

European Inventory

on validation of informal and
non-formal learning



Education and Culture DG



Case Study: VINFL in Higher Education

1.1 Introduction

In the 2005 European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning, it was recommended that the next update should include more detail on higher education institutions (HEIs) which have been active in developing policies for validation. Thus, this case study will examine the validation and assessment methodologies used in a variety of HEIs focusing on Belgian, Norwegian and Estonian universities as examples. It is based on a document review and an interview with Aili Saluveer (Senior Specialist for APEL, University of Tartu).

The case study will serve as a discussion paper on validation in higher education (HE) and will aim to:

- Draw lessons from these countries on the basis of research work that has been carried out on validation in the higher education sector.
- Discuss the types of validation methodologies chosen by different HE institutions, reasons for the selection and the barriers to development of validation in the higher education sphere.

1.2 European Policy and Validation in HE

The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 put in motion a series of reforms to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents.¹ Every second year Education Ministers meet to measure progress and set priorities for action. In 2005, they met in Bergen and released a Communiqué which charged the Bologna Follow-Up Group with continuing and widening the Bologna Stocktaking process. It was noted that progress would be sought in four particular areas, one of which was *"creating opportunities for flexible learning paths in higher education, including procedures for the recognition of prior learning"*.

The 2007 Bologna Stocktaking exercise² observed that HEIs have begun to recognise prior learning (including non-formal and informal learning) for access to higher education programmes and qualifications. However, the report also notes that there is more work to

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna_en.html

² Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2007, Report from a working group appointed by the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Ministerial Conference in London, May 2007

be done in this area. Just over one third of the countries (17 out of 48¹) included in the survey achieved the highest score for the new indicator² on Recognition of Prior Learning, which the report suggests shows that procedures for validation are at an early stage of development in the majority of countries. In fact, there was no common understanding of 'recognition of prior learning' - in some cases it was taken to mean only recognising qualifications achieved in other institutions. Moreover, there were very few concrete examples of practice in the national reports.

Our findings from the 2007 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning show that developments have taken place in HE at both national and institutional levels. We will now examine the use of validation in HE in the three cases, in order to illustrate the progress made and lessons learned.

1.3 Validation in HE in Belgium, Estonia and Norway

1.3.1 Belgium

In Belgium it is important to distinguish between the legislation in place in the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking communities. In the Flemish-speaking community of Flanders, the 2004 decree on flexible learning created a legal framework for the validation of prior learning and/or professional experience for access to higher education programmes and for decreasing study duration. In the French-speaking community of Wallonia, the use of validation results in the application to HE (*universités* and *hautes écoles*) was to be put into operation during 2007. This case study will therefore focus on VINFL in Flanders, rather than Wallonia.

The (Flemish) decree on flexible learning (2004) created a legal framework for the validation of prior learning and/or professional experience for:

- Access to higher education programmes
- Decreasing study duration.

The decree meant that the pursuit of studies was no longer determined on the basis of passing examinations but on the acquisition of 'proofs of competence' for the separate course components.

¹ Belgium (Flemish), Belgium (French), Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Ukraine, UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), UK (Scotland)

² Indicator 11, Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2007, Report from a working group appointed by the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Ministerial Conference in London, May 2007, p. 36. Definition of the highest score: There are procedures/national guidelines or policy for assessment of prior learning as a basis for 1) access to higher education programmes, and 2) allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements

All higher education 'associations'¹ were obliged to set up an agency for the validation of prior learning. The methodology applied for the validation of prior learning would be as follows:

- 1 Applicants present a portfolio which details their prior learning experience
- 2 The association's 'validation agency' assesses the application, taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for
- 3 A Proof of Competence (POC) certificate is issued

The law determines that validation assessors in higher education must be evaluation experts and are not permitted to combine the assessment activity with the actual guidance and support of the applicant. The decree law does not state the number of assessors to be involved in a procedure. Students are entitled to request support during their application and for feedback at the end of the procedure.

Each association is responsible for quality assurance regarding EVC with respect to the following criteria: transparency, reliability and regularity of the procedures and methodology adopted.²

The legislation also determines the arrangements for payment of the costs of VINFL. Institutions do not receive additional funding to implement validation – they may ask for a basic fee to cover administrative costs and for an additional amount which is related to the number of competences to be identified during the assessment phase.

Since the higher education associations install their own validation agencies and procedures, it has been found that there is currently a certain level of variation in the processes in place.

