

Recognition of non-formal and informal education in Slovenia

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1. Introduction

For more than a decade many other countries, the European Union, the OECD and other organizations have stimulated research and policies to make non-formally and informally acquired knowledge recognised. Particularly the Education Committee of the OECD put a lot of efforts into this issue. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is perceived as an important instrument of realizing the situation of lifelong learning.

This paper gives some information on the terminology about the recognition of previous learning that takes place outside the formal education institutions, benefits of such activities, the impact of the Bologna process in this respect and an inside view into the implementation of recognition practices for formal and informal learning in Slovenian higher education. This Slovene practice is further illustrated by the case of one higher education institution, at the Faculty of Management Koper in Slovenia.

2. Definitions

There are several problems across countries and languages using the terminology about the recognition of prior learning that takes place outside the formal educational settings. Some efforts on this issue were put forward by the OECD (2004). In their report on standards and quality assurance in qualifications with special reference to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning it is pointed out that *recognition* refers to learning achievements of individuals which might lead to a qualification. Recognised individual's knowledge might be used as credit to benefit in the labour market, in entry to formal education, in financial benefits or in terms of status or self-esteem. Some countries use also the term *validation* which might refer either to legal processes that permit an individual to obtain a certificate (e.g. vocational diploma) or as a means of making visible a person's skills and competencies without requiring predetermined knowledge targets to be achieved.

In the context of recognition one can discern between different types of learning. The mentioned report (OECD 2004, p. 5-6) gives the following definitions to these terms:

Formal learning is related to an educational institution or workplace which offers instruction programme and is intentional from the learner's perspective. Formal learning is always recognised in a certificate or qualification. *Non-formal* learning is achieved when an individual follows an organised programme of instruction in an educational institution, workplace or at home. This kind of learning is often embedded in planned activities that are often not designated as learning but which contain an important learning element, whereas *informal learning* is achieved outside of organised education or training provision and is not organised or structured. In most cases it is unintentional and is a result from daily 'experience' which occurs throughout life (work, family or leisure activities). It does not lead to certification. According to the same OECD source *lifelong learning* is undertaken throughout life and improves knowledge, skills and competencies within personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspectives. Thus the whole spectrum of learning, formal, non-formal and informal is included as are active citizenship, personal fulfilment, social inclusion and professional, vocational and employment related aspects.

Other sources (i.e. Corradi at all. 2006) relate to the Evens' definition of *experiential learning* which refers to the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience and study, which are not formally attested through any education or professional accreditation. It can include instruction based learning provided by any institution, which has not been examined in any of public examination systems (Evens, 1984).

A variety of terms are used across countries and institutions to capture parts of the concepts of recognition and validation of knowledge that has not been certified in the past. According to the OECD report (2004, p. 6-7) some countries (Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom) use terms like *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* and *Assessment of Prior Learning (APL)* to refer to the assessment of any prior learning, regardless of the manner in which it has been gained. It encompasses formal, non-formal and informal learning. *Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)* is similar to APL/RPL but specifically focuses on the assessment of experiential learning. *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)* is an evaluation through a valid and reliable process, by qualified specialist(s), of the knowledge and skills that have been learned through non-formal education, training or experience to determine the equivalency for credit to a course.

In Slovenia not much effort has been put in terminological discussion on these issues but all the mentioned terms seem to have some relevance in recent practice in the country. In this paper we refer to recognition practice of knowledge which students obtained prior or next to their formal study at a higher education institution. This knowledge might have a nature of “experiential learning”, “non-formal”, “informal” and “lifelong learning”. When talking about recognition we are thinking on formal acknowledgement and approval of mentioned prior learning which takes some steps in the procedure like guidance to applicants, assessment of student’s achievements by a jury and accreditation (giving ECTS credits) for prior learning achievements. As a result of this procedure a student can benefit of getting some of their knowledge gained through experience or prior non-formal and informal learning considered as equivalent to knowledge acquired in formal study obligations of a study program. This might make his or her study shorter and cheaper.

3. Reasons for implementation of the Recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning offers several policy opportunities and challenges (OECD, 2004). First, it contributes to the quality, quantity and distribution of lifelong learning by showing skills, knowledge and competencies of people. It may for example, lead to attainment of a qualification or give evidence of achieved requirements to enter formal education. It may also shorten study and therefore reduce study cost and encourage people to start with new learning initiatives. Second, the recognition stimulates development of human resource potentials. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning may improve employability of people by enhancing participation in different forms of learning and help employers to match the skills demand with supply. Third, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning can contribute to overcome social, cultural and economic inequity.

