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The adult educator in Europe – professionalisation challenges and the alternative of validation of learning outcomes

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Abstract

The paper frames professionalisation of adult educator in Europe as one of the biggest challenges experts in adult education field deal with but it also stresses competence validation system as a reliable alternative in this sense.

Europe is experiencing major transformation in which knowledge and innovation are the most valued assets. In this new society, there is an empathic need for offering everyone the opportunities to acquire the relevant skills, knowledge and competences as the route to full involvement in professional and social life. So much the more this need is stressed in adult and continuing education from the perspective of the stringent upskilling demand of Europe’s labour force. The driving forces in this domain are the adult education staff and their professionalisation is high on the EU agenda due to the diversity and variety of this professional group.

Although a well recognised need, there has been little attention paid to defining the contents and processes of initial training and the further professionalisation of staff working in adult learning. Well qualified staff is needed to support adults in their learning and yet there are few education/training systems for adult education professionals across Europe (Switzerland, Austria, UK) which, in fact, do not allow cross-national qualifications comparability and recognition.

In the context of absence of a specific professional development pathway in the majority of European countries, trainers overtake this responsibility and manage their own professional and personal developments which are generally objectified in non-formal and informal learning settings. A lot of adult educators interact with adults in a didactical way without an explicit qualification for their activity. Most of them have acquired their specific professional competencies for dealing with adults on the job, by working experiences, in trainings, voluntary activities etc, in a puzzled way.

In these circumstances, validation of adult educators’ prior learning becomes an alternative to the formal educational pathway which contributes to the comparability and transparency of adult educator qualifications in order to facilitate the access and progress in the career.

Today, an increasing number of countries have introduced legal and institutional frameworks for validating non-formal and informal learning, and these have become an established element of the existing education and training systems. This general tendency to strengthen validation policies and practices does not hide the fact that several incoherencies and paradoxes remain.

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1. Introduction

Europe is experiencing major transformation in which knowledge and innovation are the most valued assets. In this new society, there is an empathic need for offering everyone the opportunities to acquire the relevant skills, knowledge and competences as the route to full involvement in professional and social life. So much the more this need is stressed in adult and continuing education from the perspective of the stringent upskilling demand of Europe’s labour force. The driving forces in this domain are the adult education staff and their professionalisation is high on the EU agenda due to the diversity and variety of this professional group. The widely recognised imperative of lifelong and lifewide learning means that learning of adults, not only in formal but also in non-formal and informal settings, needs to be continuously promoted and enhanced. To achieve both a quantitative expansion and a qualitative improvement of adult learning activities well-qualified staff are needed to support adults professionally in their learning. The adult learning professionals and the validation of prior learning are identified as key issues in various European policy documents and initiatives such as the Commission Communication on Adult Learning “It is never too late to learn” (2006), which urged Member States to put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify people working in adult education. The professional qualification of adult educators is seen as a key precondition for the quality of educational provision for adults. However, the initiatives that have been taken to improve the professional situation of teaching staff have so far concentrated very much on school teachers or teachers in initial vocational education, not on adult educators, in spite of their heterogeneity. (Nuissl, E., Lattke, S., 2008).

There are few European or national programmes providing education and training at Bachelor level for adult educator. A significant number of adult educators have BA diploma in different professional fields and they deal day by day with adults and their learning/development by fulfilling different roles on the job: trainer, teacher, counsellor, manager, evaluator, curriculum-developer, policy-maker, decision-maker, responsible of human resource development etc. In spite of obvious scarcity of BA level programmes in adult education, the Master offers tend to become more popular and widely spread. The concrete example of the European Master in Adult Education (EMAE) initiative is eloquent in this sense as it has set up a network consisting of partners from Germany, Italy, Spain, Romania, Denmark, Czech Republic and Finland.

