When the individual is supported in this mapping process by a VPL guidance counsellor, it is highly probable that their tacit prior learning will be transformed into a conceptual communicative resource. The individual thereby acquires a new language, useful for communicating learning and competences, which similarly forms an im-

portant dimension of employability. Hence, the empowerment dimension reinforces the employability dimension.

Within learning theory, the concept of knowledge is distinguished in categories of knowledge forms, which can be characterised as *knowing-how*, *knowing-that* and *knowing-why*. As such, the three knowledge forms can also be conceived in terms of a knowledge hierarchy, with the knowing-why category as the most complex form of knowledge. The person possesses the theory or practice-based knowledge required for a certain work task. Besides, they know *how* to apply the knowledge in practice. Moreover, they know *why*, among other options, they select the specific knowledge needed for to be applied in the specific solution for the work task or problem-solving.

A mapping guidance instrument will assist VPL candidates in preparing the documentation prior to the assessment phase by making these prior learning competences both visible and speakable, and applying a conceptual terminology – the profession's language.

However, this is complex and requires guidance. Within the learning dimensions of VPL for the individual, this challenge concerns the above listed second dimensions of VPL:

(2) To learn what is required in the VPL process

In the Erasmus project *EffectVPL*, which also provided empirical data for this book, a large number of qualitative interviews with a biographic approach were carried out with persons who had previously taken part in a VPL process to gain access to a VET programme. The interviews frequently revealed that information about the VPL arrangement, process and candidate requirements had been insufficient or unclear. Analysis of the interviews revealed a lack of transparency either concerning the entire VPL process or specific steps of the process.

Case study:

From an employer perspective, dilemmas in the VPL process were described in order to manage VPL requirements for the documentation material.

In the interview, the employer explained the situation and that she had encouraged her employee to undergo formal education as an administrative assistant. The employee was highly respected at his workplace, especially for his entirely self-taught ICT competences. For years, he had assisted colleagues with ICT in work tasks. As the employee had had a negative school experience the employer felt responsible for supporting him through the VPL process. Looking back on the VPL process, the employer reflected in the interview on the dilemmas of the VPL process for her employee. Due to insufficient information and guidance from the VPL provider, the employee and the employer 'formed a team' in their shared effort to navigate in the VPL system and its requirements, which up until this time had been uncharted territory for both.

Information and guidance were provided but mainly regarding formal regulation, structure and procedures. Both indicated that the challenge was understanding what requirements X had to fulfil to provide the proper documentation in accordance

with assessment criteria. The employer called for exactly the understanding or the approach of how to document the employee's prior learning because the questions posed by the VET institution were asked *from a school perspective*, as she recalls. She goes on to explain:

“When I say that X is excellent at working in our intranet, then we did not find an equivalent category to document and measure his knowledge and competences in the ‘school-logic’. So, what did we actually do with the knowledge and competences that he de facto possessed, viewed in the workplace logic? We felt that we were not supported by good guidance in this dilemma”. (Erasmus project, EffectVPL. Manual II: VPL – The Role of Employers).

The employer was worried about the dilemma, should her employee not have his competences recognised at the level to which he was entitled, owing to his work performance. Her dilemma was that she had motivated X – and sometimes even put pressure on him – to undertake formal education. She feared a negative assessment result, which would demotivate him and perhaps make him drop out of the process.

The employer explains:

“How do you make his competences visible and convincing in an accurate way? The worst scenario was if he was asked to demonstrate his skills in a way that was far below his knowledge and level of skills? For instance, by asking him to demonstrate ‘which key on the keyboard do you choose when...?’ The employer expressed the fear that the process would not recognise him as a competent adult with the skills for which he was so highly appreciated in the workplace”. (Erasmus Project, EffectVPL. Manual II: VPL – The Role of Employers).

The dilemma expressed by the employer is the issue of what could be called *the meeting point* in the assessment phase between the practice logic and the education logic. The meeting point is where the candidate's practical knowledge meets the knowledge acquired from education. In each area, a special language is applied to express knowledge, skills and competences, based on knowledge from the non-formal and informal *practice area* and the formal *education area*.

Communication barriers between these two learning areas must be managed in terms of translation. Translation is crucial, given that two paradigms are at play in the meeting point:

Learning from practice meets **control** from the education system as the assessment of equivalence (of competences) must be upheld by unambiguous and trusted criteria. Moreover, a **formative** approach in the mapping of prior, practice-based learning in the documentation meets the **summative** approach of education to ensure that end validation results are in line with formal objectives. It is precisely this dilemma that perturbs the employer in the interview case study. In her effort to encourage her employee to acquire formal qualifications, she expresses her concern regarding a reductionist and non-appreciative VPL approach for the employee. Furthermore, the

learning dimension explored in this case study links to the learning dimension of VPL regarding how to present the individual's knowledge.

(3) To learn how to present your knowledge in the VPL

In other interviews, some of the former VPL candidates termed the assessment *an exam* and the requested documentation *a CV*. Several candidates expressed uncertainty as to the form in which the documentation should be submitted to the VPL institution to provide a thorough and solid documentation and also in terms of the format.

Case study:

Regarding the VPL process, P states that he was asked to submit his CV with his educational diplomas. When asked by the interviewer whether he had also included evidence for the internal education and training undertaken during his employment in the armed forces, he said:

“No, I did not because they asked for exam certificates so I only attached those I had”.
(Erasmus project, EffectVPL, Manual I: VPL – Benefits for the Individual).

P was neither informed nor guided on how to document his prior learning. *Moreover, for the same reason, P did not attach documentation of his work experience – for instance in terms of employers' written recommendation and/or P's own description of his work tasks.*

P explains:

“I just sent my CV by email to inform the VPL staff that I hereby forward these documents according to the agreement of my VPL”. (Erasmus project, EffectVPL, Manual I: VPL – Benefits for the Individual).

Final remarks – mapping and documentation are coherent and interrelated VPL phases

The case studies above clearly show how the documentation risks forming a vague and incomplete background for the assessment of candidates' prior learning when they fail to receive proper information and guidance on how to present their knowledge. However, the issue is not merely a problem related to the documentation format. It is even more serious that the candidate might have missed *learning what they know* by achieving awareness of their own competences (learning dimension 1)

As explained in the article, the learning potential of the combined VPL process of identification and mapping requires a structured, systematic process of several steps and must be accompanied by guidance to help the individual realise this potential.

It has been argued that awareness of their own competences increases the person's empowerment and employability – a dual concept that can be understood as

linked to the *Personal, social and learning to learn competence (The New Key Competences for Lifelong Learning)*.

Furthermore, as future societies, characterised by frequent and radical changes, express a learning imperative to all citizens to constantly ensure their employability, the availability of a lifelong guidance support, whenever needed, should be the indisputable right of each citizen.

When facing radical changes with several potential career shifts within a lifespan, the VPL activity for mapping competences becomes the key component in enabling the individual to remain aware of what they know and how to present their knowledge. The current EU agenda for Upskilling Pathways should be reflected in terms of two parallel tracks: LLG to assist the individual *to know what you know* due to the knowledge forms of *knowing that, knowing how & why, in terms of prior learning* and LLL to provide the options for the requirement of new learning and competences.

Structures have an inherent meaningfulness. Therefore, it is a point to support the candidate in working structured in the mapping process as the structured, systematic mapping of their prior learning enables them to spot patterns of choices and preferences, interests and work areas. When the above qualitative interviews were carried out, it became clear how the semi-structured interview guide helped interviewees reflect and spot patterns, which further facilitated acknowledgement concerning school, work and education.

During the mapping process, the guidance counsellor can choose to apply the interview form for the initial identification of learning activities before moving on in the analysis phase. The open and non-restricted approach to identifying learning – also known as the divergent approach – serves to activate the individual's acknowledgement of their interests and preferences to build motivation. In the next steps, the mapping contributes to the achievement of knowledge having theretofore only existed as tacit knowledge. As a final mapping stage, guidance would help the individual acknowledge their learning and competences – not only as *singular* competences but within *a complexity of competences* – similar to the patterns of interests, preferences identified at the earlier stage.

This result would significantly increase their learning identity, empowerment and employability – thereby using the key competence for *personal, social and learning to learn competence* – thus to be highlighted as the key competence for the individual to cope with transitions in life.

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Adult learning theories and VPL

ÖZLEM ÜNLÜHISARCIKLİ

Abstract

This paper focuses on adult learning theories such as andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning and transformative learning. Based on these adult learning theories, the paper explores how VPL relates to each one or whether it has the potential to do so.

Keywords: Andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning, transformative learning

Introduction

Adult education and learning comprise a significant part of the education sector. It may take the form of formal and non-formal education and informal learning (Colley, Hodgkinson & Malcolm, 2003). It is also important to note that the continuum of learning may range from highly formal to highly informal (Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016). Formal education is the systematic and intentional education provided by teachers within a school system. Learning that takes place outside formal learning environments but within some kind of organisational framework is referred to as non-formal education. Non-formal education may also be systematic and deliberate, like formal education, but does not lead to a diploma at the end of a sequentially arranged curriculum. Informal learning that occurs in everyday situations is at the end of the learning continuum, "...which includes a range of learning including self-directed learning, incidental learning, and tacit learning or socialization." (Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016, p.6). Compared to other learning activities, informal learning occupies a significant portion of an adult's life.

Attempts have been made to identify the differences between learning in children and adults to set the principles of adult learning. However, Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner (2007) suggested that no single theory explains all forms of learning nor is there a single theory for adult learning. Instead, we have a series of frameworks or models that contribute to our understanding of adult learners.

In recent years, lifelong learning (LLL) has become more popular as a concept covering people of all ages, young and old, and the term adult education is used less frequently. Since there is no universal agreement on this issue, Jarvis, for example, has preferred since 1981 to use the concept of "education for adults" (2007, p.64) rather than adult education. In this text, the aim is not to go into a discussion on adult educa-

tion and lifelong learning but to look into adult learning theories. When we talk about learning, it is not only lifelong but also life-wide; learning takes place inside and outside an individual's work-life, in formal, non-formal, and informal ways. This implies that learning is more than education; therefore, individuals need to be more self-directed in their learning. However, to give people the opportunity of lifelong and life-wide learning, "Access to learning opportunities needs to be lifelong, open and democratic, regardless of status, gender, age, philosophy, special needs or heritage" (Harris, Van Kleef & Wihak, 2014). This also brings to the fore the need for recognition and validation of prior learning since individuals learn in different contexts and forms.

The following sections will first present theories of adult learning and then explore how VPL relates to each of them or has the potential to do so.

Andragogy

The term 'andragogy' was used for the first time in 1833 by Alexander Kapp (1800–1869), a teacher at a German *gymnasium* (Loeng, 2017). Kapp used the term to point out the need for education, not only for young people, but also for adults, based on Plato's writings related to education.

Although the term existed long before, Malcolm Knowles made andragogy generally known as a concept in the 1970s. In his studies and conceptualisation of andragogy, Knowles depicted ideas from Eduard C. Lindeman (1984) who argued that adult learning is situation-motivated and experience-centred. Expanding on the work of Eduard C. Lindeman, Knowles initially identified four assumptions of adult learning (1980), subsequently including two more assumptions (Knowles, 1984 and Knowles & Associates, 1984) in later publications:

1. The first assumption of andragogy is related to the adult learners' self-concept. Accordingly, the self-concept of the adult learner moves from a dependent personality toward a more self-directing and autonomous one.
2. The second assumption relates to the role of prior experience in an adult's life. Adults bring a greater volume of prior experiences to learning activities than young children, which provides a rich resource for learning.
3. A readiness to learn comprises the third assumption. An adult's readiness to learn is closely dependent to the relevant developmental tasks in their social life. In other words, adults tend to be prepared to learn what they believe they need to know or do to deal with real-life situations and problems effectively.
4. The fourth assumption addresses the adult learners' orientation to learning. Unlike pedagogy, where learning is organised in a subject-centred way, adult learning theory postulates that an adult's learning orientation is problem-centred, task-centred or life-centred. Adults are motivated to learn when they realise that it can help them perform tasks or solve problems they may encounter in real life. Adults are therefore expected to learn new knowledge, skills and attitudes that are presented in the context of real-life situations.

5. The fifth assumption of andragogy is related to the motivation to learn. Although adults may also be prompted by external motivators, they are mostly driven by internal motivation and a desire for goal attainment.
6. The final assumption concerns the need to know why one needs to learn something. Adults need to know that the time and effort they are investing in learning something is valuable, beneficial for them and worth the effort (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Ozuah, 2016).

These assumptions help to understand the distinctness of adult learning and identify the ways of learning that suit them best.

Self-directed learning

Most adults spend a great deal of time and effort on acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills. The rapidity of change and the need to update their knowledge and skills make this essential. When such learning takes place at the student's initiative, even in formal settings, the activity is known as self-directed learning (SDL). Basically, self-directed learning is regarded as any form of study in which the learner has the main responsibility for planning, implementing and even evaluating a learning activity.

Self-directed learning has been researched, theorised and practised for over five decades, thereby considered as either a personal attribute or a process. From a personal attribute perspective, individuals would display characteristics of a self-directed, autonomous person in learning and, from a process perspective, the way of organising instruction would show such features (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Learners are more likely to engage in SDL when they aspire to gain knowledge, develop their skills and become more self-directed in their further learning. Also, SDL may inspire transformational learning if there is critical reflection on the learning process and can also be emancipatory when such learning induces the person to become more active socially and politically (Caffarella, 2000).

Brockett & Hiemstra (1991) refute several myths about self-directed learning. These myths and their refutation help to understand what self-directed learning really is.

Myth 1 relates to SDL as a concept that either exists or does not. Accordingly, individuals are either self-directed learners or they are not. However, self-directedness is more like a continuum, in which learners may possess self-directedness at different levels. Myth 2 implies that a learner is secluded from others in SDL. However, in SDL, a learner may choose to study in isolation, with two or more people or in large groups. Self-directedness in SDL means that "the learner assumes primary responsibility for and control over decisions about planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991, p. 12), while the means of learning may be in different formats. Myth 3 claims that self-direction is just another adult education

trend. However, the existence of SDL as a theory and practice in adult education for more than 50 years is indisputable.

Myth 4 claims that it is not worth the time needed to make self-direction work based on cost, time and available resources. However, engaging in self-directed learning is likely to result in more meaningful and deeper learning, in fact making it worth the time and effort. Myth 5 asserts that SDL is mainly limited to reading and writing. On the contrary, self-directedness involves a wide variety of learning activities and experiential learning that is an indispensable part of an adult's life. Myth 6 assumes that facilitating self-direction is an easy way for adult educators to act as passive observers. On the contrary, from an SDL perspective, an adult educator or facilitator of learning works actively to promote a meaningful and effective learning experience that would also ensure the development of learners' critical thinking. Myth 7 presumes that SDL is primarily limited to settings in which freedom and democracy prevail. Nevertheless, SDL certainly takes place in highly controlling social and educational settings. Myth 8 argues that self-directed learning is primarily limited to adults with substantial educational and economic opportunities, ignoring those who are disadvantaged. This is a main critique of SDL; however, according to Brockett & Hiemstra (1991), it is possible to promote self-direction in diverse social groups. Myth 9, the expectation that SDL will reduce the quality of institutional programmes, did not arise when learners were given greater control over their learning. The only risk to quality is poor implementation of SDL. Myth 10 implies that self-directed learning is considered the best approach for adults; this may cause problems since each learner is unique and one method would not fit all. However, the proponents of SDL are aware that utilising a self-directed, individualised learning and teaching approach may sometimes not be appropriate.

In their discussion of SDL, Merriam & Bierema (2014) reflect that, of these myths, six focus on the learners themselves and their learning activities (Myths 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 10), whereas others relate to adult educators, their teaching and institutions (Myths 3, 6, 7, and 9).

The myths about SDL help to shed light on some misunderstandings. Hiemstra (1999) summarises the attributes of self-directed learning:

“(a) individual learners can become empowered to take increasingly more responsibility for various decisions associated with the learning endeavour; (b) self-direction is best viewed as a continuum or characteristic that exists to some degree in every person and learning situation; (c) self-direction does not necessarily mean all learning will take place in isolation from others; (d) self-directed learners appear able to transfer learning, in terms of both knowledge and study skill, from one situation to another; (e) self-directed study can involve various activities and resources, such as self-guided reading, participation in study groups, internships, electronic dialogues, and reflective writing activities; (f) effective roles for teachers in self-directed learning are possible, such as dialogue with learners, securing resources, evaluating outcomes, and promoting critical thinking; (g) some educational institutions are finding ways to support self-directed study through open-learning programs, individualized study options, non-traditional course offerings, and other innovative programs”. (p. 9–10)

Hiemstra (1994) points out the usefulness of the self-directed learning approach in giving some learning responsibility back to the learners, especially in the workplace. He argues that if employees were given the opportunity for self-directed learning, if responsibility for their learning decisions were possible, they would learn the necessary skills in a self-directed manner.

The two earliest, most vigorous conceptualisations of adult learning are andragogy and self-directed learning. While andragogy focuses mainly on identifying the characteristics of adult learners, self-directed learning is more interested in the process in which adults engage during their own learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Self-directed, independent learning environments allow adults to learn what they want, whenever and wherever they want; self-directed adult learners choose and register their training courses or programmes in line with their learning goals or seek learning on their own.

Therefore, a great deal of learning and training takes place outside formal education or without any credentials to such learning and training. Recognition and validation of prior learning experiences of self-directed learners allow for the acknowledging of adult learning outcomes occurring in different contexts. In other words, the VPL process has the potential to enhance employees' self-directed learning capacities since they come to realise that their prior learning – be it formal, non-formal or informal – might advance their career.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning theory is different from cognitive learning theories, which emphasise cognition over affect; and behavioural learning theories, which disregard the role of subjective experience and consciousness in the learning process. Unlike these theories, in experiential learning theory, experience plays a central role in learning (McCarthy, 2016). Adults accumulate different experiences throughout their lives that are seen as a critical resource for new learning. Various theoretical perspectives place the emphasis on different aspects of experiential learning. Among these, the constructivist approach focuses on the concrete experience and producing knowledge and meaning making based upon those experiences; the situative perspective views a person's development as a social learning experience and process. Therefore, involving learners in a community of practice is also critical in this view. The need to reach an individual's unconscious desires and fears is addressed in the psychoanalytic approach, whereas the critical perspective relates to the need to resist dominant social norms. Finally, complexity theory focuses on the relationships between experiences.

