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

Iceland – By Arnbjorn Olaffson
(Educate Iceland)

ECOTEC
Research & Consulting Limited

Priestley House
12-26 Albert Street
Birmingham B4 7UD
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)121 616 3600
Fax: +44 (0)121 616 3699
Web: www.ecotec.com

CONTENTS

Comment [CA1]: Table of Contents automatically generated from Headings

1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ICELAND	1
By Arnbjorn Olaffson (Educate Iceland).....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector.....	1
1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private sector.....	5
1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector.....	7
1.5 Conclusions.....	8

1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ICELAND

By Arnbjorn Olaffson (Educate Iceland)

1.1 Introduction

For the last eight years the Icelandic government has laid an increased emphasis on lifelong learning. In 1998 a Minister appointed committee on lifelong learning produced a report on recommendations and proposals for increasing participation in lifelong learning in Iceland. The report deals with lifelong learning from various standpoints and focuses on the organisation and administration of adult learning. In the report one of the key arguments concerns the need for short and transparent routes for adults to formal graduation and that this be achievable through recognition of their prior learning. The committee also pointed out the need for a general policy for validation of adults' experiences and knowledge.

Validation has been practiced in Iceland for decades, e.g. with assessment of work experience within the skilled trades since the late 1920's as well as the recognition of vocational education and training that has been acquired abroad. However, the systematic and organised approach towards the recognition of adults' skills and the apprehension of the importance of being able to validate prior learning for re-entry into the formal school system is a relatively recent notion. The interest can be traced back to growing awareness of lifelong learning in Iceland – both from the public as well as the government.

The actions taken after the report was published can be described as the first formal procedures specifically aimed at validating non-formal and informal learning. The Ministry presented the key features of the Copenhagen Declaration to upper secondary schools and the occupational councils and have encouraged both to be actively involved in future developments. Icelanders have therefore recognised the importance of validation of non-formal learning, but specific initiatives are just now getting underway.

1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector

The main initiatives taken regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning on a national stage come from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry's goals are laid out in a service agreement with the Education and Training Service Centre from 2003, which gives the latter responsibility for the initial development of a means of validating non-formal and informal learning along with an advisory role on how such a system will be implemented in Iceland. [See chapter 2.2]

Different activities can be classified as pertaining to the field of validation of non-formal learning, but public initiatives have mostly been aimed at the assessment of knowledge and skills in connection with;

1.2.1 Career planning

Unemployment agencies maintain a national database of job seekers. Information in the database includes information about an individual's formal education, work experience, skills and other competences, such as language skills, management experience, driver's licence, computer skills, artistic talent and practical experience in industrial trades. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Directorate of Labour are responsible for labour issues in Iceland. Local unemployment agencies operated by the Department of Labour are charged with the task of providing information on available jobs and education to those seeking employment.

1.2.2 Enrolment in upper secondary schools and universities

No comprehensive legislation applies to adult education in Iceland. The Upper Secondary School Act of 1996 however covers several aspects of adult education. Municipal education centres, union study centres and lifelong learning centres work together to prepare adults for reentry in the educational system and further education. Adults are evaluated according to the requirements stated in the National Curriculum Guidelines. The guidelines state that:

“Schoolmasters at upper secondary level are responsible for assessing and validating the student's previous education – both formal or non-formal. Non-formal education, in this context refers to the knowledge or skills that the individual has acquired through means other than formal education, such as privately run courses or experience gathered on the job market.” [The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: National Curriculum Guidelines 2004]

In reviewing previous studies, schools are expected to ascertain whether the studies in question can be said to equal any given line of study deemed necessary as preparation for a new line of studies and whether the individual student has met the preconditions for completing his studies at upper secondary level. If there is any doubt as to whether previous studies can be validated, the student has a right to undergo examination in order to demonstrate his actual skills and knowledge.

It has been shown that schools at upper secondary level have had difficulties in measuring or validating adults' work experience and informal and non-formal learning. This prompted the Ministry of Education to encourage schools to go further in validating learning and to try to gain new experiences when assessing individual learning in order to reach an appropriate and fair conclusion as to the proper starting point for each individual's new studies. Thus the schools have been asked to focus on the goals of the study programme in question and the actual skills and competencies of each individual seeking admission or assessment. It has been underlined that individuals have a right to special assessment examinations where there is doubt as to the correct starting point for studies in upper secondary school. The Ministry's policy is that repetition of previous paths of learning should be avoided at all costs. It is stated in art. 6 of the Law on Universities no. 136/1997 that universities can themselves decide who is admitted for studies at the university in question. Generally speaking, it is required that students have passed matriculation examination or its equivalent. In some cases applicants with substantial work experience who have not completed their matriculation examination

may be admitted, but there is little evidence to suggest that any significant number of students are enrolled at universities in Iceland on this basis.

1.2.3 Developing individual curricula

The Ministry of Education has charged different professional educational centres with the responsibility of verifying study contracts for all those wishing to complete vocational studies within regulated industrial professions. According to the Upper Secondary School Act, a study contract must be signed for all courses of vocational study in this country, and this applies to young apprentices as well as adults.

