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CURRENT CHALLENGES IN VALIDATION OF INFORMAL LEARNING (VINFL) IN EUROPE

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Abstract

What are the political origins of VINFL in Europe? What is the current debate and which challenges can be identified in the field of VINFL? In this reflective paper the authors critically evaluate the issue and plead for a recognition of competences, which differentiates between validation as a concept and validation as a process. Validation as a process covers the appreciation of learning in everyday situations and people's life experience. Reliable validation tools would then support individual professional development and mobility by making these learning processes creditable for future education, training and employment paths. They conclude that today there is a strong need to look at the VINFL's potential to take into account, to identify, and to identify individual knowledge, skills and competences, and also to regard it as a comprehensive tool to integrate the different learning pathways; because VINFL is a way not only to motivate adults and attract them into continuous lifelong learning by helping them to become more aware of their level of skills and competencies, of their capabilities and their potential and to have a better grasp of the benefits of learning.

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1. Introduction

Validating non-formal and informal learning is currently a top priority in the educational discussion. There are various EU funded projects, studies, policy papers and European and national initiatives going on to engage in this issue in order to implement the concept in the EU2020 programme. Looking closer to this matter we could firmly suggest that validation as a *concept* directly refers to a process of identification and acknowledgment of different competences that were essentially acquired through

informal learning (Singh, 2005, p. 12). VINFL –as long as it is based on a reliable tool– it may also create a better match between the learners' competences and the labour market demand. There is not much awareness however about the validation procedure proposed by the Commission and an increasingly intensive discussion on how to embed counselling (career coaching) and further training in this procedure. Validation as a *process* however is all about bringing to the light, making visible and providing an added value to those competencies (largely horizontal or transversal) that are acquired through non-formal or informal learning paths, by using instruments, mechanisms or techniques that somehow grant reliability to the process, but also monitor or control the end result of the process; hence authorization (Zarifis, 2016). It could be argued therefore that VINFL is mainly dependent on the purpose: if the purpose is less formal (e.g. to empower learners to expand their competences) formative assessments are useful – for qualification purposes summative assessments (that nevertheless have to be fit on purpose (and correspond to the envisaged competence level) is the right choice (Sava, 2012, p. 163).

It is very much the case that prior learning experiences in daily life settings take into consideration skills acquired in domains such as home, the marketplace, the workplace, or the community. The current changes in working life however, the need for continuous adaptation and lifelong learning, and the decline of what we could label as conventional learning are new challenges for validation as a process. According to EAEA[1] validation is a key tool in order to promote lifelong learning, to ensure more flexible learning pathways, to encourage learners and build their self-confidence as well as to create a more comprehensive understanding of competences. A major obstacle in the current discussion on validation of informal learning however, is certainly a lack of clarity in regard to central terms and definitions. VINFL offers a system for evaluation and evidencing of learning outcomes with the help of a well developed, unique approach that has been scientifically approved and applied in a large scope of learning projects in non-formal and informal contexts. The specifically created tools incorporated in VINFL facilitates the comprehensive documentation and visualisation of learners' competence developments in all kinds of learning arrangements The VINFL evaluation procedure is on the one hand standardised and enables at the same time grass-root projects to establish an individualised reference system for assessing and evidencing relevant competence of their beneficiaries in a process-orientated way. It also allows the learning providers to evidence the impact of their work according to a standardised procedure while, at the same time, keeping up the specifications of their informal learning projects in their individual contexts. VINFL plays an important role in Human Resource Management (HRM) as well. This applies on the one hand when new staff members enter the enterprise or organisation, be it as new appointed personnel, but also as interns or apprentices. On the other hand also the continuing professional development is of major importance especially against the background of demographic change and rapidly changing demands at the workplace. It goes without saying that "learning on the job" is one of the major contexts of informal learning and for the acquisition of VINFL (Charraud, 1999). Non-formal competences matter a lot for life and employment and their validation may be very motivating for the learners of all ages and informative for the employer. Some education professional – working in different educational sectors (higher education, adult education, VET) – are also pointing out the importance of

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[1] See EAEA at: http://www.eaea.org/en/policy-advocacy/validation.html