A study conducted of the two largest higher education associations in Belgium (association KULeuven and association UGent)³ regarding their experience in implementing EVC found that in general, the number of EVC student applications remained restricted, both at university level and among the higher education institutions.

¹ One of the results of the earlier Decree on the structure of higher education (2003) was the official recognition of cooperation between a university and one or more 'hogescholen', which is known as 'association'. The aim of these associations is to become cooperating entities on education and research, and the development of fine arts, as well as to harmonise fields of study and create bridges between bachelor's and master's studies.

² de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

³ de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

1.3.2 Estonia

In Estonia, validation is facilitated only to students who move to different study programmes inside the same institution and/or between institutions. It is not possible to apply validation in relation to admissions to university – candidates are still required by law to have completed secondary level formal education (in Estonia or equivalent foreign qualifications) in order to apply.

The implementation of a system for Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL), including the possibility to validate both informal learning and work experience, was regulated nationally by the Universities Act and Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act in 2003. The Universities' Act allowed for 50% of the HE curriculum to be obtained through APEL. All HEIs had to develop an internal order for APEL and apply it from September 2004.

In 2006, amendments were made to the Universities Act and the Institutions of Professional Higher Education Act. The Higher Education Standard¹ defined a requirement to introduce the common principles of recognition of informal and non-formal learning. According to the amendment which came into force on 1 September 2007, there should be no predetermined restrictions related to the volume of studies for the application of APEL (except final examination and/or final thesis), providing the results of the applicant's earlier BA and MA studies are taken into account, along with the candidate's professional experience and providing the procedure is in line with the principles set out in the Higher Education Standard, and the procedure prescribed by the council of the institution of higher education².

Although the above-mentioned regulations oblige HEIs to accredit prior and experiential learning, there is not yet a common APEL regulation which applies to all educational providers in Estonia (the system is currently under development). We will therefore examine the University of Tartu as an example of the application of APEL in an Estonian university.

¹ The Higher Education Standard requires Universities to update their regulations and ensure that they are uniform

² Preparation of the 2008 Joint Interim Report on the implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme. Member States' contribution. Estonia. June, 2007.

At the University of Tartu, APEL has been brought under central control, in order to ensure a uniform approach. The box below outlines the procedure which is currently in place at the University of Tartu.

Validation of informal and non-formal learning in the University of Tartu, Estonia

The University of Tartu is the first in Estonia to have developed a system and procedures for the accreditation of prior studies and work experience. This system is now in the implementation stage.

The APEL procedure is as follows:

Depending on the volume of the accredited subjects or work experience, the application is reviewed either by the lecturer of the given subject or the APEL Committee (academic staff only) appointed by the Dean of the relevant Faculty. A particular subject will be assessed by the lecturer, whereas a larger group of subjects (from 5 credits, or 7.5 ECTS) will be assessed by the committee.

Students complete a form to describe their prior and / or experiential learning and how this relates to the course they are applying for.

If necessary, the assessor may demand additional documents, the compilation of a portfolio, an examination or an informal interview.

Assessments are carried out against the learning outcomes for the qualification in question, where these have been defined (not all curricula are currently defined in terms of learning outcomes).

The student is given a written response within one month from the date of submission of the application. 'Credits' are awarded for the elements of the qualification that the individual is determined to have met through prior and experiential learning. These are national credits but can also be 'converted' into ECTS.

The decisions on accreditation of prior learning and work experience may be contested according to the procedures provided by the Regulations of Studies.

Across Estonia, the submission of an application for APEL incurs a basic fee and an additional fee for every credit point – this is paid by the candidate, unless they meet certain conditions, such as those described below for the University of Tartu (in which case it is free). HEIs do not receive additional funding from the State to support this cost. At the University of Tartu, applications are in most cases (approximately 75%) free of charge. The University of Tartu regulations state that applications should be free in the following cases:

- if the candidate seeks assessment of subjects passed at the University of Tartu;
- if the candidate has received prior approval from their Faculty or College at another higher education institution;
- if a relevant agreement between higher education institutions so provides;

- if the candidate applies for an assessment of equivalence of prior learning in relation to admission requirements.

In Estonia, most HEIs have now worked out their internal regulations for implementing APEL (validation). Already in 2003, the Transfine Report¹ found that most HEIs in Estonia do recognise prior and experiential learning to some extent.