Although the role of experience in learning has been explored extensively, it is still an area of investigation for making new discoveries and connections between learning and experience in helping adults learn in formal and non-formal settings. The proponents of learning from experience who offer different conceptual perspec-

tives are Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), Jarvis (1987), Boud et al. (1985) and Usher et al. (1997).

At the heart of all these different approaches is the idea that learning from experience involves adults relating the lessons they have learned in the past to future situations. *Reflective practice*, *situated learning and cognition*, and *cognitive apprenticeships* are among the common methods employed in experiential learning. In the following, each is described in some detail.

Reflective practice enables us to make judgments in complex and uncertain situations, based on our experience and previous knowledge. Although reflective practice is mostly associated with professional practice, this process also applies to both formal and informal learning situations. The knowledge of one's craft, practice knowledge, is the cornerstone of reflective practice and includes more than just theoretical or technical knowledge. It involves the use of information and observations from our past and current experiences. This tacit knowledge that we use almost every day without thinking constitutes various elements of reflective practice. First, reflective practice requires that a person deliberately slows down to consider multiple perspectives. Second, the aim of reflective practice in a group is not to be right or be a winner but to be open to various perspectives because new insight and understanding can only emerge by this means. Therefore, it is important to maintain an open perspective. Third, reflective practice requires active, conscious processing of ideas that may include analysis, synthesis and metacognition to gain a wider perspective and facilitate better understanding. Fourth, beliefs, goals and practices should be examined. Beliefs consist of experiences and influence behaviour, while goals include general or specific desired intentions or aims. Practices include one's skills, behaviours or tendencies in performing specific tasks, such as developing a lesson plan or interacting with learners. Reflection helps gain a deeper insight into the action taken (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

Situated learning is another method that is related to experiential learning. In their seminal book entitled *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991), Lave and Wenger introduced a particular view of learning "that is socially constructed and acquired through practice in a community of learners" (Carter & Adkins, 2017, p. 113). They conceptualised situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice; their work influenced many educators and researchers, thereby opening new perspectives on learning and teaching (Korthagen, 2010).

The social and cultural context of learning is crucial in situated learning and cognition. In other words, the physical and social situations experienced by learners and the tools they use are seen as an integral part of the learning process. Also, the authenticity of adult experiences is of the utmost importance in situated cognition.

Similar to reflective practice, situated cognition involves learning from real-life experiences; however, they interpret experiences in very different ways. In reflective practice, learning from experience is mainly a mental activity since experience alone does not automatically promote learning. Therefore, reflection on experience is essential for learning. However, unlike reflective practice, in situated cognition, the learning

process is inseparable from the situation in which the learning takes place. In situated learning “knowledge is socially constructed within the interrelationship of learners, teachers, and the environment” (Zakrajsek & Schuster, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, learning for everyday living, such as our work, may only happen when individuals interact in a community with available ‘tools’, such as language and technology, and by being involved in an activity. In other words, “the physical and social experiences and situations in which learners find themselves and the tools they use in that experience are integral to the entire learning process” (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 178).

Lave and Wenger (1991) realised that, in any community, there would be new members or “newcomers” (p. 12) and seasoned members, whom they called “old-timers” (p. 12). They considered “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 29) as a means to explain “the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice” (p. 29). Newcomers observe the examples of the old-timers in the community and learn what it means to be a mature practitioner and adopt their practices and identities. As newcomers join the community, they uphold the existing traditions but also bring new practices and change. Initially, members of a community may participate on the periphery, becoming an insider with full participation as they move from being a newcomer to an old-timer (Zaffini, 2018).

Wenger et al. (2002) define Communities of Practice (CoP) as groups of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). They recognise knowledge from a managerial perspective and look into the nature of knowledge. From their perspective, the knowledge that practitioners and professionals accumulate through experience in the act of doing is “tacit as well as explicit” (p. 9), “social as well as individual” (p. 10) and dynamic.

Another method employed in learning from experiences or experiential learning is **cognitive apprenticeships**. The cognitive nature of apprenticeship not only gives importance to gaining skills in everything they learn as an apprentice would, but also includes ways of thinking about everything they learn. In other words, cognitive apprenticeship is different from situated cognition where learners reflect on an experience independently and aims to help the learner develop problem-solving skills in the cognitive domain to perform complex, real-life tasks. Brandt, Farmer and Buckmaster (1993) offered a five-phase model based on their study of use of cognitive apprenticeship in various professions, such as medicine, engineering and educational administration. The phases composed of modelling (a real-life activity), approximating (scaffolding, coaching), fading (decreasing scaffolding and coaching), self-directed learning (providing assistance only when requested) and generalising (discussing the generalisability of what has been learned).

One of the best known educational theorists who focus on experiential learning theory is David A. Kolb. Based on the learning models of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget, his model is designed as a holistic adaptive process on learning where

experience plays a central role in the learning process. His experiential learning theory (ELT) model is composed of four elements: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualisation (AC) and active experimentation (AE) (Kolb, 1984 and 2015). According to this approach, effective learning occurs when the individual progresses through the four-stage Experiential Learning Cycle:

1. having a concrete experience (CE), that leads to
2. monitoring and reflecting on this experience (RO), which activates
3. the formation of analysis, generalisations and conclusions (AC) that are
4. “used to test hypothesis in future situations, resulting in new experiences” (AE) (McLeod, 2017, p.3).

Concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation are seen as two polar opposite dimensions of grasping or understanding an experience, while reflective observation and active experimentation are regarded as two polar opposite dimensions related to transforming an experience (Figure 1). McCarthy (2016) refers to experiential learning as “a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning abilities” (p. 92) where the learner goes through the stages of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

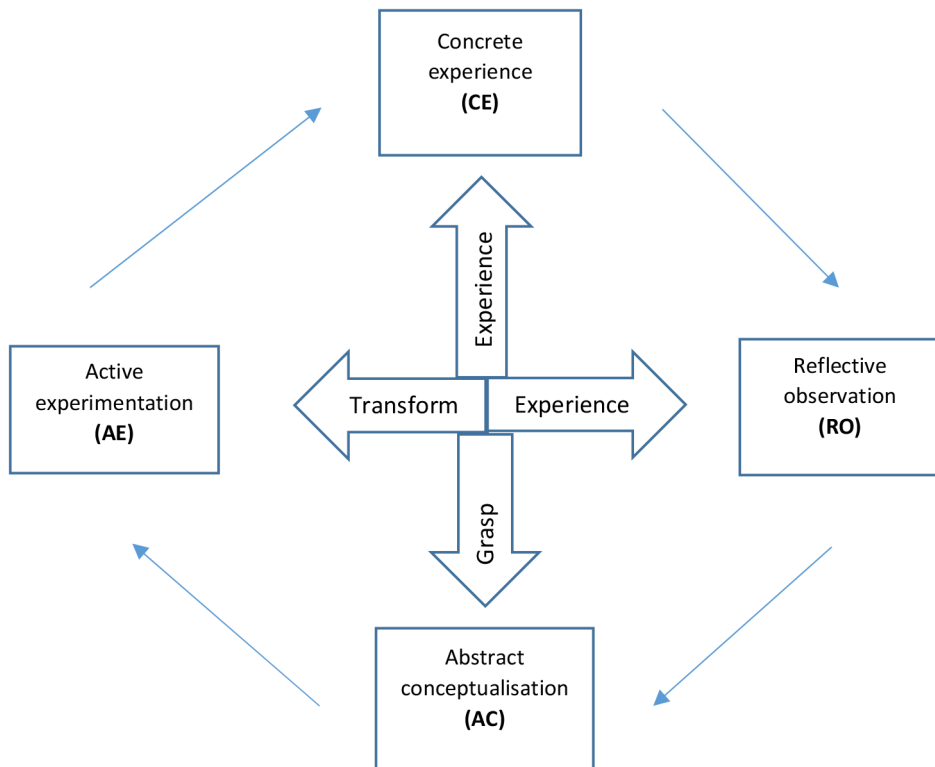


Figure 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle. (Source: Adapted from Kolb 2015, p. 51)

Experiential learning theory may be claimed to have a crucial place in adult learning theories. It provides a framework for understanding and supporting the links between an adult's personal development, education and work. Accordingly, the workplace is envisioned as a "learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities" (Kolb, 2015, p. 4).

Transformative learning

Transformative learning, also referred to as transformational learning in the literature, has emerged as a powerful theoretical perspective in the field of adult education to understand how adults learn. It has attracted practitioners and researchers with diverse practical and theoretical approaches; and what transformative learning means depends on one's theoretical perspective, thus varies considerably (Dirkx, 1998). Among the different approaches to transformative learning theory, there are three main individualistic perspectives, namely the psychocritical, psychodevelopmental and psychoanalytic approaches, and four sociocultural conceptualisations of transformational learning, namely, the social-emancipatory, cultural-spiritual, race-centric and planetary views (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, Taylor, 2017).

The best known and studied approach from an individualistic perspective is Jack Mezirow's psychocritical view, which has grown into a fully-fledged adult learning theory after decades of study. Freire's social-emancipatory view of transformative learning is the best known sociocultural approach.

This paper will focus on Mezirow's conceptualisation of transformative learning theory. In his theory of transformative learning, Mezirow was influenced by Kuhn's *paradigm*, Bateson's *psychological frame*, Freire's *conscientization* and Habermas' *domains of learning* (Kitchenham, 2008; Hoggan, 2018). According to Mezirow, humans have a drive to make meaning of their daily lives and, since change is continuous, people cannot be certain of the knowledge or beliefs they hold. We need to explore and validate our beliefs and knowledge to make more informed decisions in our lives. Therefore, a more critical world view is imperative in attaining a deeper understanding of the world we live in. Mezirow & Associates (2000) refer to transformative learning as

"the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (p. 7–8).

Overall, transformative learning theory focuses on "how we learn to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (p. 8).

The process of transformative learning developed by Mezirow generally follows the phases below:

- *“a disorienting dilemma;*
- *self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;*
- *a critical assessment of assumptions;*
- *recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared;*
- *exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action;*
- *planning a course of action;*
- *acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;*
- *provisional trying of new roles;*
- *building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;*
- *a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective”* (Mezirow, 2018, p. 118).

A perspective transformation leading to a more developed frame of reference can only be realised with a series of cumulative transformed meaning schemes; or through stressful and painful personal or social crises that could cause us to question our existence, such as the loss of a spouse, retirement, illness or war. Individuals’ processes of meaning-making can be examined and changed through critical dialogue and critical self-reflection processes (Hoggan, 2018).

The key components of transformative learning are the centrality of the individual’s experience, the critical reflection process and the promotion of adult development through transformative learning. Transformative learning theory has evolved over the years and still continues to grow as an area of adult learning, offering significant implications for adult learning and education.

An individual’s experiences through VPL can result in a process in which individuals transform their ideas, beliefs and actions regarding learning and work-life opportunities. In other words, adoption of the theoretical framework of transformative learning into the processes of VPL may further assist the individuals in transforming their ideas, beliefs and actions related to their learning and work-life opportunities. Certainly, further research is needed to examine whether the implementation and impact of the use of a transformative learning framework on the VPL beneficiaries’ altered their existing frames of reference and the lives they lead in the world.

Adult learning theories and validation of prior learning

As explained above, adult learning and education cover not only formal education but more substantially non-formal and informal learning. Adults accumulate knowledge and skills in everyday life; some of this learning or skill acquisition happens on the job or transfers to their work-related tasks. Therefore, as suggested on the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLLP), a European civil society for education, validation of prior learning, especially non-formal and informal learning “gives opportunities for second

chances, improves access to education and enhances motivation to learn. It contributes to social inclusion, personal development, empowerment and employability” (LLLP, 2020, website).

Learning throughout life is important for everyone, be it individuals, organisations, schools or institutions. Associating learning with social inclusion and career opportunities, and changes in dominant attitudes towards learning are important issues that enable us to understand the current transition towards a lifelong learning society (Duvekot, 2019).

One of the important issues in informal learning is the recognition of adult learning. Van Noy, James & Bedley (2016) suggest that there are four ways of doing this: prior learning assessment (PLA), industry certifications and licences, workplace rewards, and learn and earn models.

As the validation of prior learning is the focus in this paper, the possible contribution of adult learning theories is summarised here. The theories that were covered in this paper have some common characteristics. Andragogy determines the identifying characteristics of adult learners, thereby providing insight into how to commit adults to further their learning. Self-directed learning helps understand the process that adults engage in during their own learning. Experiential learning focuses on the role of experience in learning, thereby clarifying how valuable an adult’s daily life or real-life experiences are, whether used for personal or work-related tasks. Finally, transformative learning helps adults put their purposes, values, feelings and life meanings into perspective. Through critical dialogue and critical self-reflection processes, individuals may achieve perspective transformation that leads to a new frame of reference.

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The skills audit – an access route to the validation process

EWA BODZIŃSKA-GUZIŁ & ALEKSANDRA LIS

Abstract

Individuals' perspective is vital in the process of planning and providing career guidance services. Our aim is to underline the importance of this factor and argue that the skills audit may constitute an entryway to the validation process. This paper refers to the case study research method in the scope of which we focused on "Kierunek Kariera" (Direction Career) project as the part strictly related to the skills audit in the Małopolska region. On the basis of the biographical, in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who participated in the skills audit, we will present the significance of the individuals' perspective, especially with regard to further educational opportunities and chances on the labour market. We will also demonstrate the method itself to illustrate the influence of the well-conducted guidance on individual lives. Thus, the paper may serve as a source of inspiration for career guidance practitioners or an information tool.

Keywords: VPL, validation process, skills audit, career guidance

Introduction

The validation process of prior non-formal and informal learning is complex. To begin with, it is supposed to consist of five phases (Duvekot, 2014, p. 33). Numerous parties are involved in realising the different phases of the process. What is more, various institutions also take responsibility for the VPL process (Berlin Declaration on VPL, 2019). Each country has its own regulations, some of which designate the institutions responsible for the validation process and its execution, including very specific validation phases in the country concerned (Duvekot, 2007).

Taking the individuals' perspective into account, we would like to underline that it is crucial to be guided throughout this complex process. The career guidance and properly trained advisers play an important role in the VPL process. In the initial validation phase or prior to the VPL process, the adviser is critical. The moment when a person reflects the past professional and educational experience or the development opportunities available is the "preparation" phase (Duvekot, 2014, p. 33). When contacting a professional adviser, usually for the first time it is necessary to allow the individual to self-assess one's skills, set goals, incorporate experience and skills into a new framework, as qualifications to be confirmed or acquired through further education.

Our purpose is to highlight this factor and demonstrate that career guidance is a crucial element of the validation process, especially for individuals who may not feel confident enough to get through the VPL process without support. Thus, one of the possible entryways in this context is the skills audit. The method was recommended in the fundamental document for the VPL in Europe – Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in which a ‘skills audit’ was defined as:

“a process aimed at identifying and analysing the knowledge, skills and competences of an individual, including his or her aptitudes and motivations in order to define a career project and/or plan a professional reorientation or training project; the aim of a skills audit is to help the individual analyse his/her career background, to self-assess his/her position in the labour environment and to plan a career pathway, or in some cases to prepare for the validation of non-formal or informal learning outcomes”. (The Council of the European Union, p. 5).

As an element of a few VPL systems, for example in Germany, Netherlands or the United Kingdom (Institute of Educational Research, 16.01.2020), it was also introduced in one of the oldest validation of non-formal and informal prior learning systems in Europe – France – as a specific tool (Charraud, 2007). Currently, it has become an integral part of systemic solutions there and is known as “bilan de competencies” (Charraud, p. 153).

Our main reference point is the “Kierunek Kariera” project (Direction Career Project), which covers the idea of ‘bilans kompetencji/skills audit’ in the Malopolska Region, focusing on the impact of well-conducted guidance on individual lives, especially their learning and working opportunities.

Career guidance

Nowadays, the socio-economic development of society depends on lifelong learning, which principle states that initial education is no longer sufficient (Duvekot, 2007, p. 3). The lifelong learning phenomena strongly refers to the recognition and validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. Thus, VPL is expected to become the key element among institutions and individuals contributing to the development of a learning society. This is in line with both the European Union’s recommendations on LLL policy and the Cedefop recommendations. Moreover, it is necessary to establish a validation system that is combined with comprehensive life guidance:

“(…) validation and guidance are two important tools to assist individuals, organisations and Member States in adapting to the new reality and creating real lifelong learning systems. Career guidance and counselling play a major role in managing people’s transitions, while validation can assist in fulfilling people’s full potentials by making visible and providing value to all learning an individual has acquired” (Cedefop, 2019, p. 7).

In this perspective, career guidance may be viewed as a kind of brokerage – individuals' needs are placed first, while the individuals benefit first hand from the guidance services. As career guidance is a service that addresses the needs of society and an answer to the requests of policymakers or authorities' recommendations, it has a strong influence on its recipients (Watts et al., p. 243). What is more, it is one of many public services financed by public funds. Thereby, there is a sharp competition between career guidance and other public services to gain money (Mayston, p. 14). Reasonable funding is needed, on the other hand, to enable the individuals to adopt a holistic approach to counselling.

It may prove to be a great challenge when career guidance is regarded as a service in a holistic context. Then lifelong learning and life advising are intended to be inseparable (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016, p. 89). It is impossible to exclude the individual's lifetime experiences at different stages, whether occupational, educational or personal. In the scope of learning and counselling, non-formal and informal learning must be taken into account. Real life is not static: a person's education and professional career are subject to many turnovers that leave an open path for holistic learning in an organised form, during leisure time or at the workplace, in combination with professional guidance (There, p. 90).

In the biographical narrative approach (Kaźmierska, 2004), which turns out to be a core method used in holistic life guidance and career guidance, turning points are key to understanding individuals' perspective (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016; Laudénbach & Lis, 2019). By examining a person's life more closely, the counsellor provides feedback that may help the individual make use of past experiences in their future learning and working opportunities. Thus, the role of career counsellor entails supporting the client in the process of transferring past experiences into planned learning goals and professional aims. It is a complex process, requiring the integration of all learning experiences as well as turning points that could both encourage life learning and lead to career and education breaks (Kławsiuć-Zduńczyk, 2016, p. 90).

