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Cedefop is a link between research, policy and practice, helping policymakers and practitioners, at all levels in the European Union, to have a clearer understanding of developments in vocational education and training and to draw conclusions for future action. It stimulates scientists and researchers to identify trends and future questions.

The journal is nevertheless independent. It has an editorial committee that evaluates articles following a double-blind procedure whereby the members of the Editorial Committee, and in particular its rapporteurs, do not know the identity of those they are evaluating and authors do not know the identity of those evaluating them. The committee is chaired by a recognised university researcher and composed of researchers as well as two Cedefop experts, an expert from the European Training Foundation (ETF) and a representative of Cedefop's Governing Board.

The *European journal of vocational training* has an editorial secretariat composed of experienced researchers.

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Editorial

Dear readers, dear authors,

You hold in your hands the last issue of the *European journal of vocational training* (EJVT). After publishing this academic journal for more than 15 years, Cedefop's Governing Board decided to close it down. The reasons for this have no bearing on the quality and value of our European journal but reflect the need for Cedefop to allocate its scarce resources to a limited number of core activities, following hefty budget cuts imposed by the Council and the European Parliament on agencies' budgets. Although discontinuing its research journal, Cedefop is certainly not abandoning research on vocational education and training in Europe. We will continue to produce the research report, analyse national contributions to produce European reviews of key research issues, and develop research projects to provide evidence on VET and skills for policy-makers across Europe.

This final issue of the *European journal of vocational training* contains both a thematic dossier and articles dealing with broader issues. The thematic dossier is dedicated to assessment, recognition and certification of non-formal and informal learning. Validation of learning outcomes is one of the core subjects in European VET policies. It is key in ensuring not only mobility and permeability in education and training but also individuals' employability and recognition in the labour market of the full set of knowledge, skills and competences they possess, including those acquired through informal and experiential learning. In times of harsh economic crisis, when individuals' employment is challenged, this is particularly crucial for the 'low-skilled workers'. It is vital for companies and economies too as they may be able to identify the right skills and competences needed to grow and innovate. This issue's thematic dossier was prepared by A. L. de Oliveira Pires, our guest editor, who has also drafted the dossier's editorial.

Cedefop has actively researched validation of learning since the mid-1990s and analysed European trends. By including a thematic dossier on this topic in the last issue of the EJVT, we aim to contribute further to understanding concepts and trends and to enrich the contemporary educational debate by analysing fundamental issues and critical aspects. The thematic dossier is complemented by three articles of a general nature. B. Cabrito et al. discuss changes in continuous vocational training in Portuguese local administration; M. Paechter presents a quality assurance initiative in Austria; K. Knapp and M. Zschunke review regional education strategies to develop human resources in SMEs.

In closing this editorial, I should like warmly to thank readers of the EJVT for their faithful support, all our authors for choosing the journal to disseminate their research work, the journal's editorial and advisory boards for their commitment as well as all Cedefop colleagues who have been involved for more than 15 years in promoting the European VET research area through the journal.

Aviana Bulgarelli,
Cedefop Director

Assessing, recognising and certifying non-formal and informal learning: a contribution to its understanding

Ana Luisa de Oliveira Pires

Guest editor

Professor at the higher school of education, Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, Portugal (ESE-IPS), researcher at the research unit education and development, New University of Lisbon (UIED, FCT-UNL).

SUMMARY

Keywords

ARCNIL, validation

This issue of the *European journal of vocational training* is dedicated to assessment, recognition/validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning (ARCNIL), one of the emerging core subjects of European vocational education and training policies.

The purpose of the issue is to contribute to the discussion and understanding of ARCNIL, adopting various but complementary approaches and research perspectives, at different levels of analysis. It offers an opportunity to enrich the contemporary educational debate by analysing fundamental issues and critical aspects.

What is ARCNIL?

ARCNIL is a set of social practices developed to assess, recognise, validate and certify non-formal and informal learning, also commonly referred to as prior experiential learning. The different terminologies used to describe such practices or forms of learning attempt to capture the variety of social practices and constructs that underpin ARCNIL. As seen in the general bibliography – as well as in specific publications such as the *Terminology of European education and training policy* (Cedefop, 2008) – there is a variety of terms used in different countries, aiming to cover a diverse range of articulated practices: accreditation, recognition, certification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Driven by a complex articulation of political, economic, educational and other social aspects, ARCNIL has been named, understood and practised differently in various countries and contexts. As Harris (2006, p. 2) points out, these ideas and practices were shaped ‘by the interrelation of historical, cultural, economic and political forces in different social contexts’.

