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Models of quality assurance in evaluation and validation of competencies, for an easier access to higher education

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Abstract

Validation of competencies is an issue very much debated nowadays at European level as a solution for enlarging access to higher education. Unfortunately, the Romanian higher education system is still not open to introducing this flexible pathway from a formal point of view, even though bottom-up practices exist.

The paper presents a content analysis of three models elaborated and operating in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Nordic countries, for ensuring quality in the validation practices introduced in their higher education institutions, highlighting possible ways for transferring such models into the Romanian context.

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1. Background: Emphasis on Validation of Competencies

Validation of prior learning (VPL) has been a continuous topic in European policy making on educational and training since the launch of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (European Commission, 2000). The key message of *valuing learning* wherever and whenever it takes place, and the related approach of validation of competencies acquired in all life and learning contexts (formal, non-formal, informal) has become a guiding principle in designing inclusive and comprehensive educational policies, enjoying therefore a lot of efforts and solutions. In 2004, the European Council adopted the common European principles on identifying and validating non-formal and informal

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learning (Cedefop, 2009). CEDEFOP has played a major role in putting the issue of VPL on the policy agenda, by enabling the member states to get familiarized with the specificity of VPL and the ways it can be addressed. Not only has CEDEFOP mapped the state of the art in implementing VPL around Europe (see the Snapshot done in 2007, and published in 2008), but it has also launched in 2009 the *European guidelines for validating non formal and informal learning*, guidelines that try to clarify how validation of non-formal and informal learning is (and could be) linked and aligned to the formal qualifications system (Cedefop, 2009).

The launched instruments Europass, European Qualification Framework - EQF, European Quality assurance framework, European credit transfer system – ECTS/ ECVET etc. (see CEDEFOP, 2010) have sped up the VPL process in the national systems of qualifications, by fostering the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. The “validation is integrated with the credit transfer and accumulation arrangements, as an effort to broaden the range of knowledge, skills and competences valued in society and to make it easier for individuals to make progress in learning and work” (Bjørnåvold, Le Mouillour, 2009, p.28).

In 2012, based on the impact assessment of implementing VPL in the member states (European Commission, 2012), the *Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* was launched (Council of Europe, 2012). This Recommendation is convergent with the strategic paper for *rethinking education* (European Commission 2012b) till 2020, meant for contributing to the Europe 2020 strategy to create a smart, green, sustainable, inclusive and high-employment economy in the next decade. Therefore, a special chapter in the studies for monitoring the progress towards 2020 is covered by the VPL solutions and facts (European Commission, 2013).

Thus, VPL is continuously mentioned as a solution to address the skills matching, the skills demand and supply, the needed skills for the new jobs. VPL is seen as a solution to empower both the individuals to meet the labour market needs, and the training systems, to address in the most flexible way the needed skills, the skills gap. “By making use of the assessment methodologies, qualifications standards formulated in terms of learning outcomes, and national qualifications frameworks, many education and training institutions, mainly from the Nordic countries, integrate the credit systems recognition of professional experience as a basis for qualification award... They recognize that alternative learning forms can result in outcomes equivalent (although not similar) to those of their own courses, and there is no single route to a qualification, signalling greater tolerance towards non-traditional learning routes and pathways” (Bjørnåvold & Le Mouillour, 2009).

Such practice represents a new and innovative approach, and not too many education and training institutions of formal education are open or ready to implement this, even in countries where the VPL system operates. They are still seen as separate initiatives, with the way they could interact and create synergies being considered less. Such situation exists unfortunately in Romania also, the debates for the national qualification framework showing the resistance of higher education institutions towards introducing the VPL practice in a formal way. Such an attitude is difficult to understand, once the signals for this need, coming from the students and society, are increasing. “Validation of non-formal and informal learning and NQFs have a common objective: enable individuals to make progress in their learning careers on the basis of their learning outcomes and competences, not on the basis of the duration and location of a particular learning programme” (Bjørnåvold & Le Mouillour, 2009, p.42). The decreased number of students, the increased student drop out, the reduced finances for higher education force higher education institutions to look for solutions.