Michael Eraut (2002) presents the typology of individuals' non-formal learning: *implicit learning*, *reactive learning* and *deliberative learning*. Each of these forms is incorporated differently into their future behaviour. While *deliberative learning* goes hand in hand with planned learning goals and opportunities, the other two types of non-formal learning appear less consciously. *Implicit learning* leaves the individual unaware of previous experiences. *Reactive learning*, on the other hand, does not help the individual plan their next steps but helps them prepare for the emergent learning opportunities (Eraut, p. 116).

Accordingly, there is a significant need for career guidance, especially when non-formal learning takes the form of *implicit learning* or *reactive learning*. The implementation of VPL systems in many European countries was combined with career counselling systems. Both European recommendations (Council of the European Union, Cedefop) and good practices (Duvekot, 2007) illustrate that there is and always will be a strong cooperation and bond between validation processes and guidance services. Building and strengthening this link is of paramount importance for the validation

system to function properly and develop a learning society. Therefore, the methods for career guidance that might be an entryway for VPL process are highly valuable.

The skills audit – case study

The Kierunek Kariera project

The Kierunek Kariera (Direction Career) project is being implemented in the Malopolska Region as an initiative of the Regional Labour Office in Cracow. The project aims to assist people in developing skills and gaining qualifications the skills and gain qualifications. The project is dedicated to people who are actively engaged in the labour market, particularly those with lower qualifications, who have not attended higher education. It is estimated that, from 2016 to 2023, while this initiative is ongoing, 46,000 people will have made use of the skills audit and/or additional education opportunities that are also included in the project. Implementation of the project will change attitudes in the field of lifelong learning (LLL), attracting foreign project participants. What is more, it will allow individuals to control their own career path and prepare for effective validation, by using portfolio as a technique and the skills audit as a method.

The skills audit

The skills audit enables the individuals to prepare the portfolio or e-portfolio and to identify the potential competitive advantages in the labour market. Career counsellors assist and support the individuals, help them identify their interests, set a direction in which they want to grow and recognise the skills they should and want to improve (objectives). To achieve these objectives, various tools are used throughout the process, such as biographical and behavioural interviewing techniques, diagnostic tests, competency tests and others taken from vocational counselling (methods).

Combining individual reflection and self-evaluation was crucial in designing the tools and then acquiring certain competences to collect practical experience regarded as the source of individuals' skills – competences – qualifications. Another form of support was then established. The training vouchers offer participants an opportunity to improve their qualifications. Furthermore, this mechanism requires the person concerned to take responsibility, giving them an independent choice of a training company and relying on the quality of services up to date September 2019. Almost 16,500 people took part in the project as a whole and 1,716 participated in an in-depth skills audit.

Support of the validation process demands a great deal of the qualified advisory staff. The skills audit adviser helps those interested in obtaining qualifications to identify and document their learning outcomes. The preliminary guidelines for the process of identifying and documenting learning activities, and the skills audit methods were presented at consultation meetings with the Malopolska Partnership for Lifelong Learning and at seminars, aiming, in particular, at the target group of professional

advisers from different institutions, HR specialists, trainers, training institution owners, NGO representatives and validation contractors.

In the pilot validation project of the Regional Labour Office, Cracow was responsible not only for developing a method and tools for use in the skills audit but also for holding seminars on these issues. The seminar programme included carrying out the validation process, more precisely the aspects related to facility administration (e.g. material resources, premises, personnel competence, selection criteria for the methods and tools). During the seminars, participants were introduced to and practised the principles of biographical and behavioural intelligence, a tool commonly used to prepare the skills audit sheet.

The seminars aimed to present topics related to the newly developed integrated system of qualifications, as well as the role of the Polish Qualifications Framework in this system, which, in turn, turned out to be the starting point for creating qualification descriptions and designing the validation process. Participants admitted that the presence of the representatives of various educational institutions, the labour market and training, and entrepreneurs in the various sectors was of enormous value during the seminar. This enabled them to share information and exchange notes, which resulted in a more effective participant response towards issues related to the subject of the skills audit, vocational training qualifications, career guidance and the validation process.

It is crucial to organise interdisciplinary seminar groups in the future to achieve the desired effect of experiences and knowledge exchange. Seminars and training courses may also enhance the cooperation and networking of institutions. In turn, this will help increase the availability of information on the validation process and skills audit for clients of different institutions, and ensure the quality and reliability of the information provided. As the starting point, it will provide common knowledge of validation service policies and guidelines.

A permanent part of the seminar will be a block devoted to learning outcomes and, in the future, instructions on how to use the Integrated Qualification Register. The courses for ready-to-use assessment methods will be modular and based on e-learning. The skills audit, which is carried out by professional advisers, plays a very important role. This method is educational, aiming to motivate people who do not have the knowledge or required certificates. After a few (usually two or three) meetings with the adviser, individuals are able to identify their competences, based on experience shared, and distinguish the evidence of learning outcomes. They also receive feedback on their educational and professional potential. The time factor is crucial. Customers will be able to use advisory services at the agreed time especially if they are in paid employment. It is recommended that both parties set the timeframe.

The skills audit procedure

The skills audit is divided into three stages: the preliminary, research and summary stage. To participate in the whole process, a candidate is required to complete an application form (independently or with support) available online or as a copy. The graph

below illustrates the skills audit procedure and subsequent steps, as well as implementation methods. It is then followed by a more detailed description of applied methodology (Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015).

The preliminary stage

Services offered in the Kierunek Kariera (Career Direction) project are interrelated but the main participation requirement is the counselling session as a short or in-depth skills audit. Both cases involve discussion with a career counsellor for approximately one to one and a half hours in a goal-oriented, brief counselling session. During the meeting, participants are informed about the project activities and the scope of the proposed type of skills audit, in accordance with the agreed objective of cooperation.

Depending on a person's needs and expectations, the counselling service may be one meeting at this stage with a preliminary evaluation of their educational and occupational situation and their need for training. It may also be continued as part of an in-depth, more extended module.

Research stage

In case of the in-depth skills audit process, the first meeting is followed by several other meetings (two to four on average, each lasting up to six hours and usually spread throughout the year). Their frequency depends on the feasibility of scheduling a face-to-face encounter, given the other responsibilities of both parties. Sometimes they may take place as one or two long meetings that integrate subsequent parts of the skills audit procedure. Between the meetings participants generally have tasks to complete on their own, activating a moment of self-reflection.

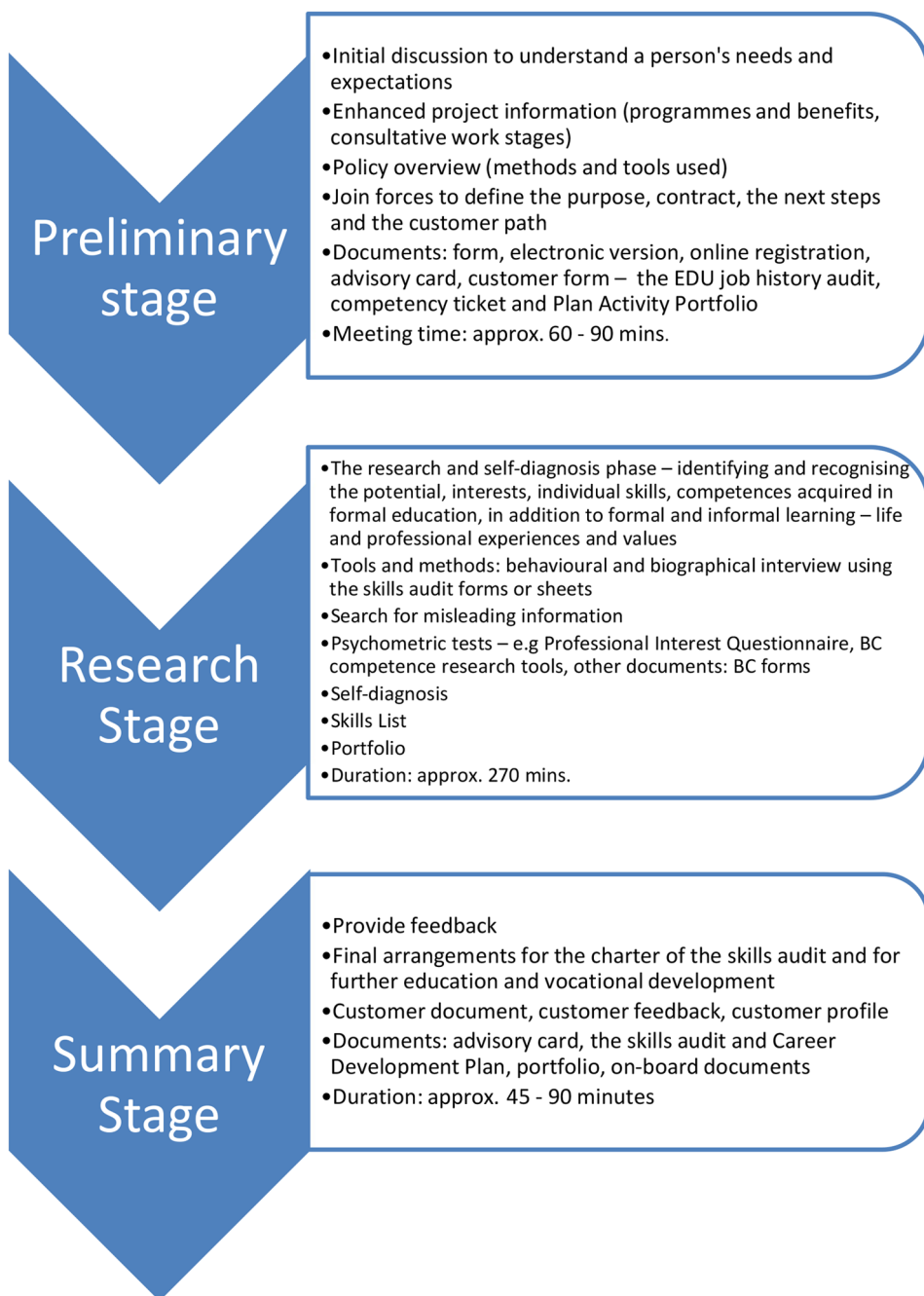


Figure 1: The main steps of the skills audit method (Source: own elaboration)

Methodologies applied during this stage include biographical and behavioural interviews.¹

As far as **biographical interviewing** (Juszczak, Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015; Barabasch & Marrill, 2014) is concerned, its aim is to establish participants' experience in different areas of their life (educational, professional, non-professional or as a hobby) and propose further action in the context of the competency identification and documentation process. The interview takes about 60 minutes and a counsellor may schedule another meeting with a participant if necessary. When preparing for the interview, the counsellor works with the list of questions and, during the meeting itself, they may also add new ones that will help analyse the information in detail, as it is important from the point of view of the career audit process. The information obtained during this type of interview includes:

- The course of education (e.g. schools, courses, experience outside school, diplomas and awards, areas of study interesting for a participant);
- Professional activity (e.g. work during school/studies, first job and subsequent work, undocumented work experience, occupied positions, favourite activities at work);
- Personal area (family, hobbies, interests, associations, activities in organisations, health condition with regard to pre-planned development activities, important facts of life, successes and failures, like-dislike tasks, context);

At the beginning of the interview (contract) in the skills audit process, individuals are informed that it only serves to verify any additional sources of their skills, including those that have not been disclosed so far. Discussing personal areas is voluntary and a person has the right to reveal only the information and level of detail they prefer. The person may also refuse to talk about this or ask to end the questions at any time.

The aim of **behavioural interviewing**, (Jurek, 2012) in turn, is to identify a person's competences developed by experiences and to plan further activities in the career audit process. The interview is based on a scenario in which the questions are structured from general to specific (funnel technique), thereby covering the areas of professional experience, personal life, key experiences and life events. The individuals are also asked to present the way they document their knowledge, skills and social competences discussed during the interview. To gather the relevant information, the counsellor uses the STAR interview technique (situation, task, action, result) and incorporates it into the document. The skills audit card is a table divided into three columns: competences, experiences and documents proving them.

The individual's task in the process is to engage in self-reflection, compile their experiences, evidence, documents and gather information about their education, job, qualification, work with the adviser to outline their competences that may possibly be developed by training and then validated. Moreover, the person makes a list of their competences and an individual development plan, specifying the skills that need im-

¹ The skills audit method was developed as part of a pilot project on qualifications, validation and quality assurance, run by the RLO in Cracow with the Educational Research Institute, 2013–2015.

proving. The adviser supports the person in the process of recalling their educational, professional and life background, pointing out that skills may result from acquired experience. Where suitable, the career counsellors also apply other tools, such as questionnaires and tests, to recognise professional interests, examine competences (e.g. professional interest) or identify participants' values (e.g. Schein's test). During the process, the adviser gives the feedback orally and prepares the written form.

Those who benefited from the creation of a skills audit sheet confirmed that they had not been aware of the value of their experience before creating the portfolio. Furthermore, the counselling service also proved to be of educational merit, informing participants about the possibilities of confirming their competences and obtaining certificates that could prove useful on the labour market and later in life (Bodzińska-Guzik et al., 2015).

Performing the skills audit in accordance with the procedure described above expects both high-level qualifications and experience of the adviser to provide the professional guidance. The comprehensive approach, familiarity with the tools and the combination of behavioural and biographical interviews is complemented by a broad and current knowledge of labour market opportunities, training markets and validation systems. Thus, it is a very complex role, calling for specific qualifications. With regard to description of the method and the skills required for its execution in the Polish Integrated Qualification Register, a new market qualification non-professional or as a hobby (Integrated Qualification Register, 20.01.2020).

The impact of the skills audit on individuals' further opportunities – an empirical study

The aim of the case study was to examine whether the skills audit could be the entry-way to the validation process. Hence, we concentrated on the individuals' perspective concerning their lives and "courses of actions" in their story. Therefore, we decided to conduct the qualitative research based on a biographical narrative interview, which turned out to be the optimal approach. We focused on investigating person's experiences, the significance attached to these experiences today and plans they have for the future (Rosenthal, p. 49). What is more, we have decided to make reference to the common project study and interview to cover all important aspects.

To begin with, one of many tasks in the Erasmus+ project "Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility (EffectVPL)" was developing the manual, based on the biographical in-depth interviews with individuals who participated either in the VPL process or the quasi-validation process. Four countries includes: Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Turkey.

This study helped us analyse the impact of the skills audit on individuals' further opportunities. The research was carried out using the tools developed and tested for this project but adapted to the needs of the study group in Poland.

Methodology – tool and sample

As part of the project work, an interview guide was compiled on conducting in-depth biographical interviews with those who have experienced validation.

In Poland, the guide was tested on two participants in the abovementioned pilot project of VPL in Malopolska. They were at different levels of formal education during the VPL process.

From June 2017 to February 2018 in the EffectVPL project, 14 interviews were carried out with those who had passed the validation process. Interviewees invited to the survey took part in VPL in the pilot project (2) either certified their qualifications through an extramural examination (7) or succeeded in their skills audit (4) as part of the Kierunek Kariera (Career Direction) project. One interviewee passed the validation process by relying on the portfolio method in a professional association.

Interviews, each lasting about an hour, were carried out among those who had been through the skills audit and accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Due to the difficulties of accessing the study group and the exploratory nature of research, it was decided to select a research sample on the basis of a survey. Both male and female interviewees took part. Participants' educational background varied from basic vocational school to university graduates. The study group was also diverse in age as the interviewees were in their thirties or sixties.

Results

The interviews with four clients who undertook the in-depth skills audit in the Kierunek Kariera project enriched the experiment, providing a plethora of information. There was significant discussion with people from different educational backgrounds, from basic vocational school to higher education, and varying viewpoints due to the diversity of age and generations (from the early thirties to the mid-sixties). Our participants revealed a number of professional, educational and occupational anecdotes during the interviews. Their current occupations, which are included in the table above, are just one episode in their entire life story.

We asked participants to share their life story with emphasis on their educational background, including non-school education and career paths. The participants were open to cooperating and admitted that it was easier for them to do so the second time. Finally, during the interview, one individual spontaneously referred to the skills audit, which turned out to be a breakthrough. Reflection on the process as a whole and its impact on their lives appeared positive. Depending on the person, the experience was more or less significant in their lives. It was certainly a turning point for every participant.

The perception of the process components was equally positive. The portfolio method is commonly used as part of the skills audit. This method enables self-reflection and is responsible for demonstrating professional experience. This may therefore be in the form of certificates, documents or recommendation letters. At the end, with the adviser contribution, a set of competences is presented, covering participants'

strengths and competitive advantages. This indicates an individual development plan and competences for improvement, acquisition or development.

The counsellor becomes a solid support in transferring participants' educational, professional and life background in the context of experience, skills and competences resulting from these experiences. Despite appearing to be long and exhausting, interviewees percept the process favourably. *"The audit I took part in was well planned. Meetings – three times, agreed time, reviewing documents, refreshing my professional and educational history but, in return, I received external feedback,"* said the male salesman. *"I saw how many skills I had, while the adviser helped me gain a true/realistic assessment of further opportunities open to me,"* he continued.

People who benefited from the skills audit often shared the reflection that they were not even aware of the value of their experience in building a portfolio. Thus, the counselling service proved educational significance for them to learn about the possibilities of confirming their competences and obtaining certificates that may be useful in the labour market. *"After meeting with a career counsellor: I found out that I had more options that I had thought/my situation was better than I had thought,"* the nurse said. The meetings showed her that she knew a great deal, encouraging her to fill in the gaps in her qualifications and find the strengths in her complex knowledge in the field of emergency medical services, for instance.

In general, participants in the skills audit assessed it positively. No doubts about the process itself (duration, timeframe or intervals between specific meetings) affected the positive feedback. None of the respondents claimed that the audit had had a negative effect on any aspect of their lives, with the majority indicating that it had had a positive impact on their career development and education.

Thus, the preliminary conclusions of the individuals' perspective of the skills audit are as following:

- The majority of respondents have seen a positive impact on their lives with regard to both their career and educational paths;
- Nobody observed any negative impact;
- The VPL process proved to be an opportunity for the interviewees;
- In general, VPL favours major changes at different stages of life, not only in individuals' careers.

