Competence assessment as a mean to facilitate employability, career progress and accreditation towards a qualification

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Abstract

The validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings is set as a priority within several European documents framing the lifelong learning policies, being acknowledged as “a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy” (EC, 2006). 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 is being dealt with in more and more countries and for various target groups. Avoiding double learning, raising awareness on one’s own competences, offering the starting point for further professional and personal development and recognising the actual knowledge, skills and attitudes of an individual are only some of the benefits of real competence assessment. The present paper is aimed to provide three case studies of competence assessment that provide clear evidence of a wide range of benefits for the different target groups they focus on: immigrants, trainers and participants in European cooperation projects. The competence assessment approaches used in these three different situations are shaped according to the characteristics and needs of the target groups, being a source of inspiration due to their innovative dimension.

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1. Introduction

As mentioned in the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning (CEDEFOP, 2009), expansion and diversification of education and training policies towards a broader, lifelong learning perspective, widens the focus from the delivery of qualifications by formal education and training institutions to include other, more flexible routes to qualification. These are sensitive to different ways in which people have developed their knowledge and skills and the way they live their lives. To ease such flexible pathways, validating non-formal and informal learning makes visible the learning gained outside learning institutions. Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and life-wide learning. A rapidly growing number of countries emphasise the importance of making visible and valuing learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, at work, in the home and during leisure time activities. 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 is being dealt with in more and more countries and for various target groups. Avoiding double learning, raising awareness on one’s own competences, offering the starting point for further professional and personal development and recognising the actual knowledge, skills and attitudes of an individual are only some of the benefits of real competence assessment.

The present paper is aimed to provide three case studies of competence assessment that provide clear evidence of a wide range of benefits for the different target groups they focus on: immigrants, trainers and participants in European cooperation projects. The competence assessment approaches used in these three different situations are shaped according to the characteristics and needs of the target groups, being a source of inspiration due to their innovative dimension.

2. Methodology

This study uses a case study methodology designed around a common analysis structure in order to provide insight into the way competence validation and recognition can be used for different target groups and serve different purposes. This analysis structure focuses on the following items: context, target group, purpose, competence validation methodology/instrument. Each case study is based on a European partnership and the related experience:

A. **Validation of Informal Learning in Grundtvig Projects and Partnerships – VIP**
   
   aims at creating a specific and transferable evaluation procedure, a tailor-made reference system for the evaluation of European collaborative learning in partnerships and web-based software that enables the internal and external validation of participants/learners in Grundtvig actions and regard to competence development in European collaborations.

B. **Capitalizing on Validpack: going Europe wide – CAPIVAL**
   
   valorises the Validpack instrument that facilitates the documentation and the evaluation of trainers’ competences acquired in formal, non-formal or informal learning contexts.

C. **Counselling returning migrants – Back to work**
   
   develops a validation and recognition of competences practice as part of the counselling services offered by the local employment offices with the view of improving their counselling services for unemployed, especially returning migrants, and increasing the chances of efficient matching on the labour market.

These particular cases were chosen because of their potential to provide a range of interesting and ‘different’ perspectives on the benefits of validating non-formal and informal learning.

3. Case studies

A. **Validation of Informal Learning in Grundtvig Projects and Partnerships**

   **Context**

   Unquestionable, in contrast to collaboration on the national level activities in these trans-national teams require not only stronger efforts in terms of resources (time, personnel, funds) but also (additional and profound) competences and knowledge about adult learning in partner countries, intercultural collaboration, tolerance, openness for change etc.). The VIP project approaches European trans-national projects as informal learning spaces for individual participating representatives of partner institutions, providing numerous opportunities to acquire new competences or develop the existing ones. In most of the cases, only the outputs and the successes of their joint efforts are in the focus of project evaluations. Informal learning in their collaborative learning situations has been seldom investigated and never thoroughly evaluated or validated. This is why VIP opens up an innovative topic that contributes to effective exchange of good practice in the fields covered by the LLP.

   **Target group**

   The main target groups of VIP are partners in trans-national projects and partnerships.
Purpose
The main purpose of the VIP project is to create and pilot an innovative validation system for assessing, evidencing and improving the impact of international projects on competences of individual participants in respect to specific European collaborative learning objectives. Internal learning processes in the framework of European projects bear a tremendous European potential, since their stakeholders are multipliers to bring about European understanding and collaboration. The competence development in a European project context has never been subject to validation. VIP seeks to establish an innovative system for validating informal learning in European Grundtvig projects.

Competence validation methodology/instrument
The effects (or the impact) of informal learning can be displayed through the development of competence (e.g. empowerment, improvement of “soft” skills, activity level, self esteem, attitudes towards other groups, civic knowledge etc.).

Kernel of the LEVEL5 approach is a model to assess evidence and validate the cognitive, activity-related and affective competence development of learners in informal and non-formal learning contexts.

Individual or group competences are evaluated in a process orientated way, visualised in a 3-dimensional cube model and fully documented in specific software system. The LEVEL5 evaluation procedure is on the one hand standardised and enables at the same time grass-root projects to establish an individualised reference system for assessing and evidencing relevant competence of their beneficiaries in a process-orientated way.