ARCNIL has been developed in the context of social systems: in relation to formal education and training, to the labour market – sectors, branches, enterprises – and to civil society. Situated at the crossing of these systems, these social practices can only be understood from a systemic, transdisciplinary, integrative perspective, as well as from different levels of analysis: macro, meso and micro, and taking into account their interrelationships and recursive effects.

Despite being complex, multilevel and also a contradictory concept, subject to tensions, dilemmas and conflicts between different logics – not always clear and explicit – ARCNIL still has the potential to offer new opportunities to adults, aiding achievement of educational and emancipatory goals, access to employment and the promotion of social justice and inclusion.

ARCNIL and education: diverse traditions and theoretical frameworks

A key assumption that dominates education is that adults learn, acquire knowledge and develop competences throughout their lives, in multiple contexts and situations, not only in formal education. Life

is a learning process in itself. The complexity sciences approach emphasises learning as a process – rather than as an outcome – where person, learning and context are inseparable: ‘a complexity-based view of knowledge helps to expand, rather than suppress or colonise, our understanding of people’s learning’ (Fenwick, 2006, p. 288), suggesting ways forward and opening new possibilities for rethinking its recognition, according to the author. ‘When learning is understood to be continuously coemergent with persons and environment, part of complex adaptative systems occurring at micro and macro levels, it simply makes no sense to treat knowledge as a product (...)’ (Fenwick, 2006, p. 290).

As many theorists state, although experiential learning is the basic process of learning, its potential has only been recently recognised and valued, specifically among formal education and training systems and institutions.

Experiential learning, learning from experience, experience-based learning: there is a wide range of terms for processes that have gained visibility and centrality in education, both in discourse and practice. The multiplicity of meanings and practices associated with experiential learning were analysed by Weil and McGill (1997), who identified four distinct ‘villages’ or clusters within the global one. According to the authors, the first one is related to assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning ‘as a means of gaining access and recognition in relation to educational institutions, employment and professional bodies’; the second village is related to ‘the activities oriented to change practice, structures and purposes for post-school education’; the third village places ‘learning from experience as the core of education for social change mainly outside educational institutions’; and the fourth village is focused ‘on the potential and practice of personal growth and development’. These villages are underpinned by different approaches: humanistic and psychological; humanistic and progressive; social change, transformation and empowerment; and experience as the basis for personal growth and development. However, borders are considered fluid and the dialogue between villages is possible, influencing one another and providing possibilities for new integrations.

Experiential learning and the social practices aimed at making it visible, have different associated meanings and values, and are related to different epistemological and theoretical traditions. Logically therefore, tensions and critical issues are arising from this new field of educational practices, challenging traditional and formal structures,

particularly questioning assumptions about learning, knowledge, curriculum, power, and social relationships, as social and historical constructs (Harris, 2006; Pires, 2005; Weil and McGill, 1997).

In consequence, ARCNIL, as social and educational practice and as object of research – developed in diverse empirical settings and at the crossing of different disciplines – must be approached in its complexity, with development of new theoretical frameworks.

The current literature provides different approaches and perspectives that emphasise specific aspects: the liberal/humanist perspective, the critical/radical perspective, the technical rationality/market-oriented perspective. However, we still need to go forward and construct new forms of understanding and new approaches to this phenomenon.

In current education, ARCNIL offers us, according to Young (2006), an opportunity not only for retheorising the frameworks that are used to understand and approach existing practices, but also for new theories.

ARCNIL and European education and vocational training policies

The evolution of social and education policies, in the context of European construction, and their repositioning in terms of globalisation challenges, has contributed to the transformation of education and vocational training systems, making issues more complex and triggering reflection and the search for innovative responses to emerging problems (Pires, 2007). The recognition, validation and certification of non-formal and informal learning have gained visibility in European educational and vocational training settings, following the orientations and initiatives developed by the European Commission. From the political point of view, this issue has achieved great visibility in current agendas and has a significant influence on the European education debate.

According to Feutrie (2005), these European concerns are articulated with the following set of intentions: offer a second opportunity to acquire a qualification, especially for those who do not have one, or who were not successful in their initial education/training; sustain economic changes and tackle the needs of higher competence levels; promote personal and professional lifelong developmental processes; promote and support internal and external

entrepreneurial, and European, mobility; and ease articulation between the job market and educational institutions, providing better responses.