We were able to obtain data relating to take-up of VINFL in terms of individuals at the University of Tartu, where there were around 2010 applications for accreditation of prior and experiential learning in the academic year 2005-2006 (2120 applications for 2006/2007), although few of these were for accreditation of informal learning (thus most related to (formal and non-formal) education and training the individuals had already undertaken, which resulted in the award of a certificate). No data has been collected regarding the profile of the students, for example the gender balance.

1.3.3 Norway

In Norway, since 1992 adults aged 23 and over can be admitted to higher education on the basis of five years of education and/or work experience and prescribed minimum levels in six core subjects from upper secondary school. Legislation in 2001 further permitted applicants without sufficient formal entrance qualifications to be admitted to HE on the basis of age (25 years or more), and a combination of formal, informal and non-formal learning.²

Most recently, the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges in 2005 regulated the use of VINFL for both admissions and for exemption from an examination or test when it has been shown that a corresponding examination or test has been taken at the same or another institution, on the basis of another suitable examination or test or on the basis of prior learning (formal and non-formal).

Applicants' qualifications are assessed in relation to the subjects or the programmes they wish to study. The institutions are free to decide what constitutes the necessary qualifications for admittance and the procedures are decided locally. As a result, there are again variations with regard to practice between institutions.

Informal and non-formal learning is assessed mostly through self-declarations and portfolios - interviews and tests are seldom used. Each HE institution is responsible for its own quality assurance while the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) oversees quality assurance on a national level.

¹ Valk, A., Saluveer, A., Kesli, U., Karo, K., Haidak, T., Kivimäe, A., Anton, E., Transfine, Transfer between Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education, Phase 2, Country Studies: Estonia, December 2002 – February 2003

² 2007 National Report on the Implementation of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, Norway

Validation is free for the individual applicant - costs must be covered by the budget of the university or university college.

The Norwegian sub-project of the European REFINE project studied the assessment of a number of candidates with non-formal and informal learning who applied for exemption in higher education. The report shows that the six institutions selected for the study lacked procedures for the assessment of exemption candidates and consequently dealt with the candidates in an 'ad hoc manner'. However, although the project revealed that exemption is not a priority in Norwegian higher education and that existing procedures are inadequate, it also found that all the institutions involved were positive about the right to exemption.¹

The number of applicants 25 years and older seeking recognition of their formal, non-formal and informal learning for admission to a HE study programme was 6,000 in 2001 (the first year this was possible). The number of applicants decreased in the following years, to reach 2,700 in 2006.² (It was expected that the number of applicants would be high when the opportunity was first made available and that this would decrease somewhat over time.) The majority of the applicants were women (70% of students admitted on the basis of non-formal and informal learning).³ Approximately half of the applicants were for health and social studies and one fifth were for educational studies, mostly bachelor studies at university colleges.⁴

Adult students admitted on the basis of recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning constitute approximately 5 % of all new HE students annually, relatively more in health and social studies (12 %) and in educational studies (10 %). The number of these new students annually has decreased somewhat, from 2,100 to 1,300 in the period 2001-2006. However, these figures show that it is still an important scheme for adults lacking formal study to gain access to higher education.⁵

In contrast, exemption appears to be less common - there were only 123 applications for exemption in higher education during the period 2001-2004.⁶

¹ Haugoy, G., Moe, F., 2005, REFINE: Recognising Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education, Final report from the Norwegian sub-project, Vox and the University of Bergen, January 2005

² Ibid

³ Nilsen Mohn, T. , 2006, The Norwegian approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning; benefits for individuals, enterprises and society, A presentation given to the Sixth ERDI expert seminar, 12 May 2006

⁴ New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Brandt, E. (2005): *Avkorting av studier på grunnlag av realkompetanse*. Oslo: NIFU STEP

1.4 Validation in Practice – Barriers to take-up and Lessons Learned

As we have seen, in all three countries, HEIs are given a degree of autonomy to determine their own procedures for validation of informal and non-formal learning. This may lead to problems in terms of take-up and quality and consistency of the procedures in place. It may also lead to low levels of confidence in the systems for validation, both among providers and users.