The LEVEL5 system allows users to evidence the impact of their work according to a standardised procedure while, at the same time, keeping up their individuality as informal learning projects in their specific contexts. With the help of LEVEL5 it can be measured, displayed and evidenced these impacts and gives a convincing picture of the effects of work. Starting from the fundamental question: “What is it exactly that you want to bring about for your target group?” it has been developed a progressive assessment system that leads to a profound analysis of the impact of those processes that are identified as being elemental for learners and beneficiaries.

B. Capitalizing on Validpack: going Europe wide – CAPIVAL

Context
Although a well recognised need, there has been little attention paid to defining the contents and processes of initial training and the further professionalization of staff working in adult learning. 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. Most of trainers have acquired 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.

The Validpack instrument was developed as a solution to the above mentioned situation, and due to its proved efficiency, the CAPIVAL partnership intends to extend its use in the most European countries by setting up a European network and developing complementary tools facilitating the Validpack effective and smooth implementation (training course for competence assessors, quality assurance indicators – reference material).

Target group
The long term target group is represented by trainers (and teachers) in adult education. They represent the ultimate target group, the beneficiaries, who will dispose of an innovative instrument documenting and making visible their learning outcomes, their expertise and level of competence.

Purpose
The Validpack will be used to document and recognize what trainers already know. This is relevant for them because they can often retrieve themselves in the following situations:
• embarking on an continuing training programme and would like an assessment of their competences by an education institution;
• planning their continuing training and competence development, for instance with their supervisor
• looking for a new job

Competence validation methodology/ instrument

The innovative tool developed within the frame of VINEPAC project: Handbook for the use of Validpack is a unique instrument of this kind. As far as VINEPAC partnership knows, there exists no other validation instrument which addresses adult educator’s competences. The occurrence of the Handbook for the use of Validpack determined a lot of reactions, all welcoming the instrument. It brings a new perspective within the complex picture of adult educator professionalization in Europe by offering an alternative to the initial and continuing education and training systems for adult educators. As there are very few such systems in Europe (UK, Austria, and Switzerland) the adult educators take over the responsibility for their professional development which usually implies acquiring the needed competences in non-formal and informal settings. The validation instrument realized within VINEPAC project can actually provide a clear view regarding the real competences an adult educator has. In this way, the final result of the validation process (validation sheet) can be considered a reliable equivalent to the certificate which could be obtained in a formal learning setting. Evaluator’s guide for the use of Validpack accompanies the Handbook for the use of Validpack and aims to offer the external evaluator some hints about how to conduct the external evaluation but also how to support the adult educator throughout the whole validation process and after it by offering counselling services regarding adult educator’s further development path. It is a new approach of the role of an evaluator, which should be able to offer also counselling and guidance services when needed.

C. Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed - Back to Work

Context

To unemployed people, including returning migrants facing unemployment, are offered counselling and support services within the local employment offices, but these services are not enough adapted to go into deep supporting the reflection and validation of the real competencies the workers have.
This initiative ultimately strives to make the competences, skills and knowledge of those unemployed visible and recognized, this being the basis for the development of personalized paths back to employment, and for motivating the NEET people (not in employment, education, or training) to follow bridges between the different learning pathways. The majority of the returning migrants had left their home country usually at a very early age, having no qualification or a low-level one. But during their stay in the host countries, they have acquired competences, knowledge and attitudes within the workplace and outside of it. Because of unfavourable economic and employment conditions, they return lately to their home countries, East European countries mainly, where they also have to deal with unemployment, although the work areas they used to be active in (tourism services, constructions) strive for qualified and competent labour force.

Target group

The direct target group of Back to Work is constituted out of employment counsellors and the indirect one are - migrants and unemployed people.

Purpose

The general aim of the Back to Work project is to develop the validation and recognition of competences practice as part of the counselling services offered by the local employment offices with the view of improving their counselling services for unemployed and increasing the chances of efficient matching on the labour market.
Competence validation methodology/ instrument

Instruments for the recognition of competences of the unemployed people in general, especially returning migrants, and to enable those involved in employment services to use them as a mean to create further development pathways and/ or better matching the needs of the labour market.

The instruments contain the specific and concrete methods in order to be used by counsellors for helping the clients to discover the major competencies (specially the hidden, but relevant competencies) they have already acquired in different contexts (formal, non-formal and specially informal) and orient them towards a validation process or schooling on the labour market. This instrument intends to be an useful one, trying to reveal the unexplored and un-exploitation competencies of unemployed people, contributing in this way to raising the self esteem, to valorise of what people know and know how to do, even they don't have a paper/ a certificate to demonstrate it.

4. Conclusions

Validation of competences it at the heart of all case studies but each is revealing a different kind of focus of the validation process. The ultimate purpose of the Back to work initiative is to assist, orient and advice the unemployed on how to capitalize on their prior learning acquisition and to go one step up in their qualification and gain a better employability profile. Although this initiative approaches the counsellors in the local employment offices, the long-term impact of this project is expected to target low-skilled and low-qualified. From a totally different perspective, the VIP and CAPIVAL initiatives promote validation instruments targeting highly skilled professionals, trainers and Grundtvig project staff, so that their competences get the validation and recognition from an external body (employers, accreditation bodies and agencies, education institutions, trade unions etc.) and, were possible, it could constitute an viable alternative to the initial and continuing education qualifications.

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