

Lifelong learning - Norwegian experiences

**Identification and validation of non-formal
and informal learning**

The nations of Europe are faced with challenges concerning the needs of both society and individuals for skills, employability and for workforce mobility. Developing a knowledge-based society requires efficient investments as well as the best possible use of existing qualifications and competencies at the individual, enterprise and societal levels.

This is one of three essays that portray and discuss Norway's experiences with developing and implementing a policy on lifelong learning directed towards adults. Norway was a relative pioneer in developing a comprehensive national lifelong learning strategy, which goes under the label the Competence Reform. These reform efforts have been ongoing since the late nineties, with implementation from 2000 onwards.

The three essays focus on different aspects of Norwegian efforts and measures in the area of lifelong learning:

Essay 1: The role of the social partners in developing and implementing lifelong learning policies

Essay 2: Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Essay 3: Qualification and labour market integration of immigrants and refugees.

The aim of these essays is to facilitate European and cross-national learning in line with the principle of open coordination

Lifelong learning – Norwegian experiences

Identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has become one of the important building blocks in promoting lifelong learning in Europe, and in encouraging and facilitating access to learning for groups with low formal skills. This paper describes and discusses the Norwegian experiences in developing and implementing a national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The development of the validation system was an integral part of a Norwegian reform on lifelong learning.

The paper describes the development of the national validation system, highlights the achievements so far in implementing it in education as well as in working life and the third sector and discusses some of the issues, dilemmas and differences of opinion among the stakeholders. Finally, the paper discusses the proposal for a set of common European principles for validation in light of the Norwegian experiences.

Background – The Norwegian reform on lifelong learning

Following initiatives from the social partners as well as the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, a Norwegian reform for lifelong learning (the “Competence Reform”), was developed during the late nineties. The main features of the reform were approved by the parliament in 1999, and included the decision to set up a

national system for the validation and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. The ultimate aim was to recognise these competencies in relation to the institutionalised education system as well as in a labour market context. The national validation system was a key building block of the reform, along with new statutory rights to primary and secondary education for adults, a new right to a leave of absence for educational purposes, the development of improved funding arrangements for learning and a Competence Development Programme to develop the market for further and continuing education.

The ambition to put non-formal and informal competence on a more equal footing with formal competencies is not new. Since 1952, the Vocational Training Act has allowed individuals to take a crafts examination, provided they had sufficient practical work experience (to take a crafts examination normally requires two years of theoretical training and two years of apprenticeship). During the last ten years between 1/3 and 1/2 of the crafts examinations each year were passed via this route.

The validation of competencies acquired outside the formal educational system has also long been supported by stakeholders in the field of adult education, such as the trade unions and associations that provide liberal adult education.

Since 1976, the Norwegian Adult Education Act has enshrined a right for adults to have their knowledge and skills documented at all levels and areas within the public education system, independently of how these competencies were acquired. However, since it was amended, little progress has been made in terms of procedures and institutional arrangements. One of the objectives in the 1999 reform was therefore to establish improved legal frameworks as well as practical procedures that would fulfil the intentions of the 1976 act. Simultaneously, the reform broadened the perspective on validation, by aiming to assess and recognise competences acquired outside the regular education system with a view to strengthening the job prospects of low-skilled individuals. In other words, it is not only an attempt to have learning validated as a means of enrolling more adults into education, but also an attempt to increase the employability of non-participants by validating non-formal and informal learning for labour market purposes.

In order to live up to these ambitions a national project – the *Realkompetanse* project – was set up. The Storting had specified that validation should take place without traditional examinations. Also, the Storting decided that methods should be developed to accredit non-formal competencies that are “equivalent” to those provided through formal education, even though they were not identical to these formal competencies. The national project therefore needed to develop new validation methods and a practical understanding of the concept “equivalent competencies”. The project covered three sectors:

- the education and training system
- the labour market
- civil society (including voluntary organisations and NGOs)

The development of legal frameworks, institutions and practical tools has progressed differ-

ently in each of these sectors. Below we will account for these developments.

Validation in the education system

A guiding philosophy of the *Realkompetanse* project was to build the national validation system from below by providing financial support to a wide array of actors and projects to experiment with new validation methods and arrangements.

