Part 4

Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Social Inclusion

JAMES OGUNLEYE

VALIDATION OF SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE IN LIFELONG LEARNING IN EUROPE

Abstract

The paper examines systems of validation of skills and experience as well as the main methods/tools currently used for validating skills and knowledge in lifelong learning. The paper uses mixed methods – a case study research and content analysis of European Union policy documents and frameworks – as a basis for this research. The selection of the case study countries was not scientific, but based partly on geography and partly on similarities in national systems of vocational education and training or in the general application of lifelong learning policies. The paper finds variations in the systems of validation across the European Union region; and there seems to be an absence of coherence and comparability in the practices and systems of validation within and between member states. The paper offers an original contribution to, and a fresh insight into, our understanding of the tools for validating learning in the European Union region.

Keywords: systems of validation, skills, knowledge, formal, informal and non-formal learning, qualification

Validation of skills and knowledge in Europe

The systems of validation vary across the European Union region to such an extent that there is now in place European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2009). In the United Kingdom, the recognition and validation of competences and qualification – in relation to workers – are assigned to the Sector Skills Councils. More generally, skills and knowledge are validated through the National Qualifications Framework, which shows the relationship between nationally-recognised qualifications; it aims to promote access to education and training and lifelong learning 'by helping people to understand clear routes or progression … avoid unnecessary duplication and overlap of qualifications whilst ensuring all learning needs are covered' (DfES, 2003, p.13). A common route for validation is the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which was set up principally to meet the needs of employers, but the qualification can also be used as a basis for applying to college or university for further education. The NVQ adopts

a competence-based approach to assessments and qualifications; this means that to gain an NVQ award, a candidate must provide evidence of how competent s/he is at performing a set of duties or prescribed tasks at work or, in some cases, in a simulated work environment, while meeting a set of performance criteria set down by the relevant Industry Lead Body. NVQs candidates are assessed by observations of performance; by assignment, project work and simulation. Even though the emphasis is on competent performance, accredited bodies may also assess underpinning knowledge via 'Central Assessment' or 'External Examination'. The Republic of Ireland operates a similar, competence-based approach to assessments and qualifications, where skills and knowledge are validated, and certificated following a candidate's successful documentation/compilation of portfolio evidence (see DES, 1998; see also Ogunleye, 2011). As with the UK vocational education provision, certificates are available in a range of vocational areas such as administration, customer service, construction, health, social care, child minding, hairdressing, and beauty therapy. Also as practise in the UK, there is an embedded system of *Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning* which enables skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning to be validated via portfolio evidence, and certificated via the national vocational qualifications framework.

France operates a policy of 'no-discrimination' in relation to skills validation irrespective of the settings in which the learning took place. It is now possible to validate knowledge and skills acquired on the job as well as those acquired in non-formal and informal learning settings (Ogunleye, 2011). The new system of assessment and validation (*bilan de compétences*) allows individuals – or those working in the public, voluntary or private sectors including craftsmen and tradesmen – to identify their competences and aptitudes and have these assessed with a view to obtaining a full or partial vocational qualifications such as the state-designed national vocational diploma qualification or sector-based professional qualifications. An OECD (2005, p.21) report indicates that thousands of people over the years have obtained 'a certification by the recognition of their professional experience' and an equal number of individuals have obtained full or partial certificates since a new system of validating knowledge, skills and on-the-job experience was introduced. There is a framework for accrediting *prior* achievements; this was developed partly to encourage other groups such women and unemployed adults to join or return to the labour market (Gendron, 2001), and partly to address the high level of unemployment in the economy (see also Colardyn, 2004). Neighbouring countries such as Germany – and to some extent Austria – have varying systems of validating skills or knowledge gained in formal and non-formal learning, but it is unclear how informal learning is integrated in the national qualifications framework.

