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

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CONTENTS

- 1.0 Introduction..... 1**
- 2.0 Existing initiatives..... 3**
 - 2.1 Public authorities..... 3
 - 2.2 Regional initiatives..... 8
 - 2.3 Industry initiatives..... 8
 - 2.4 Third sector initiatives..... 9
- 3.0 Conclusion 10**

Bibliography

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Validation of non-formal and informal learning plays an important role in Denmark's education policy agenda. The Adult Education Reform (2001) strengthened the emphasis on competence-based and lifelong learning oriented systems (s. Danish Ministry of Education, 2002). The reform aimed at an approach to validation that meets the needs of the individual and enterprises. There has been an increasing focus on learning and developing skills outside the formal education system in Denmark (s. ASEM (2), p. 32; Danish Government, 2002). Therefore, better linking of formal, non-formal and informal learning was a goal of the 2001 reform initiative. Validation of non-formal and informal learning as part of this process opens up increasingly flexible pathways between formal education and training and workplace and institutional learning (s. ASEM (2), p. 32).

The present and future initiatives of the Danish Ministry of Education are aiming at promoting a more coherent and systematic practice of recognizing non-formal and informal learning together with formal learning for crediting in education and training (mainstream system as well as provision for adults).

A policy paper on validation of 'real competences' as a follow-up to the 2002 Better Education Action Plan by the coalition government was introduced in Parliament in November 2004. The policy paper "Recognition of prior learning within the education system" ("Anerkendelse af realkompetencer i uddannelserne") contains a set of principles for enhanced assessment and recognition of prior learning (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal), and plans for next steps:

- The individual citizen should be able to request an assessment of his or her prior learning based on the framework and regulations applicable within the individual areas of education
- The individual has a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of his/her prior learning.
- A user fee may be charged for a competence assessment, excepting the low skilled when a personal study plan is prepared for them.
- A competence assessment should always be based on the objectives and admission requirements of the education programme in question.
- The individual's competences should be recognised irrespective of where and how they were acquired, but without compromising the quality/standard of the education and training programmes.
- The methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome.
- The result of the assessment should be documented by issuing a certificate.

Recognition of prior learning after competence assessment may result in the following:

- Entrance qualifications for an education/training programme
- A shorter study plan ('credit' in an education programme)
- Documentation of competences/qualifications in relation to part of an education programme
- Recognition in relation to a full education programme, if possible.

In its parliamentary debate the policy paper met with general endorsement from all political parties. In 2005, all parts of the education and training sector, the social partners and the third sector were invited to take part in development initiatives and dialogue. The necessary legislative amendments are being and will continue to be prepared to implement the initiatives outlined in the paper. Development work has been initiated, including development of clarification (identification) and documentation schemes in working life as well as in the third sector (liberal adult education and civil society activities).

A crucial issue which the Danish Ministry of Education is currently examining is the need to look at the use of fiscal tools that can help regulate the prior learning assessment activity. Educational institutions, the Ministry argues, must have the proper financial incentives to recognise an applicant's prior learning including resulting reduction of study time on an individual basis. The taximeter principle (funding per student activity) works as a negative incentive in this respect because it encourages the institution to offer the 'whole package'. Existing arrangements operate with funding per individual competence assessment or per personal study plan.

On the whole, the Ministry will try to ensure that within the public budget available priority is awarded to those with the lowest level of education and training. Graduated user fees for competence assessment will be introduced, except for the low skilled when their objective is a personal study plan.

2.0 EXISTING INITIATIVES¹

2.1 Public authorities

The Danish experiences with validation of non- and informal learning are based mainly on the adult vocational training and vocational education and training schools (s. Danish Ministry of Education, interview May 12, 2004; The Danish University of Education, interview June 21, 2004). Yet important developments have recently occurred in other areas.

This section of the chapter presents an updated overview of existing arrangements on recognition of prior learning in the following areas: General upper secondary education, initial vocational education and training (VET), tertiary education, general adult education and vocationally oriented adult education.

2.1.1 General upper secondary education: A more flexible credit transfer system

Within general upper secondary education, a new A Level reform in Denmark (taking effect from 2005) has introduced a credit transfer system based on an assessment of the individual student's prior learning. The objective is to give the students the opportunity to get credit transfers for previously completed studies, periods of stay abroad, etc. and therefore be granted admission to subjects at a higher level or extra optional subjects or – if the particular credit transfer is very substantial – a reduced A Level course.