Conclusions

All in all, integrating the two services: the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning, and career guidance constitutes the key message of this paper. Whereas each of them, separately, provides a significant value for individuals and society, the coexistence and systemic solution strengthen the synergy, allowing beneficiaries to notice it clearly. The assumption is still more compelling when viewed in conjunction with Cedefop publication (Cedefop, 2019), which highlights to close relation between VPL and guidance.

The emphasis in this study was placed on the fact that career counselling services are much more popular than VPL. Thus, career guidance may be perceived as a source of information on the validation service. As the information tool, the career counselling process not only provides information about the VPL as such but also about the possibilities of validation for validation providers and particular individuals. Moreover, career or life guidance may constitute the turning point that could help precisely identify skills for the validation process, thereby recognising and rewarding qualifications. After all, the individuals' skills may subsequently become more noticeable on the labour market.

This brings us to the fundamental conclusion of this paper. The skills audit might serve as the entryway to the validation process. The combination of several methodologies and approach methods, eclectic as it may seem, is well suited to either validation or guidance processes.

"To understand the relationship between validation and lifelong guidance, it is necessary to compare their distinct activities, bearing in mind that neither service has a single standardised method" (Cedefop, 2019, p. 14).

The lack of standardised method – typical of both combined services – allows greater flexibility and the use of distinct activities, thereby bringing tremendous advantages. Consequently, both processes require professional specialists with certified qualifications and experience as the quality content depends on the counsellors. Career advisers are responsible for providing feedback and information on educational opportunities, while motivating and offering VPL as appropriate. The key element is the feedback itself, however. Hence, the adviser's role is not to inform individuals about the skills they possess on the basis of the interview but to elicit the skills of the individual in the light of the opportunities on the modern world labour market. This is challenging and rewarding at the same time.

This study proves that individuals' perspectives on the skills audit and guidance, which led to the validation in general, are perceived as valuable. Although the main aim is occupational and/or educational, due to its distinct character, it is perceived as a milestone in their entire life, not only on their educational or professional path. Receiving feedback on reliable self-characteristics activates consciousness and facilitates entering the labour market. Thus, their skills and experiences are converted into qualifications and, after training, may be validated within the VPL process.

To conclude, the skills audit is a complex method that may serve as an entryway to the validation process. When deployed, it 1) meets clients' (individual) expectations and 2) responds to EU recommendations on the systemic coordination of both systems: validation and guidance.

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Part Two: Empirical Perspectives on VPL

The role of employers in VPL processes.

Benefits for employers: lessons learned from case studies.

ALEKSANDRA LIS AND JOANNA ŁUSZCZKI

Abstract

Many players in the validation processes are both participants and beneficiaries of these processes. In this part, we examine the role of employers and the benefits they derive from validation. We will present a set of issues in the area of human resources management and human resources development faced by entrepreneurs in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey, relevant self-assessment approaches for entrepreneurs and the range of positive outcomes they can gain from solutions offered by validation, as well as a guide to VPL solutions in domestic and European law. Our conclusions are drawn from a survey based on the case study method, which assessed how companies were implementing VPL and whether VPL led to diverse individual results. In each of the four countries, we conducted a study with the participation of five companies of various sizes: small, medium and large enterprises. They represented various industries selected for the purposes of the study, that is, the cleaning and maintenance industry, construction, production, gastronomy, and care services.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, lifelong learning, VPL, labour market, employers

Introduction

In modern societies, people are no longer expected to learn only in schools or in other formal ways. People learn all the time and everywhere in their lives. Lifelong learning is about making use of qualifications that people obtain during their lives. Its central aspect is validation, of which the main purpose is “building bridges between non formal and formal learning – and between education and the labour market” (Duvekot, Kang & Murray, p. 12). VPL (validation of prior learning) is a process with numerous definitions and can be understood in a broader or narrower meaning although it certainly has at least three stages: 1) recognition 2) evaluation 3) accreditation and valuation (Duvekot et al., 2014, p. 6–7)

TVPL has been developed to validate people's existing knowledge and skills, including those that are not easily discernible. Four models of VPL are discussed in the literature:

1. *An educational model to initiate a particular qualification;*
2. *An upgrade model to determine the educational or training needs of organisations or individuals;*
3. *An HRD model to match employees' competences to organisational aims;*
4. *A lifelong learning model to support the personal development bridge between formal education, especially vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE), and labour market.*¹ (Duvekot, Kang & Murray, 2014 p. 12)

Two are linked to the labour market and employers. Crucially, the labour market is a highly challenging environment for entrepreneurs. Moreover, it is dynamic and highly flexible as the challenges may vary depending on the size and sector of the enterprise as well as the geographical scope of its activities: a whole country, a region or even a smaller area. To understand this complex situation, we need a closer look from an insider perspective, with access to the daily struggles of entrepreneurs and the paths they see as a solution. In particular, we aim to define the role of employers in validation processes. Thus, this article aims to present the role of employers in VPL processes.

Our objectives are to get deeper insight into employers' perspective of the validation process, their knowledge of the procedures and understanding of the process itself, and their role in it, as well as into the benefits of validation for entrepreneurs. To reach them, we used the case study method in four European countries. The cases were different types of public and private enterprises representing the healthcare, construction, production, gastronomy, cleaning and maintenance sectors. The analysis of interviews conducted with various parties in each organisation shows the range of opportunities gained by employers through VPL and how crucial their role might be in the process itself.

Role of employers in VPL processes

Until now, the role of employers in the validation of prior non-formal and informal learning has not been clearly defined. We provide an overview of ideas on the role of employers found in the literature, policy recommendations and theoretical models. However, doubts remain due to the lack of empirical studies on the subject. Based on this literature query, the next part of this paper introduces our research objectives and investigates how this role is seen by the subjects themselves – the employers.

The most obvious role of employers in the VPL process is that of those who need to be persuaded to adopt this process and who are not easy to persuade (Halba, 2007,

¹ Underline added by citing authors.

p. 9). Moreover, it is rather the role of antagonist in a conflict of interests between employee and employer. The perspective of the conflict of interests is connected with employers' fear that employees who have enhanced qualifications and obtained certificates might easily change their place of employment (Enggaard & Aagaard, 2014, p. 104). However, it is possible to observe employers actively participating in employees' qualifications development and they are encouraged to take financial responsibility for their workers' acquisition of certificates:

"We must strongly encourage individuals and employers to invest more heavily in their skills development, not only to secure the best 'value for money' but to reap the benefits of people's potential. [...] We need to persuade more people and organisations that their future prosperity depends on broadening skills and raising skill levels" (European Commission, p. 4).

On the other hand, employers' cooperation with education institutions, awarding bodies, employment services and other parties involved in the VPL processes and/or lifelong learning is fundamental for these initiatives to be truly effective (Charrud, 2007; Enggaard & Aagaard, 2014; Anders & Lee et al., 2014). This is probably the most commonly invoked role of employers in both literature and policy reports, in particular since it applies both specifically to VPL and more broadly to lifelong learning. It is also connected with vocational education and training (VET), workplace training and apprenticeships, which require strong cooperation between the parties involved: learning providers, employers, state institutions and so on.

However, research also argues that the true, key role of employers becomes visible once the VPL process ends, when certificates for qualifications awarded in the validation process have to be recognised on the labour market (Cedefop, 2018; Duvekot, Kang & Murray, 2014). According to numerous studies describing national VPL systems (e.g. Charrud, 2007; Enggaard & Aagaard, 2014), one crucial role of the labour market is to incorporate certificates awarded in validation processes and regard them as equally valid as those obtained in formal education. The labour market is represented by trade unions, non-government organisations and, first and foremost, entrepreneurs, who recruit and employ staff and develop their qualifications. In this context, validation serves as a bridge between formal education and the labour market, and the role of employers is to be aware of this bridge.

Importantly, for great numbers of people, the validation process brings better employment opportunities (Enggaard & Aagaard, 2014, p. 98). These opportunities derive from 1) the acknowledgement of certifications awarded by employers to the person during the VPL process and 2) the empowerment resulting from the validation process. As a complex process with built-in guidance and expanded feedback elements, VPL offers individuals much more than the recognition of particular qualifications and the awarding of certificates. It has a much wider significance, bringing people an awareness of their own strengths in both their professional and personal lives (Duvekot, 2014, p. 36).

Methodology

The research method used in this paper is a multiple case study. As a method in organisational research, the case study method is particularly relevant because the key part of the research is to show internal processes and understand the context. For these reasons, we considered this method appropriate for researching the role of employers (Hartley, 2004, p. 323). Recognition of employers' role in the VPL process requires the most thorough understanding of the context. Moreover, to understand employers' perspective on their role and benefits of the validation, it is crucial to observe the organisation, obtain insight into its regular actions and internal processes. As Jean Hartley points out, many methods can be used to determine the context in organisational research but the case study method is the key one (Hartley, p. 323). This method also allows for a much better understanding of the phenomena analysed in the study since, as stated by Yin (2014), an empirical study of contemporary phenomena examines a phenomenon ('case') in depth and in a real-life context.

As part of the Erasmus+ project Effectiveness of Validation of Prior Non-formal and Informal Learning – EffectVPL, the research was carried out by the project partners in the four countries: Germany, Denmark, Poland and Turkey. The methodology of the study, including the research plan and the tool for conducting the study, was also elaborated in the project. To highlight the most important issues in the case studies and maintain the comparability of the data obtained, we prepared detailed instructions and a shared tool for the interviews planned as part of the case study.

The methodology and research plan included a work plan for the case study, research questions and detailed questions for the interviews (with the structure and the number of interviews depending on the size of the company), as well as the planned structure of each case study. It was decided that each partner would conduct three to five case studies among companies from various sectors and companies in which the employees had undergone the process of confirming their qualifications.

We set the following research questions:

- What is the level of employers' awareness of the concept of validating employees' competences?
- How do companies confirm qualifications obtained by informal and non-formal means?
- What is the attitude among the researched companies towards improving employees' competences?
- How do companies confirm qualifications during the recruitment process?

To identify the benefits of VPL for employers, discernible for companies at different levels, and employers' role in the process, we included in-depth interviews (IDI) in the case studies. We decided to conduct the interviews on three levels at each company (and case study): the CEO or top manager, the HR manager and an employee who had undergone the process of confirming their qualifications. The goal was to capture and

show the three different perspectives of the interviewees in the same company. Each partner in Denmark, Turkey, German and Poland organised and prepared the case studies according to the same interview structure and used a similar set of questions. This process helped us summarise and compare the cases in the four countries, while indicating the common parts and challenges of VPL.

Research tool

Since the case studies included interviews, we developed a research tool for the in-depth interviews (IDI) on the basis of our research questions. The tool presented suggestions for areas or themes to be covered during the interviews, with a list of detailed model questions for each area. The list was not regarded as exhaustive, however. It was emphasised that the main purpose of the instruments was to provide 'topics' rather than specific questions per se and, where questions are suggested in the following sections, they are essentially illustrative and not to be taken as the only way, or indeed the optimum way, of exploring the issue.

Study group/sample

The Denmark partner prepared interviews in diverse sectors: in the children's day care unit (age 0–6) in the Municipality of Aarhus, in a group of international retail companies with various units and departments, in a facility service department, a cleaning department and the local nursing home.

The Polish partner organised interviews in four places in Krakow: a large company offering cleaning, maintenance and security services for buildings and catering services; a medium-sized company building roads and bridges; a small company providing catering services and a Lublin foundation specialised in education and certification.

The Turkish partner held the interviews in three medium-sized companies: a company producing spare automobile parts, a tourism and food industry company and a heavy machine industry; one small company selling CNC machines and machine tools; and a micro enterprise active in the field of healthcare equipment and supplies.

The German partner conducted three case studies in organisations representing three different industries. The first one was a photographic and printing services provider, one of the largest companies of this type in Europe, with an approximately 3600-strong workforce. The second one was in the energy sector, employing approximately 1200 people and providing qualified staff in the field of energy technology for 27 other companies. Finally, the third study was realised in one of the biggest regional care centres in Bremen.

Despite the involvement of many researchers, it was challenging to conduct research in a variety of different cultural and legal environments, especially in terms of employment, education and VPL regulations. However, we were able to rely on our project experience and on previous research comparing the four countries in terms of VPL regulations from an institutional point of view (Haasler & Laudénbach, 2017).

Findings

While analysing the interviews, we found several areas related to employers' role in the VPL process. In consequence, we included the following areas in our presentation of the findings: employers' awareness of the concept of validation; attitude towards the raising and confirmation of employees' qualifications; recruitment procedures; attitude towards validation and, especially, views on its methods, financing and utility; experience with VPL processes. Our initial conclusion was that there were no significant differences between employers from various industries but there were differences in some areas, depending on the country in which the case study was conducted.

Awareness of the concept of validation

The level of awareness among employers of the concept of VPL varied; in general, however, it is not related to its use (or the use of some elements of validation) by entrepreneurs nor does it have an impact on their perception of their own role in this process. Entrepreneurs seem to be fairly knowledgeable about recruitment procedures, the development of employees' qualifications and even the confirmation of these qualifications but not about the concept of validation. We assume that this is a result of entrepreneurs' lack of familiarity with this concept, which is not embedded in the language of business unlike the other terms listed.

Furthermore, the concept of validation is not perceived as useful even when employers are familiar with it; especially in Poland and Denmark, they usually explain that they have no need for validation processes. In Germany and Poland, we observed a different attitude towards validation in the case of employees with a migration background – employers found validation very useful in this particular situation: "(...) the validation of qualifications would be helpful for Ukrainians and/or other migrants. Those who came to us were inexperienced, could not do anything, everyone was just learning, did not have any certificates or documents. Perhaps such validation could be very useful for them as it could help them understand what construction works are all about, what to expect and whether they can do it. If they had been trained before, they would receive documents confirming that they are skilled at something (...)" said one of the interviewees in the Polish case study. The German cases illustrated a particular, pragmatic approach to qualifications: no emphasis is placed on how an individual has learned something but it is seen as crucial for the company to have the option of offering its employees further training. This is : the German companies (in the case study) were open to the concepts of transition and VPL.

The reverse was observed in Turkey, where VPL processes are well-known, at least in theory, but this does not result from their use in practice and certainly does not induce trust in these processes. In Turkey, non-formal and informal education is not held in such high regard as formal education and seems to be confused with training. On the other hand, the validation process itself was mandatorily financed from company funds and was compulsory to some extent; therefore, larger enterprises organ-

ised VPL processes for their unskilled workers (i.e. without formal education) on quite an impressive scale.

Attitude towards the raising and confirmation of qualifications

In-house staff development paths are standard in large companies. In medium-sized enterprises, development opportunities are provided for senior staff. Further education opportunities are monitored and employees are offered internal courses. This looks very optimistic. There is, though, a dark side to the internal qualifications development in companies. Employees offered training do not have qualifications obtained in this way confirmed externally. “We have a large number of workers, for instance kitchen helpers, who do a lot of things on their own [without supervision], and they do all these things. We trust them and pay them for their work: they have been our employees for years. However, there is no need for the ladies who have been working as helpers in this kitchen for so long to receive certificates. It was crucial for them that we gave them an opportunity to have their skills recognised and increase their earnings”, an interviewee from Poland assured us. However, after leaving a particular place of employment, the qualifications thereby obtained are not externally recognised and confirmed.

Companies are unlikely to confirm formal qualifications. They may persuade employees to continue their formal education but with the goal of improving their formal qualifications, for example, by attending a formal course or undertaking university studies. By contrast, the development opportunities on offer, in the case of unskilled workers and even in the smallest enterprises, are the result of several factors, such as a high turnover rate, an attempt to retain an employee and the fact that staff often do not have the required qualifications, especially in an employee’s market. This is the case in all four countries, where it is difficult to find employees.

Recruitment procedures

Regardless of the country and the industry concerned, recruitment is now a crucial process for most employers owing to the lack of qualified candidates on the labour market. In virtually all case studies, employers mentioned their difficulties in finding well-qualified workers. This is not only due to the skills mismatch with the labour market but also because employers’ qualifications are not recognised and verified. VPL might help resolve the second issue. Meanwhile, many companies have invested resources in the recruitment process and trial periods to increase their chances of finding employees with the necessary qualifications. To sum up, recruitment usually:

- a) takes place through many channels: advertisements/through word of mouth/temporary work agencies (the least successful channel)
- b) focuses on attracting low-skilled workers and integrating them in the workplace. Very often, the most important factor is their ‘willingness to work’, especially in the case of low-skilled and unskilled workers.

Thus, the usefulness of validation in recruitment is considerable. “Today we are doing a work trial, which is time-consuming and, if there were more market qualifications, we could put our trust in validation, saving both time and money”, states an interviewee from the case study in Poland. This is an area where validation could be used much more frequently than at present; its development potential is enormous, both because of the shortage of people with formal education on the labour market and because employers are unable to wait until staff complete formal education. Employers are willing to invest in further training and on-the-job training in response to the insufficient supply of workers with formal certificates. In the German study, we observed a pragmatic approach: if someone has industry experience, they are offered further training in the workplace. It “is not important how you learned it, we’ll teach you by working with the Chamber of Crafts”, an interviewee from Germany assured us.

Attitude towards validation and, especially, views on its methods, financing and utility

With some exceptions (one case study from Poland), no examples indicate very good awareness of the concept of validation, of employers discussing its utility, methods, and so on. A Turkish company mentioned the obligation to finance employees’ validation processes and possible subsequent training and certification procedures. However, the employer does not regard validation as helpful from the company’s perspective. “I keep on talking about the lack of certificates. OK, there might be a fire in the kitchen, someone might cut themselves with a knife, the fryer might have a short-circuit... There are many dangers but we are careful and meticulous about these issues. I don’t understand how the VQA document eliminates the hazards here. I accept that a VQA certificate is required for heavy jobs in cookery/tourism/the food industry... but I really don’t understand why”, the Turkish interviewee explains. On the other hand, others in the same country found validation useful from a safety point of view. “I think that the validation of competences is indispensable for employees in manufacturing. The most important part in determining the quality of a product is manufacturing. In a situation where you cannot catch the error at the source, enormous material losses occur. You lose control if you don’t make products of good quality”.