Colardyn and Bjornavold (2004) also mention several positive effects of the validation of informal and non-formal education. It provides motivation to individuals for inclusion in formal education, increases interest among employees for participation in organized education program within a company, shortens the time of studies and thus makes them more available to those who rarely decide to participate due to other obligations, it reduces study costs for both students and institutions and it improves employment possibilities in the labor market as well as greater mobility of labor force within the EU.

Different experiences among countries

As such, the recognition of non-formal, informal and experiential knowledge are rather recent phenomena in higher education and are very much related to fast changing social and economic characteristics of contemporary societies which require flexible learning paths through lifelong learning. This results in shorter study programs, modularization of academic courses, implementation of the ECTS and mobility of students and workers.

However, the introduction of recognition at higher education institutions is a rather slow process. It has been easier to implement the system of recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge in vocational/professional tertiary system than in more academic institutions of higher education (Davies 2006). For professional schools worked based learning in the same or close related professional field is relevant to develop skills and competencies, whereas for traditional academic universities it is not so

obvious how professional skills and competencies can be relevant or how it is relevant to acquire theoretical knowledge through practice of any kind (Davies 2006).

As a result the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is still rare in European universities. The level of implementation of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning depends very much on national legislation and on the level of the autonomy of higher education institutions in a particular country (Davies 2006). In most European countries entry requirements and the conditions for the award of university diplomas are set out in national legislation. But legislation in some countries is more supportive and direct for implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning than in others. There are only few countries with very coherent practices like in France, the UK, and Norway for example, some countries already defined procedures and have some results like Italy and Estonia, there are countries like Slovenia where some legal basis for the implementation already exist and in some countries like in Greece, Lithuania, Romania where no recognition practice at all is possible due to the national legislation (Davies 2006, Trunk-Širca&Gomezelj 2006). Thus the implementation of the recognition procedure depends very much on the higher education legislation, whether it is directly stimulated, allowed or even prohibited and on the autonomy of higher education institutions and its own motivation to have ambitions in this direction.

4. The impact of the Bologna process

In the area of higher education, the Bologna declaration is the current driver of deep change among systems of higher education in the EU countries. At the beginning the strategic aim was mainly focused on transparent Bachelors – Masters – Doctorate structures of study programs leading to comparable degrees of higher education awarded within the European higher education area. Two years later, in Prague, the ministers indicated the lifelong learning as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in order to face challenges of competitiveness, improvement of social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life the (Prague Communiqué, 2001).

In Berlin (2003), the Communiqué included explicitly also the recognition of prior learning into an integral part of higher education. They stressed the importance of working on qualifications frameworks for the EHEA to encompass the wide range of flexible learning paths (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

In the same direction goes the Lisbon strategy which started with the Lisbon Declaration in 2000. According to it the European Union should become the world most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010 and education and training are considered to be the main tool to reach this goal. The EU citizens need to acquire and update their skills, knowledge, competencies and skills on an ongoing basis to become a world-class workforce (Adam 2006). In 2002 the European Ministers of Education and Training called for guiding principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2003).

Trends IV report prepared for the Bergen Communiqué pointed out that the recognition of non-formal/non-academic qualifications is part of lifelong learning that has been very much neglected in the Bologna discussion. Thus the creation of opportunities for flexible learning paths in HE, including procedures for recognition of prior learning became an important goal of the Bologna process (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).

Also the London Communiqué in 2007 stressed the recognition issue:

“Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components of the EHEA, both internally and in a global context.”

Mentioned was also a need for a more systematic development of flexible learning paths which in most countries are only in an early stage. It has been recognized that only in a small number of EHEA countries the recognition of prior learning for access and credits can be said to be well developed. For this reason the BFUG in cooperation with ENIC/NARIC was invited to develop proposals for improving the recognition of prior learning.

Since the Bergen conference the development of qualification frameworks have become an important instrument in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners. They should also enable to design modules and study programs based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning¹. The overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA comprises of three cycles generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. On this basis the national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA should be implemented by 2010.

The overarching Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA is also compatible with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) which was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe in April 2008. The EQF is important because it encompasses the adoption of European higher education of levels, level descriptors, qualification descriptors and learning outcomes. This will provide transparency and a common methodological approach for European higher education systems and a basis for introduction norms and standards for recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge (Adam 2006).

