

Portrait of Recognition and Validation of Prior Learning in Romania

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Abstract

The article presents the issue of recognition and validation of prior learning and experience in the Romanian Higher Education (HE) system and in Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, clarifies concepts, practices and regulations implemented in the two systems. While, the regulation for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) does not apply in an explicit way to HE yet, there is a legal framework in place for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in relation to professional competences. Although it has a fairly short history, validation of informal and non-formal learning is gaining momentum in Romania through an increase of certified validation centers and experts (CDEFOP, 2010). As a result of a study that I carried on in 2013, which aimed to estimate the impact of the validation process on the beneficiaries from their perception, the article includes conclusions and recommendation outlined with the purpose of optimizing the existent practices at the moment.

Key words: *recognition, validation, accreditation, prior learning*

Introduction

Nowadays the formal learning is not sufficient to facilitate and utilize the full human potential of any society. Recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) became an important instrument for comparing different forms of learning, in order to eliminate discrimination against those who acquired competences non-formally or informally (UNESCO-UIL, Singh, M., Duvekot, R., 2013, pp. 12). The importance of RVA comes also from the need to make visible, assessed and accredited the learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their life. This need is created by a dynamic, fast changing world where individuals must acquire and adapt competences thorough all forms of learning in order to cope with various changes. However, qualification systems in many societies are still focused on formal learning in educational institutions (UNESCO-UIL, 2012).

In the last decades, policies and practices concerning the recognition of prior learning have been developed all around the world, and especially in Europe. Recognition of learning acquired throughout life has been known by

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different names in the different countries in which has been adopted, as a result of a different focuses, principles, or procedure it includes. Several examples are provided by France, where it is called VAE (*Validation de acquis de l'expérience*) and VAP (*validation de acquis professionnel*), in England - *accreditation of prior learning*, in Sweden *recognition of prior learning*, in Portugal *recognition, validation and certification of competences* and in Romania is *assessment and certification of professional competences obtained in non-formal and informal contexts* (OECD, Werquin, P., 2010).

Validation of competences was introduced into the discourse and public policies in Sweden in 1996 and since then competence took on a new meaning, stressing its usefulness (Lima, L.C., Guimaraes, P., 2011, pp. 62-63). The European Commission's White Paper Teaching and Learning (1995), was the first step regarding this new educational opportunity, when proposed a common European approach to the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Since then, validation of non-formal and informal learning has been identified as a European priority on many occasions (European Commission, DG EAK, 2009). Validation of non-formal and informal learning became part of European policy agenda starting with 2001 when the Commission defined lifelong learning as all learning activity undertaken through life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective (European Commission, 2012). Coming closer to the present, the demand for recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning outcomes was expressed through the Belém Framework for Action, adopted by 144 Delegations of UNESCO Member States at the Six International Conference on Adult Education (CONFITEA VI) in Brazil, in December 2009 (UNESCO-UIL, 2012).

Being considered a priority after the Belém Framework for Action, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) took the initiative to develop the *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. This document propose principles and mechanisms that can assist Member States in developing or improving structures and procedures to recognise all forms of learning, particularly the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning (UNESCO - UIL, 2012).

The Council Recommendation on The Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (EU Council, 2012) recommends to the Member States to improve their validation practice, no later than in 2018, on aspects like: to make the link between the validation arrangements and the national qualifications frameworks; to offer accessible information and appropriate guidance, and counselling; to give special attention to disadvantaged groups and individuals who are unemployed or at risk of employment; to develop quality assurance measures that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools; to develop professional competences of staff involved in the validation process; to assure the synergy between validation arrangements and credit system applicable in the formal education (ECTS/ECVET); to use Union transparency tools, such as the Europass framework

and Youthpass. All in all, national arrangements should apply the above principles with the main aim of creating opportunities for individuals to validate their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning to be created and opportunities to obtain a qualification on the basis of validated learning outcomes.

Main concepts

While there is a growing evidence that individuals can acquire their skills, knowledge and competences outside the formal education and training system, there is little consensus about the definitions of the terms (Singh, M., Duvekot, R., 2013, pp.15).