It is quite common that an individual with extensive work experience in a particular field seeks to complete formal studies and be licensed as a professional in his field. These individuals must first get a study contract with an approved master. When doing this, they can ask to have their work experience assessed in order to shorten the length of practical training required. The education centres previously mentioned do not have particular assessment tools, other than assessing the type of training the individual has received and measuring it against the national curriculum and the requirements of the labour market. Some education centres have only looked at the time of training, but not its contents. In spite of this, some centres have demonstrated an interest in developing more useful assessment tools and would like to take as their point of departure the descriptions of in-company training that in the future will accompany all curricula for vocational education.

1.2.4 Issuing school-leaving certificates

Students who complete individual courses receive diplomas that confirm the passing of a particular course of study, but these diplomas are not valid within the official school system. On the other hand, they can form a basis of assessment for further studies at particular school levels.

School leavers from upper secondary school level receive certificates upon graduation which have a formal standing within the school system since they provide the basis for enrolment at universities and other further education institutions. These however do grant professional recognition within regulated professions.

Within regulated industrial professions, students who graduate from a vocational programme at upper secondary school level must apply for a journeyman's examination as soon as they have completed the required length of practical in-company training. If they pass the test, they are granted permission to work as licensed professionals and to enter a master study programme. Students who complete examinations in health professions must apply for recognition to the Ministry of Health and Social Security.

Individuals who come from abroad have the possibility of getting their vocational education recognised on the basis of art. 14 of the Regulation on Journeyman's Examinations no. 525/2000. The foreigner would receive a letter from the ministry stating they have equal competencies to an Icelandic person in a similar position. The individual from abroad would

however still need to sit an exam to gain the Journeyman qualification. The Minister of Education can fully recognise education that has been acquired abroad, so that the individual in question will be issued an Icelandic journeyman's certificate. If there is any doubt as to the contents of study abroad or length of practical work experience, the individual has the opportunity to demonstrate his skills and knowledge in a practical examination.

There was previously an alternative way for individuals to seek recognition as licensed professionals without having to take the formal route through the education system - the so called Ten Years' Examinations. This possibility was in existence from approximately 1950 until 1998 when it was abolished by law. Initially, it applied only to those who had had accidents and suffered injuries during their apprenticeships so they were unable to complete their vocational education, but who were able to work at particular jobs with satisfactory results. This examination gradually became interpreted so liberally that anyone who had gained ten years' work experience under the guidance of a qualified master had the right to undergo a practical examination, the passing of which granted the individual in question the right to work as a licensed professional within a certain regulated trade. The Ten Years' Examinations were abolished in 1998.

1.2.5 Regulations for validating non-formal education and workplace experience

The Ministry has issued guidelines for upper secondary schools for validating non-formal education and skills acquired on the workplace for two separate professions, social service workers and medical secretaries, in order to shorten the formal study path. Currently work is being done in developing guidelines for validating non-formal learning and experience for assistants in pre- and compulsory schools.

1.2.6 Improving the individual's position in the labour market, job development or wage increases

Wage contracts sometimes contain options that enable employees to increase their wages through vocational education. It is up to the employers themselves to maintain an overview of the degree of education that the employee has reached. This applies especially to civil servants, municipal employees and those working within the social and health sectors, where a special system of continuing education has been established.

1.2.7 The Educational Gateway

Recently, the Ministry has striven to lay the foundation for new forms of education by utilising information technology.

The Educational Gateway is a means to that end. It is a web based environment for responding to the needs of students, teachers, schools, parents and others connected with education. The Educational Gateway includes a sub-site which deals with the validation and assessment of prior learning, where it is possible to find guidelines for self assessing prior vocational education. To begin with the guidelines will primarily benefit those seeking either

to certify foreign vocational education and training or certify the vocational education obtained in Iceland for use abroad.

1.2.8 Conferences and work-groups

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture organised a conference on validation of non-formal education in February 2003 in order to introduce international initiatives on the subject and address the need for national strategies. The conference served as a formal start-up and forum for the discussion of validation of non-formal learning and development of national policies in Iceland.

The Research Liaison Office at the University of Iceland (RLO) organised a conference on the development of adult learning in Iceland and Europe in March 2004. As part of the preparation for the conference the RLO formed a working group to discuss methods for validating non-formal learning and skills. The working group looked at the motivation for developing a system for validating non-formal learning and skills, the essential requirements of such a system and the methods and tools needed for successful implementation of such a system.

A delegation from Iceland attended a two day conference in Stockholm in November 2003 organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers on validation of non-formal learning. The objective of meeting was to discuss and share information on the Nordic initiatives being taken on the subject of validation.

1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private sector

Fræðslumiðstöð Atvinnulífsins – The Education and Training Service Centre

The Education and Training Service Centre functions as a mutual platform for partners from the Ministry and both sides of industry with special focus on the task of development of validation of non-formal, informal and individual competences. The Centre's main task is to function as an advisory body for the Ministry of Education and develop methods for validation on non-formal and informal learning.

The Education and Training Service Centre opened in 2003. Currently the centre is developing and formulating its approach as well as structuring the tasks ahead and various initiatives in the field of validation.