In the *upper secondary sector* all the counties (which are responsible for providing upper secondary education) were given financial support to establish procedures for the validation of informal and non-formal learning. In addition, projects in twelve counties received extra support during 1999-2002 for projects to develop new validation methods. All in all, 15,000 adults took part in experiments at the upper secondary levelⁱ. A number of different methods were tried out, including assessments of written CVs/portfolios according to fixed rules, personal interviews, self-assessments with and without the use of electronic tools and various combinations of these. Two projects aimed at immigrants developed vocational testing as one method. The method allows the candidates to have prior learning validated by means of practical demonstrations combined with interviews. The evaluation showed that this method was potentially effective in improving employability in the labour market, as well as in laying the foundation for shortened and cost-efficient courses that prepare candidates for crafts examinationsⁱⁱ.

As an integral part of the evaluation of these projects, end-users were asked if they believed the assessment of their prior qualifications was done according to objective standards. 70% of the respondents confirmed thisⁱⁱⁱ. However, a general challenge to training of the co-ordina-

tors and executive officers involved in testing non-formal and formal competencies was identified.

In the *higher education* sector, sixteen state university colleges and one university tested a variety of different entrance requirements, allowing admission for adults who lacked the general academic exams normally required for admission to higher education. The trials received a favourable evaluation, showing that in most subjects adult students admitted on the basis of non-formal and informal competencies progressed as fast as younger students admitted on the basis of a general upper secondary education. Except in mathematics and the natural sciences, they also received as good marks as the traditional students. The teachers also appreciated that work experience was brought into the classroom by the adult learners, and stated that they added positively to the learning environment at the institutions^{iv}.

Following the *Realkompetanse* project a number of individual rights concerning the validation of informal learning were enacted into law:

- adults with a right to complete education at the secondary level can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed. This assessment can entitle them to admission to secondary schools and entails a right to have courses shortened in accordance with prior learning achievement.
- those applicants aged 23 or older who have at least five years of work experience and who possess competencies in six key subjects can obtain general admission to studies at tertiary level (“general entrance requirement”)
- in higher education, adults aged 25 or older can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed in order to allow them to study a specific subject, even when they lack

the required general academic examinations or degrees. In some cases, the applicants should be exempted from courses and exams, and thus allowed to condense their period of study. This assessment is performed by the institution at which the applicant wishes to enrol.

Even adults who are not applying for enrolment can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed free of charge, provided they have a right to secondary education, or are referred by the employment or social security offices. Immigrants may also be referred by local government offices.

Changing practices in institutions of higher education?

Many adult students have already exercised the new rights. In 2001 and 2002 between seven and eight per cent of all applicants to higher education enrolled by following the procedure for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Without these new rights, many of these applicants would most likely have remained non-participants. The typical profile of an applicant under this scheme is a woman with some work experience wanting to study nursery or pre-schooling^v. This is particularly appropriate in the present labour market with its shortage of qualified workers in health and social services. Further evaluations reconfirm that these students are highly motivated and that their study performance equals the assignment level of students recruited on the basis of formal qualifications. Moreover, institutions of higher education have invested considerable time and effort in setting up their procedures to adapt to the new admission criteria^{vi}.

Adults are admitted mostly on the basis of a written CV/portfolio specifying prior work and learning experiences, which is then assessed in relation to the subjects or programmes they

want to study^{vii}. It should be noted that the right to convert non-formal and informal learning into shorter study periods has not come into practice. While the adults are largely admitted on the basis of non-formal and informal learning, they are not exempted from courses or examinations. Also, there is a tendency to require some formal examinations from secondary education, in addition to non-formal and informal learning. There are substantial geographical variations in the implementation of the right to exchange non-formal and informal learning for access to specific university subjects. State university colleges in rural areas tend to compensate for a drop in applications from candidates having sufficient formal qualifications by opening up the door to adults (aged 25 and over) with informal and non-formal competencies.

Changing practices in secondary education?