In Belgium for example, one of the challenges identified is the need to harmonise the different methods and standards used by different associations. At the present large inter-institutional differences between, but also within institutions, can be observed.¹ This brings another problem - students have the impression that they can 'shop around' between the various associations.²

The Transfine report on the use of APEL in Estonia suggested that subjectivity in decision-making caused a number of problems when APEL was first introduced. The report proposed that generally accepted norms and definite rules of procedure were necessary to overcome this problem. Today, the definition of curricula in terms of learning outcomes is in development and will be adopted in 2009. For qualifications where learning outcomes have not been defined, assessment is more difficult and there remains the question of how quality and consistency are assured. Quality assurance is recognised as an important issue in Estonia and is also under development.

Validation inevitably involves a cost (academic staff time, support and administration etc) and some universities may be resistant to taking on this additional cost burden. In Estonia, a great deal of discussion to date has revolved around the question of payment for the APEL procedure.

In Norway, it has been found that the centrally located university colleges, which have too many applicants, find it hard to provide enough resources to deal with these application schemes³ and in Belgium, students expressed criticism of the costs involved in submitting an application for VINFL.

Where validation is employed as a means of widening access and encouraging new target groups to enter higher education, it is clear that the imposition of a cost for individual

¹ de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

³ Findings of a survey by NIFU STEP, the Norwegian research institute for studies in innovation, research, and education.

applicants must be clearly thought out. However, it is suggested that applying a cost for the applicants might be a way of ensuring applications are 'taken seriously' and based on a well thought-out description of the individual's prior learning and experience in relation to the qualification sought.

In Belgium, although a survey of students that had undertaken the validation procedure reported positive experiences, some were disillusioned because of the heavy workload involved. The time commitment was also an issue for staff involved in administering the process.

The lack of awareness of the opportunities presented by APEL is suggested as a barrier to take-up in Estonia. This has also been highlighted as a problem in Belgium - although information on VINFL is made available on HE associations' websites and also on the website of the Flemish department of Education, the low rate of take-up to date is attributed in part to the fact that students were unfamiliar with EVC and procedure, and that information and publicity about EVC was not yet widely distributed within the organisations.¹

Finally, attitudinal barriers are also evident. In Estonia for example, in the sphere of higher education, it is suggested that awareness of APEL is also low among 'academics'. They are not yet familiar with the concept of validation and in some cases may be resistant to its application, due to their traditional perception of the value of formal qualifications. In Norway however, experience has shown that the introduction of VINFL can bring about a change in attitudes. Initially, there was scepticism among Norwegian HEIs towards VINFL but experience has now led to a positive attitude among most institutions.²

1.4.1 Impact

We have categorised the impact of validation in higher education according to the impact on individuals, as well as the impact on institutions.

For individuals:

- Validation opens up learning opportunities to new target groups – it provides a 'second chance' for learners from under-represented groups.
- Individuals benefit from the possibility to shorten the duration of formal studies. This may also lead to a reduction in cost.

¹ de Craene, B., An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education, Sense Publishers

² New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

- Increased mobility – validation helps to bring down barriers, both in education / training and the labour market.
- Successful completion of a validation procedure can bring increased self-esteem and confidence.

The example below illustrates the positive response to the introduction of VINFL in Norway.

Benefits of validation – Norway

During the national Validation Project in Norway between 1999 and 2002, 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. Apart from mathematics and the natural sciences, they also received final results which were on a par with the traditional students' results. 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.¹

NIFU STEP² has surveyed the effects of the legal right to seek admission to HE in Norway on the basis of non-formal and informal learning. Before the national Validation Project was implemented, there was scepticism among higher education institutions towards validation but experience has led to a positive attitude to the reform in most institutions. Small university colleges particularly value students admitted in this way, who are found to be motivated and hard working.

For universities:

- Increased student satisfaction – tailored learning paths can be provided;
- Increased diversity of the student population – students with prior learning / experience can bring a valuable contribution to the learning environment;
- Improved rates of completion;
- Improved adaptability in relation to the needs of the labour market – courses can be tailored appropriately and graduates thus have the right skills for employers;
- Changes in attitudes towards learning – increased emphasis on competences and learning outcomes, rather than duration of study;
- Where validation includes the involvement of other stakeholders (e.g professional members of interview juries in France) or stimulates a process of sharing experiences

¹ E. Brandt: Høgskolenes erfaringer med realkompetansestudenter fra forsøksordningene i 1999 og 2000, NIFU Skriftserie 11/2002, Oslo:NIFU. In Skule, S. and Ure, O B, Lifelong Learning – Norwegian Experiences, Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Paper 2004:21

² Norwegian research institute for studies in innovation, research, and education.

and lessons learned among the HE community, it can help to promote cooperation among institutions and with external partners.