Although a well recognised need, there has been little attention paid to defining the contents and processes of initial training and the further professionalisation of staff working in adult learning. Well qualified staff is needed to support adults in their learning and yet there are few education/training systems for adult education professionals across Europe (Switzerland, Austria, UK) which, in fact, do not allow cross-national qualifications comparability and recognition.

In the context of absence of a specific professional development pathway in the majority of European countries, trainers overtake this responsibility and manage their own professional and personal developments which are generally objectified in non-formal and informal learning settings. A lot of competences that are job relevant have been developed in informal and non-formal learning contexts. This also applies to adult educator’s competencies that frequently go unrecognised. A lot of adult educators interact with adults in a didactical way without an explicit qualification for their activity. Most of them have acquired their specific psycho-pedagogical competencies for dealing with adults on the job, by working experiences, in trainings, voluntary activities etc, in a puzzled way.

In these circumstances, validation of adult educators’ prior learning becomes an alternative to the formal educational pathway which contributes to the comparability and transparency of adult educator qualifications in order to facilitate the access and progress in the career and also the mobility of adult educators on the European labour market.

Today one can find a lot of approaches that consider the fact that job relevant competences often are not covered by traditional qualification papers as they have been acquired in different learning contexts and by working experiences. One can find validation approaches in different countries and different contexts. They are common in their aim to validate or accreditate prior experiential learning (APEL). Some of the European approaches not limited to a specific profession are the French „Bilan de compétence”, the Swiss Qualificationsbook „CH-Q”, the German „ProfilPass” or the German „skills analysis”. In general, validation of competences can be described as a process of competence identification, competence measurement and competence assessment that can be done by different methods and instruments.

The validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings has represented a priority within several European documents. The 4th key message from the “Memorandum on Lifelong Learning” (2000),
the Communication from the “Making European Area Lifelong Learning a Reality” (2001), the Copenhagen Declaration (2002), all go in the same direction: the necessity to improve the understanding and appreciation of learning participation and outcomes, particularly those from non-formal and informal area, and to promote the innovation in forms of certification for these types of learning. Furthermore, the Communication from the Commission (2006) “Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn” stressed the importance of the recognition and validation learning outcomes through its third key message which regards the validation of non-formal and informal learning as “a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy”. In order to implement this key message, the Action Plan on Adult Learning “It is always a good time to learn” encourages specific actions in the area of speeding up the process of assessment of skills and social competences and have them validated and recognised in terms of learning outcomes. Also, the second key message from the Commission’s Communication “Ensuring the quality of adult learning” regards also the issue of quality of staff. As adult educator’s profession it is not always recognised within formal career structures it is recommended that social partners to involve in the recognition of competences of adult learning personnel (Commission, 2006).

2. Debates and challenges

The employment conditions faced by staff are more or less insecure everywhere. A permanent fulltime job in adult education is the exception rather than the rule in every country. Many staff members do not even see themselves as adult educators but rather as part of a certain social or business strata. This is especially true in cases where the activity is related to other organisational contexts (such as companies, cultural institutions, associations, etc.) or when the activity only represents part of work on the job. On one hand, from this perspective a unique competence profile for all adult educators cannot be developed as referential or standard which is certainly needed for the validation process but a common referential would contribute towards the transparency of competences and the mobility of adult educator on labour market.

Furthermore, the existing competence profiles vary from country to country, sometimes being more differentiated, sometimes of a more generic character. Reference is made to “core skills” in some cases, and more to instrumental skills in others. However, in no case the identified competencies have been made a compulsory prerequisite for receiving a job in adult education in general.

Today, an increasing number of countries have introduced legal and institutional frameworks for validating non-formal and informal learning, and these have become an established element of the existing education and training systems. This tendency is closely linked to other initiatives, notably the introduction of standards for describing learning outcomes, the development of modularised and credit based education and training. Some countries have made an effort to link these different elements within coherent national frameworks and an increasing number of other countries are considering this option. This general tendency to strengthen validation policies and practices does not hide the fact that several incoherencies and paradoxes remain (Colardyn, D.; Bjornavold, J., 2005).