Bulgaria has a general framework for developing standards for vocational education and training; the aim is to provide vocational education and training for the labour market. Knowledge and skills gained in formal and non-formal learning are validated by a broad range of licensed formal and non-formal education and training institutions including the centres for vocational training run by the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Bulgarian Industrial Association (see Dumitrescu, 2005). Vocational centres provide assessment

framework which set out competencies; they also assess, validate and certify skills and knowledge acquired in the training. In neighbouring Romania, there is a developing mechanism for recognising and validating knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal settings following the adoption of competence-based approach to defining occupational standards. The aim is to link 'employment and learning specifications' (Com, 2004a, p.18); sector-specific occupational or training standards have been defined and progress is being made to integrate assessment outcomes in the training standards. Work is reportedly underway to integrate formal and non-formal learning in compulsory education, where learner assessment takes into account learning acquired through the formal settings (via end of cycle tests) and those gained in both non-formal and informal settings (via portfolio evidence). Similarly, learning acquired by adults in non-formal settings can be assessed against occupational standards and validated through certification by the state-supported Regional Adult Training Centres occupational assessment centres (European Training Foundation, 2004). It is hoped that learning acquired informally by unemployed persons can also be accredited by the occupational assessment centres – to remedy the absence of connections in the national qualifications system between formal and informal learning. Skills and qualifications are at the heart of Poland's policies on vocational educational and training and lifelong learning, according Polish Ministry of Economy and Labour (2005), but a coherent national system of validation is yet to develop. However, there are local and industry-based skills assessment and validation systems in operation; an example of a local initiative is the Polish Association of Craft, which has 'competence to examine young workers after they have completed their practical education at company level' (UEAPME/UNICE, 2006, p.87). Large Polish employers have their own systems of competence validation.

In Norway, non-formal learning setting such as the workplace is promoted as a 'venue for learning,' where 25-30 per cent of young people received their vocational training (UEAPME/UNICE, 2006). Competence Building Programme (KUP), a state supported initiative, offers a platform for recognising and validating learning in the workplace. KUP also provides the tools for documenting competencies acquired through informal and formal learning. Sweden has well established systems of validating skills, knowledge and experience gained in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings. The aims of validation are to 'further social justice and make it possible to gain access to higher education,' and to 'offer equal possibilities for groups that traditionally have difficulties accessing the education system'. To that end, a mature student with no formal education, non-formal and informal learning can still access higher education by virtue of his or her 'relevant practical experience,' according to an OECD (2005, p.16) review of the national qualifications systems in the EU region. This suggests that Swedish higher education institutions recognise the three forms of learning activity as a basis for further education. It should be noted that the validation of learning that takes place outside the university is a joint responsibility of the education systems and the labour market. Finland is known to have the most developed 'seamless' system of skills validation settings in Scandinavia: every individual has the right to have their competences (skills and knowledge) assessed and accredited if necessary. Although not a Scandinavian country, skills and knowledge gained through non-formal and

informal settings in Denmark can be accredited/assessed and validated within the context of work-based training and vocational education for adults. 'It means that an adult with experience within a specific area of work can have his or her informal qualifications [real competences] assessed and compared against the formal goals for a vocational education' with a view to gaining a formal recognition and certification (UEAPME/UNICE, 2006, p.41).

Mediterranean countries such as Spain and Greece have systems of accreditation and validation in relation to learning gained in non-formal settings such as the workplace. In Spain, for example, there are (national) working groups covering industry sectors that are charged with defining training needs, competence standards and qualifications; hundreds of occupation-specific qualifications have been defined under the new system of national vocational qualifications. However, there is a relative absence of a process/procedure for validating and recognising skills and knowledge gained in informal learning. In Greece, there is a legal framework for recognising and validating competences and qualifications via the National System of Education and Training linked to Employment or ESSEEKA (UEAPME/UNICE, 2006). Skills and knowledge are accredited and certified depending on how they are acquired. The state, through the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, is responsible for the certification of qualifications acquired in formal education, but professional organisations, associations or agencies are responsible for providing and accrediting vocational education and training – or non-formal learning – under the supervision of the relevant government ministries such as Labour and Social Affairs, Agriculture, and Development. It is unclear what system of validation exists, if any, for skills and knowledge acquired in informal settings, according to a review by the National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training and Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development (EKEPIS/OECD, 2003, p.4; see also Georgiadis and Zisimos, 2010). The EKEPIS/OECD review found that skills and knowledge acquired in informal learning through courses offered by organisations such as trade associations, chambers of commerce, and social partners, for workers and unemployed adults 'in the context of lifelong learning do not result in any accredited qualification certificates.'

