

The Importance of Certification of Prior Learning. Practices at European and Non-global Level with Examples of Best Practices

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Abstract The certification of prior learning is an important tool for all countries, contributing to the wider development of the whole and of each state equally. The impact of good practices in certification is observed both in the society, the economy and, of course, education and vocational rehabilitation, even in international relations. For those reasons the EU and other countries prioritize it. Certification of prior learning is also related to the evaluation of learning and the acquisition of qualifications and training. Best practices from different countries can be used as indicative tools to promote new techniques and methods.

Keywords: *prior learning certification, ECTS, vocational rehabilitation*

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1. Introduction

The methods and the evaluation of education and training as well as the main aspirations of the learner are important aspects of the learning process. Depending on whether the evaluation will be used for professional rehabilitation or matching qualifications, etc. relevant measures are expected to be considered. So, it is important to be able to teach people new knowledge and skills taking into consideration their prior experience and educational background. At the same time, depending on the field (natural sciences, humanities, engineering, etc.) or the social, economic and cultural environment, different methods must be chosen and the assessment should be carried out accordingly. For this reason, most countries have established their own criteria, and so have Universities, Businesses and Institutions (HOC, 2005).

The concept of "prior learning" is far more complex than one can assume in a first reading. First, it must be understood that assessing prior learning is related to the ability, motives, learning styles, and even the pupil's personality. For its assessment there may be some indicative strategies, but there can be no common, universally acceptable method to assess and certify prior learning [1]. This work will examine both the value and usefulness of prior learning certification and models / best practices from different countries.

2. Importance of Prior Learning Certification

Due to the fact that knowledge is in any case divided into informal and formal, there must be some common

criteria when applying it for assessing the person's ability to acquire new knowledge. So, the evaluation of prior learning to facilitate the further acquisition of knowledge through teaching, can be a combination of "traditional" examination strategies and personalized tools used by teachers properly trained in the use of such tests. The assessment, then, becomes a base for teaching and guidance ([2], p. 145-186).

It is understood that the lack or the inadequate understanding of teachers about the cognitive background of learners may be a serious problem. A teacher's awareness of misconceptions in prior learning can be used effectively in future teaching. This is a recurring topic in the literature on previous knowledge. The background of teachers itself also acquires great importance ([3], p. 134).

The importance of certification of prior learning and knowledge can be observed through the evaluation of the specific and significant policies and objectives of the state and the EU on the matter. These areas **include:**

A) Lifelong Learning

Lifelong Learning is an ideal and much more than a simple political and socio-economic goal. While many believe that only higher education aims at ensuring better vocational rehabilitation, it essentially covers from early childhood up to old age. It also includes both traditional and alternative forms of learning. For the EU, it may concern the improvement of cognitive competence, vocational training, social and cultural development and progress. It is then, through the use of European programs and funds that lifelong learning is addressed to both Member States of the Union and partner countries.

B) European Integration

In order to achieve European integration EU Member States should reach a higher level of multilateral cooperation. That requires on behalf of all states, a substantial allocation of policy rights and economic control to a supranational institution. This essentially includes cooperation in aspects of military infrastructure and training and external relations. The central objective is for the Union to achieve cohesion and transparency through the abolition of democratic deficiency, especially in the common market, without being hampered by technical and practical obstacles ([4], p. 2). Within the framework of the common market, all policies related to education, vocational guidance, employment and social innovation are assessed and centrally-administered. This occurs as to allow unrestricted movement of persons and workers within the EU. Thus it is understandable why recognition of prior learning and its certification becomes an EU priority. If there are some commonly applicable indicators it becomes possible to compare skills, knowledge and qualifications of workforce ([5], section 6.4).

C) Improving Education Generally

To comprehend the level of prior learning it is important to understand that a simple test is not itself a full assessment. An institution can use many methods to test students, either directly or indirectly. Direct methods can include interviews, work, preliminary exams and auditions. In contrast, indirect methods enclose students' assessment reports, the results of previous programs in which any participants work etc. The importance of certification standards lies on the fact that they can help measure the quality of education. The regulation of the teachers' performance and the institutional capabilities (when it comes to further training) can be assessed as well. At the same time, students are able to self-improve and critically evaluate their skills and personalities.

