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

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## **1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN NORWAY**

*By Odd Bjørn Ure (CONSULTUR.)*

### **1.1 Introduction**

One of the aims in a lifelong learning reform, which was approved by the parliament in 1999, was to put non-formal and informal competences on a more equal footing with formal competences. This ambition was supported by stakeholders in the field of adult education, such as the trade unions and associations favouring liberal adult education. Hence, a number of economic and societal sectors were addressed, mainly by urging them to start experimental projects in the frame of the LLL reform. These projects received public subsidies and they covered three broad sectors:

- education & training system
- labour market (incl. the social partners)
- civil society (incl. voluntary organisations and NGOs)

A total of 24,000 people took part in the testing of various methods and tools during the project period. As part of the labour market, tests were carried out among 6,000 employees in 150 enterprises belonging to different organisations. In the voluntary sector, 13 organisations at local and regional level participated in the development of methods and tools. At the level of secondary education, 15,000 adults had their non-formal learning assessed. At a regional level, all county municipalities took part in the trials and 600 people underwent training to assess non-formal learning.

After five years, major achievements have been made in the educational sector and these are embedded in state legislation. Continued preparations are needed in the civil sector and with regard to the labour market before agreed competence passports can be introduced. Many local projects have been launched but less attention has been paid to how the models should be shared and to how competence passports from the three broad sectors should communicate. It might be hard to talk about any national system of validation before the exchange of competences between the three sectors is sorted out.

As a follow-up to the experimental projects launched from 1999 and onwards, the Norwegian Institute for Adult Education (abbreviated to Vox) has been asked by the Ministry of Education and Research to develop a national standard for the competence passports. This work is carried in a less compartmentalised manner than suggested in 1999 when a division was made between education, labour market and the civil society.

## **1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector**

### *1.2.1 National*

The Norwegian reform for lifelong learning (the “Competence Reform”) 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. This ambition can be found in previous official documents, for example in the Law on adult education from 1976. This law states a right for adults to have their knowledge and skills documented at all levels within the public education system, independently from how these competences were acquired. Already the Law on vocational training (1952) allowed individuals to pass a crafts examination, provided they had sufficient practical work experience. On an annual basis up to 14,000 candidates have used this opportunity.

During 2004, the future of the Competence reform, is to be considered by the ministries concerned. The co-ordination and overall policy formulation is done by the Ministry of Education and Research. One backdrop for the consideration of future LLL policies is how the 1999 reform has interacted with adjacent policy fields constituting “a policy of knowledge”. A cross-sectorial approach was recommended in the evaluation report on non-formal and informal learning as part of the Competence reform. Moreover, the OECD review of adult education in Norway emphasised that a “whole –of government approach” was needed if the political commitment to lifelong learning is to be realised.

### *1.2.2 Sub-national*

The role of counties in the validation of prior learning stems from a number of individual rights, which were integrated into public laws, then subsequently to the Competence reform. Some rights are geared towards the education system, others towards the labour market:

#### *Rights assuring educational opportunities:*

- adults with a right to complete education at secondary level can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed. This assessment can give access to secondary schools or can, in some cases, allow the applicant to shorten the study period.
- applicants aged 23 or older, who have at least five years of work experience and who possess competences in six key subjects, can obtain general access to studies at tertiary level (“general entry requirements”)
- adults aged 25 or older can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed in order to allow them to study a specific subject (opposed to “general entry requirements”). In some cases, the applicants should be allowed to condense their study period.

*Rights strengthening employment opportunities:*

- adults with a right to complete their secondary education can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed, even if they do not apply for enrolment in a education or training institution.
- the right to have non-formal and informal learning assessed also applies to individuals whom a public agency allowed to undergo the assessment. This applies for:
  - a public employment office wanting an assessment of unemployed job applicants
  - a social security office trying to reintegrate clients in the labour market
  - a municipal service following up immigrants who have a permission of residency but who need a job or further education

Against the background of these rights, 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, all counties have set up assessment offices to which citizens can direct enquiries. The county municipalities are also in charge of practical arrangements at all education levels through which individuals can exercise their right to have their non-formal learning assessed.