Given that institutions at this level have less autonomy than universities and state university colleges, a successful implementation depends on their collaboration with the county administration. Each county is responsible for ensuring the proper implementation of the rights at the level of secondary education. For this purpose and in relation to ensuing assessment procedures of non-formal and informal learning, the counties have all set up assessment offices to which citizens can direct enquiries. Some counties rely on a “one-stop-shop” philosophy; others operate with several offices because they deem proximity to the citizen as most important.

A survey conducted shortly after the passage of the act guaranteeing an individual the right to complete a secondary education shows that the assessment of non-formal and informal learning is mainly done for students in vocational subjects. This partly reflects the higher interest among adults in completing education in subjects related to health and social services, for example. However, the fact that only 20% of

assessments of non-formal and informal learning have been done in relation to general subjects might indicate that county authorities pay less attention to such validation. This was confirmed by responses from adult candidates when asked whether they have had their non-formal and informal learning assessed. Only 35% of the adult students confirmed having gone through such an assessment^{viii}. In view of the recent amendment of the act granting individuals the right to complete a secondary education, this percentage is not necessarily low. More worrying, perhaps, is that 10% do not know whether they have been through an assessment of non-formal and informal learning. In the same evaluation it is reported that this assessment is not as frequently used for shortening and adapting the courses for adult students, as is stated in the act.

A persistent discussion topic throughout the *Realkompetanse* project was the meaning of the term “equivalent competencies”. In the vocational track it appears that exemptions are often made in the first year, which contains more general subjects, but more seldom in the second year, which contains more trade-specific theory. The apprenticeship period required in the vocational track is frequently shortened^{ix}.

Each person has a right to receive a “competence passport” as proof of the competencies he or she possesses. In the evaluation report on experiences in the field of formal and non-formal competencies it is reported that a closer collaboration between public agencies would be beneficial for a successful implementation^x.

Validation in the labour market

From the start the mandate of the *Realkompetanse* project was geared towards the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the education system for persons who wanted

to enrol in secondary school or college. The social partners moved to extend the mandate to the development of validation tools for working life as well. However, in spite of their partnership in the project, there was quite an amount of scepticism in the employers' confederation in the private sector towards developing new validation tools. Their main fear was that employees who had their non-formal and informal competencies validated would demand a wage premium^{xi}.

Nevertheless, nine experimental projects targeting the labour market or working life in general were started. The projects were carried out by the social partners in different sectors, study associations and county administrations, which cooperated with enterprises. The social-partner-based projects explicitly decided that wage increases should not be a goal. Some of the projects were directed at specific sectors or industries, others used a geographical area as their point of departure. One of the projects was a direct follow-up and an attempt to strengthen the implementation of a new chapter on the "development of competences" set out in the Basic Agreement between the major employers' organisation and trade union federation in the private sector. Other projects also tried to develop tools that could describe and account for non-formal and informal competencies in a way that would be useful to the enterprises in allocating and developing their human resources. At the same time, these validation schemes aimed to be useful for the individual when applying for a new job in the labour market or when applying for admission to an educational institution.

Here, too, a number of different tools for validating non-formal and informal competencies were developed. Most of these tools start with some sort of self-assessment, which is then subject to discussion, evaluation and ultimately

validation and signed by the employer. Based on these experiences it was recommended that validation tools should comprise at least a CV and a competence passport signed by the employer, confirming more or less in detail the kind of tasks the employee has performed and responsibilities he or she has held in the enterprise. At present however, there is a multitude of tools available from the different projects, and none of the tools developed so far have materialised into a national standard.

Negotiating the value of informal and non-formal competencies

An experiment in using this kind of work-based competence passport as a starting point for validation in the education system showed that differences persist between how prior learning is valued in working life and how it is valued in school. One important difference was that enterprises are primarily interested in recording what the individual can actually accomplish in relation to the strategies and tasks in the enterprise, while the point of departure for education providers are to map the lack of competencies compared with a given curriculum or plan of study. Translating the competence passport issued in working life into the scheme used by the upper secondary education was thus necessary. The evaluation concluded that these translations served as a framework for negotiations between the individual or the company on the one hand, and the assessors on the other hand, and that competence passports validated by working life strengthened the position of working life in these negotiations. In spite of these translation processes, the conclusion was that the authorities would still save time and money if individuals or groups of employees brought a competence passport with them when entering a validation process in the education system^{xii}.

