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VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING – RESEARCH RESULTS

ABSTRACT

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is one of the priorities of the educational systems in the European Union. As is evident from the literature review and research results, a great deal has been done in the legislative field, but educational institutions need more guidance on procedures for evaluating non-formal and informal learning. The paper also presents the results of the »Lifelong Learning 2010 (LLL2010)« project, dealing with the issues related to this topic..

Keywords: *lifelong learning, formal education, non-formal education, informal learning, experiential learning, accreditation, validation*

PRIZNAVANJE NEFORMALNEGA IN PRILožNOSTNEGA UČENJA – REZULTATI RAZISKAVE – POVZETEK

Priznavanje neformalnega in priložnostnega učenja je ena od prednostnih nalog razvoja izobraževalnih sistemov v Evropski uniji. Kot je razvidno iz pregleda literature in rezultatov raziskav, je bilo veliko narejeno na zakonodajnem področju, izobraževalne institucije pa pogrešajo predvsem več navodil glede postopkov vrednotenja neformalnega in priložnostnega učenja. V članku tudi predstavljamo rezultate projekta »Vseživljenjsko učenje 2010 (LLL2010)«, ki zadevajo vprašanja, povezana s to tematiko.

Ključne besede: *vseživljenjsko učenje, formalno izobraževanje, neformalno izobraževanje, priložnostno učenje, izkustveno učenje, priznavanje, vrednotenje*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, validation of learning outside the frame of formal education is becoming very important in the field of education. Challenges that educational institutions face when recognizing complex knowledge from various fields require a systematic regulation of procedures involving assessment and validation. The aim of the present article is to summarise the some important issues and offer additional clarifications substantiated by the empirical results of the »Lifelong Learning 2010 – Towards a Lifelong Learning Society in Europe: The Contribution of the Educa-

tion System‘ project¹ (further referred to as LLL2010), carried out within the 6th Framework Programme of the European Union.

The idea of validation of previously gained knowledge in adult education is far from new. The importance of this form of learning and the need to take it into consideration when planning and implementing adult education curricula was stressed already by the classic authors in the field of adult education (e.g. Knowles, 1980). Documents originating from that period pursued objectives which could be designated as humanistic. The UNESCO’s »Learning to be – The World of Education Today and Tomorrow‘ report from 1972 emphasised, for instance, the role of non-formal learning in elimination of social inequalities

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and unequal educational opportunities as well as in progressing democratisation of the society (Faure et al., 1972). In the 1970's Fordham (1993; in: Hozjan, 2010), for example, established that the discussion on the importance of non-formal education focused predominantly on the needs of disadvantaged groups and other special categories of individuals a clear definition of the learning objectives and flexibility of organisation and methods. The validation of learning performed outside the formal system may thus have an important inclusive role as it allows the less privileged adults who have failed to complete their formal education or enter the system to have their knowledge evaluated and verified.

A SHORT HISTORY OF VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND IN SLOVENIA

In the last decade, the initiative for the validation of non-formal and informal (experiential) learning was taken over by the European Union. European documents mention recognition and validation of previously gained knowledge as one of the key requirements for successful development of lifelong learning. This, however, seems to be basically economy-oriented. With recognition of knowledge gained in non-formal and informal learning, lifelong learning would contribute to linking learning with the needs of the knowledge-based society, which is, furthermore, closely connected with the attainment of the Lisbon Treaty objectives. According to the latter, the EU should, by the year 2010, become “the world’s most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.” (Lisbon Strategy, 2000).

The EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000), furthermore, emphasises one of the

key requirements for efficient development of the lifelong learning system, i.e. the assessment of knowledge, the aim of which is to “significantly improve the ways in which learning, participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning.” (Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000, p. 15). The European Commission mentions recognition of non-formally or informally gained knowledge as an important part of education allowing realization of one of the main principles of lifelong learning – knowledge equity regardless of the form of learning. (Commission of the European Communities, 2004).