VINFL for migrants (Zarifis, 2016). Professionals also highlight the key role played by mobile devices in supporting learning especially in adult education, as well as the use of self-produced videos as a tool to prove acquired competences. It was clear that the development of an IT tool to validate transversal competences that could be applied and trusted EU-wide would be very important and helpful. Finally, all participants agreed about the need for customized and flexible tools to support validation. Participants in all countries agreed that validation systems integrated in VINFL are very much wanted and anticipated, but the connection of virtual learning environments and validation is expected to be easy to use. Virtual learning environments could be as intuitively automatized as possible (e.g., using key words, recognition of associations, etc.) to require less support and provide a maximum of objectivity. The possibility to connect such procedures to IT based learning systems is attractive, but needs to be based on sound description of learning outcomes and transparent criteria and procedures. Also, respective technical competences to establish and maintain these systems on organisational level are needed.

There is also quite significant evidence (Hawley et *al*. 2010) that shows that the process of recognition, validation and certification of competences is based on the assumption that there is continuity between learning and experience, and that learning processes are independent from the accumulation of experiences, therefore making it pertinent to recognise and validate the learning acquired by adults with a low level of schooling throughout their lives, giving this knowledge visibility through certification (see CEDEFOP, 2005). It is also acknowledged that learning results from the need to respond to the challenges and unforeseen events that life throws up, as "a non-transferable right that each person has to survive" (Gronemeyer, 1989, p. 81), and as such learning takes place throughout life and in several contexts, in informal, non-formal and formal ways.

2. Political Origins

The increased interest on VINFL, led the European Commission to launch a "Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). The recommendation suggests that informal and non-formal learning is not only delivered by main-stream educational providers. All kind of social organisations and self organised entities may also deal with "informal learning" – and may not even be aware of it. Thus informal and non-formal learning is a rather ambivalent topic: On the one hand it is highly recognised by educational experts but on the other hand there is not much consciousness about the value in the field and – as consequence – there are relatively few and rather scattered approaches to give evidence of this important modality/way of learning. This is the reason why VINFL is currently one of the top priorities on the educational agenda of the European Commission. However there are major systematic obstacles to a validation of informal and non-formal learning since the uncountable variety of learning contexts; contents and the lack of specified learning objectives are limiting a standardised evaluation. One should also keep in mind that the goals of educational administration and funding bodies in regard to a validation of informal and non-formal learning do not necessarily match with those of the experts working in the field, e.g. in grass-root educational projects. These fundamental target conflicts have to be considered when evaluating "informal and non-formal learning" especially in order to secure that it may serve those target groups that are already disadvantaged in the formal education system.

The policy debate on validation however, goes back to the early 1970s when policy planners and economists at the World Bank (OECD, 2007a,b) proposed that education professionals from different sectors of education, including higher education, adult education as well as corporate world support VINFL. Some professionals have a lot of experience in working with Learning Management Systems, others have some exeperience, and some have no experience at all. All of them agree however on the importance of VINFL at all levels of education and in all sectors they represent. Those who have more experience in European projects have more developed concepts of validation, yet those are also aware of the complexity of the subject of validation. In general, there is not much awareness about the validation procedure proposed by the European Commission (identification, documentation, assessment, and certification) and an increasingly intensive discussion on how to embed counselling (career coaching) and further training in this procedure. (CEDEFOP 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009a,b,c and Tissot, 2004).

Reading however the relevant policy and research documents we identify that when discussing VINFL reference systems, the idea was taken on board to develop so called "action fields" to describe the acting situation of the learners and to transfer them in a next step into a learning field (which is then represented by the reference system as basis for competence descriptions and derived learning outcomes, contents and learning materials ("learning objects"), assignments and assessments. According to the different purposes of VINFL systems, desirable features vary. Generally, we should anticipate limits of available resources of the educational professionals in practice applying them and add value against existing analogue procedures, they should be easy and quick to use. The possibility to connect such procedures to VINFL is attractive, but needs to be based on sound description of learning outcomes and transparent criteria and procedures. Also, respective technical competences to establish and maintain these systems on organisational level are needed. (Charraud, 2007, pp. 149-160).