Methods, systems and tools used in validating skills and knowledge

The European Commission has sought to develop common European principles for validating non-formal and informal learning in vocational education and training and lifelong learning. These principles are organised into six largely overlapping themes of: *purpose of validation, individual entitlements, responsibilities of institutions and stakeholders, confidence and trust, impartiality and credibility and legitimacy*. A key aim of the common principles was to ensure a 'greater comparability between [and compatibility of] approaches in different countries and at different levels' (Com, 2004b, p.2). The Commission believed that common principles will enable existing – arguably – fragmented validation methods, systems and tools to be 'linked and combined'. One suggestion is that the EU adopts a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning as a basis for comparing national qualifications (European Trade Union Confederation, 2004), but other stakeholder groups such as the employers' organisations see strengths in the

diversity of the existing approaches in Member States; they believed the current arrangements offered greater flexibility.

There is, at present, an implied acceptance that the methods and tools currently used for validating formal learning – examination, assignment, project writing, presentation, etc – are broadly *fit for purpose* in relation to formal education in Member States. The focus, therefore, is on non-formal and informal learning. At the European level, methods, systems and tools for validating non-formal and informal learning are broadly standardised or similar; these include EuroPass Portfolio, EuroCV, Euro Language Portfolio, Computer Passport and Active Citizen Course. An EU-sponsored *Joint Action Project* on the recognition and validation formal, informal and non-formal education (see Davies, 2006) undertook laboratory testing of a range of tools in a dozen European countries including UK (England, Wales and Scotland), Norway, Finland, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania and Switzerland. The study examined and tested assessment tools/methods in vocational training, adult education, higher education (universities) and youth/voluntary sector including Portfolio, EuroCV, Euro Language Portfolio, Computer Passport and Active Citizen Course. The study found an absence of rigorous quality assurance in the current practices: for example, there were inadequacies in the existing assessment tools, some of which 'do not provide adequate space [for the candidates] to present all the learning from a wide range of contexts and situations overtime' (Davies, 2006, p.4). In addition, some assessment tools were clearly unable to meet the needs of all the target groups. The study also found a tendency for the assessment tools to focus more on the past thus lacking 'a prospective element where people can set their request for recognition or validation in the context of a personal and professional development plan.'

Conclusions

From the foregoing study, there is evidence of continuing progress in the development of systems of validation of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the EU, although there are variations in the state of national development of the validation systems. This variation reflects largely the state of development of social and economy-supporting institutions and the history of vocational education and training provision in the individual countries. In some countries such as France, Finland and the UK, there is a history of continuous development of systems of skills validation that are clearly linked to national qualifications frameworks. Other countries such as Greece and Spain are catching up, although the validation of skills and knowledge acquired in informal learning do not as yet result in accreditation. New EU countries such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria are only beginning to develop systems to validate skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal learning; however there is still an absence of connection in the national qualifications frameworks between formal and informal learning. The challenge for the EU is how to achieve coherence and comparability in the practises and systems of validation within and between member states.

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Dr James Ogunleye
EMILIA Project
School of Art & Education
Middlesex University
Trent Park Campus
Bramley Road
London N14 4ZY
England, UK
J.Ogunleye@mdx.ac.uk