VPL is seen as a solution for wider access to higher education, for shortening the studies, and for improving the retention into higher education institutions (HEI) (European Commission, 2011; European Union, 2013).

The paper will analyse what tools and approaches have been developed and used in three countries already implementing VPL in higher education, trying to identify the solutions which can be adapted to the Romanian context as well. The framework models for VPL elaborated and operating in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Nordic countries will be analyzed, in an effort to answer two questions:

- Which concept of VPL is followed in their framework model: is their tool designed to be used by the whole cohort of candidates, or it is responsive to individual candidates' learning; it is more about formative or summative VPL, or both?
- Which steps of implementation do they plan or realise already?

We follow these questions first for each country separately and compare the findings in the end, looking for common ideas and instruments, which might be an impulse for the further transfer in HEI. Not only the descriptive papers will

be followed, but the national reports on their use, as elaborated within the project ALLinHE (*Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education for All*, 2011-2014; <http://www.allinhe.eu/>) by the national experts.

2. Content analysis of the framework models

2.1. VPL model in Switzerland

Switzerland is a federal state, with the cantons having the autonomy to adapt and implement the regulations agreed at the federal level as they wish. The “vision” of VPL is quite articulated in Switzerland, as well as experiences and practices developed in the field since about 20 years ago. A bottom-up approach to VPL (typical of the first phase) has been integrated during the last decade by general rules, defining a top-down scenario (built up however with a large participation of actors and stakeholders) as far as summative VPL is concerned (Stiftung ECAP, 2013). In this sense, considering the Swiss general framework, one must distinguish between *recognition practices* (including valuation of learning outcomes) and *validation of learning outcomes*, leading in Switzerland to an official qualification. The legal basis for VPL, followed by the general Guidelines for the development of VPL in any educational sector, was launched in 2002. In *Validation* VPL is strictly summative, but it coexists with complementary approaches, in which VPL has different perspectives, such as: a) admission to a cycle of studies on the basis of a dossier b) exemptions from preparatory training, in order to pass a qualification exam or assessment c) certification of competences, including key skills, as a component of a qualification.

In 2004 the *CH-Q System of Managing Competencies* has been developed with the support of the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology. It enjoyed relatively little use till 2011, when intensive efforts started to be put into its wider use and dissemination, together with the Federal Association for Continuing Education (SVEB). In the expected federal act for continuing education (2014) VPL plays an important part (www.ch-q.ch). Universities are free to organize themselves as far as admission rules (including valuation of prior learning) are concerned. A Federal Act aiming at coordinating HE is under discussion. So far VPL is only marginally practiced in this sector, but a good example is the University of Geneva (<http://www.vae-formations.ch/>) (Stiftung ECAP, 2013).

2.1.1. VPL concept

The *CH-Q System of Managing Competencies* from Switzerland (Calonder Gerster, 2004) was designed as “an overarching concept committed to the *individualized development of young people and adults thus enhancing their job flexibility and mobility*” (p. 2). In ten pages (Calonder Gerster, 2004) the concept of the CH-Q system is explained, covering its origins, basic features, organization/structure, application (for which target groups) including the CH-Q training and guidance program and the system for certification and awarding of the CH-Q label, together with the existing structures and the involved stakeholders.

The CH-Q is described as an “Integrated concept for bottom-up process”, allowing all three perspectives of the VPL process, previously described, according with the individual decision and personal situation.

The CH_Q is designed in a self-administered way, putting full emphasis of the individual’s own potential, responsibility and self-management of competencies and qualifications, directing towards a realistic deliberation of his/ her career and personal development.

Oriented toward the individual, the Swiss system tries to *capture, in a holistic way, the personal strengths of individuals*, linking “various different areas of life / activity, linking cultural, general and vocational education from all learning contexts (formal and non-/informal learning), including all types of competencies (technical, methodical, social, self-competencies)” (p. 3).