This benefits teachers as well. Through the assessment of their students they also receive feedback on their work. As a result they improve their transmissibility, influence, potential and knowledge. When it comes to new teachers, certification of prior learning helps to assess the degree of prior learning which will help them to better organize the teaching material, time and teaching methods ([6], p. 11-12).

For the department/institution, there are equally positive results. Just like for teachers, at institutional levels, an evaluation of their effectiveness is possible, while a good average also improves the institution's status and ranking. At the same time, the foundations for communicating between departments and faculty are enforced, allowing the planning of future programs ([6], p. 11-12).

On a personal level, all methods are equally important. This is because when a person is forced to participate in elaborate certification procedures and to also assess his / her own qualifications and knowledge. So, the student can review what he/she has learned so far, including experimental skills, assess strengths and weaknesses, define needs and abilities to properly allocate time etc. As a result, he/she can also develop a sense of responsibility, critical ability and, therefore, achieves personal improvement ([6], p. 11-12).

Adding to that, as made clear by the Dutch government (refer to the latter part of the paper), who devote a large part of their educational policy, prior learning certification is crucial to avoid re-examination and re-assessment of already existing skills. At the same time, the person is able to use and not repeat the knowledge that he/she has obtained in previous classes (National-Kenniscentrum).

3. Best Practices

3.1. UNESCO

UNESCO has published several guides on how to achieve a validation of all forms of knowledge. In particular, the Organization separates between various types of prior learning:

- Formal learning,
- Non-formal learning,
- Informal learning,
- Recognized-Validated-Accredited learning (RVA).

To UNESCO, even though non-formal and informal learning are different as non-formal learning is obtained through an institution and informal in the workplace and through daily activities. Both can also be a result of contingency and a sub-consequence of a different process ([7], p. 8-10).

3.2. EU

In European level there is the famous "Bologna Process", which aims at an institutional cooperation in order to overcome the problem of the existence of differences between the education systems among EU member states. This is accomplished with the introduction of a system of three study cycles in higher education: Bachelor / Master / PhD, improving the quality of studies and the establishment of common criteria for the recognition of both qualifications and periods of study and training [18].

The key, perhaps, tool of the Bologna Process is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, for which most frequently scholars use its acronym: *ECTS*. Most students know the system because of the *Erasmus* program, which facilitates student mobility. As regards the *ECTS system*, Universities set some typical limits per course of study and agreed an indicative average units and some suggested duration. For example, to obtain an undergraduate degree it is required to complete 180 or 240 units, a graduate 90 or 120 units etc [19].

Certification of prior learning is largely related to the need to find ways to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning in different systems and countries. As criteria must be found to assess whether formal and informal forms of education are effective, procedures including certification and knowledge transfer should be promoted at the same time. Thus, to overcome the perception that enough conventional forms of performance "measurement" as quantitative test are enough, countries must promote alternative assessment methods to verify the knowledge acquired abroad, training through work etc. ([8], p. 25-28).

3.3. Australia

Australia follows its own prior learning certification system, which fits into the education system and needs of the Australian labor market. In general, to speak for the Qualifications Recognition Policy in the country, the acronym *AQF* is used, which is derived from the full title in English: Namely Australian Qualifications Framework. The *AQF* is not used as an indicator, however, of efficiency, integrity and validity of study programs or institutions that provide initial training (knowledge) [9].

Parallely, the AQF is certified by a) the Australian legislation through special provisions, b) the national quality certification authorities, c) the authorities issuing certificates, d) the AQF titles. The significance of its existence lies in the fact that it can be used to validate the knowledge and training (qualifications) acquired in various institutions and technical colleges throughout the course of study. This is done by using, in combination, a *testamur* and a transcript ([9], p. 69-70).

The *testamur* must contain:

- Degree name, issuing organization, dates etc.
- The names of those responsible for recognition in the issuing authority,
- Some authenticity certification (stamp, watermark) ([9], p. 69-71).