Experience with VPL processes

Generally, these experiences are lacking or very limited, which is the greatest weakness of the functioning systems: they do not get through to the entrepreneurs. Many employers have sent employees to external examinations, for training in the Chamber of Crafts, to certified courses and so on, but these experiences cannot be equated with validation. This was also the most serious limitation of the presented study. The understanding of VPL among employers is still on a very basic or even lower level, which is why some elements of validation were equated with VPL and treated as such. Nonetheless, taking into account that the study examined the employers’ perspective, we

include these partial interpretations and view them as a sign that employers need more specific information on the VPL processes.

Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the role of VPL and its benefits for employers. Our case studies indicate some issues troubling entrepreneurs but the most important conclusion we have drawn from our research is that employers are not aware of the role they could play in the validation process. More importantly, in general they are also not aware of the validation concept: they do not use this term, even when they adopt some elements of the VPL process. Entrepreneurs in different countries have different approaches to formal education; this is the biggest challenge for institutions promoting lifelong learning and VPL.

There are some differences between the countries participating in the study, especially between Turkey and the other three. Formal education enjoys high esteem in Turkey whereas, in the other countries, employers emphasise that they put more trust in employees' real qualifications than in their formal education. However, despite the theoretically pragmatic German approach and the mistrust of Polish entrepreneurs towards formal education, employees in these countries often enter on the path of formal education after having their qualifications confirmed. In Poland, validation allows employees to re-enter the labour market with confirmed qualifications or to pursue formal education. We observed a similar situation in Denmark where, thanks to validation, people can re-enter the formal education system with the qualifications already acquired in a non-formal or informal way.

We also aimed to present a set of issues in the area of human resources management (HRM) and human resources development (HRD) faced by entrepreneurs in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. The table below presents practical HR issues indicated in the case studies discussed in our article. These conclusions were also the basis for the manual prepared in the EffectVPL Erasmus+ project.

In this set of HR elements, one area of particular interest is professional development, on which every employer focuses internally but without confirming what employees actually 'learn' by doing their work. The next issue is that of the existence of subsidiary internal systems for recognising and developing qualifications in large companies as an alternative to formal validation and certification. This concerns Denmark and Poland in particular.

Looking more closely at the challenges indicated in the case studies, the following are the most onerous for employers:

- High staff turnover
- Lack of reliable knowledge/skills despite formal certificates/qualifications
- Difficulties in communicating with workers with a migration background
- Insufficient competences/faulty work performance

- Lack of qualified staff on the market/unavailability of employees with the required qualifications (insufficient supply of employees with the required qualifications on the labour market)
- Recruitment channels: job offers/recruitment through word of mouth/temporary work agencies (the least successful channel)
- Temporary employees: the potential opportunity to recruit them as permanent employees if employers invest in the recognition and development of their qualifications.

Since we aimed to point out the benefits of VPL for employers, it may come as a surprise that we have listed the challenges they face on the labour market. This was, however, the first step on the way to identifying the benefits employers can derive from validation. For each and every problem listed above, the validation processes offer a solution – not in the form of employment services, educational institutions or other institutional partners, but the employers themselves.

Despite not using the term ‘validation’ literally and implementing only partial VPL processes, employers are aware of the variety of opportunities provided by the recognition and validation of prior learning. Especially in terms of recruitment, both internal and external, validation processes might be a solution to the problem of high employee turnover and the mismatch between employees’ qualifications and their roles in the organisation. “We think that validation would be very helpful in the recruitment process. We might save time and money we now have to spend to check whether candidates actually have the qualifications they claim to; furthermore, they are not always qualifications from the formal education system but computer-related skills, for instance” (a manager in the fourth case study, Poland). The VPL processes can also help employers deal with the challenges related to the recruitment and training of staff with a migration background.

Validation processes may not only allow employers to save time and money but can also be useful in the case of a shortage of skilled workers on the labour market. “However, we don’t systematically take informal competences into account during recruitment, though if an applicant gives us examples that prove the competences that we need, e. g. experience earned as the board manager in the local rabbit association, they are relevant to us as well. (...) Our departments focus more on what a person can do. They usually adopt a pragmatic approach: come to our premises for a day’s or week’s work trial. And then we will see if we are a good match” (a manager in the second case study, Germany).

Another important benefit is connected with safety in the workplace – a key factor in many industries. Some of the case studies were from the construction industry, the hospitality sector and the machine industry. The Turkish case study, already mentioned in this article, shows how employers can benefit from the VPL processes to ensure safety for their entire staff. The final issue is unsatisfactory work performance, which sometimes signals a need for training or a mismatch between an employee’s qualifications and their position in the organisation. We also found solutions to these

two problems in our case studies – solutions made possible by the validation concept. When a person's real qualifications are recognised, there is a need to develop only those they are actually lacking, which saves both time and money. In consequence, employers are more likely to encourage staff to go through a validation process instead of dismissing them and hiring someone new, especially because it is not easy to find an acceptable replacement. "We cannot hire just anyone to take care of our elderly citizens (...). Some of our employees have low self-esteem. They often need a gentle push to accept the need to improve their skills" (fourth case study, Denmark).

In conclusion, employers rarely see themselves on the VPL bridge, to echo the metaphor introduced by Ruud Duvekot, Dae Joong Kang & Jane Murray (2014) but they often use this bridge in reality. The results presented show that employers are unlikely to use the terms 'validation' or 'VPL' but are likely to use the VPL processes to prevent or limit the negative phenomena affecting their companies. Hence, the interviewees were eager to play an active role in the validation processes whenever they saw them as advantageous to their company. Public employment services, educational institutions, validation and lifelong learning offices should therefore put more effort into informing business partners about 1) VPL – many entrepreneurs still have not heard of these processes, despite having implemented partial validation (elements of validation) 2) the possible benefits of validation. These two actions should get employers involved while encouraging many more people to embrace the opportunities offered by VPL, which would not be possible without the involvement of employers.

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Germany's winding paths to the implementation of validation

Or: how to introduce a new instrument without damaging a successful system?

MARIO PATUZZI

Abstract

The recognition and certification of competences, those acquired non-formally or informally in the process of work for example, is currently one of the central themes of vocational training policy in Germany. Undertaking to introduce legal validation procedures, the paper first outlines the needs of validation with regard to the low skilled and for the professional development of qualified employees, emphasising the importance of validation as a potential motor for upskilling and further training. Subsequently, based on the concept of the trade unions, the two pilot projects of validation procedures will be presented and evaluated; lastly, the connection with the intensive debate on partial qualifications in Germany will be clarified. The core issue is the question of how future validation procedures can be embedded in the VET system to be effective, especially for the low skilled.

Background in Germany

Until now, knowledge, skills and capabilities¹ have been recorded in Germany almost exclusively through formal education and training courses leading to the acquisition of qualifications. Evidence is largely based on formalised courses of education and examinations in the various vocational training sectors in Germany. Acquisition of competences outside school, VET and higher education is only documented to a limited extent and thus receives little attention. In particular, informally acquired work

¹ The German term 'Kompetenz' does not have an English equivalent. The actors in the dual VET system in particular prefer to use the term 'Berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit' (BMJV, 2020), occupational proficiency, or '(Berufliche) Handlungskompetenz', (vocational) action competence. The Dual Training Act refers to knowledge, skills and capabilities that constitute this occupational proficiency. In the German National Qualifications Framework (NQF), Kompetenz is understood as the individual's ability and willingness to use knowledge and skills, as well as personal, social and methodological capabilities, and to behave in a thoughtful, individual and socially responsible manner. In this sense, Kompetenz is interpreted as comprehensive action competence (Bund-Länder-Koordinierungsstelle für den Deutschen Qualifikationsrahmen, 2013, p. 60). In the German NQF, Kompetenz is presented in the dimensions of professional competence (knowledge and skills) and personal competence (capabilities). Due to the manifold and complex definitions and terms, the author fundamentally summarises here the terms knowledge, skills and capabilities under the collective term competence.

experience – and competences gained through such experience – is underestimated and cannot be fully utilised by employees for their needs.

As in other European countries, the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on the validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in December 2012 set in motion a process that is intended to develop and test new procedures, making informal and non-certified competences transparent and enabling them to be recognised. Most recently, the National Skills Strategy confirmed that the visibility and usability of informal learning and the associated opportunities for developing skills and continuing vocational training must be improved to meet the demand for skilled workers and offer fair opportunities for participation (Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie, 2019, p. 16).

However, Germany is affected to a certain extent by the recognition and crediting of non-formally and informally acquired competences. Since the late 1960s, the 'Externerzulassung' – the option of examination for external candidates – has been an instrument in the Dual Training Act; this regulates admission to a regular VET examination without prior apprenticeship and thus includes the validation of non-formally and informally acquired competences. This also applies analogously to the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code (Handwerksordnung, HwO). Since 2012, the Foreign Recognition Act (Anerkennungsgesetz, BQFG) has established a legal claim to the examination of equivalence of foreign vocational qualifications with German qualifications; the Act also contains regulations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. If diplomas cannot be presented through no fault of one's own, it is possible to carry out a qualification analysis (Qualifikationsanalyse), which also includes non-formally and informally acquired competences. The 'Valikom' pilot project is based on the prototype of the qualification analysis of the Foreign Recognition Act. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF) now wants to lay the foundations for the statutory introduction of the validation of occupational relevant competences for the coming legislative period of the German Bundestag (from 2021).

Many questions are still unanswered with regard to introduction and implementation, however. In particular, the embedding of these validation procedures in the dual system of VET remains open. This is shown firstly by the critical discussion on the competing project MySkills, which was developed by the Federal Employment Agency, the German PSA, in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation. Secondly, there are also connections with the discussion on the standardisation of partial qualifications and the extent to which there is a need to modularise the dual system of VET. In short: the implementation of validation procedures in the dual VET system touches on fundamental questions of how this system should be oriented and conditioned in future.

Objectives and target groups of validation

The implementation of procedures and regulations for validation presupposes an agreement on the objectives of validation among the relevant actors in the dual VET system. Reference is made here to the consistently high number of 20 to 34-year-olds who are not formally qualified and employees without formal qualification. The heterogeneity of the target group of low-skilled workers, and ultimately also their living conditions and employment histories, is often overlooked, however. Results of the micro census on labour market participation for 2019 offer greater insight: 4,494 million workers are thus in employment without a formal (VET or HE) qualification. Of these, 3,814 million people were employed with a permanent contract, 655,000 with fixed-term contracts; 2,841 million are in full-time and 1,652 million in part-time employment (Destatis, 2019). This data indicates the increased participation of low-skilled workers in the labour market. However, it does not answer the question of the extent to which low-skilled workers are employed, at what level of work requirements, in what (contractual) employment relationships and at what price. Findings indicate that low-skilled workers are mostly employed in the low-wage sector and in insecure and unstable employment relationships. It can be assumed that the majority of the employment histories of low-skilled workers are characterised by atypical employment relationships (fixed-term contracts, temporary work/work contracts, part-time, marginal employment) and recurrent unemployment, and are unstable to an increasing extent (Eichhorst et al., 2019; Sperber & Walwei, 2017). At the very least, it can be assumed with a high degree of probability that low-skilled workers have fewer alternatives in their choice of employment opportunities (Seifert, 2017; Sperber & Walwei, 2017). The latter reflects the structural changes in the labour market over the past decades. By contrast, the Hartz laws of 2003/2004 created an institutional framework that tended to favour the use of atypical forms of employment and, under Hartz IV law, increased the pressure on the unemployed and persons threatened by unemployment to accept non-preferred forms of employment.

The political discourse on the implementation of validation procedures and regulations is often linked to the hope of increasing the labour market mobility of low-skilled workers through validation instruments. Nonetheless, focusing on the low skilled would mean that the potential of validation procedures would not be fully exploited. For example, the 2013 BiBB-BAuA employee survey shows that only 25 % of employees actually work in their trained profession; the rest have a related or completely different occupation (Hall & Martin, 2013). In addition, this survey shows the high relevance of work experience and informal learning at work as a source of competence development for employees (Hall & Martin, 2013). Finally, in connection with the digitalisation of the world of work, Pfeiffer & Suphan point out that 71 % of employees are already able to deal with complexity and change (Pfeiffer & Suphan, 2015, p. 11). If today's professional and life biographies are no longer linear and the importance of learning in the process of work is growing, validation will play a more crucial role than before for the future development opportunities of employees. This does not

render apprenticeship or other forms of initial vocational education and training meaningless. On the contrary, it is still the best basis for developing comprehensive, (vocational) action competence and organisational work capacity (Schütt, Pfeiffer & Ritter, 2015).

The implementation of validation procedures and instruments therefore goes hand in hand with a strengthening of employees' competence development and occupational status, which drives the strengthening of lifelong learning, opens up connections to further career development and CVET, while also giving HR managers and work councils further opportunities to reinforce in-company training. Experience gained to date from the joint programme "ESF Social Partner Directive on CVET and Equal Opportunities" (Sozialpartnerrichtlinie Weiterbildung und Gleichstellung)² shows that in-company learning is successful where employees' existing competences are taken up in the company. The cooperation of the parties involved is therefore a decisive success factor in improving the visibility and usability of informal learning, and the associated opportunities for CVET.

Germany has a diverse range of competence recording and assessment instruments, however. On the one hand, companies often only use procedures and instruments for identification and documentation selectively, for example in the recruitment process and for personnel development. On the other hand, in many cases, development-oriented procedures are also offered as counselling services, which tend to be deployed more for personal positioning. One mixed type is the AiKomPass³, for example. Developed by the joint agency (Agentur Q) of the social partners in the metal and electrical industry in Baden-Württemberg (IG Metall and Südwestmetall), the AiKomPass maps competences acquired in relation to the requirements of typical tasks in the sector and documents general competences, such as voluntary work, at the same time. The AiKomPass thus represents an important link in the developmental step towards binding validation. Nevertheless, in view of the diverse range of company projects, models and forms of competence acquisition in the work process, the question ultimately remains unanswered as to how these competences can be visualised, reliably documented and ultimately recognised under public law. Finally, for employees, it is also a question of how the competences they have acquired in the process of work can be connected and utilised on the labour market and in the VET system.

Conceptual ideas of the trade unions in Germany

In 2017, the German Trade Union Confederation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB) and affiliated trade unions agreed in a separate concept that non-formally and informally acquired competences should be made visible and usable for employees (DGB, 2017). This presupposes, on the one hand, that the documentation of recorded competences is conclusive and meaningful and, on the other hand, that the validation

² <https://www.initiative-fachkraefte-sichern.de>

³ <https://www.aikompass.de>

of recorded competences is regulated. Both should be regulated under public law. Parallel structures to the existing VET system shall not exist. If validation is to have a positive effect on employees, it must be embedded in the VET system. The introduction of regulated validation must therefore meet fundamental requirements:

- A broad consensus of the relevant actors in the VET system and the labour market is needed to establish trust and acceptance in these new procedures.
- The assessment and certification of non-formally and informally acquired competences must determine whether and to what extent there is comparability with a formal VET qualification.
- This requires a legal basis with binding entitlements to counselling, documentation and access to regulated validation and must be docked with the competent bodies under the Dual Training Act (usually chambers).
- Access to validation procedures should be regulated in such a way that the importance of apprenticeships as a basis for further competence development is taken into account. In our view, a minimum age of 25 years and at least three years of professional experience are prerequisites for access to validation.
- Finally, financing issues such as costs for validation procedures and supplementary training measures must be clarified before implementing regulated validation.

Furthermore, the implementation of validation procedures should be carried out in three steps that build on each other:

1. Information and guidance should be easily accessible. The motivation for regulated validation procedures can be in-company counselling, for example.
2. Competence recording is the next step, which should identify and document existing competences. Minimum standards should be introduced in this regard:
 - Those interested in validation must be able to rely on their competences being identified and recorded by suitable and qualified professionals. First of all, a validation facilitator should be involved as the 'master of the procedure' as well as suitable experts (e. g. examiners) who have no operational connection to the people interested in validation.
 - The bodies carrying out the competence recording can be the competent bodies under the Dual Training Act, but certified VET providers and companies are also eligible.
 - Professional and multidisciplinary competences are to be recorded.
 - A competence record is divided into three components: first, a summary of confirmed formal and non-formal evidence in the form of CV instruments; second, a self-assessment by those interested in validation; and, third, an external assessment by the validation facilitators and experts. The result should be recorded in a competence balance, which may be suitable as an individual overview, as a reference for CVET, as an application document or as proof for admission to an examination for external candidates. Nonetheless – and this has changed – it can also be suitable proof for regulated validation.

3. Finally, the competence balance leads to the competence assessment. The latter determines whether there is comparability with formal qualifications. The competent bodies under the Dual Training Act should be entrusted with organising the implementation of competence assessments. The competence assessment itself should be placed in the hands of the examination committees of the competent bodies. Finally, the competent body certifies the result of the competence assessment.

Pilot projects in Germany for validation

It would be presumptuous to believe that trade union decisions are converted into governmental action without any changes. However, the trade union concept for validation of 2017 still serves DGB and affiliated trade unions as a common thread and a set of criteria for classifying and assessing the pilot projects. Since 2016, the BMBF has been funding the pilot project 'Valikom'⁴, based in Chambers of Industry and Commerce and Chambers of Crafts, which was designed to develop and test a standardised procedure for validating occupationally relevant competences. In the same year, in cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation, the Federal Employment Agency set up a pilot project to record and identify occupation-related competences (MySkills – Berufliche Kompetenzen erkennen). For a long time, it was not clear which of the two projects was to become the blueprint for future validation schemes. In the following, both projects will be presented and evaluated.

The MySkills project

The MySkills project aimed to identify non-formally and informally acquired skills by means of technology-based procedures, thereby improving the counselling and labour market integration of refugees and low-skilled workers. The project was implemented by the Federal Employment Agency and developed by Bertelsmann Foundation. These test procedures were to be carried out independently by the clients of the Federal Employment Agency (jobseekers) with support through videos and pictures and thus with minimum reference to language. Test results were automatically transmitted to the Agency's placement specialist. The client receives a copy of the test result in a subsequent counselling interview.

From the outset, the DGB and trade unions doubted that MySkills was the right approach to validation. At best, it was an instrument to improve the placement of low-qualified jobseekers. The test results correspond to performance level surveys (as in the PISA studies) and indicate how suited the test subjects might be for employment

4 www.validierungsverfahren.de

in certain occupational fields. Nonetheless, these tests cannot prove whether the individuals are able to apply their knowledge in the process of work.