During the implementation at a county level there are several observations that the two perspectives of validation co-exist among the parties concerned. While enterprises assess competencies in relation to their tasks and strategic needs, schools tend to assess competencies in relation to curricula and plans of study. Broadly speaking, validation is done for enrolment in education & training or in a labour market context.

### ***1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector***

Recent research indicates that training and skills development in larger Norwegian firms is often organised by the human relation (HR) department. According to a survey of 600 firms, the existence of a HR department is particularly important in launching work for mapping the skill level of employees, while a high proportion of university trained staff seems to ensure sustained skill development in a firm. Of the firms covered by the survey – 60% declared to carry out systematic stocktaking of in-house skills. Very often the stocktaking categorises competences along *domain specific work activities*, such as managerial, technical and social skills.

Nine experimental projects emanating from “working life” were carried out in the frame of the Competence reform. The social partners, study associations, county administrations and a few enterprises were directly involved in these projects mainly targeting industry and service sectors.

One of the nine projects was an attempt to underpin the implementation of a new chapter on the “development of competences”, set out in the Basic Agreement between the major employers’ organisation and the trade union federation in the private sector. Similar chapters exist in other framework agreements covering commerce & services and the public sector.

Other projects also tried to develop tools that describe and account for non-formal and informal competences in a way that is useful for enterprises in their allocation and development of human resources. At the same time, these validation schemes aimed to be useful for the individual when applying for a new job or for admission to an educational institution.

Whilst some of the evaluation tools developed for the labour market received favourable evaluations from human resource managers as well as from employees who took part in experiments, the dissemination of these tools has so far been limited. This point can be illustrated by one electro-technical company where tools are available for mapping skills, included informal and non-formal competences, and this information is gathered for HR purposes. However, the information is scarcely used when training arrangements are defined and developed. The training of the company staff is predominantly a response to changes in the markets, without any significant consideration of the skill profile and knowledge base of the entire staff. This happens despite the availability of branch specific training tools linking market needs to individual skills.

A competence and validation tool started in the electro-technical industry and was further developed as a project in the frame of Leonardo da Vinci, is geared towards internal processes in the sector. Thus, 18 skills areas/core modules have been developed and they are analysed in relation to the company, a department inside a company and to the employees. If you choose to play the role as an employee when applying the tool, there is a further breakdown of skills and each employee is asked to rate his/her own skills level. The main point is to perform a gap analysis departing from the present skill level and in relation to a desired state. With such a competence tool one challenge lies in reaching conclusions on what skills areas/core modules there are a need for training. Most of these are of a technical nature and can be related to formal vocational plans. However, the ambition is also to take account of social skills of employees (<http://komptest.prodproc.no/>).

In many respects, experimental projects on validation of prior learning were set up as “umbrellas” over individual projects. One of these was labelled DRA (Documentation of Real Competences) was a collaboration between the Federation of Norwegian Manufacturing Industries and the trade unions. Other branch organisations have been taking part in the dissemination of this tool. Particularly larger Norwegian enterprises who have experimented with in-house validation tools serving similar purposes. Some study associations working closely with individual enterprises have also presented schemes or tools with a view to identify, assess and finally validate competences that can be recognised in a formal context.

Another umbrella project, sparked off by the Competence reform, took place in the county of Nord-Trøndelag. Under the auspices of the local offices of the social partners in the private sector, a web based tool for the mapping of vocational skills was tried out in 40 pilot firms. Subsequent to positive feedback from the firms, one study association (AOF), emanating from the Norwegian labour movement, took over this competence tool and marketed it systematically under the label “2+2=5”. The tool is useful for the stocktaking of various vocational skills in a firm, it guides in conducting GAP-analyses leading to the definition of

in-house training plans. Less emphasis is put on mapping social skills of the employees (<http://komptest.prodok.no>).