- *Validation* is a process of confirmation by an authorized body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard. It consists of four distinct phases: 1. Identification through dialog of particular experiences of an individual, 2. Documentation – to make visible the individual's experiences, 3. A formal assessment of these experiences and 4. Recognition leading to a certification for example a partial or full qualification. On short *Validation* it makes learning's outcome not only visible but also official (European Commission, 2012, COMMISSION STAFF WORKING PAPER IMPACT ASSESSMENT, pp.3). Validation process assumes a set of Common European principles (European Commission, 2004), which are necessary to encourage and guide the development of high-quality, trustworthy approaches and systems for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. They are necessary to ensure the comparability of non-formal and informal learning's outcome against some certain standards and wide acceptance of different approaches and systems in the Member States. They also enable the transfer and acceptance of all learning outcomes across different settings. Key terms related with validation concept, but which have different meanings are: *recognition* and *accreditation*.
- *Recognition* is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society (UNESCO-UIL, 2012).
- *Accreditation* – is a process by which an officially approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles) or grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, the terms accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a program as a whole (UNESCO-UIL, 2012).
- Prior learning is defined as the knowledge, know-how and/or competences acquired through previously unrecognized training or experience (AEHESIS, 2006).

Further in this article, the validation concept is understood as: 'The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard'(CEDEFOP, 2009). It is a process that consists of four steps and has the power of making the prior learning not only visible, but also official.

Validation practice of non formal and informal learning in Romania - a holistic approach

The recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning in higher education is commonly associated with two main purposes: to gain access to a higher education program or to get exemption from certain higher education requirements by demonstrating that you already possess the knowledge and skills related to certain parts of study (European Commission, 2013). The same Eurydice study states that in Romania the implementation of recognition of prior learning is in a pilot phase at some higher education institutions, while an alternative route to access higher education does not exist.

The European agenda on "the Social Dimension of Education and Training" states that recognizing prior learning and providing individualized support enhances participation of underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners in higher education (HE). HE institutions are still considering how to support the LLL (Lifelong Learning) perspectives and making use of the added value methods for Validation of Prior Learning (VPL). Some universities develop VPL – practices as an answer to economic and labor market needs; others use VPL as a way to widen access and participation of target groups which are obstructed in getting access in HE. Reality therefore calls for action on making HE more accessible for underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners by focusing on flexible lifelong learning strategies, opened up by tailor-made VPL-approaches (Duvekot, R., Halb, B., Aagaard, K., Gabršček, S., Murray, J., 2014, pp.3). The article "Integrated solutions for adult learning professionals to access master levels" published in the VPL Biennale volume entitled "The Power of VPL", highlights the idea that in Romania there is a great need for a more flexible and more open HE system, adapted to non-traditional older students, with a wide experience and a great need for getting it recognized. Alternative solutions must be identified by the universities in order to cope with issues like: the decreasing number of students and public funds, and also the students' interest in looking for more flexible and quick solutions which support them to struggle with their time, money and other constraints (Sava, S., Borca, C., Danciu, E, 2014, pp.79). In Romania, the regulation for validation of non-formal and informal learning does not apply to Higher education yet. The legislation does not explicitly mention recognition and validation of prior learning (VPL) for universities, but neither forbids it. It is up to the universities and coordinators of

programs, to teacher themselves, based on their autonomy, to use partly such possibility, mostly for the students with practical experiences (Sava, S., Borca C., Danciu, E, pp.86-87).

While, in Romania, the regulation for VPL does not apply to Higher education yet, there is a legal framework in place for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in relation to professional competences. However, validation has so far mostly been confined to non-academic sectors (CDEFOP, 2010).

The validation process of professional competences acquired in non-formal or informal learning contexts is regulated by law and the main responsible body for this process is the National Qualifications Authority (NQA). NQA was established in June 2011 as a reorganization of two main institutions: The National Council for Adult Training in charge of CVET qualifications and the national Authority for Qualifications in Higher Education, responsible for higher education qualifications. This was an important step in order to cope with one of the main challenges in the recent years: to link two development process, structures and stakeholders from VET, higher education and labor market, in a more comprehensive framework. Starting with 2013, Romania has a comprehensive NQF linked to the EQF, developed by the NQA. The NQF *establishes eight levels of competences that can be acquired through the formal education and training in Romania and through the recognition of learning outcomes acquired through non-formal or informal learning contexts during life* (HG 918/2013).

Recognition and validation of vocational competencies acquired in non-formal and informal contexts are performed by the assessment centers authorized by the NQA 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, Research, Youth and Sport and of the Minister of Labor, Social Solidarity and Family, with subsequent modifications and completions (3329/81/2005) (Order No.4543/468 from 23 august 2004).