This system basically is quite different, although has similar aims to the *ECTS*, namely to compare:

- The results of the learning process,
- The amount of teaching material comprehended,
- The content of the studies,
- Educational perspectives and methods. ([10], p. 2-3).

In the same way that the students and professionals in the EU must demonstrate that they acquired a certain number of *ECTS*, Australians declare acquisition rate *AQF*

to the Reception Institution according to which, in order to negotiate the right to recognition of prior knowledge and the relevance to a program, they must prove that they have a certain amount of prior learning and professional experience. This is done by comparing the degree obtained in a different country with those who can be legally completed in Australia. A table that describes the ten different levels of academic education based on the certification of prior learning through the use of international criteria is used ([9], p. 4-6).

3.4. UK

Even before the referendum on BREXIT- Britain's decision to leave the European Union- as an EU member state, Britain followed its own education and employment policies. Since Britain is one of the countries in the European continent that have world-renowned universities, many foreign students choose to study there and return later to their home country to work. For this reason, there is a need for some form of supervision and assessment, through a process made known to other countries. To this end, UK institutions work together and communicate with their respective certification bodies in other EU member states and globally in order to achieve the matching of qualifications and the recognition of degrees and skills acquired by students during their studies in Britain [11]. The UK, in general, follows the APL model-Accreditation of Prior Learning- which helps students in their academic life through exempting them from classes that would provide them with skills and knowledge they already have gained by previous classes/education (Exeter, Manual). The students can also prove prior knowledge through Accredited Certified Prior Learning (ACPL) for the whole module. The method used is the following (Exeter Manual) [15]:

| Award Type | Total credit required for award | Maximum amount of APL allowed | Minimum amount of Exeter credit |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Credit-rated graduate research | | | |
| Credit-bearing Doctoral awards (e.g. Professional Doctorates) | 540,00 | 180,00 | 360,00 |
| Postgraduate Level Award | | | |
| Masters Degrees (MSc, MA etc.) | 180,00 | 90,00 | 90,00 |
| Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) | 120,00 | 60,00 | 60,00 |
| Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) | 60,00 | 30,00 | 30,00 |
| Undergraduate Level Award | | | |
| Graduate Diploma (GradDip) | 120,00 | 60,00 | 60,00 |

Figure 1. Exeter Manual 1

An immediate consequence, therefore, of the need for systematic certification is that Great Britain has developed a complex yet functional system of prior learning certification. So for students under 19 years, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with three (3) other agencies are responsible: the Education Funding Agency, The Teaching Agency, Standards and Testing Agency and the National College for School Leadership. In charge for certification of prior learning and supervision of persons over 19 years are the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and three (3) governmental institutions: a) the Skills Funding Agency, b) the National Apprenticeship

Service and, c) the UK Commission for Employment and Skills [8,12].

3.5. Netherlands

As mentioned, although the EU generally follows some commonly agreed modes of assessment, some member states retain their ability to form additional certification models to promote lifelong learning and European integration, through certification courses [20]. Although many state-models incorporate innovative elements that can be used as best practices, the Dutch system seems to be highly organized.