#### ***1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector***

Associations for adult education, independent distance learning institutions, and folk high schools are providers of education outside the public education system. These players concentrate heavily on offering opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills that enhance adults' understanding of democracy, while motivating them to take more actively part in working life and the civil society.

In the frame of the Competence reform eight experimental projects were carried out in the third sector. Later, a draft "personal competence passport" was set up in order to validate experiences from work in the civil society. 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 2004 this passport is being revised in light of experiences gained so far. The challenge is to validate competences from 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, this multitude of learning contexts in the civil society has prevented a coherent approach to the validation of competencies. 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, 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.

#### ***1.5 Conclusion***

##### ***1.5.1 Summary***

From the experimental projects on validation of prior learning we see that the two perspectives that were present at the start of the Competence reform, still structure today's efforts in the field. Validation can either be done with a view to enrol people in the institutionalised education & training system or in a labour market context. Although these perspectives are not contradictory, the validation process is measured differently: either according to a study plan within an educational institution or against training needs in enterprises (and in principle of employees). This distinction cannot be reduced to validation driven by the education & training system vs. by enterprises; but might reflect that both angles are necessary.

A number of tools for validating non-formal and informal competencies were developed in the nine experimental labour marked orientated projects sparked off in 1999. Most of them

start with some sort of self-assessment, which is then subject to discussion, evaluation and ultimately validation, before the employer signs the paper (or “certificate”). 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 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.

Another reason for modest results of experiments with validation of non-formal and informal learning at the work place is that the social partners do not agree on what implications a passport of non-formal and informal learning should have on the human relation policy at the level of the firm (wage increase, promotion, prioritisation during redundancy or lay-offs). Overviews of staff competences have been set up as part of redundancy plans. However, there are divergent views on how to elaborate on these overviews as part of the ongoing staff development in firms.

An assessment of validation of competences in a labour market context should also take into account experiences with the abovementioned scheme allowing to pass a crafts examination on the basis of prior non-formal and informal competences. Given that this scheme has been quite successful, stakeholders have not necessarily experienced a need to rush into new arrangements proposed in the frame of the Competence reform. After some tug of war, it now appears that the non-scholar path to crafts examinations will survive alongside other tools for validation of non-formal and informal learning.

#### *1.5.2 Outline of national policy trends and on-going research*

The state of play is that validation of non-formal and informal learning has become further rooted among the main stakeholders. Also, the issue of validation has been flagged on the public agenda. Important achievements have been made in the educational sector and these have been incorporated into national legislation. Differences persist as to how prior learning is valued in working life and how it is valued in schools. One major difference is that enterprises are primarily interested in recording what the individual can actually accomplish in relation to its strategies and tasks, while the point of departure for education providers is 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 is therefore necessary. However, more needs to be done in developing transparent national standards of practice in both upper secondary and higher education. Also, more work is needed in the civil sector and with regard to the labour market before generally agreed competence passports can be introduced. Finally, more attention should be paid to how the evaluation methods in the education & training system, labour market and the civil society could be shared and to how competence passports from several sectors should communicate.

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 validation tools designed for different economic sectors, occupational groups or voluntary organisations might continue

to exist as attachments to the macro framework. A basic assumption is that a future standard has to be compatible with similar tools developed in a transactional context, above all the new EUROPASS.

### *1.5.3 Analysing the efficiency and effectiveness*

Few costs and benefits analyses of specific initiatives for validation of prior learning have not been undertaken – one exception is a study by ECON Analyse carried out in 2004. So far therefore, only general assumptions about the effectiveness of systematic validation have been made. The White paper introducing the Competence reform refers to reduced costs when people can have their acquired competences assessed instead of going through formal education. In a report commissioned by the Norwegian Institute for Adult Education (VOX) similar theoretical assumptions about gains and losses are presented. No calculations based on concrete experiences and estimations for the future are made.

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