The Centre's initiatives that are concerned with validation of informal and non-formal learning include:

Advisory role

According to the service agreement with the Ministry, the Education and Training Service Centre is "... to aid the Ministry in developing methods to validate education and educational progress, including validation and accreditation of non-formal learning and training in

cooperation with work life and educational providers. Also, to assist in developing personal portfolios for individuals within the target group [i.e. unskilled workers].”

Working groups and committees

The Centre has members on a steering committee which works with the assessment and validation of knowledge acquired outside the formal school system as a means to shorten the formal education for unskilled workers.

A working group appointed by the Ministry, including two representatives from the Ministry, one from the upper-secondary system and one from the Education and Training Service Centre, was appointed in the fall 2003 to serve as an advisory body for the Ministry in matters regarding validation. The committee has met numerous times and is well on its way in developing rules for validation of non-formal education. The first results are due in the fall 2004.

The Centre has also attended national and international conferences on the subject of validation, as well as participating in various working groups.

Projects and specific initiatives:

- Development programmes for unemployed people in the Sudurnes region which aims to assess and validate the unemployed skills in order to enter vocational education at the Sudurnes Comprehensive College. This is a joint project between the regional Directorate of Labour office, Sudurnes Comprehensive College, Sudurnes Centre for Lifelong Learning and the Education and Training Service Centre. The first students are scheduled to enrol in the college by the fall 2004.
- Joint development project between Iceland Telecom, Efling Trade Union, Starfsafl (fund for the educational support of untrained workers in the greater Reykjavik area), Reykjavik Technical School and the Education and Training Service Centre. The project aims to develop methods of assessing and validating the competence of unskilled employees at Iceland Telecom for them to shorten the formal telecommunication technician study path at the Reykjavik Technical School. As a part of this project, special focus will be put on developing methods for the employer to verify the workers job related skills.
- Joint project between Efling Trade Union and the Education and Training Service Centre et al, which aims to validate the competences of unskilled employees at the Psychiatric Ward at Landspítali University Hospital to shorten the formal study path as social service workers.

The projects and initiatives at the Education and Training Service Centre have only recently started and even though the general process of validation has been structured, the specific methods and procedures are still under development. The Education and Training Service Centre has recognised four main steps in the validation process:

1. The identification of the individual's skills, either in groups or privately. Currently the registration forms and individual portfolios are being developed.
2. Documentation of the individual's skills in accordance with the National Curriculum Guidelines.
3. Validation of individual skills in association with the upper secondary school in question (a workgroup including members from the upper secondary school will decide how the process of validation will take place, ex. personal interviews, written information)
4. Acknowledgement of the individual's skills, which leads to enrolment in an upper secondary school at the appropriate place in the study path in light of the individual's skills and previous education outside the formal school system.

The first results of the projects will be visible in 2004, but to date the Education and Training Service Centre has established itself as a pivotal actor in the development of methods and procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning in Iceland. Their strong ties to both sides of industry as well as the service agreement with the Ministry of Education and close contact with the educational system (both formal and non-formal) will ensure that the procedures developed will be widely acknowledged.

All information regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland will be managed either by or through the Centre in the future.

1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector

Mennt – EDUCATE Iceland

EDUCATE Iceland is a co-operation forum between the educational sector, social partners, local authorities and others interested in education and training. The main focus of the work of EDUCATE is to gather and disseminate information and to facilitate transference of knowledge and competences.

Even though it is not strictly concerned with validation of non-formal and informal learning, EDUCATE Iceland is currently involved with a project aimed at recognising educational providers outside the formal school system called "Accreditation of Lifelong Learning". The project is a two year pilot project funded by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci programme and is set to be finished in the fall 2005. The project aims to develop a new approach to meet the need for increased transparency and quality assurance in continuing and lifelong learning. For more information go to www.all-accreditation.com

1.5 Conclusions

From what has been said in this chapter, it can be noted that the work on identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning in Iceland is in its initial stages. Previous efforts in this direction have been heavily influenced by formalities, official demands, curriculum and adaptation to school-based education programmes. In other words, the emphasis has been on exposing what the individuals concerned cannot do, instead of focusing on what they can do. This has obviously prevented adults from having their skills and competences fairly assessed and thereby made effective participation in lifelong learning less likely.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a concerted government effort is needed to push this process further in order to gain real results in validating non-formal learning. The existence of centres for lifelong learning, the discussion on lifelong learning within the EU along with a pressure from individuals and labour unions for a system of validation of non-formal learning has led to the first steps being taken to lay the foundation of such a system. It has been acknowledged that vast amounts of human resources exist in society - and that society would benefit from making them visible.

The work and the development of methods regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning has only recently started in Iceland. The lack of initiatives from the social sector and a national policy does not mean that they have been idle, but rather that the apparent need for a structured and well defined validation system has not been considered necessary up until recently. Even though the process is still marked by information gathering, network building and a few pilot projects, awareness of the importance of validation, the relatively small size of the formal school system, close contact with policy makers and governmental bodies, and wide participation of social actors, will ensure a comprehensive and unified system of validating non-formal and informal learning in Iceland.