In Slovenia, the recognition of all forms of learning began (formally) with the adoption of the National Professional Qualifications Act (2006/2007), which determines the requirements and procedures concerning verification and validation of non-formally gained knowledge. Furthermore, the Adult Education Act acknowledges the importance of non-formally gained knowledge by allowing acquisition of nationally-recognised education through verification and validation of knowledge with examinations or on the basis of authentic instruments (Adult Education Act, 2006, Art. 8). In the formal school system, new possibilities of recognition of non-formal learning that have a closer connection with the labour market have emerged in educational programmes. They are determined in the Vocational Education Act, Higher Professional Education Act (2004) and Higher Education Act (2006). A thorough review of the European and national documents of this type is available in the latest publications on this topic (Hozjan, 2010; Ivancič et al., 2007; Svetina and Dobnikar, 2010; Vuković, Žnidarič, Kuncič and Šibanc, 2008).

Only recognizing the equity of knowledge gained outside the formal school system is, however, not sufficient. In addition to the legislation, the regulation of procedures and instruments allowing evaluation and validation of knowledge

must also get underway. As stressed in the report issued by the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (Vuković et al., 2008), the procedure of evaluation and validation of non-formal and informal learning in the formal education system is complex and thus requires a thorough preparation.

The studies used in the evaluation of the implementation of legislative provisions in practice also point to the complexity of the problem concerning recognition of non-formal and informal learning. They show that, in spite of an adequate legal basis, non-formally or informally gained knowledge has still not gained the recognition it deserves (Hozjan, 2010; Ivancič et al., 2007; Žnidarič, Kuncič, Makovec and Bauman, 2010). Moreover, its importance has increased predominantly in the field of adult education and not in 'youth' formal education.

The second part of the article presents the results of the researches undertaken within the LLL2010 project, which will substantiate the existent evaluations. The first research study dealing with the characteristics and experience of individuals included in formal adult education was quantitative (participant survey; Radovan, Mohorčič Špolar and Ivancič, 2008). The second study, on the other hand, was qualitative (interviews with representatives of institutions providing adult education programmes, interviews with ministry representatives; Mohorčič Špolar, Ivancič and Radovan, 2010).

SURVEY RESULTS

The target population of the survey were adults enrolled in formal education programmes at all levels of education. The survey included 1,290 people, with approximately 250 participants at each level of education (the data balancing was

done at a later point). It was carried out in the period between 1st March and 30 June 2007.

The participants in formal adult education were asked if they were exempt from class attendance and exams in a particular school subject/part of the curriculum, and, if so, on which grounds.

Table 1 demonstrates that, on the average, the respondents asserted their knowledge in more than one way (1.2). The majority of respondents (68%) were partially exempt from the curriculum if they proved their knowledge with formal documents, such as certificates or diplomas. Almost half as less respondents had their knowledge acknowledged on the basis of suitable work experience (40%). On the basis of the interviews with the representatives of educational institutions it is possible to deduce that the knowledge in question was limited to IT skills. The type of knowledge that was recognized the least frequently in educational institutions was the knowledge based on personal experience or the knowledge the participants could not account for with official documents. The scope of recognition of informal or experiential learning was not statistically significant, only 6% of the respondents had been granted this possibility.

Table 1: Exemptions for certain parts of the study programme on the basis of prior learning or relevant experience

	Answers		% units
	N	%	
Based on certificates or diplomas	386	56.4	68.2
Based on prior learning experience without a diploma or certificate	35	5.1	6.2
Based on relevant life experience	39	5.6	6.8
Based on relevant work experience	225	32.9	39.8
Total	684	100	121

Note: There was a multiple choice of answers.

The research report of the project (Radovan et al., 2008) furthermore states that the majority of the participants who proved their knowledge on the basis of personal life experiences had received education at the primary level. Those to whom previously gained knowledge

was recognised without any formal documentation, on the other hand, were predominantly taking part in secondary school programmes. On the average, professional experience was recognised to 18% of the participants, mostly in tertiary education.

The table below shows the recognition of previously gained knowledge according to the type of institution in which the respondents were enrolled (Table 2). The results show the biggest discrepancy between private schools carrying out curricula at the secondary education level and (mostly privately-owned) vocational colleges on the one hand and other public institutions, such as folk high schools, secondary schools and universities on the other.