The EC policies in higher education are not obligatory for the countries. Also in respect to recognition of non-formal and informal learning European policies and developments have had a rather indirect influence on higher education institutions. Some developments in this field take place through projects like it will be illustrated in the following Slovenian case.

3. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Slovenia

3.1 Legal framework for non-formal and informal learning in Slovenia

The concept of national system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning doesn't exist for the higher education system. It has been written in the national report on recognition of non-formal and informal learning (Ivančič at. all, 2007) that the legislation regulating various levels of education determines enrolment conditions in formal education in the majority of cases. Apart from the evidence demonstrating the fulfillment of formal enrolment conditions (reports, school-leaving certificates, credits), the recognition of knowledge obtained by non-formal education and informal learning (e.g. Higher Education Act, Gimnazije Act) is not very detailed. Two fields could be exempted from this - vocational education and training as well as post-secondary vocational education which are under a separate legislation than the higher education.

Recognition of non-formal education and informal (experiential) learning in higher education is loosely regulated. The foundation for its introduction is laid down in the Higher Education Act (2004 and 2006). The Article 33 permits higher education institutions to implement a variety of life long learning courses next to study programs which lead to formal degrees.

On the one hand the Higher Education Act refers in Article 35 to higher education institutions which are to define in their accredited study programs the criteria for recognition of knowledge and skills gained before enrolment into the study program. The accredited study programs define also the conditions for passing into the next year of study and the transition between study programs.

On the other hand Article 49 of the Higher Education Act defines that the Higher Education Council which is the national accreditation body is to specify the criteria for the accreditation of knowledge and skills acquired before the enrolment into a first degree higher education programme. The Higher Education Council adopted the Criteria for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programs (2004). According to these Criteria (Article 9) higher education institutions are responsible for accreditation of formally, non-formally and experientially acquired knowledge and skills which correspond to specific qualifications of study program. For the recognition and validation of knowledge higher education institutions are to consider:

- Formal certificates and documents;

¹ For more information on qualification frameworks see the web page:
<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/eqf/overarching.asp>

- Documents of non-formal and informal education;
- Concrete work outputs (products) and other documented work experiences.

Recognised knowledge can be used as a fulfilled entry requirement to a study program or as a fulfilled study obligation (i.e. a candidate does not need to pass a certain exam) which is evaluated according to the ECTS.

Though the Slovene higher education legislation offers some basis for the implementation of the recognition of non-formal education and experiential learning there are still many issues which need to be discussed and clarified (Vrečko 2006):

- The current legislation does not bring much clarity on criteria and standards for valuation and recognition, also not on how to carry out the recognition procedure, who should be in charge and what competencies people should have involved in the recognition procedure. Nothing is proposed about the possible structure and shape of formal applications for recognition neither about how to inform possible candidates about this type of recognition and how to help them.
- Criteria for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programs define that higher education institutions are responsible for validation and recognition procedures. However, this can be done at different levels like at the level of a particular study program, including teachers and professors teaching in it, or at the level of individual faculty or university including groups of particular academic disciplines or experts at the university level or at the system level (i.e. expert groups, interuniversity groups or commissions).
- Recognition and validation procedures require specific skills and therefore appropriate training of people who are involved into these procedures. The current higher education legislation in Slovenia does not give any direction for this type of training and who should be responsible to carry it out.

Though the Slovenian legislation is in a preliminary phase the universities and other higher education institutions will play the most important role in developing a system of recognition of non-formal education and experiential learning. We assume that their role will include the following:

- drawing up the criteria for the accreditation of non-formal education and experiential learning regarding higher education programmes,
- promoting a range of approaches in education and training in higher education,
- organising educational processes and analysing various validation and accreditation options for non-formal education and experiential learning,
- ensuring greater transition within higher education programmes and between programmes,
- implementing the concept of lifelong learning,
- helping candidates in their efforts to define their individual projects – portfolio,
- advising and supporting candidates in writing up their accreditation applications,
- monitoring the effects of the accreditation system implementation.

A step in a direction to implement the system of recognition of informal and non-formal education has been made in 2006 when the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology financed a special project for the Implementation of the system of recognition of non-formal and informal education in Slovenian higher education, which is introduced in the next section.