The majority of countries use validation as a means to increase flexibility of formal education and training systems and to accommodate alternative learning pathways. But promoting validation simultaneously challenges the role of formal education and training insofar as validation of non-formal and informal learning may fulfil goals different from those served by formal education and training. This challenge to the formal system is accentuated by the increasingly important role played by enterprises and sectors in developing assessment and validation instruments for internal management purposes, frequently referring to a formal job-profile or to the function of the employee. In most Member States, validation approaches developed by enterprises and sectors remain isolated from validation approaches developed in formal education and training. In addition, international norms (ISO and EN) are used to certify competences in associations, enterprises, professional bodies, or others. These autonomous certifications serve the individual by providing recognition of their learning outcomes in specific contexts (sectors, professional associations). For enterprises, it often ensures quality in their services and human resources. The co-existence of these very different validation systems is necessary and important. If these systems continue to operate in this self-contained manner, this diversity may easily result in competition, creating rather than reducing barriers to transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. This competition between different validation systems highlights the key-issues surrounding valuing learning:

- who should decide how a learning outcome is valued?
- who should eventually set the standards used for assessment?
The fundamental issue is whether lifelong and life-wide learning can be realised as long as different validation systems are unable to communicate and, even more importantly, as long as they fail to recognise each other’s value. The need for increased coherence and communication between validation systems was the direct background for the initiative in 2002 to develop a set of common European principles for validating non-formal and informal learning (Colardyn, D.; Bjornavold, J., 2005).

3. Towards a european policy on validation

The agreement on common European principles for validation confirms that European countries share many of the same challenges. While methodological and institutional solutions have to be developed nationally, regionally and locally, the European role is to foster the links and bridges between approaches and systems and to support high quality. The proposal for a European qualifications framework (EQF), referring to learning outcomes and competences rather than formal education and training structures, is an important step in this direction. The validation of non-formal and informal learning has to be seriously considered in establishing coherent national systems of LLL, to which the Member States committed themselves by 2006, with the support of all stakeholders and especially the social partners.

4. National context: adult educator’s qualifications and the validation system

The national policies also emphasis the need of qualified adult educators i.e. in Romania, the Govern Ordinance no. 129 / 31.08.2000, republished, with the subsequent modifications and completions refers to adult educators in article 24 as following: the vocational training providers will be authorized by the National Training Board if they rule vocational training programmes with trainers having similar profile or specialisation with the training programme they are in charge of. From 1st of January 2010, the vocational training providers will have to meet another requirement in order to be authorized: trainers have to have not only this similar specialisation with the training programme but also specific pedagogical background for adult’s training/education. A new legislative measure modified the 2010 term for 2008, putting under pressure the training providers.

The Romanian training systems for adult educators envisage both their initial and continuing vocational education. Depending on this, the certification system engages two main authorities: Ministry of Education, Research and Youth – MERY (mainly for the qualifications at bachelor, master or doctoral level, with the related competencies mentioned in the diploma supplementnt) and Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family (for those till the 3rd level of qualification – eg. to be adult educator for different crafts) - ML.

Both MERY and ML recognise the qualifications of trainers and trainer of trainers obtained through vocational training programmes provided by the national authorized vocational training centres. The National Adult Training Board is the one elaborating the methodology of certification for adult vocational training, but also of the assessment centres, as continuity in the certification area for competencies acquired in formal, non-formal and informal settings (VINEPAC report, 2007).

Recognition and validation of vocational competencies acquired in non-formal and informal contexts are performed by the assessment centres authorised by the National Adult Training Board (NATB) in accordance with the Procedure of the assessment and certification of the competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts (Procedure), approved through the Joint Order no. 4543/468/2004 of the Minister of Education and Research and of the Minister of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family, with subsequent modifications and completions.