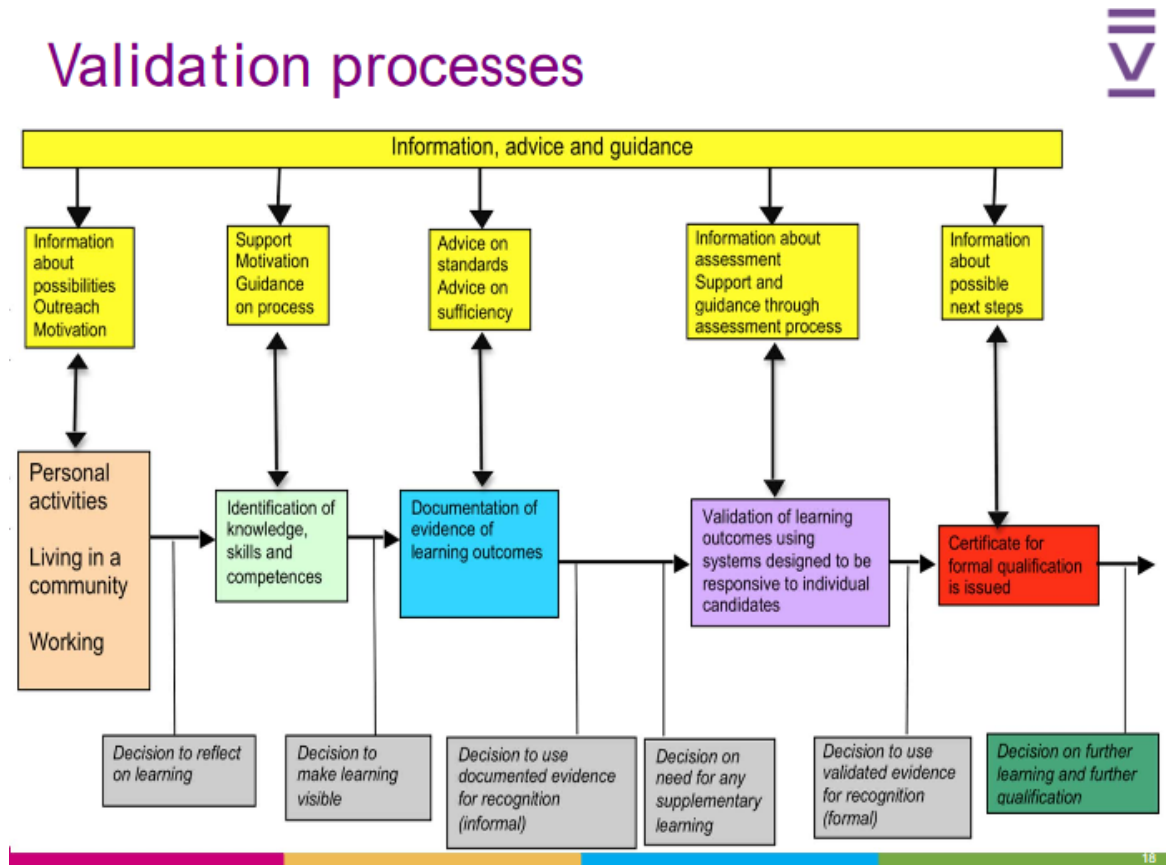


Figure 2. [13]

The Dutch government, for instance, has issued various reports on how the accreditation of prior learning using informal and formal practices can help reducing unnecessary cost to repeat already learned knowledge and techniques. Instead, they use a system as described in the image (Nationaal-kenniscentrum) [16].

- In Philippines, learners were able to become leaders and there was an overall increase of literacy levels, children’s education etc ([7], p. 23).

**Some countries like Belgium, Norway and Thailand use a combination of portfolio-assessment and interviews-dialogues ([7], p. 23-29)

4. Measurable Contribution in States

Due to space constraints, the cases will be presented in brief. Indicatively:

- In Mauritius, it has helped “keeping” in the system persons who have received informal education (practical) ([7], p. 16).
- In the Seychelles, it enables fair access to all workers ([7], p. 17).
- In Pakistan, certification of prior learning helps in the access of the people who could not attend school in the market ([7], p. 18).

5. Conclusions

With the constant movement of students and workers in the globalized economy, the world moves to a direction of cohesion. Globally, however, various countries have kept different education models [21]. So, it is important to have some guidelines for comparison of qualifications and learning outcomes to manage increasing the level of education, the development of educational institutions, transnational cooperation, and even personal development [14].

The essay examined both the value of prior learning certification from different perspectives as well as best

practices to achieve the most appropriate matching of qualifications for students, according to their level, the objectives of their previous training and the purpose of their subsequent studies. Through the coordination of these policies and their combination, new best practices can be created. In the appendix of this paper, an example of informal evaluation is given for purely research purposes based on the theory of pre-school and primary education, which is borrowed from the US.

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