2.1.2 Initial VET: Individual competence assessment as a general principle

Following the Better Education Action Plan the government has amended the Initial VET legislation, taking effect from 1 August 2003, introducing a general principle of individual competence assessments as a basis for preparation of trainees' personal education plans. In order to manage highly individualised VET programmes, all trainees have to have a personal education plan drawn up. Together with a contact teacher (tutor), trainees draw up a personal education plan describing all their learning objectives and how to attain them. The personal education plan is based on an assessment of trainees' competences and outlines an individual pathway through the VET system. When the trainee starts practical training in an enterprise, the latter is also involved in the definition of the overall objectives for the training in cooperation with the trainee.

Flexible pathways (personal education plans) adapted to the trainee's actual ('real') competences may shorten education periods (exemptions), but they may also lead to longer education pathways adapted to individual needs, or to additions in order to enable the trainee to acquire additional qualifications.

¹ This section relies importantly on the information contained in the paper and a presentation from Annelise Hauch (Danish Ministry of Education) to the OECD in January 2006.

The national trade committee for a particular VET programme has the authority to decide on exemptions from programme requirements that exceed four weeks (exemptions of up to four weeks being within the authority of the college). The social partners are equally represented in the bipartite trade committees.

In connection with 2004 amendments of legislation, similar provisions of individual assessment of competences now apply at the institutions of social and health education.

Since 1992, following a Parliament resolution, all ministerial orders on initial VET programmes regulated that in Adult VET, students at least 25 years of age who can document relevant non-formal learning may get credits as part of a VET programme. In general, these former special arrangements are now being replaced by the general principle of individual competence assessment of trainees in the initial VET system. However, for specific reasons, some VET programmes expressly indicate special pathways for adults with prior learning.

2.1.3 Tertiary Education: Admission

Within tertiary education, the individual educational institutions may – as previously – grant admission to students on the basis of individual assessments of these applicants' qualifications when the applicants have actual qualifications that are comparable to the general formal admission requirements (exemption from formal requirements).

In June 2004, the Government decided to change the restricted admissions system for tertiary education with effect from summer 2007. The objective of the new admissions system is, firstly, to encourage and assist young people to complete their studies faster and minimize the time between completing their A Levels and continuing their studies at tertiary level, and secondly, to strengthen the course-specific qualifications of the successful applicants in order to reduce the drop-out rate. Two quota systems are in place.

Quota I, which is based on the results from the qualifying examination, will – with minor adjustments – continue to be the main admission route to the studies where admission is restricted.

Quota II has been changed. Quota II applies to certain selected studies and provides a small group of applicants with a further chance of admission after a reduction in the quotient of admission, including adjustment for any relevant course-specific skills enhancement. For all studies, this group permits admission of students following individual assessment and entrance examinations or similar.

The system clearly attaches importance to qualifications for studying but also provides opportunities for prior learning assessment with the aid of examinations, interviews, and other means.

2.1.4 General Adult Education

On the whole, practice in Preparatory Adult Education (literacy and numeracy courses) already lives up to the principles of the Government policy paper on Recognition of prior learning, especially through individual competence assessment for placement at suitable level and personalised study plan. The same may be said for General Adult Education at lower secondary level, although development and enhancement is called for.

2.1.5 Vocationally oriented adult education and training

Adult Vocational Training ('AMU', CVT): Individual Competence Assessment and individual training plan

Since 1997 Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) centres and technical and commercial Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges have been offering individual competence assessment (ICA) for the identification of competences and referral to courses within the adult vocational training programmes (AMU). The goal is twofold: First, to establish individual training plans that identify the individual's prior formal and non-formal learning; second, to offer individual training in accordance with (since 2004) the participant's job competence profile as reference point, and drawing up an individual training plan referring to the adult vocational training courses and VET single subjects listed in a common competence description that match the participant's job/competence profile.

The target group consists of employed workers of all skill levels. The scheme may be used by an individual for further personal or career development or, more typically, by enterprises as part of a Human Resources Development plan. The Public Employment Service may buy adult vocational training courses according to the identified needs of unemployed workers.

In the Adult Vocational Training scheme, ICA may be said to fall into the category of formative assessment approaches in which the validation process helps the student to fill in the knowledge and skills gaps on the way to meeting a job competence profile since the purpose of the ICA is to assess prior learning of the student and linking it to institutional learning which results in a personalised study and training period at the adult vocational training institution. However the ICA may also result in the recognition of prior learning, giving a right to credit transfer into initial VET, and therefore may be said to be summative in this respect.