In the Copenhagen declaration (2002), the development of 'common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning, with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels' is encouraged (Cedefop, Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005, p. 133). Following the work of the European Commission, the European Education Council agreed in May 2004 on a set of principles to be taken into account as guidelines for validation policies and practices, driven by the following considerations: individual rights, obligations of stakeholders, confidence and trust, and credibility and legitimacy.

Setting common principles at European level can contribute to the quality and coherence between the diverse approaches and practices. However, different national contexts and different systems can only be addressed if the specificities of each reality are taken into account. As it is currently understood, ARCNIL is a social practice, developed in particular contexts: we have to consider the social conditions that influence its emergence and further developments.

In this special issue, relevant examples of this national or contextual specificity are provided. Transversal critical questions arising from the research are highlighted. Articles shed light on the complexity of ARCNIL policies and practices, and offer an opportunity to understand the interrelationships between different levels and perspectives of analysis.

Structure of the thematic issue

The articles selected focus on different but complementary perspectives of ARCNIL: a policy analysis focusing on the structural functioning of systems, their success in implementing ARCNIL, and consequences for education, employment mobility and wages; national case studies; and critical reflection based on literature and empirical research.

From a societal perspective, this issue contains an analysis of why ARCNIL is a social issue, and the challenges associated with this new field of social practice; also from this perspective, there is analysis of the French validation system, pointing out its national

specificities and shedding light on ruptures that emerged with this innovation. The issue also features an analysis of policy development focused on the relationship between ARCNIL and the European credit transfer arrangements, in the framework of the European and national lifelong learning strategies.

Social, professional, personal and economic benefits and effects of ARCNIL in France and Portugal are discussed, along with an analysis of the concepts of non-formal and informal learning, and their links with the policy aim of validation, and its intended effects.

The first article, by Ivan Svetlik, 'Assessing, recognising and certifying informal and non-formal learning: evolution and challenges', explains why ARCNIL has become a social concern, and puts forward factors that make ARCNIL a pressing issue for European policy; the author discusses some challenges for ARCNIL, pointing out its complexity.

The second article, by Isabelle Le Mouillour and Jens Bjørnåvold, 'Learning outcomes in validation and credit systems', analyses recent education and training developments in the European context – namely the shift to learning outcomes and the development of qualification frameworks – relating them to ARCNIL. The authors identify the need for an integrative perspective as well as future issues for research and policy development.

The next two articles describe the French system of validation and discuss its specificities, pointing out the major challenges and also some of its benefits. The first, by Anne-Juliette Lecourt and Philippe Méhaut, 'Accreditation of prior experiential learning in France: an evolving system with national characteristics', underlines the socially constructed nature of the system. It sheds light on the challenges and ruptures introduced at a societal level. The other article, 'APEL pathways: a passport to employment?', by Isabelle Recotillet and Patrick Werquin, based on data from a survey, analyses the effects of the French validation system on individuals at different levels (employment, salary, personal aspects).

The fifth article, by Pedro Afonso, 'Recognising and certifying lifelong skills: impact on labour market integration of the unemployed', relies on an econometric estimate supported by a purpose-built longitudinal database. The author analyses the impact of the national Portuguese system of skills recognition, validation and

(¹) In this article learning is understood as a process leading to knowledge acquirement, and knowledge as contextualised information (Beijerse, 1999).

certification (RVC) on unemployed individuals, and provides clues to understand the role of RVC in the transition between unemployment and employment.

The article Recognition and validation of competences – complexities and tensions, by Carmén Cavaco, addresses the complexity of this specific field of practice, and the tensions that arise between the theoretical approaches and the political and organisational aims. With case study research carried out locally, the author analyses the ‘recognition and validation of competences’ methodological approach and identifies the paradoxes and tensions faced by the actors in the system.

To conclude this special issue, Gerald Straka discusses the nature of informal and non-formal learning, in his article Informal and implicit learning: concepts, communalities and differences. He analyses the concepts of informal learning in European education and training, relating them to the ARCNIL discussion.

We hope you will enjoy pleasant and fruitful reading, contributing to further and deeper debate.