Failure to adopt validation tools and lack of standards in working life

While some of the tools developed in working life received favourable evaluations from human resource managers as well as from employees who took part in these experiments^{xiii}, the diffusion of the tools throughout working life has so far been limited^{xiv}. Several factors may contribute to this failure to adopt these tools. One is that the employees may be sceptical about how the documentation might be used by the employers in times of downsizing. Another is that the competence passports that had been developed were never meant to induce employers to increase wages. This may reduce the short-term incentives for the employees and the unions to engage in this activity. The most important reason however might be that companies do not perceive that the pay-off is sufficiently high to expend the required resources. All in all, neither unions nor employers appear to have a sufficiently strong interest in propelling this work forward with much energy.

An assessment of competence passports in a labour market context should also take into account experiences with the above-mentioned scheme whereby a crafts examination may be passed on the basis of prior non-formal and informal competences. Given that this scheme has been very successful^{xv}, stakeholders have not necessarily experienced a need to rush into new arrangements proposed in the frame of the Competence Reform. After some back-and-forth, it now appears that the non-school path to crafts examinations will survive alongside other tools for validating non-formal and informal learning.

Validation in civil society (the third sector)

Experimental projects were also carried out in what is called the third sector, which encompasses study associations, distance learning institutions, folk high schools and various non-governmental organisations. Following eight development projects, a draft “personal competence passport” has been set up to validate experiences from work in the third sector. Compared with competence passports issued by other sectors, the one from the third sector is mainly a self-declaration with less input from assessors. During the spring of 2004, this passport is being revised in light of experiences gained so far. The challenge is to validate competences from among the wide range of contexts that make up civil society. Among the activities documented is participation in courses and study circles.

According to an evaluation report^{xvi}, this multitude of learning contexts has prevented a coherent approach to the validation of competencies in civil society. Some associations involved fear the unnecessary paperwork a systematic documentation and validation of competencies would entail. Given that the Norwegian branch of what can be labelled a Nordic “movement for popular enlightenment” is involved in some of the projects, it is probably no surprise that (some) members fear that documentation entails red tape. Despite the non-institutional origin of this movement, which has much in common with “popular schools” and “popular universities” elsewhere in Europe^{xvii}, the reluctance of individual members may underscore a general challenge to come up with simple and practical tools for validating non-formal and informal learning.

A Norwegian system for validating non-formal and informal learning?

The tripartite dialogue that paved the way for the Competence Reform created a broad consensus among all the stakeholders that learning outside the formal educational system is valuable and that opportunities to validate this kind of learning should exist. Many local projects following a bottom-up approach were launched. These have mobilised approximately 24,000 participants in validation experiments. The validation of non-formal and informal learning has therefore become more deeply rooted among the principal stakeholders. Also, the issue of validation has moved to near the top of the public agenda. Especially in the educational system, where a more traditional conception of knowledge used to prevail, the establishment of new rights and procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning is no mean achievement. Not least because there are now more candidates with non-formal and informal competences streaming into institutions of formal education.

While a uniform national validation system was envisioned from the start, this ambition has been somewhat tempered by experience. The state of play is that important achievements have been made in the educational sector and that these have been incorporated into national legislation. There is still a way to go in terms of developing transparent national standards of practice in both upper secondary and higher education. More work is needed in the civil sector and with regard to the labour market before generally agreed competence passports can be introduced. The Norwegian Institute for Adult Education (VOX) is trying to follow this up by a less compartmentalised implementation of future competence passport(s). This may result in proposals for a common name and standardised cover sheet, while different tools designed for different industries, occupational groups or

voluntary organisations might continue to exist as attachments to this common packaging. A basic assumption is that a future standard has to be compatible with similar tools developed in an international context.

In working life and the third sector, new statutory rights have not been provided, nor are they strongly advocated. Fearing red tape, employers strongly resist any kind of legislation making validation in working life an obligation for the enterprise. In order to make validation of prior learning more widespread in working life, the employers will probably have to see clearer benefits than they do today.