The *procedure* used contains three interlinked working methods:

- Documenting, i. e. the systematic recording, compiling, arranging of data and facts;
- Reflecting, i. e. the periodic reviewing of developmental steps, evaluation of learning, job and life contexts and drawing of conclusions;
- Implementing, i. e. solution-oriented and context-specific planning and strategy decision-making.

The procedure results in a personal portfolio and/or file for furnishing proof of specific competencies (files for job applications, equivalency assessments) (p. 7).

2.1.2. Implementation

For a proper use of the CH-Q System of Managing Competencies, accompanying *products* are available, and a coherent system of training for the specialists using the model has been designed. Also, accompanying tools have been developed, and they are available for affordable prices. The CH-Q Association coordinates and monitors the certification, and takes care of developing further products and tools for different sectors. Products include:

- Procedures based on methods and sets of contents, accompanied by specific tools and supporting actions;
- Quality criteria, principles and guidelines for implementation in education, training, career guidance, together with a developed system of training experts and instruction manuals for specific groups of users.
- Competency portfolios (folders) for consistent career planning
- Certification files to prepare for formal recognition (e. g., job applications)
- Identification documents for formal certificates (qualification passport).

The CH-Q Association provides a framework for quality assurance and includes the commission for certification. It takes care that the CH-Q label is a trusting one, putting a big emphasis on the training system of the practitioners, to make sure that the VPL process is carried out in a qualitative way.

The CH-Q is already used in five countries: Deutschland, Luxemburg, Holland, Austria and Flemish Belgium.

2.2. VPL model in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands in 2000 a first step was taken towards lifelong learning using the VPL (*VPL*; *EVC* or *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties* in Dutch). EVC had to bridge the gap between the education supply and the demand on the labour market side, by converting learning experiences into certificates or diplomas, and for the development of competences in a career context (Werkgroep EVC 2000, apud Duvekot, 2010). In 2001, the government established the Kenniscentrum EVC (Knowledge Centre on Accreditation of Prior Learning), to support this application of EVC and to learn from the existing practice. Over the years 2005-2010, the Dutch government invested nearly EUR 100 million in lifelong learning including EVC at upper secondary and higher vocational education levels, in developing a regional infrastructure for learning and working and in promoting EVC (*Ervaringscertificaat*) (Duvekot, 2010). From 2013, in the national strategy for VPL, the focus was changed from overseeing the quality of and access to VPL towards a system focusing on Validation of Learning Outcomes for two perspectives: (1) VPL for career steps on the labour market and access to non-formal training (sector standards); (2) VNIL for career steps aiming at formal learning (national qualifications) (Duvekot, 2013).

Dutch higher education is a binary system of higher vocational education (HBO) and of universities (WO). EVC is embedded in higher vocational education but not in universities (academic levels; apart from the Open University). EVC is primarily an instrument for awarding exemptions for higher education programmes and for admittance to higher education (Duvekot, 2010).

2.2.1. VPL concept

The VPL process in the Netherlands consists of five phases: (1) Information and advice for the candidate, the employer or other organisation, etc. (2) Intake of the individual and making individual arrangements linked to the individual's defined career goals. The candidate decides on choice of qualification and whether to start the EVC procedure or not. (3) Recognition of competences: portfolio (supported by the coach); (4) Validation of competences: assessment (by the assessors); (5) EVC report: Description of results and accreditation (by the assessor), compared with the individual career goals, together with advice on further personal development in the direction of the individual defined career goals (Duvekot, 2013, p.13). On the other hand, EVC distinguishes between two specific instruments:

1. The '*Ervaringscertificaat*' - is the formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes. It is a summative approach; a portfolio is referred to a specific national qualification standard and the accreditation consists of a number of credits that can be cashed in at a qualifying institute or school. The portfolio therefore is a dossier-portfolio or a showcase of the relevant learning outcomes to be referred to at least one specific standard. This form can be called *Accreditation of Prior Learning* (EVC).