1.5 Sustainability and mainstreaming

The findings of the survey *Bologna with Student eyes 2007*¹ indicate that the situation regarding the availability of VINFL is diverse. It found that *"In the large majority of the countries surveyed, there are no national policies designed for all institutions. Even when there are provisions for RPL at the national level, national bodies are absent or almost irrelevant. Higher education institutions are considered the main holders of responsibility for the promotion of validation, spreading information and carrying the necessary procedures. However, in the absence of a solid implementation of these mechanisms at national level, institutions develop their own initiatives and policies, operating without any given guidelines.(...) Moreover, RPL is far from being a well-known mechanism among the wider public for assessing knowledge, skills and competences."*

The survey findings thus appear to be mirrored to some extent in the countries we have examined for this case study. As we have seen, the lack of national level mechanisms can lead to problems as a result of the diversity in provision, which may raise issues in terms of the sustainability of VINFL. Diversity in provision may represent a barrier to take-up and could lead to a lack of confidence in the system among stakeholders and beneficiaries. However, in each of our case study countries, actions are now being taken to learn from experiences to date and to further develop and sustain the initial activities relating to VINFL, as outlined below.

In **Belgium**, the 2006 Decree on the establishment of measures for restructuring and flexibility in higher education simplified and improved the procedures for the recognition of prior learning. However, there remain several issues to be addressed. A critical issue for many institutions is that not all curricula have been fully developed in terms of competences. For the associations, the time investment of staff is high and no additional resources have been made available by the Department of Education so the extra work has to be taken up by existing staff. It is felt that EVC is politically promoted on the one hand but not financially supported on the other – which affects its acceptance at institutional level.²

¹ National Unions of Students in Europe, *Bologna with Students Eyes 2007*, London

² de Craene, B., *An Exploratory Study of the Formal Recognition of Prior Learning Experiences in the Context of Flemish Higher Education*, Sense Publishers

The Flemish government has responsibility for the five-yearly evaluation of how the associations.¹ It will be important that these evaluations are acted on to ensure that validation in HE can be further improved on in Belgium in the future.

In **Estonia**, the development of an effective national APEL system has become a priority for the Ministry of Education and Research. HEIs and the Ministry of Education are working together to discuss the future of validation in the country, to share their experiences and good practice, as well as collecting data relating to the VINFL procedures currently in place. The issue of quality assurance is also being prioritised. At the University of Tartu, for example, there is a procedure for quality assurance which is regularly monitored and there is also a Committee to oversee this issue.

The Estonian National Qualifications Framework has not yet been finalised (it is due to be adopted in 2009), which presents an obstacle to consistency in the application of validation, since there are no national level descriptors. The definition of curricula in terms of learning outcomes is currently being developed and will be adopted in 2009.

In terms of information and guidance, there is a plan to develop more integrated guidance and counselling services (which include APEL counselling), to make better links between career counselling and other counselling services and involve labour market counselling services in giving initial information and orientation on APEL issues. Cooperation with the National Resource Centre for Guidance is also planned.

In collaboration with the Ministry, the University of Tartu has launched a project financed by the European Social Fund (LÜKKA²) for the development of a national APEL system. The project aims to develop APEL tools and practices, promote APEL networking in Estonia, provide advanced training to APEL assessors and set up and implement a system of quality standards for APEL. Thus, in the coming years, progress in many aspects of APEL may gain pace in Estonia.

In **Norway**, it is suggested that if the criteria for qualifications are altered to learning outcomes, the recognition process would be easier to conduct. It is recognised that increased cooperation among institutions is necessary, and institutions are in contact in order to learn from each other and develop more coherent practices. Vox, the Institute for Adult Learning, has been a leading and coordinating actor in facilitating learning between

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² www.ut.ee/lykka

Higher Education Institutions. However, it is recognised that more work needs to be done.¹

1.6 Conclusion

The 2007 Bologna Stocktaking report stated that validation is "*an area where there is a need to raise awareness of the issues and provide support for future development.*" Our case study seems to confirm this statement. In the three countries we have looked at, although there is policy or legislation in place relating to VINFL, institutions are generally left to devise and implement their own procedures, leading to a number of problems and barriers, together with an overall lack of cohesion. It thus seems that cooperation between institutions and other stakeholders should be increased in the future. The experiences to date can serve to provide valuable lessons which must now be acted upon and shared.

¹ New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway