

## *Validation of non formal and informal learning*

### ABSTRACT

The article gives a brief overview about the concept of life long learning in the European Union with a focus on informal and non formal learning. Amongst others a clear definition of skills, qualifications and competencies is presented. Secondly we discuss how to identify main areas of informal and non formal learning by the means of time use and task analyses in order to validate informal and non formal learning. Thirdly we describe the situation in regard of validation of informal and non formal learning in Europe whereas the emphasis is put on the partner countries of the Europlacement project. Furthermore some useful theories to guide the development of tools are being presented. And finally we discuss some methodological approaches to the validation of informal and non formal learning processes. A comprehensive bibliography and link list completes the article.

*KEYWORDS: lifelong learning in Europe, time use, task analysis, informal and non formal learning, validation, skills, qualifications, competencies, theories*

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\* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Martin Maier, Hafelekar, Bozner Platz 5, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING WITH FOCUS ON INFORMAL  
AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING

In recent years, the concepts of informal and non-formal learning have grown in importance and research into them is becoming more commonplace. In 2002, the European Union developed and enplaced policies on life-long learning, and one of the main foci was based around the need to identify, assess and certificate informal learning (Bjornavold, 2000). Both academics and policy makers alike see recognising and accrediting informal learning as an opportunity to substantially widen participation in learning with all the positive connotations this can have both at the societal and the individual level.

The Council (June 2002) underlined the key role played by the validation of non-formal and informal learning and called for the development of ways to validate this experience. The Copenhagen Declaration (Nov 2002) and Council Resolution (Dec 2002) stated that there was a need "to develop a set of common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels". The Council and Commission Joint Interim Report (26 February 2004) states "that the development of references and principles can usefully support national policies". The most important elements that followed the Copenhagen Declaration are the development of a single framework for transparency, the development of a European credit transfer system for VET, as well as common reference levels for VET, and common principles for certification, further the development of common principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and, finally, increased support for the development of qualifications and competences at sectoral level (see also Balduini et al, no year, pp4).

The European Council and the representatives of Governments of Member States recognise that the identification of non-

formal and informal learning ‘meet the specific needs of those individuals who seek integration or re-integration into education and training, the labour market and society’ (The council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, May 2004).

#### INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING – DEFINITION

There exist many varying definitions of formal, informal and non-formal learning throughout the existing literature. The European Commission (2001) give the following clear and accurate definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning.

*Formal Learning:* learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.

*Non-formal Learning:* learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.

*Informal Learning:* learning resulting from daily life activities relating to work, family life or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and, typically, does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but, in most cases, it is unintentional or incidental.

#### INFORMAL AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING IN EVERYDAY SETTINGS

The phrase “we live and learn” lends itself well to informal and non-formal learning. Humans beings are social by nature, and learning is a natural byproduct of living. Learning is not

confined to explicit learning situations. People who are lacking in explicit education may wrongly feel that they do not know much at all. However, learning is omni-present. A central feature of informal and incidental learning is learning from and through life experience. Fundamentally, experiential learning means the learning we acquire through experience.

Informal Learning takes place also in the community. It is difficult to estimate the exact amount of informal learning that is undertaken in a community because of its scale and diversity and because it is often both a part and a product of ostensibly non-educational activities. (McGivney, 2004). Another concept very closely related to informal learning is viewing it simply as implicit learning or tacit knowledge. The first person to make note of the construct was the great Social Scientist Michael Polanyi (1967) in his profound book "The Tacit Dimension", in which he refers to tacit knowledge as 'that which we know [about] but cannot tell [much about it]' and believed that "we all know more than we can tell".

Validating informal learning involves making implicit learning or knowledge explicit. The reverse is also true: explicit learning can lead to tacit knowledge. This brings on the argument as to whether any knowledge is totally explicit or implicit. Most knowledge is composed of both elements to a greater or lesser extent. The Europlacement project is interested in also utilising, or harnessing, tacit knowledge for constructive purposes, i.e., aiming to bring it to conscious awareness in order to channel it into a career path for the graduates seeking for a job.

#### FROM COMMON EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES TO COMPETENCIES

As learning happens in everyday contexts as part of daily life both during work and leisure time, an analysis of time usage is helpful to identify main areas where learning takes place in

order to validate informal and non-formal learning. For an LdV project called INFORM (IRL/06/B/F/PP-153101), a tool was developed to identify hidden strengths from common tasks that people do everyday and to see how these strengths are transferable to the labour market. The first step in developing the INFORM tool was to research how people in Europe spend their time. After the initial research, a qualitative study was conducted to find the most common everyday activities across the target population. Finally, research was carried out to find a broad range of competence components that each common activity could be rated against. The final list of such components totalled 123 individual elements and included the following categories: Cognitive Strengths, Physical Strengths, Emotional Strengths, Interests, Personality and Work Styles (for further information, see the report *Validation of informal and non formal learning*, 2010, pp12).

#### VALIDATION OF INFORMAL AND NON FORMAL LEARNING

“Validation of non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a key to realise lifelong and life-wide learning. A growing number of European countries (2) emphasise the importance of making visible and giving appropriate value to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, for example, at work, in leisure time activities and at home.” (Cedefop, 2008, p 5). (See also Balduini et al, no year, pp 4.

1. Validation of informal and non-formal learning in Europe (as of in 2007)

- A reality – i.e. policy statements; tangible practices; general acceptance; legal structures; all sectors; good take-up (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Romania, Spain, UK)

- Emergent – i.e. not systemic; legal and/or policy framework (not both); implementation commencing; pilot stage; take-up variable across sectors (Austria, Czech Rep, Iceland, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Sweden)
- Low level of activity – i.e. VINFL sometimes controversial; little policy or practice; driven by EU agenda and NQFs (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Slovak Rep, Turkey)
- Patterns of developments: UKà Ireland; Franceà Belgium; Finlandà Norway, Denmark & Sweden; new Member States seeking coherence with older members
- (Harris 2009).
- For further information, see also <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/2007.html> (European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning ©ECOTEC Research & Consulting Limited, Birmingham).

## 2. Tools for studying informal and non-formal learning

The existing literature points to two general approaches for the analysis of potential:

- Methods using self-assessment and -opinion
- Methods using external-assessment and -opinion

Within both of the above approaches, there are a variety of methods:

### *Method for self- and external analysis – Portfolio Analysis*

The concept of the portfolio originates from the French-speaking part of Canada, and arose following the Second World War. At the time, tests were conducted with the idea that they should be suitably developed to identify civilians, especially women, with acquired abilities useful for the civilian labour market. The portfolio is a structured collection of all personal data, facts, and career documents pertaining to personal potential and profile. Thus, formal and extracurricular acquired competence should

be documented and accentuated. It is possible that institutionally unrecognised life experiences are not documented, and, subject to these, development of an equivalent method institutionally is important.

### *Instruments for External analysis*

Instruments pertaining to the Europlacement topic, especially for external analysis:

- Assessment-Centre
- Tests
- Suitable interviews

*Assessment-Centre.* The literature compares in particular the portfolio as an instrument of self-analysis and the assessment-centre as an instrument of external-analysis. In assessment, people's competences are registered using a number of complex tasks. Several persons act as observers, tracking the behaviour of the participants, finally bringing together their single observations.

*Tests.* The literature especially distinguishes between the following types of tests to ascertain potential:

- Ability tests
- Performance tests
- Observation at work or simulations
- Personality tests
- Interest tests
- Traditional tests or examinations

(Schmidt, p. 38)

*Interviews.* An interesting extension to the field of External Analysis is offered by the "Multi-modal Interview" method by Schuler (1992); at an essentially minor expense, one can achieve similar results with these methods in the assessment-centre

(with equivalent validity values). A Multi-modal Interview (duration: approx. 30 minutes) consists of the following eight steps (here described for choosing an external applicant for specific employment):

*Mixture of methods to solve the integrated, individually-centred assessment*

In the literature, it is unanimously agreed that instruments for self- and external-analysis mutually complement one another. For example, while assessment methods, interviews and tests are primarily heteronymous, the portfolio is especially suitable for self-evaluations, and here it is important to recognise and bring in informal study experiences. On the other hand, some tests stand out particularly due to their inherent high degree of validity, and multi-modal interviews are used as a substitute for expensive Assessments.

*The Europlacement Tool Kit*

The main aim of the Europlacement Project is to promote the transfer of a kit of products enabling graduates to enter the labour market. The transfer concerns a kit of tools produced by the same partners in previous projects. The Europlacement project is to experiment and adapt these tools, with the aim to propose an integrated system of good practices certifying non-formal and informal learning outcomes, supporting LLG, favouring employability, and reducing information asymmetry between labour demand and supply.



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