One scenario is that tools and arrangements from the three sectors cannot easily be merged into a single standard. The standards used for assessments are not the same, since enterprises assess competencies in relation to the tasks and strategic needs of the enterprise, while schools assess competencies in relation to curricula and plans of study.

Another possible scenario is that the threefold implementation of the validation of non-formal and informal learning will merge over time. However, at this point, we might be faced with a dilemma: on the one hand, the evolution of a tool that transcends the split between education, the labour market and civil society; on the other hand, a simple and practical tool that expresses what is vital for the citizen in a particular context. It is a challenge to develop something that is at the same time simple and comprehensive. Rather than seeking a single all-encompassing standard and a single method, more attention should perhaps be paid to developing translation mechanisms between different validation schemes and methods.

Norwegian experiences and the EU principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning

How do the Norwegian experiences comply with the recently adopted European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning^{xviii}?

The first principle deals with the issues of individual entitlements, voluntary participation by the individual, equal access and the privacy of the outcome. While on the one hand these ideas are broadly shared in Norway, the experiences with developing validation methods in working life complicate the picture. If validation tools are to be widely used in working life to target employees who do not intend to enrol in formal education, they need to be useful as an integrated tool for human resource policies in enterprises. This means, in turn, that most of the employees must be involved and that their employers must have access to the data.

The second principle deals with the obligations of stakeholders to establish systems and approaches that include appropriate quality-assurance mechanisms and provide guidance counselling and information. While the validation of informal and non-formal learning has been an issue in Norway for some time, there is still a great need to provide more information and guidance, which underscores the importance of this principle.

The third principle deals with confidence and trust, and requires that the validation processes, procedures and criteria be fair, transparent and subject to quality-assurance mechanisms. The Norwegian experience of persistent differences between working life and education in the perceptions of what “counts” as valid knowledge also indicates that all stakeholders should be involved in working out these criteria.

The fourth principle deals with credibility and legitimacy and requires the balanced participation of the relevant stakeholders. However, the introductory debates on the mandate of the *Realkompetanse* project, the debate on equivalent skills and the hesitance of some educational institutions to exempt candidates from courses and exams, do raise the question of whether this should be left as their responsibility alone or whether working life needs to be brought more closely into the validation process.

The discussions referred to above about the curricula and plans of study as the standard against which prior learning is measured underscores how this is perhaps the most important principle and that it underpins the others.

In line with the heavy EU emphasis on bringing LLL closer to the citizens, EU policymaking on the validation of non-formal and informal competencies appears to focus on developing frameworks and practical tools directed at individuals. In general, the same emphasis can be found in the Norwegian efforts. For when it comes to building a framework that makes access to further and continuing training easier for the individual, the Norwegian Competence reform has apparently achieved much. Less, however, has been done to set up a framework for competence development in enterprises^{xix}. This can be explained in part by the fact that the education and training system and enterprises (as a group) diverge in how they conceive the validation of non-formal and informal competencies. The same may perhaps be said of employers versus employees. The future competence passport has to strike a balance between divergent concepts and interests with regard to validation. Taking into account the fact that the workplace is often the most important learning arena for adults, a challenge for the validation efforts, as well as for the field of lifelong learning more generally, will be to engage the social partners more deeply in these efforts.

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- iii "Evaluering av realkompetanseprosjektet", Final report to the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research", Agenda Utredning&Utvikling AS, Oslo 2003.
- iv E. Brandt: Høgskolenes erfaringer med realkompetansestudenter fra forsøksordningene i 1999 og 2000, NIFU Skriftserie 11/2002, Oslo:NIFU
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- xiv McHenry and Mohn (Op.cit.)
- xv A. Pape: " 20 - Fagbrev gjennom dokumentasjon av realkompetanse i Norge", Fafo-notat 2000:6.
- xvi Agenda (op.cit.)
- xvii O.B. Ure: "Lifelong learning for civic employees and employable citizens" in M. Kuhn, R. Sultana (ed.): "Homo Sapiens Europeus? Creating the European Learning Citizen", Peter Lang, N.Y 2004 (forthcoming).
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- xix Skule (op.cit.)