The individuals who would like to be assessed in the view of recognising of vocational competencies acquired through non-informal and informal ways should address to an assessment centre authorised for such occupation/qualification.

Each assessment criteria will be analysed based on evidences provided by the centre for each of the following stages of quality cycle: planning, achievement, checking and improvement.

Each assessment criteria will be marked from 0 to 3 for each stage. The criteria score is given by the least score get by stages.

Assessment could be done for all the competences units from the occupational standard/ vocational training standard or for one or more competences units, depending on the candidate’s request (VINEPAC report, 2007).

Beside the clear procedure described, and the positive fact that such procedure exists, as well as assessment centres already accredited to perform the evaluation and validation of the pedagogic competencies of dealing with
adult learners, acquired in non/in-formal contexts, some challenges (aspects to be questioned) are still to found solutions for, if we want to have this validation approach functioning in a qualitative and credible manner:

are the criteria for accrediting an evaluation centre sensitive enough to make sure that the evaluators of pedagogic competencies are competent enough to foster such validation process in a qualitative way (eg. both for supporting the adult educator to reflect, conceptualise, give arguments for his/ her didactic choices, both for evaluating the proved competences)?

the criteria for those that can be evaluators are also questionable, as far as the evaluators also supposed to have a certain experience, but no formal qualification in pedagogy, in spite of evaluating pedagogic competencies.

as far as the adult educators achieved a lot of their pedagogic competencies by attending continuing training seminars run by different trainers with no clear training competence, and the trainings have varied a lot as lengths, content, quality etc, in most cases being about some practical tools, instruments, methods, but not about reflecting on how to use them, on which bases to make choices while setting up a didactic situation, this limit will continue not to be ameliorate in a validation process, when comes more to formal certification.

furthermore, each evaluation centre has its own methodology for assessment. Without a referential, the evaluation exigency can vary a lot, and even the quality of the instruments is to be questioned.

These aspects are just some arising while reflecting on the quality and credibility of the validation process in the way it is designed now, because it can be a real danger that the professional status of adult educators will not be acknowledged as such on the labour market if both the continuing training and the certification process are not of trust regarding the quality of provision. We suppose to have competent adult educators, able to foster the quality of adult’s learning. If different professional paths are acknowledged, then we have to make sure that the competencies acquired are at high level, or at least that there is correctly identified the needs for further trainings and improvements (see also Sava 2006, 2007).

5. Validation process steps: a vinepac proposal

Our „Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Psycho-Pedagogical Competencies of Adult Educators” (VINEPAC) project aims to initiate and develop specific measures, instruments, strategies for recognition, validation and certification of the competencies acquired in non-formal and informal settings and contexts –for adult educators.

The VINEPAC developments indicate three steps for the validation process:

Step I  Self evaluation of competences
Step II  External evaluation
Step III Consolidation of the results

The self-evaluation step (self assessment) – is a section offering the adult educator the opportunity to reflect upon real competences that he/ she achieved outside the formal learning settings. This reflection is guidelined and structured in reflection on learning biography and reflection on competences. It is also foreseen to attach all relevant documents that give hint on your specific competences or qualifications.

The purpose of this section is to encourage the adult educator to build up a clear picture of the extent and the range of the competences related to adult educator role performance. This picture will help the adult educator and other people also, for example if the adult educator enrol in a new study programme or apply for a new job.

The external-evaluation step (external assessment) – is an additional step in the validation process to increase the objectivity of the validation results. In this section the adult educator is assessed by the means of an observation checklist and an interview grid. It is provided that an external expert will observe two training session and assess adult educator’s competences with help of the observation checklist and the interview grid.

The consolidation step – is the last step in the validation process where all results are put together into one single validation outcome. This step will be undertaken from an authorized validating institution. The results from your self-evaluation and the results from the external-evaluation have to been balanced and consolidated. If the adult educator fulfils the minimum standard of the required competences, he/ she will get the Validation-sheet which proves adult educator’s competences for external authorities.
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