On the other hand, as the project progressed, it appeared that the project operators were trying to use the technology-supported skill recording procedure to set up a parallel system of labour market-relevant certificates that was superficially oriented to the VET system, yet independent of VET standards and independent of the VET players. In particular, the test result structure in the form of certificates and the separate marketing of the MySkills test by the Bertelsmann Foundation⁵ were seen as evidence of this. Trade unions, employers' associations and the chambers made it clear that they objected to the project's chosen direction and that under no circumstances would MySkills serve as the reference project for future validation procedures. The Federal Employment Agency is now considering discontinuing the project as placement specialists have little use for the test results when advising their clients. Finally, the agreement on the National Strategy for Continuing Education 2019 clearly emphasised that the Valikom project and not the MySkills project was to be the basis for further steps towards validation.

The Valikom project

The Valikom project, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and implemented by the Chambers of Industry and Commerce and the Chambers of Crafts, aims to develop and test a standardised procedure for the validation of vocationally relevant competences. The assessment of occupationally relevant competences is based on recognised initial VET qualifications and – as with recognition procedures for foreign qualifications – is determined in terms of equivalence.

Although the DGB and trade unions would have supported the testing of Valikom procedures in other regulated areas of VET, such as social, healthcare and education occupations, they welcomed the focus of the pilot project from the beginning. This applies in particular to the fact that responsibility for carrying out the assessment and certification procedure is to be placed with the competent bodies under the Dual Training Act and that the proof of competences acquired is to be designed in line with the reference standards of recognised initial VET qualifications. The DGB and trade unions viewed these decisions as a rejection of a parallel system. On the other hand, Valikom does not narrow the target group to low-skilled workers. Thus, in future, there is a possibility that all employees will be able to have their non-formally and informally acquired (vocational) competences validated. Overall, the project has shown that the developed and tested procedures can be implemented in reality. However, many questions are still unanswered regarding the implementation. For example, Valikom's assessment of competences is only a good solution on the surface. The

5 <https://www.myskills.de>

dual control principle applies to the professional experts, with a full-time chamber consultant as one of the two controllers. However, as a rule, the consultant has already advised the person interested in validation and helped them complete the self-assessment form. Both the objectivity of the chamber consultant and the validity of the assessment are no longer given. Moreover, it is unclear how professional experts are selected. If the assessment procedure is to be robust and meaningful, we need a clear separation between the role of the chamber consultant as adviser and organiser of the procedure and the role of the experts, who should be professionally qualified and come from an operative and work process-related context.

On the other hand, it has also become clear that there is no equivalence with the Valikom procedures in terms of the comprehensive (vocational) action competence, which is ultimately determined in the final examination of a VET qualification. Rather, the question arises of how to embed Valikom procedures in the existing dual VET system. Specifically, the relationship between validation procedures and external admission to the final examination must be clarified. In our view, the possibility of linking validation and external admission to the final examination is a good way of doing this. In addition to the standard access of one and a half times of the apprenticeship period, it is also possible to allow external admission by making (vocational) action competence credible (i.e. by documenting informal and non-formal acquisition of competence). Apart from evidence of training measures, practical experience is often cited here. Difficulties arise if work experience is not or only insufficiently documented. In such cases, the Valikom procedures could be used as a supplement on the way to external admission to the final examination in the sense of certified work experience. Nonetheless, identifying and documenting during the counselling process which competences and work experiences are adequately certified would be a prerequisite for this. However, as already described above, there are no sufficiently well-founded starting and stopping points for this form of competence recording or competence balancing on which employees, companies, education providers and competent bodies could draw. More common standards of competence recording and competence documentation could prove useful in visualising non-formally and informally acquired competences, thereby simplifying access to external admissions but also improving the counselling and placement activities of the Federal Employment Agency.

If the basis for legally implementing validation is to be laid in the coming years, the political decision makers would be well advised to link the Valikom procedures more closely to external admission to the final examination and enable more common procedures for recording and documenting competences. This will also be necessary because, in the upskilling discourse, not just validation, but the issue of partial qualifications is also coming increasingly to the fore.

Upskilling with partial qualifications?

For some years now, there has been intensive debate in Germany about the suitability of partial qualifications as an instrument for upskilling low-skilled adults (Severing & Baethge, 2015; BiBB Hauptausschuss, 2018). Currently, the BMBF is funding at least three larger projects that are directly related to partial qualifications as an instrument for upskilling low-qualified people with the aim of advancing the quality-assured development of the nationwide, standardised implementation of partial qualifications in occupations in particular demand (Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie, 2019, p. 18). The Federal Employment Agency also intends to continue its activities to expand partial qualifications, viewing standardised, occupation-related partial qualifications as an increasingly important alternative on the gradual path to VET qualifications (Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie, 2019, p. 18). Obviously, numerous actors regard partial qualifications as a suitable – if not the most suitable – instrument in the context of upskilling low-skilled workers. In particular, the Bertelsmann Foundation is endeavouring to increase the political status of partial qualifications and thus set up a parallel system to dual VET (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020). Thus, partial qualifications represent an alternative path to implementing validation procedures, framed by a special narrative. Partial qualifications would combine several advantages at once: tailored provision, orientation on VET qualifications and labour market usability (Wolf et al., 2018, p. 8). This narrative offers a simple upskilling solution.

However, this narrative cannot deliver on its promises. As a special analysis of labour market statistics by the Federal Employment Agency for the DGB shows, this type of measure does not usually lead participants to a formal VET qualification and, for the time being, helps them remain on the level of unskilled labour (Patuzzi, 2020). The analysis of the Federal Employment Agency shows very clearly that only a small minority of 4% aim to obtain external admission to a final examination. Instead, for many graduates with partial qualifications, the focus seems to be on their employability in combination with the acquisition of entitlement certificates (driving licences, welding licences, security permission, etc.). However, there are doubts as to whether partial qualifications can achieve permanent integration into stable employment relationships. This is because partial qualifications are most frequently used in industries where low-skilled workers are disproportionately employed in marginal and/or temporary jobs, usually on low wages. Whether partial qualifications as a training measure can build a bridge to stable employment and a secure existence or whether it is a training measure for optimising low-wage sectors remains unclear at present.

A look at the practice of upskilling and supplementary training measures within the framework of recognition procedures for foreign qualifications also shows that partial qualifications do not correspond to tailored provision. Due to the diverse individual skill needs, individual training plans must also be drawn up, which often do not correspond to the standardised framework of partial qualifications and thus also make course-based training in the form of group measures considerably more difficult (BMBF, 2019). Standardising partial qualifications, as sought by some actors, neither

offers added value for practical application nor reflects any need, since the demand of participants usually only relates to one partial qualification measure with the associated acquisition of entitlements.

Particularly with a view to the precarious employment histories of low-skilled workers, the implementation of documentation of recorded competences would be extremely helpful in the area of upskilling, which transparently records previous professional experience, education and training measures (e.g. also partial qualifications). It could thus provide information for individual career development and possibly for acquiring a formal qualification. In other words, partial qualifications are not a solution for upskilling the low-skilled, but the implementation of validation procedures is a chance for the low-skilled to escape their precariousness.

Prospects

The National Continuing Education Strategy 2019 agreed that the BMBF and the German Länder, with the involvement of the social partners, will examine possibilities and variants for a nationally binding implementation of the tested validation procedure according to Valikom (Nationale Weiterbildungsstrategie, 2019, p. 17). The BMBF has announced that a corresponding law (from 2021) could possibly be passed in the coming legislative period of the German Bundestag. Irrespective of the majority existing in parliament at that time, it will be the concern of the trade unions to create a counterweight to the often not altruistic and partly competing interests of chambers, employers' associations, foundations and training providers and to work towards an open validation procedure that is embedded in the structures of the VET system and which allows access and connections to more CVET and decent work.

The potential, but also the risks, resulting from the gradual establishment of a digital architecture in the field of CVET through platforms and platform-related tools are not yet foreseeable. The European Commission has already made a certain progress with its new Europass platform and related services, in particular with the new Europass and tools for digital certification to present diplomas and certificates more transparently in a type of CV and competence portfolio. Whether the new Europass platform is suitable for the purposes and objectives of the German VET system must remain open at present. We are on the cusp of a huge experiment.

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The individual perspective on VPL.

A comparison of experiences from Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey.

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Abstract

The validation of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is central to the EU's approach of lifelong learning. It aims to enhance the employability, labour market opportunities and educational perspectives of disadvantaged individuals on the labour market, such as low-skilled, unemployed and migrant workers. VPL is seen and conceptualised as a tool to improve social inclusion and the labour market mobility of all age groups. At the same time, it increases the transparency and usability of informal learning outcomes. This paper emphasises the individual perspective on VPL in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. Going beyond the policy level, it is necessary to focus on the individual benefit of a validation process. The paper links institutional VPL practice based on the national validation policy with the concrete benefits to the individuals who have started or completed a validation process. This comparative analysis of the four European countries, with their varying regions and socio-cultural context, shows the differences between national understandings and practices of VPL and their impact on individuals.

Keywords: Validation of prior learning, biographical research, informal learning

Introduction

The validation and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is a priority of the European Union's (EU) educational policies and central to its understanding of lifelong and life-wide learning. The aim is to strengthen the flexibility of learning pathways to increase labour market inclusion and mobility across Europe. One key objective thereby is to enhance the labour market opportunities and educational perspectives of disadvantaged individuals, such as low-skilled, unemployed, migrant workers, refugees and individuals with restricted labour market and learning opportunities. In this context, VPL is seen and conceptualised as a tool to improve social inclusion and the labour market mobility of all age groups. At the same time, this approach emphasises the centrality of the individual by focusing on their needs, interests and benefits (Cedefop, 2015).

In the past two decades, many different VPL initiatives have been started and implemented at the national and European level, thereby leading to the significant advancement of VPL, particularly in terms of creating policy frameworks and piloting validation methods and procedures (Colardyn & Bjørnavold, 2004; Andersson, Fejes & Song-Ee, 2004; Diedrich, 2013; Harris, Wihak & Van Kleef, 2014). Nevertheless, VPL in Europe presents a fragmented picture with some countries not yet having engaged in the process (Haasler, Laudenbach & Anslinger, 2018). While continued efforts at various levels and the development of common European principles for VPL seek to move from fragmentation to stronger coherence, limited evidence exists concerning the impact and effectiveness of validation and what benefits individuals who have completed a validation of their prior learning actually derive from it.

In this paper, we elaborate on the effectiveness of VPL policies and practice in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. The focus is thereby placed on the benefits of VPL for the individual, the perception of the process and its connection to the educational system and labour market. In the first part, we outline the national VPL approaches in the four countries. In the second part, we analyse biographical interviews with individuals who completed different types of validation processes. We discuss the contrasting experiences in the four countries and the predominant benefits offered within the national VPL system. We compare the content of the interviews focusing on four dimensions: the feeling of improvement, the description of the VPL process, the linking of the VPL process to the educational system (including new educational opportunities) and to the labour market (including new employment opportunities).

The theoretical framework and underlying assumptions

As mentioned above, within the EU the validation systems vary from member state to member state. Due to this variation, we have to consider these influencing factors when analysing the effect of VPL on individuals in the EU. It is necessary to understand the national context of VPL and hence to understand the effect of VPL on the individual level. Therefore, we chose to narrow the scope of analysis to Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey. The four countries represent different European regions as well as contrasting socio-cultural contexts, which influence the educational and labour market. The findings on the validation systems in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey are based on unpublished Policy Reports that have been developed during the ongoing Erasmus+ project “Effectiveness of VPL Policies and Programmes for Labour Market Inclusion and Mobility – Individual and Employer Perspectives (EffectVPL)”. The countries were chosen according to the different stages of their implementation of VPL policies at the beginning of the project period.

As we focus on the linking of individual perspectives with the VPL systems in the four countries, we outline our underlying assumptions briefly. Following von Felden and Schmidt-Lauße (2015), we maintain that individual life courses are shaped by institutional arrangements and ascriptions. As Kohli (1985, 2003) argues, it is institu-

tions such as the education system, the labour market or the pension insurance scheme that roughly shape our lives. The individual's life course is arranged around the work system and must be organised to fit into the system. At the same time, this individualised conception of the life course corresponds to the activating labour market policies that have been developed under the EU's approach to employability. In this context, these individual characteristics have to conform to the needs of the labour market.

At this point, we can link the validation of prior learning to our biographical approach: the individual must have biographical competences to adapt to the labour market and frame their skills and working experiences throughout the work system. This individualised process must be examined from a biographical perspective. By adopting a biographical research approach, we aim to outline these perspectives in the respective work system. Thus, we are interested in how individuals cope with changes in their lives. Moreover, we endeavour to indicate the effects of those changes on their personal labour and educational situation. As Duvekot et al. (2007) argue, VPL comprises an empowering effect. This means that the individual defines their competences through the validation process, thereby becoming aware of and empowered by their "employability-potential" (Duvekot et al., 2007, p. 9). For our analysis, we focus on VPL as (1) the recognition of foreign degrees as equal to the qualifications in the host country, (2) the validation of competences, granting admission to an external examination of vocational education and training (VET) and (3) the validation of competences and career guidance.

We chose this biographical perspective to reflect the effectiveness of European policies. Thus, we link the policy level with the individual level, hereby shedding light on the impact of European policies on the individual. Consequently, we define effectiveness as the improvement of an individual's personal employment situation either (1) by receiving official recognition in the respective labour market or (2) by having their competences validated and thus being granted access to further education.

Our analysis is based on 25 semi-structured interviews with persons who passed the validation process and were conducted in Germany, Poland, Denmark and Turkey¹ in the period from June 2017 to February 2018. The interviews were conducted between several weeks to one year after the interviewees had completed their VPL process. The interviews, each lasting about an hour, were carried out among individuals who took part in VPL processes of different kinds. Due to the difficulty of access to the study group and the exploratory nature of research, it was decided to pick out a research sample on the basis of voluntary selection. Using different channels of communication (emails, telephone calls, leaflets in the VPL centres), we contacted former VPL beneficiaries. The participants' educational background varied from basic vocational school to university graduates. The majority of interviewees had at least a high school degree. In Turkey, the participants were generally employed as skilled workers. Half of the employees who benefited from the certification process in this study had attained a lower education level or completed primary school (50.7%). About a third of

1 The interviews were conducted as part of the Erasmus+ project EffectVPL.

the participants had a high school degree (31.9%), while a minority had a two-year (11.6%) or four-year (5.8%) higher education degree. Most interviewees had completed the VPL process successfully. Only two interviewees failed to have their qualification recognised in Germany.

It was not possible to conduct interviews with a biographical perspective in Turkey. Instead, questionnaires were used to interview 69 employees who had undergone the VPL process. These questionnaires also provided some insight into the VPL process from the beneficiaries' point of view. To reach the target sample, we first contacted all authorised certification bodies (ACB) in Turkey via e-mail or telephone, requesting their cooperation in finding companies that recruit people with a Vocational Qualification Certificate (VQC), a form of VPL. However, only one of the nearly hundred ACBs agreed to cooperate. This certification body gave us a list of companies that employ certified workers. We then contacted these companies to ask if we could approach their employees holding a VQC to collect data. Only one company agreed to help. However, a biographical approach meant it was not possible to collect data in an interview as managers were unwilling to release their employees from their duties, even for a short time. Therefore, the data was collected in a more structured way using a questionnaire form. Altogether, 69 employees who had been through the VPL process completed the questionnaire. Whenever possible, open-ended questions were also asked, but only a few responded to them.

For this reason, we decided to combine the two sources: the interviews and the questionnaires. We prepared four summary documents, one for each country, describing collected answers and/or the course of conducted interviews. Since the Turkish part was based on a different research tool, we decided to analyse it separately and compare it with the other three countries. The summaries of the interviews from Germany, Poland and Denmark were evaluated by means of a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000, 2010). We used lexical searches and coding to examine all interviews and cross-checked the coding. In both phases we used the MAXQDA2020 software to ensure the objectivity of our findings (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019), for which qualitative coding with an inductive-deductive approach was employed. We developed four codes to recognise the effects of VPL on individuals and compare the effects between the countries surveyed: (1) education, (2) professional/work, (3) improvement and (4) VPL process. In the three documents (one for each country studied), 323 fragments were coded in total. We encoded 134 fragments for education, 108 for professional/work, 17 for improvement and 64 for VPL process.

In the first code, we included all content relating to formal education, new paths for further education, extramural examinations and certification related to vocational education and training (VET). The second code, 'professional/work' was used for content involving changed work opportunities, the engagement of labour market institutions, and professional change. Both were the indicators of the VPL effect, as previously defined. We also decided to add a separate code for individual benefits – 'improvement' – as interviewees referred to particular benefits. Finally, we also developed a separate code for the content related to the VPL process. Since the study con-

centrates on the individual effects of VPL, we also studied individuals' perception of the process, or the 'cost' of gaining the benefits. Hence, we look at both the description of VPL processes in the interviews and interviewees' assessment of those elements. Before outlining the findings of the interviews, we will briefly describe the VPL systems of the four countries.

Validation of prior learning – a variety of understandings

Germany

In Germany, currently, VPL presents a picture of rather uncoordinated regulations, programmes, processes and projects, all headed by different authorities and with varying outreach. Only limited regulations or guidelines exist to establish flexible and transparent validation processes. Among other reasons, this is due to the highly regulated education system that focuses on formal qualifications and the close link between school-based and work-based learning in the framework of the formalised, nationally regulated dual system of vocational education and training (Greinert, 2007). While informal and practice-based learning at the workplace is considered important, it is not taken into account in the context of validation, mainly because it takes place outside the formal system. Below, we outline two validation approaches that are currently practised in Germany and have a legal basis.

First, the recognition of prior learning to be admitted to an external examination that forms part of the formal education system. For vocational training, this procedure was established in the 1960s to give those not formally trained in the dual apprenticeship programme the chance to acquire a formal vocational qualification. According to the Vocational Training Act (Section 45 (2)) and regulations set up by the Chamber of Crafts (Section 37 (2)), people may apply to sit the final examination without having attended the respective vocational training programme (i. e. as external candidates) if they meet certain requirements, including proof of relevant work experience of at least one and a half times the duration of the regular training programme. A further option is proving that relevant competences have been acquired in other ways.