The ICA operates at two levels. At the individual level, the ICA starting point is the individual's personal ideas and professional and educational aspirations. At the enterprise level, the competence analysis focuses on the qualification needs of the company.

During the ICA the participant's prior learning is assessed by different methods (s. Danish Ministry of Education, 2002):

- Interview, to establish personal ideas and priorities

- Interview, to assess and recognize prior work experience and formal learning relevant to the present situation
- Tests, written and/or oral
- Practical exercises
- Simulation

The training plan based on the assessment of the individuals' prior learning covers technical, general and personal areas.

The vocational training committees according to the legislation on Adult Vocational Training, in which the social partners are equally represented, do not play any part in individual competence assessment.

Basic Adult Education Scheme: Individual competence assessment, Recognition of prior learning and individual study plan

The Adult Education Reform (2001) introduced the Basic Adult Education Scheme ('GVU'). This scheme aims at introducing a new, coherent and flexible way for low skilled adults to have their formal, non-formal and informal learning assessed and recognised with a view to acquiring formal VET qualifications while retaining their work.

VET colleges offer a one-stop individual competence assessment and recognition of the student's prior learning. This forms the starting point for an individual study and training plan which allows for part-time study in a single subject structure qualifying for a VET diploma, without the practical training part and therefore without an apprenticeship contract with an enterprise. The target group consists of part-time students who want to combine the study with continued employment (s. Danish Ministry of Education 2002). The admission criteria are threefold: 25 years of age, minimum two years of relevant work experience, and qualifications corresponding to compulsory school exit level in relevant subjects.

The Basic Adult Education Scheme is a summative approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning. It enables the student to close the knowledge gaps on the way to mastery (diploma identical to a VET diploma).

The reference points for the individual competence assessment (ICA) are the targets of the corresponding VET programme. These targets are indicated either in an annexe to the regulation of each VET programme or in attached guidelines. The assessment is part of the formal VET systems. ICA includes the two years of relevant work experience, which are admission requirements for the desired education programme, and should contribute towards exemption for the practical training part. For ICA methods, see above under Adult Vocational Training.

The personal study plan drawn up by one college on the basis of individual competence assessment is binding for other colleges that provide the same programme.

In contrast to initial VET, the national trade committees - in which the social partners are equally represented - do not take part in the individual assessment and recognition of practical competences in a Basic Adult Education programme. The college informs the relevant trade committee on the individual study and training plans that it has drawn up for participants. The trade committee has the right to advise the school on future practice.

Individual Competence Assessment (ICA) in the Basic Adult Education programme and ICA in the CVT programme (see above) are to be merged into a joint concept.

Advanced levels of the Adult Education System: Work experience as part of admission requirements, study in interplay with work experience

The Adult Education System as part of the Adult Education Reform (2001) also introduced a new framework for further education at tertiary level.

The reform of the Adult Education System aims at better connecting formal education and non-formal learning at work. This promotes the goal of further education at advanced levels to develop progression in professional competence rather than the progression in study competence, which is dominant in the mainstream higher education programmes (s. Danish Ministry of Education, 2002).

The Adult Education Reform (2001) introduced relevant work experience as part of the entrance requirements for the Adult Education System. Although validation of non-formal and informal learning is not recognized as part of the education programme at this level, the (shorter) duration and the organization of the content and teaching methods of the continued education programmes is to a high degree based on the life and work experience of the adults. Especially in connection with the final student's project there is interplay between theory and the adult's prior non-formal and informal learning acquired through work and life experience. In accordance with the Act on Open Education (which governs provision and financing of vocationally oriented adult education and training), the target group of the study programme are individuals that are working.

The admission criteria for this programme are twofold: Relevant educational background and two years of relevant work experience are required. The educational institution assesses the relevance of the work experience in two dimensions: relevance in relation to the previous educational background and relevance in relation to the desired further education programme.

In the context of implementation of the 2004 Government Policy Paper on Recognition of Prior Learning in the Education system, the following legal amendments are foreseen for the advanced levels of the Adult Education System to bring it in harmony with the principles of the paper:

- The introduction of general access for applicants who do not have the formal qualifications to have their corresponding prior learning assessed and recognized
- The shortening of courses in the ordinary programmes on the basis of recognition of non-formal competences

- The possibility of having certificates or diplomas issued exclusively on the basis of recognition of non-formal competences.