In comparison with public educational institutions, private (secondary and higher vocational) schools are more willing to recognise professional experience in their curricula. On the other hand, the proportion of formal documentation recognised (certificates, diplomas etc.) was twice as high in state schools. The percentage of non-formalized knowledge or knowledge based on personal experience that was recognised was not statistically significant. The results should, however, not be generalized, since the research sample was not representative.

Regardless of the fact that institutions and participants do report on recognition and validation of knowledge, it seems that recognition procedures are still quite complex. The ,Participation of employees of small and medium-

sized enterprises in formal education' research report (Ivančić, Mirčeva and Mohorčič Špolar, 2008) clearly shows that, in participants' experience, it is less than easy for individuals to formalize previously gained knowledge even when they possess formal education documents from another educational institution.

Furthermore, the evaluation performed at the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (Žnidarič et al., 2010) shows that as many as two thirds of educational organizations included in the survey on the scope of non-formally gained knowledge validation admit that this type of validation has not yet been performed in their organizations – despite of the adequate legal regulation of the procedures and methods for validation of non-formal education. The most common reason for this has been a lack of interest on the part of pupils, students and adults involved in adult education. (Ibid., p. 46) In spite of the fact that the respondents were familiarized with these procedures, the established ,disinterest' is predominantly a consequence of their insufficient awareness of the possibilities they are entitled to.

In addition to the lack of awareness, which is a huge barrier in the practice of recognition of non-formally gained knowledge, it is worth mentioning the need for clearer instructions and guidelines that the legislator should provide. As was also stated in the evaluation report, the differences in the number of the procedures involving the recognition of non-

Table 2: Exemptions for certain parts of the study programme on the basis of prior learning or relevant experience (in %)

	Folk high school	Private school	Secondary school	Vocational college	University
Based on certificates or diplomas	78.1	40.0	70.0	36.3	71.4
Based on prior learning experience without a diploma or certificate	5.8	2.9	11.1	3.2	9.5
Based on relevant life experience	6.2	4.7	6.2	5.6	4.8
Based on relevant work experience	10.0	52.4	12.6	54.8	14.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note: N=684. The percentage was calculated according to the number of affirmative answers.

formal knowledge occurred predominantly with respect to the different types of education. Most recognition procedures were undertaken in higher vocational education (particularly with adults), whereas the smallest percentage occurred with pupils in primary and secondary schools. (Ibid., p. 45).

INTERVIEW RESULTS

Finally, I would like to present the findings resulting from the interviews conducted within the fifth LLL2010 subproject (Mohorcic Špolar et al., 2010), which involved representatives of the organizations providing formal and non-formal adult education. A total of seventeen interviews were done with the representatives of folk high schools, secondary schools, vocational and professional colleges, and universities. A special research target group were prisoners, which is why a person in charge and a social rehabilitation expert from a Slovenian prison also participated in the interview. The interviews were conducted in the period between March and May 2009.

An interviewee from vocational college stressed the importance of provability of knowledge gained in a non-formal or informal way. Schools tend to recognise only what can be backed up by documents and certified by an institution – school or university. They are much more reluctant to grant recognition of non-formal learning, as it cannot be substantiated by standardised certificates.

There are, however, exceptions in case of internships as well as knowledge and skills resulting from rich professional experience:

... someone might be an IT expert [...] without any formal education, a technician working with computers whose knowledge is better than that of many of our other employees, right, and they just take a test and then the lecturer says <OK, you're great at it,> [...] <you don't have to sit the exam, you passed>, there should be a basis, [...]

they need to prove themselves... (E02–R2, p. 4: 130–32).

The lecturer may address the faculty board and request that a previously-employed adult or a student in full-time education be exempt from some exams. The student must, however, provide the board with the certificates and documentation (diplomas, reports and similar) with regard to the knowledge gained in other educational programmes. The board examines and evaluates the documentation and decides whether the student should be granted a full or partial exemption from an exam.