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Assessing, recognising and certifying informal and non-formal learning ⁽¹⁾ (ARCNIL): evolution and challenges

Ivan Svetlik

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Keywords

ARCNIL, education,
human resources,
knowledge society,
training

SUMMARY

Certifying non-formal and informal knowledge may be a consequence of separating education and training from other social and economic activities. Specialisation and formalisation of education and training both aim to increase learning efficiency. In the emerging knowledge society, this has attracted particular attention among researchers and politicians involved with human resources. There are increased efforts to expand knowledge, including explaining and certifying non-formal and informal variants. Faster knowledge cycle turn-round speed makes the education market an insufficient mediator between demand and supply, increasing inconsistencies between education and work and raising questions of transparency. Offering a second chance of better education attainment and diminishing the effects of closed internal labour and training markets are also important. While favouring certification of non-formal and informal knowledge and skills, the author identifies those who might lack interest and warns against simplifications that discredit certification or create illusions that it might replace formal education.

(¹) In this article learning is understood as a process leading to knowledge acquirement, and knowledge as contextualised information (Beijerse, 1999).

Introduction

The plea for assessment, recognition and certification of non-formal and informal learning (ARNIL) has frequently been expressed in EU documents related to topics such as lifelong learning and qualifications frameworks. However, it has mainly focused on practical economic and social needs without sufficient account of its essential reasons and nature. The purpose of this article is to:

- explain why ARNIL has become a social issue;
- put forward the factors that today make ARNIL a pressing issue;
- discuss some challenges to ARNIL, which do not always allow for straightforward solutions.

Why has ARNIL become a social issue?

In this section, we argue that ARNIL is a social construct that has been put on the agenda by three processes:

- the separation of education as an organised form of learning from other social and economic activities;
- the formalisation of learning and education;
- making knowledge official by accrediting schools and their curricula and recognising certificates issued.

Separating education from other social and economic activities

In the preindustrial era, education was mainly organised as a household-based apprenticeship structure. 'In these structures, there is no separate school, no distinctive place or organisation where training takes place, apart from where the mature activity is itself done' (Collins, 2000, p. 218). The separation of learning and education from other activities, such as private life and work, occurred parallel to the division of labour. According to Weber [1925, (1978)], the modernisation of economies and societies, the essential part of which was industrialisation, brought about the spatial and temporal separation of work and private life. Production has been placed in factories and practised during working time. A similar process can be observed with learning and teaching. Education has been purposefully organised out of private life (home) and working life (enterprise) environments, and has been placed in schools where it

is practised during specially designated 'learning/ teaching' time.

Durkheim [1893 (2002)] complements Weber's view by pointing out the social division of labour. His theory helps understand how different social and production activities have gradually crystallised in the forms of distinct social and economic institutions, occupations and professions. This has also happened to teaching, which has been placed in schools and taken over by teachers. 'School may be taken in a more explicit sense, as a formal institution: an activity taking place in special places and times, under the direction of a specialised teacher' (Collins, 2000, p. 215). Functional differentiation and specialisation have led to greater efficiency in economic and social systems. Teaching and learning are no exception.

In Boisot's terms (2002, p. 65-78), the learning cycle starts with the concentration, abstraction and codification of uncodified and tacit, concrete and undispersed knowledge. In this way, knowledge takes its objective and materialised – explicit – form, which enables it to be more effectively dispersed to or obtained by others. Upon individual reception it again turns into a concrete and uncodified form. During its use, some individuals, groups and organisations upgrade it and innovate, creating new pieces of knowledge. This is the starting point of a new knowledge cycle. The processes of abstracting and codifying knowledge increase the effectiveness of individuals' knowledge creation and its transfer to others. Since the abilities to run these processes are not equally distributed among the population, and they can be learned and made more refined and effective, professional researchers and teachers obtained their specific role in the division of labour. Their key roles are to create new knowledge and to disperse concrete and uncodified knowledge among the population by means of its concentration, abstraction and codification.

Formalising learning and education

To make knowledge transfers more efficient, namely to transfer an increasing amount of knowledge in the shortest time possible, learning has become increasingly dependent on organised, formal teaching. This means that knowledge was not only encompassed in a written form in books and, later on, in other media. Teaching programmes and curricula have also been written down and textbooks prepared. Knowledge of how to teach various groups effectively has developed in the form of scientific disciplines, such as pedagogy, andragogy and didactics. The organisation and management of schools have been conducted according to special rules. The aim has been to

make knowledge explicit, to improve its availability and put it in a standard form which would guarantee its quality and transparency, as well as the possibility of its assessment and verification. Teaching has become formal, paid work and teachers a special profession which dominates a new institution, the school.