The individuals who would like to be assessed in the view of recognizing of vocational competencies acquired through non-formal and informal ways should address to an assessment centre authorized for such occupation/qualification. The NQA has the responsibility of the authorization of the assessment centers. Authorization is considered for occupations/qualifications included in the Romanian Classification of Occupations/List of Qualifications (ORDER NO. 1832/856 from 6 July 2011). In Romania, the advisory and validation services are not interconnected; there is no link between these two categories of services. Unfortunately, validation is an early-stage process and is quite difficult for the following reasons: it is a service that involves paying fees; lack of popularity and knowledge of these types of facilities among people; lack of confidence in this type of services (Crasovan, M., Siliman, A., Samoila, R., 2011).

The assessment and certification procedures for non-formal and informal learning in Romania are elaborated in line with the standard ISO/IEC 17024:2012 *General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons* which contains the principles and the requirements for a body certifying persons against specific requirements, and includes the development and maintenance of a certification scheme for persons (ISO/IEC 17024:2012). The individual assessor must be authorized by NQA in conformity with the *Occupational Standard of Evaluator of professional competences*. There are clear standards set for the individual assessors: he must be able to plan, organized and carry out an assessment of professional competences as well as make decisions and report on the assessment. The assessor can also show competence in the elaboration of assessment tools, but this is not a mandatory requirement. The performance of individual assessors is evaluated and monitored by internal observers also certified by NQA. The legislation sets out clear competence requirements for the internal observers. The actual of assessment procedure is followed by a process of internal verification, and an opportunity for the applicant to appeal against the decision (CEDEFOP, 2010).

In the last years, there has been an increase of certified validation centers and experts, refinement of assessment methods and the legal and practical procedures have become clearer in the VET system, which means that the number of validation process also increased.

According to the National Report on Flexi-Path (*Flexi-Path: Flexible professionalisation pathways for adult educator between the 6th and 7th level of EQF, 2008-2010*), on 15th March 2006 there were registered in the National Register of Competences Assessment and Certification Centres 28 authorized centres, for 20 qualifications and 40 occupations in the fields such as: social assistance, agriculture, education and vocational training, culture, constructions, administration and public services, informational technology and communications, tourism, hotels and restaurants, retail trade, food industry, forestry and wood processing, welding. The number of the certified assessors of vocational competencies was 182. On 19th of March 2009, there were registered in the National Register of Competences Assessment and Certification Centres 11 authorized assessment centres for trainer/ trainer of trainers' occupation, while in the current National Register of Evaluation and Certification Centers of professional competences authorized by the NQA/ 31.03.2014 (http://www.anc.edu.ro/uploads/images/RNCECCP_31_03_2014.pdf) are registered 12 authorized assessment centres for trainer/ trainer of trainers'. The article *Credibility of trainer's competences assessment* signed by Raluca Lupou, Prof. Phd Simona Sava and Prof. Phd. Ekkehard Nuisl concludes that *the training path to certification is considered by the experienced trainer much more credible on the labor market than the validation. In spite of having the same national recognition by law, the graduating certificate and the professional competence certificate are differently valued on the labor market* (R.Lupou, S. Sava, E. Nuisl, 2010). Having in mind this increase in number of the validation centers and the conclusion above, I find it quite necessary to clarify this situation also from the beneficiary's point of view. The survey I carried on in 2013, for my

Master's thesis, aimed to estimate the impact of validation on the beneficiaries from their perception, with the purpose of optimizing the existent practices at the moment.

Methodology

The survey carried on in the spring of 2013, had the following specific objectives: to identify the motivational factors that determines the target group's participation in the evaluation process; to emphasis the beneficiaries' perception regarding their experience in competence validation; to identify the factors that hinder the participation in the validation process of such interested adults; to identify the further benefits of this process in the respondents perception; to identify the factors that cause difficulties for the respondents in using the certificate obtained through validation. More than 30 people that have passed through the validation process in different fields, in validation centers from different regions of the country were questioned about their experience regarding the validation process and the further benefits that came after it.

Managers from seven validation centers from all over the country were contacted in order to facilitate the contact with the respondents. The data were collected via structured interviews which were applied either by sending it to the respondents via e-mail, either by asking them in a face to face meeting, either on the telephone. The sample was represented by 37 adults who went through a validation procedure in order to obtain a professional certificate for different professions, without considering their age, gender, level of education, or region in which they live.

Findings

The benefits mentioned by the respondents were: 'getting employed' for the profession for which they have been qualified through validation, 'professional development' and 'personal benefits' like: increasing self-esteem and confidence in their strength. The main benefits were in concordance with the level of the studies of the respondents. The lack of validation possibility was an impediment in getting employed for the people with low level of education (13, 3%) and qualification needs, while for the respondents with a high school level (30%) and higher education (53,3 %), the promotion at the work place and professional development were the main benefits they expressed. It can be observed a connection between the educational level and the benefits subsequent the validation process.