Second, the recognition of equivalence of prior learning to national education standards and certificates, the Vocational Qualifications Assessment Law (BQFG) was introduced in April 2012. It guarantees individuals the right to have foreign qualifications recognised by a competent authority as equal to a respective national qualification within three months. Although the law focuses on assessing and comparing formal qualifications, informally acquired competences and relevant work experience may be considered when formal certificates are missing or incomplete (BQFG section 3 paragraph 1). The recognition process is based in the first place on assessing relevant documents such as training certificates, certificates of capability and proof of relevant domain-specific work experience acquired in a foreign country or in Germany (BQFG section 3 paragraph 1). Complementary competence assessment is also possible, based on practical tests, proof of work and interviews. Should significant skill gaps

impede full recognition, partial recognition can be awarded and may be supplemented by further training, for example (Böse et al., 2014).

Poland

VPL-like processes in Poland have been in place for some time, particularly in the context of vocational qualifications and crafts. For these domains, VPL was regulated by law in 1989. Since 2010, VPL has been introduced more systematically; the system was fundamentally overhauled in 2012 by establishing the possibility of taking an extramural vocational examination (without attending formal vocational education).

Overall, several legislative changes gradually led to the restructuring of the system, with most taking place between 2012 and 2017 (Duda, 2016). The aim was to build a consistent VPL system in Poland with coherent, nationally defined procedures that recognise the competences acquired by individuals in different learning settings and through different forms of learning. The approach seeks to recognise these forms as equivalent to formal education.

State-regulated VPL for the time being includes (i) the extramural vocational examinations conducted by Regional Examination Commissions (OKE); (ii) Chambers of Crafts examinations; and (iii) special professional qualifications (e.g. in the field of civil engineering). The methods used for validation are theoretical and practical examinations. In addition, based on the Integrated Qualification Systems Act of 22 December 2015, some pilot initiatives introduce new ways of validation, placing the individual and learning outcomes at the centre of attention rather than the educational system.

Apart from the extramural VET exams, two other VPL processes are available in Poland, both still on the basis of temporary, regional initiatives. The first is a pilot programme that was carried out in Małopolska as part of a project entitled “Development of a national qualification system – pilot implementation of the national qualification system and the information campaign on its operations carried out in cooperation with IBE (Institute for Educational Research)/WUP (Regional Labour Office) in Kraków 2014–2015”. In this project a group of participants had the opportunity to conduct a validation in one of five qualifications². The VPL process was conducted with methods such as the balance of competences method; a conversation/interview; a portfolio; an evidence analysis; a self-assessment questionnaire; an examination (this can be a knowledge test and a practical test); on-site observation or a simulation with work samples.

The second approach is the ongoing project Kierunek Kariera (Career direction), which offers participants a skills audit (*bilans kariery*). Here, participants are guided by professional career advisers as they compile a portfolio and establish potential professional and educational pathways. After finishing the skills audit, participants receive educational vouchers that allow them to start realising the next educational steps, as planned during the skills audit.

2 These qualifications comprised CNC operator, management coach, property management, pâtissier and management of small teams.

Denmark

VPL has been on the agenda in Denmark for about 20 years, and a legal framework has been in place since 2007. The Danish approach to VPL is decentralised, based on common principles. As such, the authority to provide a complete VPL process, including assessment and recognition, lies with the formal educational institutions. Every educational institution is obliged to provide validation towards goals and criteria for the corresponding study programme.

Due to the legal framework for VPL, there are three possible aims and outcomes of a VPL process:

1. to enable access to formal education, when ordinary preconditions are not met by the applicant
2. to tailor an individual study programme or award credits for certain classes, within the National Qualification Framework (NQF) up to but not including the master's degree level (NQF Level 7), and
3. to award a Competence Certificate if the participant meets the requirements for a partial qualification of an education programme. Awarding a full qualification is possible, yet rarely attained by applicants.

Furthermore, the Danish validation system includes a 'pre-phase' (information, identification and guidance). Candidates pay a fixed amount for the VPL process, based on a taximeter principle, for an institution to provide VPL. For applicants who have achieved education Level 4 or lower (NQF), there is no charge for the VPL process.

Although the Danish Ministry of Education recommends that the process include identification/mapping and documentation, institutions are not obliged to assist applicants in developing their documentation portfolios. The legal framework states that preparing the documentation of prior learning is the responsibility of the applicant.

In reality, compiling these portfolios appears to be quite complicated and time-consuming for applicants. Hence, other bodies such as trade unions, employers' associations or Public Employment Service Centres offer counselling for these pre-phases.

The application for VPL to access higher education and vocational and diploma programmes (at NQF Levels 5 and 6) enables candidates to have their prior learning recognised.

The 2015 reform on vocational education and training courses (VET) – with a special track for adults aged 25 and over – includes compulsory VPL prior to VET. The intention is to shorten the length of time required to complete education. VPL recognises documented and assessed prior learning competencies, based on the relevant work experience and formal education. Thereafter, as a post-validation result, an individual curriculum is prepared to enable each applicant to obtain their respective qualification.

According to the Danish model for the development and monitoring of education and training across the entire educational system, strong stakeholder collaboration secures the legitimacy of and trust in VPL results. Sector organisations develop the

criteria and standards for VPL and assessment according to the specific study programmes.

Turkey

In Turkey, validation of prior learning (VPL) was put into practice quite recently. The VPL process in Turkey is mainly implemented by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA). The General Directorate of Lifelong Learning also contributes to the development of the VPL system in Turkey by carrying out several projects. Other institutions involved in validation activities include the Higher Education Council, and the Turkish Employment Agency.

Since VPL practices are mainly implemented by the MoNE and VQA in Turkey, their procedures will be outlined below.

In the first approach, vocational training centres affiliated to the MoNE General Directorate of Vocational and Technical Education implement the validation process in accordance with Vocational Education Law No 3308. Established in 1979, vocational training centres are public institutions where apprenticeship training is mainly carried out in Turkey. On the whole, apprenticeships target at least secondary school graduates who want to acquire a profession mainly through working at enterprises. In this system, apprentices attend a training centre once a week; the other six days, they work in a workplace where a mentor known as the 'master trainer' is responsible for monitoring their work-based development. Apprentices become journeymen on completing their training and passing their examinations. On completion of further training and passing the examination, a journeyman is ultimately awarded a master certificate by these institutions (Ünlühisarcıklı & Vos, 2013). However, under recent regulations, those who have not taken part in the apprenticeship training system in these centres but have practised a profession being employed in the past and have the relevant social security insurance papers and other required documents can apply to a vocational training centre for validation of their prior learning. After applying, individuals sit the journeyman and master exams; if they are successful, they can get a certificate. These procedures are carried out in accordance with the Directive Regarding the Procedures and Principles Regarding the Recognition of Prior Learning, Equivalence and Measurement and Evaluation Procedures put into effect by the Ministry of National Education in 2017.

In the second approach, VPL practice in Turkey is implemented mainly by the VQA through authorised certification bodies (ACBs), which provide Vocational Qualifications Certificate (VQC). In 2015, an official statement entitled Occupations Requiring Vocational Qualifications Certificate was published in the Official Gazette (25 May, No. 29366). The purpose of this official statement was to identify occupations that require VQC for employees. This requirement is especially for extremely dangerous jobs such as steel welding, natural gas infrastructure construction control and industrial pipe installations (Akkök, 2016). Therefore, the VQC has become compulsory in specific occupations mentioned in the official statement.

Individual perspective on validation – differences between European countries

The analysis of the individual perspective shows that the differences on the national levels are also visible on the level of single applicants. The comparison of the country reports from Germany, Poland and Denmark shows that the main emphasis of each system influences perception of the process, as well as chances for further education and/or better employment opportunities. We examined the interview reports in terms of lexical content to compare the dominant aspects in the interviewees' perception of their VPL process. Turkey was excluded from the lexical analysis due to the different tools and methods used for gathering data. The analysis for Turkey is included in the further steps of the study.

An analysis of the frequency of the terms used in the interviews shows that the words used most often were *work* (183 occurrences), *education* (105 occurrences) and *qualification* (89 occurrences). The word cloud in Figure 1 shows that the initial dimensions for effective VPL processes are well adjusted to the actual individual perception of VPL. Even an initial analysis of the lexical content shows the differences between the countries in the study. In Denmark, the most frequent words were closely related to the formal educational system: *education* (40 occurrences), *competence* (23 occurrences) and *assessment* (21 occurrences) (Figure 4).



Figure 1: Word cloud – most frequently appearing words in all examined interviews

At the same time, the word cloud for Germany shows a stronger relation to work, the non-formal education and recognition process, and the labour market (Figure 2). The most frequent words are *work* (89 occurrences), *train* (39 occurrences) and *process* (32 occurrences). In Poland, the content of the interviews combines these two orientations and is related to formal education and work, as the most frequent words are *work* (92 occurrences), *qualifications* (64 occurrences) and *school* (61 occurrences) (Figure 3). In Turkey, since VPL is carried out by authorised certification bodies through a straightforward application, examination and certification process, and because it is a necessity, those who benefit from the process regard it as a formality. The observations on the lexical level are equal to the conclusions based on the coding differences between the analysed countries, presented below (Figure 5).

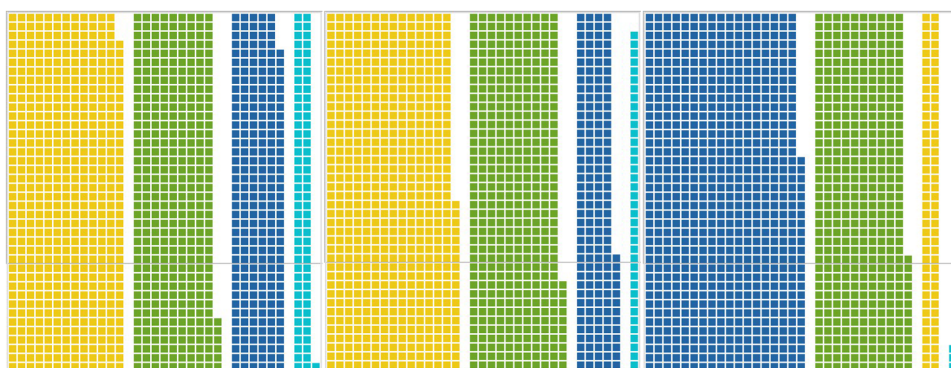


Figure 5: Coding differences: Germany, Poland and Denmark

Colour coding: professional/work – yellow, education – green, VPL process – dark blue, improvement – light blue.

Thus, depending on the country and operating VPL system, individual perception of the effects of the validation varies. In all countries, approximately the same percentage of coded content relates to education (green). The difference is clear in the other areas. In Germany and Poland, the most important (or frequent) aspects relate to the profession and work/labour market (yellow), while in Denmark the process itself was the most frequently discussed issue (dark blue). In the next sections, we will look at each of those areas in greater detail. The analysis presented below combines interviews and questionnaire responses (including Turkey).

Perception of the VPL process

In Poland and Germany, interviewees continually indicated the importance of guidance throughout the process. This was a key issue for the perception and assessment of the process; if the guidance was managed well, the subjective feeling about the VPL process tended to be positive. By contrast, the lack of proper guidance caused frustration and made the process both longer and harder:

"She [the counsellor] said 'You are studying, why do you need to?' I said 'Yes, but I want to do it'". (Germany)

In Denmark, the interviewees referred to the process itself most frequently, calling it complex, but very transparent. In the description of the process itself, strong links to the educational system are visible:

"Then another interview is carried out, in which the consultant gains a clear picture of which subjects need to be assessed. The individual competence assessment is continued with a teacher of the relevant subjects. Several materials and methods are used in the assessment". (Denmark)

In Turkey, the process was viewed rather as a formality and closely linked to the labour market: most beneficiaries went through the VPL process because it is a formal requirement for employers to employ workers with a certification:

"I got the certificate and left it at home. I did not learn anything new about my job during the certification process; I learned everything from my master trainers. Do you think employers would allow me to use a 650,000 TL machine just because I have a certificate? That's ridiculous! I got the certificate only to please my employer". (Turkey)

New educational opportunities

Poland and Germany show many similarities in reference to the links between VPL processes and the educational systems, also in terms of self-preparation for extramural examinations after some time or going back to study on a higher level. In Germany, higher education aspirations were mostly found among migrant workers:

My dream was to study. I had to give it up back then in Poland. Then I came here and then there were questions regarding the financing and admission, nothing was recognised. I couldn't do anything with that, so I didn't bother". (Germany)

In Poland, although it often leads to further education, the VPL process is not directly connected to the education system. As one of the interviewees said, "The more I learned, the more I learned that I do not know". (Poland)

The VPL system is closely linked to the educational system in Denmark, reflecting the perception of the process by individuals. This influence is visible both in the number of mentions of education-related issues in the interviews as well as in what the interviewees say about the results of the VPL process:

"During the session, I was informed of my options and offered a course to help clarify my position. (...) By this means, I was given a personalised job and education plan via an adult vocational training module". (Denmark)

The perception of educational input was rather different in Turkey. Certification, as respondents referred to the VPL process, was extremely important on the labour market, instead of being an opportunity to learn:

“(...) obtaining the certificate does not mean you are a master. The experience I gained while doing my job is more effective for me than the certificate I got”. (Turkey)

Employability potential

The VPL system in Germany is closely linked to the labour market. Thus, the interviewees mostly cited job opportunities, explaining how the VPL process enhanced their employability or increased their chances for promotion. The validation process opened new doors, as in the case of one interviewee, who was promoted to coordinator in a household services business, doubling her income, after her validation. She describes the promotion as a challenge:

“Coordinating also includes dealing with clients, like the customer admission, customer calls and communication. This was uncharted territory for me. [...] I slipped into nothing, [I had no support] and had first to learn how to deal with customers”. (Germany)

In Poland, on the other hand, the impact of the VPL process on job opportunities is not overly significant and mostly relates to increased self-esteem after the process. Many interviewees admitted that, following validation, they were no longer afraid to change their workplace or find new employment for themselves. Employability potential is rarely mentioned in the Danish interviews. The VPL process certainly helped tap the potential in the current workplace, especially when the employer helped with initiating and going through the process.

Overall, 72.5 % of the participants in Turkey viewed the VQC as a positive contribution to their job opportunities because the certification proves they have the required qualifications, should they not have any other evidence or relevant training to prove their competence.

“I believe that obtaining the certificate increased my chances of getting a job. While certification increases confidence, it has no effect on increasing knowledge”. (Turkey)

Feeling of improvement

Given the individual perspective on the effectiveness of the VPL processes, this category may well be the most important. Despite its direct impact on study participants' career or education level, the VPL was viewed as a positive experience by most.

In Germany, Poland and Denmark, the analysis shows that virtually all processes had a favourable outcome: promotion or new job opportunities, opening the door to further education or investment in a brand new path, such as self-employment. These effects are mostly related to both the certification and the guidance, which increase the self-esteem and confidence level of VPL process beneficiaries considerably.

The Turkish experiences show that VPL is a formality and tends to be viewed as such. On the other hand, in open-ended questions, the Turkish employees stated that, although the VQC increased their job opportunities and consequently their self-confidence, their previous work experience had a more significant impact on their skills than the VPL process. The following reflection of an employee exemplifies this situation.

“Being certified increased my confidence. It is not convincing to just talk about yourself during the recruiting process; employers want to see proof. So having a certificate makes the process easier”. (Turkey)

Another employee also reflected on how it contributed to his self-confidence:

“Being certified boosted my confidence. I am now much more comfortable doing my job than before”.

Conclusions and discussion

All policies presented in the paper were influenced by the European regulations. These regulations introduced a common understanding of VPL processes. Nonetheless, the mode of implementation, the main aim of VPL policies and the perception of the VPL process vary a great deal among the countries described. The four countries are very different in terms of their national policies and their predominant ideas about VPL. The national systems are either based on the labour market (Turkey), the education system (Denmark) or designed to combine the two (Germany, Poland). These variations in the system are easily visible on both analysis levels: the policy and the individual level.

Differences in the individual perspective occurred at all levels of the analysis: education and work opportunities, the perception of the process and subjective feelings of progress. In Turkey, for most individuals the process was a formality, whilst in Denmark it was chiefly an opportunity to return to formal education with their skills and expertise acknowledged. In Germany and Poland, the validation process was a chance for enhanced recognition on the labour market and sometimes a way into further education.

At the same time, some similarities were noted. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents admitted that the process had significantly influenced their self-esteem and confidence level. Even if there were no other objective improvements in their lives, this was an important and positive effect of VPL for the majority. The formality or bureaucracy was mentioned by individuals, despite the differences between countries. This factor was regarded as a negative aspect of VPL processes, with the majority of participants of this study finding them complicated, time-consuming and lengthy.

There are significant contrasts between the main aims of VPL processes in the four countries and the implementation of the EU recommendations (European Council, 2012) on the national level. These differences are not only visible when comparing the policies, but also on the individual perception level. The beneficiaries of the VPL process in different countries perceive the process and the effect it has (or had) on their lives in contrasting ways. The main conclusion from the study is that the individual effects of VPL processes are closely related to the systemic solutions in the given country and therefore depend on the respective national policy. This implies that fur-

ther research is required with regard to the historical and cultural aspects that influence the introduction of VPL in different European countries.

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The diversity of validation approaches in Europe.

GRAŻYNA PRAWELSKA-SKRZYPEK

In the modern world, competences and willingness to develop them are becoming increasingly important, as well as constant improvement, supplementing and gaining new qualifications throughout life and, above all, the ability to respond quickly to changes within the scope of qualification needs. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated (on a global scale) the importance of the ability to shape them flexibly. We observed it especially in the case of essential workers who, by using previously acquired qualifications, were able to acquire new skills 'in the battlefield', adapt them to new challenges in fighting for the health and life of their fellow citizens and providing the necessary conditions for societies living in isolation. This situation clearly showed the importance of managing the competences of organisations and individuals and, above all, the need to improve the flexible approach to shaping qualifications. Imagine the social consequences of the decision to admit only medical personnel with formal epidemiological authorisation to care for people suffering from Covid-19. Now that we have experienced a situation in which not only representatives of selected professions but entire societies quickly acquired new knowledge and skills, stimulated their reflection on global threats and ways of dealing with crisis situations, and had the opportunity to demonstrate their civic responsibility. While writing this text in Poland in mid-2021, I hope that this experience will convince those in power and societies in countries that have so far been reluctant to implement universal systems and practices of lifelong learning to implement flexible pathways for shaping qualifications. We have generally found that they increase the ability to adapt to changes, not just of individuals or enterprises but also of entire societies.