An interviewee employed at a faculty stressed that, in the period in which the interviews were held (spring 2009), only formally gained knowledge was recognised, i.e. the achieved level of education and/or the exams passed at other faculties or within other educational programmes. University teachers must thus study the curriculum and its length, and on this basis decide whether to grant full or partial recognition. In her opinion, the current situation does not allow the recognition of other forms of knowledge. What she misses is a clear definition of the criteria for a systematic recognition of previously gained knowledge.

An interviewee employed at a (private) vocational college stated that the school itself had developed a procedure for evaluation of previously gained knowledge. Based on this procedure, a number of students were exempt from participation in specified parts of the curriculum. Recognition of education received at an earlier stage which can be proved by means of formal documentation is an old practice at that school. The evaluation of non-formal learning, on the other hand, is quite new and comes under responsibility of a study committee, including among others a specialised teacher and the school principal.

when it comes to the non-formally gained knowledge, I as a principal [...] help the person, ... how they can prove their knowledge, what they need to provide in order

to do so – as people tend to have important experience, but they are not really aware, we are not really aware how, in what way, we gained the knowledge. For example, someone has worked as a computer programmer for 15 years and would like to have the exam in computer programming recognised. So we sit down and talk about the programming language and the certificate provided by their employer. Such a debate always includes a lecturer of the relevant subject. By means of an interview or a short practical examination the latter determines the knowledge of the candidate. (E17–R1, p. 4: 28–36)

The above-mentioned school warns about the issues of validation of non-formal or informal knowledge. The interviewee stressed the lack of suitable tools for evaluation of knowledge and skills that cannot be proved by official documentation.

The last organization included in the interview also provides non-formal adult education. They stress that their institution has developed and started issuing their own certificates showing the curriculum content and the participant's marks. In this way, a formal educational institution can immediately recognize a participant's knowledge. Moreover, this possibility is presented to participants by their advisory service. The institution has also issued a brochure with information on the requirements for recognition of previously gained knowledge. In the interviewee's opinion, adult education institutions have a slight advantage over other educational institutions:

[...] perhaps adult educators are slightly more flexible about it since we are used to this form of practice; also the previous recognition of some types of experience... (A38–R2, p. 7: 19–23)

According to the interviewee, the main obstacles in the establishment of a system for recognition of previously gained knowledge are a lack of certificates which would show what knowledge a person has gained in non-formal

education and that fact that the education providers do not issue (suitable) certificates. This could be solved if the institutions could be made to issue certificates of knowledge, with the help of a tool which could be used to systematically determine what knowledge should be recognised and in which way. This would standardise issuing of certificates as well as evaluation and validation of knowledge in various institutions of adult education.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the evaluations and researches carried out in the recent period show that recognition of prior learning has not yet been applied to a suitable extent although there exist a regulated legal foundation. The data show that, regardless of the level of education or the subject field of an institution, recognition of prior learning predominantly relies on the 'solid' data – i.e. on what can be proved with documentation and confirmed by educational institutions. It thus excludes all other forms/types of knowledge unless gained in an organized environment.

All the interviewees saw the lack of transparency and the shortage of standardised procedures for validation of prior knowledge and skills as the main obstacle in recognition of previously gained non-formal and informal knowledge. Although we see some cases of positive practice in our society (i.e. National Vocational Qualifications, language certificates, IT certificates), it would be essential that we prepare national reports or inter-institutional agreements, such as certificates of knowledge and skills gained in non-formal programmes, which would constitute an important contribution towards improvement of certification of non-formal knowledge.

Awareness is another important issue. Adults are frequently not aware of the rights they may exercise with regard to recognition of previously gained knowledge. Educational institu-

tions should work towards informing adults of their options. This trend has been followed by several educational institutions, while others still do not practice it sufficiently. An increase in the number of requests for recognition of previously gained knowledge might additionally stimulate search for a suitable solution of the issues in the field presented in the article.

Finally, it is important to take into account the different notions of the concept of learning and ideas on where knowledge and skills can (also) be developed. Educational activities providers should accept the fact that knowledge can be gained in various ways, the formal (school) environment being merely one of them. At this point it would be possible to tackle a wider problem, that of recognition of previously gained knowledge, which exceeds the narrow field of education and concerns employers, who are still choosing their employees (mostly) on the basis of certificates and diplomas issued by relevant schools.

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