2. The '*Ervaringsprofiel*'. This procedure sets up a generic, personal portfolio. It was developed in the context of the economic crisis. It is a formative approach aimed at validation of all the generic competences of a candidate. It

advises on the possible opportunities for accreditation or personal development steps. It also points out what to do when a specific qualification or diploma is at stake. This form can be called *Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL or in Dutch the informal HVC or *Herkennen van Verworven Competenties*). (Duvekot, 2010, p.3).

2.2.2. Implementation

In the Netherlands the VPL process is introduced in public sectors: education, health care and welfare and in the private sectors: engineering, process industry. Implementation includes: evaluation of VPL pilot, embed VPL in human resource management, including financing, promulgate (new) organizational policy and individual administrators portfolio. There is a role knowledge infrastructure of implementation, with accreditation of VPL assessors (internal/external) and quality control procedure (Duvekot, 2013, p. 15).

As it can be seen from the description, the VPL concept in the Netherlands is a flexible one, based on the decision of the individuals, but planned for cohorts of people, a big emphasis being allotted to the VPL option at national level. The Netherlands is one of the most active in this field, with a lot of developments, a large infrastructure and resources, with tools and detailed differentiations with the quality view.

2.3. VPL model in the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are among the countries in Europe with the longest tradition in introducing VPL, and ones with the most active practices in this respect, mainly Finland (since 1996), Denmark and Norway. Their forum for exchange and cooperation, the Nordic Network for Adult Learning, has facilitated sharing of experiences and common reflections, for improved practices, and increased quality. Therefore, in 2013 the quality model for validation of competencies in the Nordic countries was launched (Grunnet, Dahler, 2013). Previously, a comparative study, for better mutual understanding, was commissioned (Hult, Andersson, 2008). Of course, each of the Nordic countries can be an example of good practice in this regard, but the option for the cross analysis is sustained by the trans-nationality of the product, making the transfer to another country easier.

2.3.1. VPL concept: for a quality model

In 2013 the quality model for validation in Nordic countries was launched (Grunnet, Dahler, 2013), as a framework document “for collection, categorisation, and documentation of the work with quality in validation” aiming “to ensure a certain consistency in descriptions and documentation of quality” (p. 4). The quality issue for VPL is on the agenda at European level and in most of the member states, and such an attempt is a good example of a transnational tool, in line with the CEDEFOP guidelines (Cedefop, 2009), contributing to improve the trust and comparability of such certification path. Therefore, the Nordic model for quality assurance in validation is designed quite broadly, following the logic of the VPL process: the individual is in the centre, and several factors are to be taken into account for a proper accompanying of the person through the validation process (p.11): information, preconditions, documentation, coordination, guidance, mapping, assessment, and follow-up – all of them with a detailed description.

2.3.2. Implementation

The quality model is addressed primarily to the educational institutions (p. 13). The testing of the model was carried out in all Nordic countries in different educational institutions, from different sectors (i.e., HEI in Norway, in an upper secondary institution - NQF 3 in Iceland, on 3rd sector and trade unions in Denmark, and in Finland and Sweden of VET system, NQF 4) to ensure its validity, irrespective of the educational level and sector.

Further specifications are made for ensuring organizational quality, the assessment quality and the procedural quality, a set of quality indicators being attached to each of the 8 quality factors. But it distinctly mentioned that quality assurance is an on-going improvement process, not a checklist to tick, being understood as a “dialogic, circular, and recurring process whereby conditions, routines, methodology in the validation are continuously evaluated and re-evaluated” (p. 16), and it is not dependant on the professionals carrying out the validation process, but it is the responsibility of the whole institution.

This transnational model was chosen for analysis to underline the elements of transferability to different national contexts, even for states where the national system of VPL is quite developed.