Level of education	FURTHER BENEFITS					TOTAL
	Promotion at the work place	Mobility in the workforce	Professional conversion	Entering the labor market, employment	Professional development	

Secondary school	0 %	0 %	50 %	50 %	0 %	100 %
Vocational school	100 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	100 %
High school	33,3 %	11,1 %	11,1 %	11,1 %	33,3 %	100 %
Higher education	25 %	0 %	12,5 %	6,3 %	56,3 %	100 %

Table 6: Correlation between the benefits and the level of education of respondents

Another issue that respondents highlighted is the need of improving awareness and information procedures to potential interested adults. The majority of 43, 33% respondents were informed of the existence of the validation procedure by their friends; only for 30 % respondents the work place and the internet represented a source of information. The responses of the respondents enhanced the need of improving awareness and information procedures to potential interested adults. It can be concluded based on these findings that if the awareness and recruitments procedures would be improved, the number of adults interested in having recognized and validated their professional competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts, could be higher.

Regarding the possibility of using the certificates of competences obtained through a validation procedure, on the labor market, the respondents did not confirm any difficulties in having the certificate recognized by the employers for purposes as: attend to professional development programs, get employed or be promoted.

Regarding the quality of the service the respondent's feed-back was a positive one. More than 80% of the beneficiaries stated that they have received support and guidance, the requirements were clear specified to them, and the assessment procedure was objective. A negative aspect that was mentioned by a part of the interviews respondents was the bureaucracy that this procedure imposes. It can be concluded that there are differences on the perception of the beneficiaries regarding their experience of the validation process. While the majority of respondents (80 %) concluded that the experience of validation was a pleasant experience, were they have founded quality services, guidance, seriousness and an objective evaluation, for several (more than 10 %) respondents this experience was stressful and implied to much bureaucracy.

Data confirm that the validation of professional competences in Romania have a major impact on the professional life of the beneficiaries and its necessity is assessed by them in terms of immediate benefits like promotion, employment, and so on.

Another conclusion is that `validation` in Romania is not yet a concept valued in the society to its full potential, being correlated in the practical life only with the official recognition of some professional competences through a certificate of competencies. But the reality is that validation of competences have much more to offer and can have benefits for different category of adults, either they are unemployed, or migrant, or disadvantaged people.

Conclusions and recommendations

Concluding, I would say that is room as well as necessity for further detailed research in the field of validation of competencies acquired in non-formal and in-formal learning. Is, for instance, the case of those who receive embedded training at the work place or are apprentices in a non-formal manner and, in spite of becoming highly competent workers in some professional fields, they have not a official recognition of those skills and knowledge. Due this fact, they often are in the situation of working outside of legal framework. So, more publicity, awareness and recruitment procedures are needed, especially among simple people, without higher studies. Validation of competences can be a solution for encouraging quitting work outside the legal provisions.

Spreading a number of the validation centers across the country, so they could be much more accessible to more categories of adults in different geographic regions could offer better chances to the people o get their acquired competencies validated and recognized. At the present, people have to travel from their local community in order to attend a validation procedure, which is sometimes too expensive for them in terms of time or many. Distance and cost of this service is a disincentive for many adults.

As an observation, in some cases, institutions that are authorized as centers of validation of professional competences provide also training services, but without working in a complementary way. The Sweden⁶² model on validation of professional competences is a good example, and in this way the centers survival would be much easier: providing training services in order to fulfill the missing competences, is easier than to function only as a validation center or a training center.

⁶²CEDEFOP, 2010, *European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2010, Country Report: Sweden*, edited by Ida Thomson, available at: <http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2011/77476.pdf>.

As much as possible, the process of validation of competences should be more individualized, being part from a more complex counseling and guidance procedure, for different kind of beneficiaries: migrants, unemployed, youth, etc.

Developing counseling services for the people inside different stakeholders: NGOs, NAE (National Agency for Employment), and inside the Human Resources departments of the firms, HE institutions and so on, is an opportunity for a better utilization of human resources.

In the present, validation of competencies is starting to be more and more appreciated as an alternative route for obtaining a qualification. Though it has a bottom-up approach the practice of validation of competencies obtained through a different context of learning starts to be appreciated not only at the academically contexts, but also in the practical reality, by becoming a practice more and more required in the practitioners world. It is important to identify specific areas of competencies and to develop specific procedures of validation which are to be follow in the process in line with the standards set by the specialists in the certain professional fields. On the other hand, having in Europe an open labor market, the national standards and procedures have to be in line with European ones.

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