Flexible shaping of qualifications is based on the fact that we accord value not only to formal learning processes (school and formal education) but also appreciate the learning outcomes obtained through other forms of education (e.g. courses or training) and those acquired in the course of professional work and various life experiences. In this approach, validation plays an extremely important role. Even after the first paragraph of this text, we intuitively feel the importance of validation and its meaning. However, it is much more difficult to define it and agree on a single definition of this approach to acquiring and recognising qualifications, leading to "confirmation by an authorized body that a given person has obtained learning outcomes measured in accordance with the relevant standards" (Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012, p. 5), in a four-step process.

Validation – the concept and its understanding

International organisations (UNESCO, OECD, CEDEFOP), individual nations and European countries use different terms to describe the process of qualifying, assessing and recognising learning outcomes obtained in various ways (formal, informal or non-formal), in different places and over different times. According to Judy Harris (2011, p. 128), “In EU political circles, the assessment and recognition of prior learning is more and more often referred to as Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) – Validation in brief”. However, it is imperative to know that individual countries, as well as various sectors of the economy, use different terms that are historically established. In English-speaking countries, they focus on the concept of ‘recognition of prior learning’, while in other linguistic circles the keywords of these definitions are validation, accreditation, certification and acquisition (Prawelska-Skrzypek & Jałocha, 2013; Werquin, 2011). Despite the disparate nomenclature, all terms are characterised by a similar range of activities that make up the defined process (Ranne, 2012).

Validation shifts attention from the learning process to the learning outcomes, regardless of the way in which they were acquired. The key is to prove that you have really attained certain learning outcomes. Of course, the value of such confirmation – acquired knowledge, skills or other features that make up specific learning outcomes or qualifications – requires it to be carried out according to standard procedures, using adequate methods, by authorised persons, as well as an indication regarding the level of the recognised learning outcomes. The latter remark relates validation to the Qualifications Framework. Many studies indicate that the introduction of a Qualifications Framework changed the approach to validation and introduced new dynamics (Van Kleef, 2011).

Validation is a process in which four stages are most often distinguished: identification, measurement/documentation, assessment and certification. Patrick Werquin (2010, p. 35) draws attention to the often overlooked stage of this process – social recognition, which is non-linear and contextual in nature. It is an element of the process that is associated with the general acceptance of validation and its results. Neglecting and ignoring this aspect is the main reason for resistance to implementing validation in the practice of recognising qualifications and developing individual competences in many countries. Moreover, social recognition is sometimes replaced by the demand to build a culture of validation.

The diversity of approaches to validation

In the EU, the connection of validation solutions with the specificity of educational traditions and other country-specific determinants has not only been observed but also reflected in many documents, for example in the first point of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01). The authors of this book also addressed this issue, emphasising that,

in EU member states, there is no general approach to designing validation of prior learning (VPL), but many different concepts coexist. The authors show how this recommendation is implemented and reflected in the national context of Germany, Denmark, Poland and Turkey. Due to various country-specific determinants, each of the four countries adopted a different approach to implementing and practising validation

The diversity of approaches to validation is manifested in various aspects: the time and availability of validation, its predominant way of understanding, perception by various stakeholders (politicians, employers, advisers, individuals, assessors, formal and non-formal education organisations) and, above all in terms of institutionalisation, the meaning and forms given to it in public policy, as well as validation practices at lower and higher qualification levels.

Time is key in validation. Validation processes are widely criticised for their long duration. Another aspect of validation time is also important – the length of the period of its practice, as a process that allows value to be added to qualifications previously acquired through various professional and life experiences, including education or training. With regard to higher education, the first practices of recognising the value of skills acquired through work experience were observed in France as long ago as 1934. The *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* (VAP) mechanism was introduced in 1985, granting access to universities for people without sufficient qualifications, based on the assessment of a detailed dossier describing their career paths. The current validation system was established in this country in 2002, when – based on the experience of the regulations on sectoral professional qualifications of 1992 and 1998 – all types of qualifications were validated (Lafont & Pariat, 2013, p. 31). The long period of practising validation has led to advanced institutionalisation; however, this system is currently being criticised for the excessive regulation, high complexity and length of procedures. Nonetheless, it enabled all parties to gain practical experience/compare notes on their experience, which was used to formulate the arguments/propositions/hypotheses for EU policy, as well as in individual countries. It has also become the subject of numerous studies (including critical studies on the approach to understanding validation) on the implementation of this specific educational and social innovation.

Many European countries carried out their first attempts in the 1990s. However, it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that a systemic approach to validation was developed in Europe. When analysing validation, it is worth remembering that it is a deep social innovation resulting from a change in the perception of the value of various forms of learning and their adequacy with regard to contemporary requirements, related to the development of competences and qualifications, as well as personal development management. The validation system must be established in society, which is related to the wide availability of this type of services, especially for people with low key competences, as well as trust in the reliability of procedures must be established in society. Access may be restricted by both prerequisites and financial

conditions. The transparency of the system and the provision of educational counseling and career guidance are also crucial.

As Judy Harris wrote ten years ago (2011, p.136/137), referring to the CEDEFOP research, European countries can be divided into three large groups, based on the function of validation: in other words, assigning validation processes a mainly formative role (with the support and guidelines for natural persons) or a more summative role and orientation of validation mainly towards certification. The first group includes countries where validation has become a practical reality for individual citizens, that is, validation has been transferred from the general policy level to everyday practice. This group includes Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and the United Kingdom. The second group consists of countries where validation is emerging as a practical reality, but processes still need to be introduced to provide access to services for individuals in a systemic and systematic manner. This group, which is highly diverse due to the level of validation activity, includes, besides Austria and Germany, also the Czech Republic, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland and Sweden. The third category groups the countries with low or no validation activity, mainly because the idea is new and has not yet been added to the political agenda, perhaps because validation is perceived as a controversial issue. This group mainly comprises the countries of Eastern and South Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Slovakia and Turkey. Due to the diversity of validation approaches, the researched countries represented all the above mentioned groups.

The variety of institutional aspects of validation

Validation is a frequent subject of research. Among the numerous classifications of validation, those relating to the institutionalisation of the system are of particular importance. The level of institutionalisation is often regarded as a determinant of the implementation capacity of public policies. In the case of the validation system, the elements of institutionalisation constituting its wider context are: implementation of the practice of describing learning outcomes in formal and non-formal education; the National Qualifications Framework; and the adoption and entry into force of national legal regulations on lifelong learning, including the validation system. In turn, to ensure the proper functioning of validation, it is necessary to design and create institutional foundations for the implementation and operation of the validation system. The individual chapters of this book show the varied experiences in this field in the four countries under study. They present a reflected perspective of public policies, employers, people involved in the performance of validation services (education and career advisers), as well as individuals applying for recognition of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education.

As part of OECD research in 22 countries (including the two countries described in this book, Germany and Denmark), Werquin and Wihak (2011, p. 164) distinguished

seven model policies for implementing validation (system, quasi-system, a consistent set of practices, a fragmented set of practices, some practices, initial stage and no practices). This enabled a classification of countries to be drawn up, according to the state of validation development. The authors found that each of the 22 countries in question had made at least initial efforts to implement a validation system; at the same time, none had a fully developed validation system. As the subject of our research, Denmark, along with Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway, was included in the group of countries classified as having the quasi-system RNFIL (Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning). The authors characterised it as “Inclusive policy, a vision and a global system. In detail: legal framework or political consensus, practice, all groups or individuals, financial provision, quality assurance, all level and sectors of education and training” (ibid., p. 164). Germany, next to Spain, Italy, Iceland and Switzerland, was included in the group of countries whose validation status was defined as a fragmented set of practices. This model was characterised by “clear objectives. In detail: practices, target groups, some financing, few levels or educational sectors” (ibid., p. 164). The 22 countries analysed by the OECD differed greatly in terms of their use of RNFIL in relation to the formal education system, and the relationship between RNFIL, workplace development and vocational training. Germany was also in the group whose type of validation application was defined as ‘labour competence certification’, characterised by “Exceptional procedures to allow those with established competence to gain existing formal qualification” (ibid., p. 166). Looking for an explanation for the observed diversity of approaches to validation, the authors suggested the existence of a relationship between the model of implementation of validation and the social and economic environment of individual countries.

In the model views, the detailed elements of the validation system are: clear legal regulations giving it a formal status and showing the relation of validation to other educational services, the national register of qualifications, validation procedures along with the definition of process standards and methods of validation, as well as the specification of the rules for financing validation services. For the implementation and proper functioning of the validation system, it is important to develop validation guidebooks and make them available to those conducting validation, candidates who want to use these services, advisers in validation processes, employers interested in confirming employee qualifications and entering qualifications into the register and organisations applying for authorisation to conduct validation or certification. It is also crucial to clearly define the quality standards of validation services and establish internal and external quality assurance systems for these services, as well as to appoint a supervisory body therewith. Finally, it is necessary to train the staff involved in the validation processes, especially educational and career advisers, assessors and administrative staff handling the validation processes. Social marketing is essential in ensuring the successful implementation of validation – both as information campaigns in communities interested in validation and broad social campaigns.

When we look at the diversity of validation systems in Europe, they seem to reflect – as in a lens – the cultural diversity of Europe. France has the oldest centralised, well-established validation system. The British system also has a long history, radiat-

ing strongly to other continents (America, Australia); although decentralised, it is based on a single logic subordinated to the comparability of learning outcomes in various contexts and arousing great interest among recipients. In the highly decentralised German system, there is no single legal regulation or uniform system for validating the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning. There are several validation approaches and procedures related to different components of the education system. Validation practices are strongly linked to well-functioning vocational education. The validation system is perceived by the participants as opaque and therefore not attractive, however the number of participants is significant (Bacia et al., 2013). There is a certain balance in meeting the expectations of various stakeholders in the Danish model. It emphasises practicality, flexibility and cost-effectiveness, and arouses great interest among the participants. With the exception of Estonia, it was not possible to put an efficiently functioning system of validation into practice in Central and Eastern European countries, allowing not only for the recognition for professional purposes but also for the purposes of further formal education.

The experiences described in this book show that, in many countries, VPL is most successfully used at lower qualification levels, preferably for basic vocational qualifications. Germany and Denmark have particularly positive experiences in this regard. The situation in Turkey is also interesting, where validation works well in the practice of enterprises and enables people with low key competences to enter the labour market (European Commission; Cedefop 2014). In general, it can also be observed that the way of confirming full qualifications at a given level is different for the lower (1–4) and higher (6–8) levels of the qualifications framework. For the first four levels, all countries have both national validation organisations that may recognise that a person is fully qualified and organisations across various industries. At levels 6–8, recognition can only be carried out by a specific, autonomous institution of higher education – and most often only in terms of partial learning outcomes – for further education there.

In all countries whose validation practices are presented here, the validation system functions poorly at higher qualification levels. Moreover, it takes on different forms and plays different roles:

- Based on the recognition of the value of previously acquired – in various ways – learning outcomes, the validation system enables the student to take up studies. In fact, validation in this case plays the role of confirming the necessary learning outcomes as an admission requirement. A small percentage of students follow such a path. The available data indicates 1–5 % for Germany and 6–10 % for Denmark (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 127).
- When a person meets the formal requirements for starting studies, they may apply for recognition of some of the effects of prior learning as equivalent to that achieved in the course of a selected field of study. This enables them to “pass” some subjects and shorten their study period at the selected university. As stated in the report *The European Higher Education Area in 2015* (...) “this possibility exists in 29 systems (18 of which also offer admission based on the recognition of prior learning)”. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 124).

- A less frequently used practice is the accreditation by universities of courses provided by enterprises to develop their employees' qualifications. On this basis, the learning outcomes obtained by completing these courses are automatically recognised as learning outcomes for the interested parties, in the indicated field of study at the university that cooperated in the creation and implementation, and accredited the education programme (Shapira & Brogan, 2013).
- Much less often, but also in the system in Denmark described here, it is also possible to apply validation in order to obtain a full qualification without taking up studies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 125).

Cultural diversity and approaches to validation

The diversity of validation approaches confirms our belief that effective management of the implementation of such important social changes – and validation is important, undoubtedly – must fit into the cultural context of societies and countries (Hofstede, 2007). The idea of validation seems to be commonly understood and perceived as an approach in shaping qualification development paths. However, depending on the predominant features of culture, as well as the social and economic environment, it is adapted in various ways in different countries. Moreover, as validation develops, it becomes not only a new phenomenon, but an organisational system, strongly influencing the evolution of educational systems and learning processes, and thus an important process of education itself (Lafond & Parriat, 2013).

In highly developed countries with established validation systems, we can observe two types of situations: in France, characterised by a high degree of centralisation and, at the same time, an average level of social trust, we find a high level of institutionalisation of validation – extensive central regulations and institutions. In the decentralised United Kingdom, characterised by a high level of public trust, decentralised yet highly institutionalised validation systems linked to the Qualifications Framework operate effectively, with a strong emphasis on accreditation of the quality of these services.

In the countries under research with newer, yet well-functioning validation systems, we also observe two types of situations: in Denmark, characterised by a high level of public trust and extremely high social trust, where a large part of activities for the benefit of society is performed by citizens and social organisations, we find a systemic approach and regulations at the central level, yet highly decentralised activities. Germany, a country with a decentralised system of public administration and, at the same time, strong traditions and high-quality formal vocational training, is characterised by decentralised validation systems and a shift of emphasis to validation of qualifications in terms of the needs of enterprises, in various sectors of the economy.

The situations were also diversified in the countries covered by our research with less established democratic systems and lower economic and political stability, and with a low level of public and social trust. Poland has solid system regulations: laws

and organisations with clearly defined competences. However, validation only works efficiently in the formal education segment of vocational education, with validation procedures being carried out by state committees. They also test individuals who have acquired learning outcomes outside formal education. Turkey has also started practising the recognition of learning outcomes previously obtained outside formal education in formal vocational education. It is also possible to obtain professional qualifications outside the formal education system. However, validation is largely limited to meeting the needs of employers, allowing qualifications to be recognised and assessed, as well as enabling their development in accordance with the needs of the labour market.

The experiences presented in this book also contain critical reflections: for example, they show the experience of people who acquired different learning outcomes outside formal education and additionally studied during the validation process. These valuable learning outcomes were then included in the formal (summative) assessment. In this case, the opinions of employers were quoted, who believed that summing up the effects achieved by subordinating them to the formal framework results in the loss of essential knowledge about individuals' real (sometimes unique) competences.

Summary

The experiences described in the book show that, despite the varying approaches to validation, its procedures consist of analogous elements and similar rules are introduced in the system. A closer acquaintance with the detailed dilemmas and solutions used in four countries (Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey), differing in terms of culture as well as their social, economic and political situations, allows for a better understanding of the main trends of contemporary European discussion on validation. Initially, it was understood as a tool to help individuals and society adapt to changes in the labour market and the demand for qualifications. Over time, it was observed that this process contributes to the empowerment of the individual and, through a self-reflective, self-evaluation approach, is an important formative factor. This resulted in paying more attention to competences, especially key skills, that determine the possibility of acquiring qualifications. The latest recommendations of the European Council of 22 May 2018 – in addition to the European approach to micro-credentials, currently the subject of public consultation – indicate the emergence of another approach to validation. More and more often, it is being understood not only as confirmation of the effects of prior learning for professional purposes or further formal education, but as a process of expanding an individual's autonomy, self-realisation and emancipation in managing their own development to adapt to changes as well as possible.

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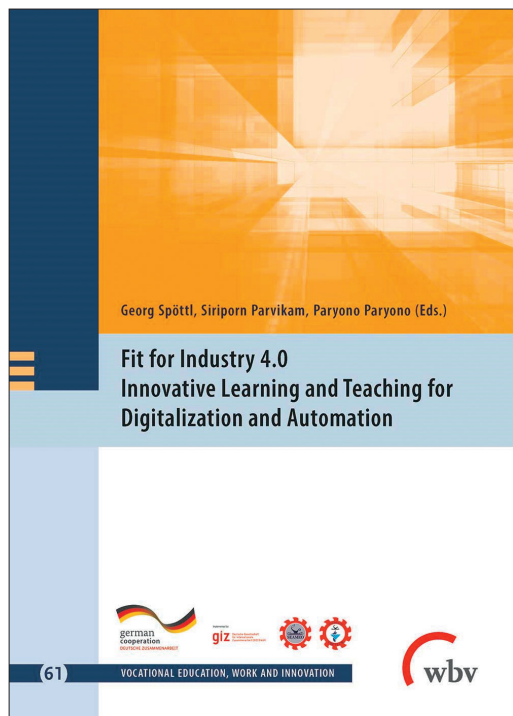
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Berufsbildung, Arbeit und Innovation, 61
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 ISBN 978-3-7639-6762-9
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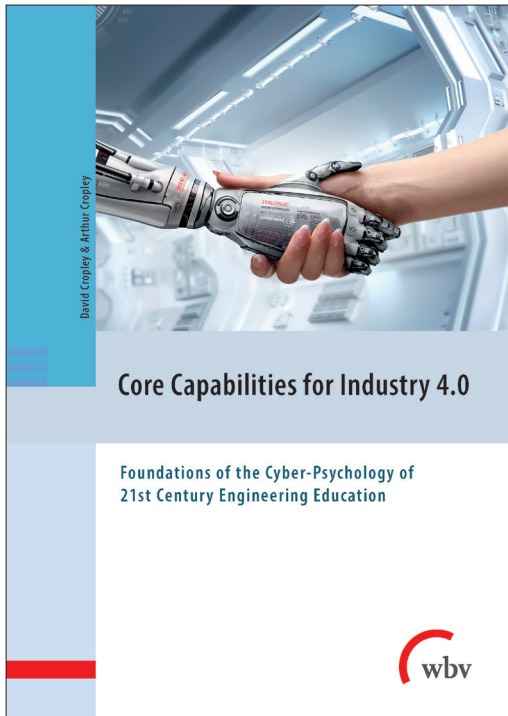
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ISBN: 978-3-7639-7058-2