Making knowledge official

While the early initiative for schooling lay in the hands of rich landowners, traders and artisans, the proliferation of nation States and big industries needing a lot of labour brought about the need to educate everybody. Enlightened emperors, such as Maria Theresa (1717-80) and Josef the Second (1741-90) in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, inspired by philosophers, such as Rousseau, Diderot and others, wanted all citizens to become literate and to understand their oral and written decrees. The expectations of employers were that new employees would understand their commands and written instructions, start working effectively as soon as possible and to shorten the long training period associated with apprenticeship. As Collins writes (2000, p. 225), 'The origins of bureaucracy require the existence of at least some education because the key to controlling a large number of specialized workers is the use of written records [...] official actions are supposed to be recorded, so that subordinates know what they must do and superiors can check on their behaviour.' These are the main reasons that compulsory education of all youth was gradually introduced and paid for by the State.

The active role of the State in this area did not only increase the formalisation, professionalism and expansion of schooling. Compulsory education was put under the direct control of State authorities which erected schools, selected, appointed and paid teachers, prescribed the contents and methods of teaching and issued certificates, which guaranteed that certain knowledge was obtained at school. The knowledge conveyed in this way has become recognised as official and certificates have been issued to graduates making their knowledge officially valid. Even vocational schools that long remained in the hands of employers and their associations gradually accepted the practice of accreditation by authorities of the State or social partners.

Many factors behind this development remain valid today. The separation of time, space and institutions devoted to private life, work and learning has not decreased. Parents have neither the time nor ability effectively to teach their children. Being under competitive

pressure, employers seek qualified employees who are ready to work. Formalisation has increased more than it has decreased. In spite of the expansion of privatisation the State firmly holds education in its hands. However, this development has not been without its deficiencies of which we should mention two: weak links of teaching and learning with other social activities, especially work; and the growing closure of formal education institutions leading to a partiality of formalised and institutionalised official knowledge.

Linking work with teaching and learning

Increasing specialisation requires mechanisms to keep the specialised parts of society and the economy together. Durkheim [1893 (2002)] highlighted organic solidarity, which has been maintained by the functional interdependence of individuals and groups and by the exchange of goods produced by specialised producers in the market. The separation of work and education between enterprises and schools, employers and (potential) employees, with each performing its own function, is bridged by labour and training markets. On this basis, education and training programmes are expanded, created anew, contracted or terminated.

The other mechanism of mediation is planning by the State and/or social partner bodies; it includes the network of schools as well as the curricula. Planning authorities try to anticipate future demand for knowledge and skills and shape the structure of schools, curricula and qualifications accordingly. They send information on actual and expected labour market needs to adults, the young and their parents, as well as to training providers and the wider public.

Internal labour and training market segments allow development and transfer of new, organisationally-specific, knowledge and skills to core workers and between them (Kerr, 1954; Loveridge and Mock, 1979). The demand for training comes from line managers and directly from workers who apply to participate in various kinds of training. The supply of training is either mediated from outside or directly offered by training departments and training centres engaging internal experts. Organisations have established training departments and employed training specialists who are supposed to manage the transfer of knowledge inside organisations, as well as to obtain it from the outside. However, for those workers with 'ordinary' jobs and those who are available in sufficiently large numbers a 'hiring and firing' approach and other types of numerical flexibility prevail (Atkinson, 1986).

The combination of market and planning mechanisms kept the worlds of learning and work in touch quite successfully in the past. However, as we show, these mechanisms are facing growing difficulties.

The closure and partiality of formal education institutions

While the links between education/training and work were maintained successfully, the closure of education and training institutions in their formal structures was not paid much attention. The assumption was that knowledge created in formal research, education and training institutions, as well as in private life and work environments, could be fluently brought into formal curricula and conveyed to students. However, this was not always the case. A part of the knowledge created in private life, civil society and work organisations remains unnoticed and, in the best case, informally disseminated. There are several reasons for this:

- (a) teachers and curricula designers are themselves specialised and belong to various disciplines. They therefore tend to overlook interdisciplinary knowledge that occurs in the margins and intersections of disciplines. In addition, their monitoring of new knowledge creation could be insufficient and the criteria for its selection outdated;
- (b) communication barriers between schools and research centres of universities on one hand and companies on the other prevent fluent inflow of newly created knowledge found in work organisations into curricula. The first speak the language of scientific disciplines, while the second refer to specific life and work issues;
- (c) companies often resist sharing their firm-specific knowledge to preserve their competitive advantage. Further, they can legally protect it as their industrial property;
- (d) it is difficult to express a lot of knowledge in an explicit form and convey it with school teaching methods (Polanyi, 1966);
- (e) the appearance of official curricula based on national accreditation procedures could lead to certain ideological biases and blindness that cause some knowledge to be overlooked or deliberately left out of curricula. 'Curricula are detailed statements about national preferences: a preferred natural and social world, a preferred history, a preferred understanding of children as learners' (McEneaney and Meyer, 2000, p. 201). 'Political control faces the risk of being captured by groups pursuing narrow interests; for example, those pursuing fundamentalist