Against the background that especially the adult or lifelong learning community should profit from these learning modalities relevant European policies unite behind the following principles: Non-formal and informal learning should gain more attention in the European learning community. It should be recognised on an individual and purely voluntary level and it should reflect the living and learning contexts of the individuals. It should also ground on action research principles and include all stakeholders (experts from the field, the learners) in the evaluation process. Last but not least it should not only evaluate learning following a utilitarian approach, e.g. against the principle of employability, but it should also recognise a free learning which is not directed to specific job-related competences. In the first place VINFL must support the individual by highlighting the developed competences to raise motivation to learn in informal learning contexts. It may also contribute to recognition of good informal learning practice in terms of learning outcomes to motivate learning providers to increase their efforts to create good informal learning offers (Council of Europe, 2012, p. 17). The OECD (see Werquin, 2010, p. 8) differentiates the order and process. Other colleagues in different countries (see Carneirro, 2011) point out different stages with the same rationale. On the other side, there are those who have a limited concept of VINFL with high hesitations regarding the dangers of subjectivity in validation of non-formal learning. Personal and organizational competences, especially teamwork are appreciated by employers.

The above approaches essentially direct towards the way lifelong learning as a concept has evolved through the years, particularly as a policy concept rather than a realistic process that touches upon human development. It is about a perspective which – going beyond the traditional conceptions of the

economical development, including those concerning the theme of human capital – focuses on people's abilities to live their lives and appreciate them, while multiplying the realistic opportunities at their disposal by acquiring and developing those skills which represent a strategic condition for the individuals' fundamental freedom and focusing on the likeliness of carrying out an active role within the economical and productive process (Alberici, 2008). Such a perspective arises from the 1960s on (Faure et *al*., 1972) and crosses the alternate events of the international political and cultural debate. In the present scenario, more and more influenced by the social complexity, on the one hand the principle of the learning potential of human beings is undoubtedly internalized (Jarvis, 1992) while on the other hand, the primate of economical rationality is strongly questioned, also considering the global economical-financial crisis.

3. Current Challenges

There are a number of fundamental questions arising: Can competences acquired in informal learning settings be assessed and even validated? Can we validate exactly those competences that were developed by the learners specifically in this learning environment? The constant utilisation of different concepts under same titles, the different meanings of a theme (for instance different definitions on "informal learning") is a phenomenon that can be seen as a major thread throughout the current discussion. To answer the questions raised above, to avoid meaningless discussions and to lower down the political implications behind these approaches it seems useful to clarify some basic terms and definitions – or at least to show that there are different connotations of the same terms and expressions. Obviously there is a huge gap between the two concepts presented in chapters one and two. As soon as they are combined different connotations of central terms lead to a rather confusing discussion. This is why basic terms and definitions in regard to validation, assessment, accreditation and evaluation are normally presented and discussed in order to create an awareness what different educational stakeholders mean when they talk about VINFL.

Today more than ever, there is a need for strong mechanisms to recognise the skills and competences students, trainees and employees acquire both through on-the-job learning and non-formal training, as well as informal learning. Such mechanisms would support the individual's career development and mobility, by enabling learning to be recognised for future pathways in education, training or employment, including pathways into formal learning (Brown et *al*. 2010). As well as the drive from the public sector, demand from the private sector can also lead to the introduction of validation initiatives. According to Hawley et *al*. (2010) the active involvement of a large range of stakeholders from both public and private sectors is a prerequisite for the successful development of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation needs buy-in from all parties so that the outcomes can be trusted and bring full benefits to beneficiaries, as well as to extend opportunities for accessing validation to different categories of learners and at different levels. However, the respective role of stakeholders is somewhat different according to the type of validation. For example, in vocational education and training and in higher education, education providers, private partners and social partners are also responsible for the development of many successful validation practices on the ground. Within these areas, the role of private sector stakeholders is stronger in the VET area (CEDEFOP 2005 & 2009).