2.2 Regional initiatives

Two projects have been initiated on the regional level: First, a consortium of vocational schools in the Århus area, together with the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers, is working on validation of prior learning. Second, an adult education and training centre on the island of Fyn is a good practice example for accreditation of prior learning and innovative ways of meeting the needs of people who have little or bad experiences with schooling.

2.3 Industry initiatives

The largest Danish Telecom company TDC assigned a private company, Ordkløveriet, to develop basic training for their dyslectic employees. Ordkløveriet introduced validation of informal learning in their 11 day basic training courses. In the first two days of the course, an elaborate testing system (developed by Ordkløveriet and approved by the National Education Board in Denmark) was used to find out about the status of the participants competences in reading and writing. The system consists of various tasks of reading and writing developed by Ordkløveriet, complemented by testing tools from outside specialists and individual 30 min interviews to find out about the learning needs and preferences of each participant.

The method falls into the category of formative validation approaches. It aims at tailor making the following nine day courses on the basis of the recognized non-formal and informal learning results of the first two days. At the end of the basic training the participants are tested via a questionnaire on their achievements during the course. So far two trial and three follow up courses with 15 participants each have taken place between November 2001 and spring 2003. More courses for TDS and for other companies in Denmark are planned.

It is important to mention that, in the context of the implementation of the Government Policy Paper on Recognition of Prior Learning in the Education System, the individual should have a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of his or her competences. Thus, methods and tools that the individual may use to describe and document his or her prior learning are of great importance for the assessment and recognition vis-à-vis the education system. It may also benefit the individual on the labour market, e.g. in connection with job-seeking, or in his or her present job, just as it may support competence development in the enterprise.

There are already a variety of tools developed by companies, organisations related to the labour market and others, as well as a number of tools for job seeking. However, clarification (identification) and documentation tools in the form of a portfolio in order to ensure the best possible interaction between people's work and leisure pursuits – and the competence assessment vis-à-vis the education system - need to be developed further.

The Ministry of Education is presently developing such tools in cooperation with on the one hand, the social partners and on the other hand, stakeholders in the 'third sector' (liberal adult

education organisations and voluntary organisations etc.). These development projects should be completed by autumn 2006.

2.4 Third sector initiatives

There is little information in English on recognition of prior learning initiatives in the third sector available, although there are a number of interesting initiatives in place in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning in the third sector in Denmark.

The day high school sector has done a project with developing the portfolio method together with the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers. However, no documentation in English or interview partner have been available for further information. It is documented in Danish on <http://www.daghojskoler.dk/> (link: portfolio & realkompetence).

New projects in the third sector are being developed. Seminars with scientific consultants have already taken place. Among the NGOs who have initiated development projects are: NetOp (Netværk for Oplysning) in cooperation with LOF (Liberal Oplysnings Forbund), both adult education associations, and DUF (Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd), which is the Danish Youth Council. Information in English on these particular projects can be found on the website of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning: www.nordvux.net/object/5982/validationobject.htm, and www.nordvux.net/object/5981/validationobject.htm, respectively.

The "Danish Adult Education Association", which is a non-profit umbrella association for the liberal adult education associations and other associations within the "Folkeoplysning", has also had, for some years now, a "Realkompetenceforum": This is a forum for input, mutual learning and coordinating ongoing work in its member organisations. The Board of the Forum makes, and is responsible for, all political decisions on "Realkompetence" (Prior Learning including Non-formal and Informal) in liberal adult education. Links to ongoing projects are to be found on <http://www.dfs.dk/aktiviteter/realkompetencer/rkprojekterimedlemsorg>. An English description of the Forum itself can be seen on <http://www.nordvux.net/object/5983/validationobject.htm>.

3.0 CONCLUSION

The Danish Government is taking the validation system further by going beyond recognizing formal and non-formal learning within the framework of the Adult Education System. A change of perspective towards the needs of the individual and enterprises is under way. National education policy also aims at a more coherent and systematic practice of validation of informal and non-formal learning.

There are some initiatives in the private and third sector. However, they are in the developing stage so that little information is available at this point. It is too early to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the various Danish validation initiatives since there is too little information on the results and no evaluations available at this point.

Denmark does not have a tradition of evaluation. It is more – as one employee of the Danish Ministry of Education has put it - “a tradition of trust”. In the context of the unexpectedly negative Pisa study results for Denmark, the topic of evaluation is gaining more and more importance which might also cover the validation initiatives on non-formal and informal learning.

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