3.2 Implementation of the system of recognition of non-formal and informal education in Slovenian higher education system

The main aim of the project *Implementation of the system of recognition of non-formal and informal education in Slovenian higher education* was to discuss national and international practices on the field of lifelong learning and recognition of non-formal and informal education. It analysed Slovene legal conditions for the implementation of such system in the country. The findings of the project were discussed at two conferences in 2006 for the purpose to inform the academic and expert community about the system of recognition of non-formal and informal education and to make foundations for the implementation such a system in Slovenian higher education.

In the following the conclusions and practical proposals for the implementation of the system of recognition of non-formal and informal education in a higher education institution are summarized:

1. Higher education institution shall define standardised procedure for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal knowledge which students obtained before enrolment into higher education institution.
2. The validation and recognition procedure shall start with the introductory interview with the candidate and creating an individual portfolio which contains all supporting documents attesting to the knowledge and skills which the candidate gained prior to the enrolment in a study programme. The candidate should get expert support at the higher education institution but it is his or her personal responsibility to collect all necessary documents.
3. The next step should be the validation and recognition of the knowledge. This is a process wherein the knowledge and skills obtained by the candidate are evaluated. In beforehand the higher education institution should draw up the criteria for the recognition of non-formal education and experiential learning regarding the content and goals of a particular higher education study program. On this basis the recognition commission could evaluate previous knowledge of the candidate and find out how comparable it is with parts of the study program (e.g. module, course).
4. The last step in the validation and recognition process is the recognition of the prior learning and skills. They may be recognised as qualification for enrolment into a study program or as a fulfilled particular study obligation of a study program. Student needs to have a right to oppose to the decision of the recognition commission.
5. It has been recommended to higher education institutions to cooperate in this process and to prepare the criteria for recognition of non-formal and informal learning together. Similar criteria and standard of recognition would contribute to quality of the process and reduce lowering standards of the recognition process.

3.3 Implementation of the system of recognition at the Faculty of management Koper

The Faculty of management in Koper is one of the first higher education institutions which implemented its own system of recognition of non-formal and informal education and skills in Slovenia. In the Academic Year 2005-06 the faculty adopted special *Rules* to regulate the procedure for examining, validating and recognizing non-formally and informally obtained knowledge. The Rules were upgraded in 2007. Corresponding to these regulations also the Manual for preparing the portfolio was designed to help candidates to prepare their documents for the official application for the recognition and validation of prior non-formal and informal learning. Next to these, the Faculty adopted also the regulation on life-long learning which regulates the implementation of this type of courses provided by the FM.

In accordance with the Rules, prior learning can be recognized before enrolment or during study. The whole recognition process should be finished no later than in two months after submission of an application. The applicants get special training in making their portfolios and can benefit from additional advisers' assistance if necessary.

If an applicant submits a certificate or other document which clearly shows one will not claim more than 30 ECTS credits of previous learning, the Commission for the Recognition of Knowledge and Skills can reach the decision based on such documents alone. However, if an applicant submits documents which clearly show more than 30 credits, the Commission for the Recognition of Knowledge and Skills must arrange an additional examination (conversation, interview, written or oral exam). This additional examination is carried out by an appointed teacher or Assessment Commission.

3.3.1 Some empirical data on recognition of knowledge and skills at the Faculty of Management

The Faculty of Management in Koper has been implementing the process of recognition of knowledge and skills since academic year 2005/2006. In the academic years 2005/06 and 2006/07 the Commission for the Recognition of knowledge and skills handled 67 applications at undergraduate and graduate level of study. The previous experience of 80.6% or 54 of them was (partially) approved, which means that these applicants with recognised previous learning and skills did not have to pass all the study obligations in the study program in which they were enrolled. The growth in the number of applicants was remarkable particularly in the second year, when 61 applications were handled (see Table 1). This is understandable because the faculty in the first year just did not have any experiences with the procedures of recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge and potential candidates could hardly know about it.

Table 1: Number of applications in the academic years 2005/2006 and 2006/2007.

	2005/2006		2006/2007		Total
	Undergraduate level	Graduate level	Undergraduate level	Graduate level	
Approved applications	2	0	45	7	54
Declined applications	3	1	2	7	13
Total	5	1	47	14	67

Characteristics of the applicants

In the following tables some data are presented on the students who applied for the recognition of their knowledge gained non-formally and informally before enrolment in the bachelor or master's program at the FM.