For instance, in Denmark, one of the countries with a fast development in the VPL sector, mainly since 2007, with proper system, structures, and coordinating national centre implemented – The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning - the framework and principles for assessment and quality assurance set to be followed stipulate that “educational institutions are responsible for quality assurance. These principles state that the methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome, and the institutions are obliged to have an evaluation system. Educational institutions have to develop practice that ensures transparency and quality in the process of recognition of prior learning” (Agaard, 2013).

To enable the educational institutions to perform in such a way, at national level the framework set by the ministry also covered support tools like: publishing information materials, pamphlets, videos; supporting developmental work in various educational fields; publishing a ‘good practice’ on-line booklet; commissioning a report from The Danish Evaluation Institute on quality assurance in relation to VPL; setting, by the Centre for Development of Human Resources (SCK – a state institution) the competence development training for VPL practitioners, a pilot project to develop certified education for VPL professionals etc. (Agaard, 2013). Furthermore, from 2013 the law stipulates that individuals can gain access to short-cycle and medium-cycle Higher Education (Bachelor-level degrees) based on an individual competence assessment. It is again the responsibility of the higher educational institutions to provide the necessary information and guidance for applicants, assessment procedures and quality control, being a common practice to appoint a VPL officer or coordinator to undertake the actual reinforcement and responsibility of the task (Agaard, 2013).

The examples chosen were meant to illustrate that there is more about commitment, about the principles to be followed, about ensured quality as on-going ameliorative practice, about getting trust on VPL by systematic development of tools and reliable practice, based on inner quality assurance concern.

3. Conclusions and discussions

Recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning has been a constant principle in all the framework papers addressing the Bologna Process in higher education since 1998 (Zgaga, 2012, p. 28). The examples presented show that there is not a need for very powerful national regulations for introducing VPL practices at university and program level. The university autonomy allows such developments, and it is up to its management and the openness of the program coordinators, once they set admission guidelines, to introduce the VPL practice. Different successful bottom-up initiatives can be the basis for further top-down regulations. The examples illustrated above show that even it is not a widely spread practice, in each of the three countries there are universities implementing the VPL service, being up to each university to implement such alternative solutions.

A useful resource for all universities around Europe interested in introducing VPL practices has been gathered by the European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN) during the “*Observal*” project (www.observal.org). The previous analysis also presented different tools that can be used and adapted. In addition, the updated CEDEFOP inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning can be a useful source of inspiration on how synergies with the practices developed outside universities can be created, for complementing the national lifelong learning policies by a common European approach, notably taken forward through the Bologna process.

For instance, following the recommendations for internationalization, for setting up joint degrees within the Bologna process and the European Space for Higher Education, a group of 10 universities from nine countries, within the ESRALÉ project (“*European Studies and Research in Adult and Learning Education*”, an Erasmus project, coordinated by the University of Kaiserslautern, between 2013-2016) is exploring the possibility of setting up consecutive degree programs for master and PhD in adult education. Furthermore, they are exploring how the access to the master level of the practitioners in adult education can be facilitated, working upon the experience of running the European Master in Adult Education and the experience of running VPL services in universities from some partner countries. West University of Timisoara as one of partners in this project will pilot such initiative. Setting up such VPL provision, as comparable practice, with comparable tools in each partner university, even for

the Romanian universities can be a stronger argument for accepting such bottom-up initiative. Reflections on needed VPL solutions for the adult learning professionals have been published (Konrad, 2007, Sava, 2012).

To conclude, the development and implementation of European and national qualifications frameworks have increased the focus on integrating ('mainstreaming') validation of non-formal and informal learning in the overall qualifications system. The same trend can be observed for credit systems, although currently less so. There is no doubt, however, that the work on frameworks offers an opportunity to consider how validation and credit transfer and accumulation, can contribute to a more comprehensive strategy on validating learning outcomes (Bjørnåvold, Le Mouillour, 2009, p. 42). Such a trend cannot be stopped and in the near future. By bringing credible examples to universities, by increasing awareness and trust of the university staff on the added value of the VPL, by providing them with useful tools, it is expected that the VPL solution will enjoy a wider acceptance and implementation.

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