There are a number of other developments, specifically within the sphere of education and training, which have an influence on the development or implementation of validation systems. Perhaps most significant is the move towards a learning outcomes approach, which has to some extent been encouraged by the development of national qualifications frameworks, driven in many countries by the development of a European Qualifications Framework. Two other important developments identified are the introduction, or wider use, of occupational profiles or standards and the increased use of modular, unit or credit-based qualifications. In addition, as outlined in more detail in the Inventory 2010 thematic report on the use of validation in the higher education sector, the Bologna Process has provided some impetus for further developments in this area (Hawley et al. 2010). It is also worth noting that developed guidance and counselling systems also play an important role in the use of validation, as through them individuals can be pointed out towards appropriate educational pathways, and opportunities for VINFL. Last but not least, the role of European funding programmes and associated projects in the development of validation has been referred to above. Yet evidence indicates that not only European funding programmes but also wider European drivers have played a significant role in the development of validation practices.

4. Conclusion

According to Villalba-García et *al.* (2014, p. 16) the importance of VINFL has been strongly emphasised within the context of the development of lifelong learning policies in Europe over the last decade. Validation has acquired an increasingly central part in most of the educational discourse of the EU: general education, vocational education and training, higher education and adult education. The Recommendation of the European Council on VINFL in December 2012 can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage for validation in Europe as it signals an enhanced level of political commitment, call all Member States to establish by 2018 arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Re-commendation is significant in that it sets a date and intro-deuces a coordinating body that is responsible for its follow up: the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG). It also identifies the systems that will be used for the reporting and monitoring of the situation concerning validation and allows for the continuous development of supporting tools, notably the European Inventory and the European Guidelines.

According to Zawacki-Richter et *al.* (2010) however the conversion towards competence-based assessment has been realized only insufficiently. The prerequisite for competence-based assessment is that the courses of study are themselves based on recognised competence models, which contribute to making a portfolio not merely a collection of artefacts but a systematic presentation of acquired competencies accessible to an assessment by third parties (Zawacki-Richter et *al.*, 2010).

As Singh (2005, p. 21) indicates non-formal learning and transversal competences are highly appreciated when companies select students for internships or work in HE and also crucial for career development and progression. In addition, non-formal and informal learning (e.g., volunteering, active participation) may be even a more deciding factor in determining personal and career success that academic achievements (i.e. the best academic achievers are not necessarily most successful in employment) (Werquin, 2010, pp. 44-64).

There is agreement today that VINFL instruments have to be contextualised – which leads to the idea that VINFL tools have must serve a high adaptability – in other words: they have to be so flexible that they can carry different contexts, contents, serve different target groups etc. The realisation of a fully pledged VINFL methodology would contribute to fill existing gaps of knowledge and needs for user-friendly online systems for both learning and validation. Many experts in the field report that recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning entails comparison of the learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements. Also, they appreciate that applying learning management systems is lifesaving for the current reality in HE where attending classes is optional enhancing student's engagement as they become part of everyday life of the academic environment. Many experts also highlight that an online validation system helps educators to check their own knowledge, methods and practices to improve them by bringing them in contact with new ideas and theories and in some way, validates them. They consider very important the fact that ICT facilitates open access to knowledge in a society with the goal of increasing the per capita rate of knowledge for personal and professional development. They also suggest that virtual learning environments should be easily used by anyone and have a pleasant environment. VINFL is essentially about the individual, about its values, its capabilities and strengths, to take stock of existing competencies. VINFL therefore can be seen as a way of empowering people (Zarifis, 2016). As a resume, it is clear the importance that non-formal learning and transversal competences are assuming when the companies select students for internships or work and also crucial for career development and progression. Nevertheless, it is always mentioned that transversal competences are subjective and difficult to measure. When VINFL methodology is clear, thre is also great appreciation on the system to link the validation and the virtual learning environments in an IT platform. In some cases however the possible use of a validation tool to choose future competences to develop and to enrich the curriculum trough the validation of informal learning may be needed. As it is underlined by some researchers in the field, a reliable validation system would have to be trustworthy, and easy to use (Charlot, 1997, *cited in Canário, 2000, p. 133*). As Duvekot & Geerts underline (2012, p. 91), VINFL reflects on those characteristics that would allow comparability from one country to another and learners and companies could really trust and use the certificates linked to the system. As final sentence, it is clear that the development of an IT tool to validate transversal competences that could be applied and trusted EU wide would be very important and helpful.

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