Table 2: Applicants by gender.

	2005/2006	2006/2007	Total
male	5	26	31 (46.3%)
female	1	35	36 (53.7%)
Total	6	62	67 (100%)

The majority of applicants were female, in total 53.7%, but in the first year most were men (83.3%). Regarding the age, the biggest number of applicants fit in to the age group of 31 to 40 years old and most of the applicants were enrolled in bachelor programs (70%) (Table 3).

Table 3: Applicants by age and study level.

	2005/2006		2006/2007		Total
	Undergraduate level	Graduate level	Undergraduate level	Graduate level	
21-30	2	0	17	5	24 (35.8%)
31-40	2	1	18	6	27 (40.3%)
41-50	1	0	11	3	15 (22.4%)
51 and more	0	0	1	0	1 (1.5%)
Total	5	6	47	14	67 (100)

The majority of applicants were employed in the public sector like administration and public administration professionals (25%), 17% worked as the office management staff, 11% as service workers, 11% as client relations officers, 8% technicians, 8% as small company directors and managers. Other occupations were presented in much smaller shares.

On average, applicants were awarded 10 credits (30 credits max.) of study workload towards formal qualifications. The applicants invoked the knowledge gained in the fields of economy, legal studies, business, administration, and on the basis of work experience achievements or non-formal education (courses, seminars, workshops etc.).

The case of the Faculty of Management in Koper shows that higher education institutions in Slovenia are very much autonomous in implementing the recognition and validation of previous learning. At least in the first couple of years it is a rather demanding process as the institution needs to take several decisions on defining the whole process and to build its own capacities of administrative and academic staff involved in the process which is very demanding in terms of time and costs. Additional training is needed for potential candidates for application to teach them how to prepare their portfolio and inform them about the whole procedure.

So far the faculty managed to define and upgrade the validation and recognition procedures on the basis of their own experiences and examples of good practices like France for example. Due to a very loose national legislation it is about the motivation of the individual institution whether to implement validation and recognition of prior learning. So far the process has been found as a rather costly and complex.

The Faculty of management was willing to share its experiences with a new higher education institution – the International School for Social and Business Studies where similar validation and recognition procedure was set up in the academic year 2007/2008. This is beneficial for both institutions to share experiences and to discuss criteria and standards of the recognition process.

4 Conclusions

The recognition of non-formal, informal and experiential knowledge that has not been certified in the past is a topic with relative little systematic writing and research. Also the terminology varies between countries and between higher education institutions. However, the topic became interesting in contemporary societies which require flexible learning paths through lifelong learning. Both, the Bologna and Lisbon processes stimulate the recognition of prior learning to become an integral part of higher education. Many efforts have been put to develop qualification frameworks for European Higher Education Area which encompass the adoption of European higher education levels, level descriptors, qualification descriptors and learning outcomes. They can be used to improve transparency of higher education provision and as a basis for recognition of non-formal and informal knowledge.

The recognition of non-formal, informal and experiential knowledge has many benefits. Formal education might become more accessible, shorter and cheaper. It might lead to recognition of certain qualifications, stimulate lifelong learning, improve employability of people and overcome social, cultural and economic inequalities. However, the implementation of recognition of non-formal, informal and experiential knowledge is a very slow process in the area of higher education. It is very much related to national legislation and particularly on the level of the autonomy of higher education institutions. There are very few European countries with coherent practice in this field like France and the UK.

The Slovenian case shows that this type of recognition gain importance in current higher education policies but due to a rather permissive national legislation, higher education institutions are fully autonomous in implementation of the whole process. This allows them to adapt to their own needs and fields of study but on the other hand they get hardly any guidance which might be very helpful at the beginning stage of the implementation. Thus at least at the beginning higher education institutions struggle with the complexity of the process which relates to definition of the whole procedure, criteria and rules of accreditation procedure and particularly on necessary training of professionally trained staff as well as guidance and training of candidates who want their prior learning to be validated and recognised (accredited). So the recognition process is not only complex, but also lengthy and costly.

One can expect that different higher education institutions will use different practices leading to lack of clarity at first. But it can be expected that in short time clearer lines will emerge. The Faculty of Management Koper tries to overcome this problem by sharing the expertise and support in the implementation of the recognition of knowledge and skills also at the another higher education institution with similar study fields – the International School of Social and Business Studies. On such a way both institutions can share experiences and discuss criteria and standards of the recognition process.

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