- or creationist agendas, teachers' unions, or book publishers' (Hodges Persell, 2000, p. 397);
- (f) even though certain knowledge has been brought into accredited programmes, access to it may remain restricted due to limited numbers of students admitted, caused by constrained school capacities, protection of professional status, etc.

These difficulties lead to a certain loss of knowledge, which remains closed in informal environments and cannot be widely shared in society.

Factors making ARCNIL a pressing issue

A self-evident question is why ARCNIL has only become a pressing issue in the last two or three decades. Which changes in the economy and society brought it to the forefront of professional and political debate? Referring to Lopez et al. (2006), we will offer two sets of reasons: economic and social.

Economic reasons for the growing attention to ARCNIL

Among the economic factors, globalisation should take first place. It has led to a single, highly interdependent world economy with less and less nationally protected areas. It has made all natural, financial and technological resources available to all producers and to all national economies, parallel to the ever tougher competitive pressures to which they are exposed. Diminishing natural resources and the availability of the others are leading organisations and national economies increasingly to seek competitive advantage in the relatively abundant, most specific and least mobile (²) resource – human resources. The most valuable human resources are undoubtedly knowledge and skills. 'Relative abundance in certain skills in a given country constitutes a comparative advantage for firms in that country' (Estevez-Abe et al., 2001, p.146). 'The various theories of corporate competitiveness stress the skills of human resources as a key determinant of success' (Lopez et al., 2006).

If competitive advantage is sought in human resources, in particular knowledge and skills, and if the competition is shifting to labour and skills markets, then the amount and quality of knowledge and skills in a certain economy and organisation is becoming a major developmental concern. This is not only expressed in political declarations in terms of knowledge-society and knowledge-economy

scenarios (European Commission, 2000). It takes concrete forms such as investment in science, technology and education, expanding numbers of the young attending higher levels of education, the increasing involvement of adults in lifelong learning, the development of national innovation systems, support for technological restructuring and similar. The strategic question is how to increase the capacity of human resources or, more specifically, how to increase the amount and quality of knowledge and skills (Saussois, 2000)?

In the search for knowledge and skills, attention has not been paid just to the formal research, education and training institutions that were long ago purposefully established to create and disseminate knowledge. It has been realised that 'much of the know-how we possess was acquired through practice and painful experience' (Bjørnåvold, 2001). Therefore, non-formal and informal learning agents such as enterprises and other work organisations, the media, the worldwide web, civil society and local community clubs, associations and organisations, households, professional associations and other 'communities of practice' (Wenger et al., 2002) have been regarded as desirable partners in knowledge and skill creation and dissemination. It is not important how knowledge and skills are created or acquired. What counts is the amount, quality and relevance. At this point, assessment, recognition and certification of informal and non-formal knowledge offers the means to make additional knowledge visible, valid and more accessible to a wider range of potential users. '[...] there should be a legal follow-up instrument which facilitates the accreditation of new knowledge acquired and also fosters the desire to learn new things' (Lopez et al., 2006).

With ARCNIL in place, it is expected that individuals would be motivated to acquire additional knowledge and skills, especially if they are better paid according to awarded certificates, but also if their employability, social and organisational status increase (Lopez et al., 2006). The knowledge creation and dissemination process is thus self-reinforced.

Another implication of today's global competitive pressure is that the knowledge cycle is turning at an ever-increasing speed (Lundvall, 2001). Competition is expressed in terms of the time needed from

(²) Labour force surveys carried out continuously by Eurostat show low levels of labour mobility inside the EU as well as from outside. The majority of the population is rooted close to their birthplace and employers must count mainly on the local and regional labour force. In addition, the inflow of labour from non-EU countries is restricted by various social, political and economic factors.

an invention to its application in a marketable product. It is important how quickly new knowledge is acquired, disseminated to relevant organisations and individuals and applied in the work process. This is leading to unprecedented organisational and technological change, to a greater need for new, and an abundance of, obsolete knowledge, and to the increasing need for learning and forgetting (Lundvall, 2001).

At least two complications are caused by this speed of change, the first of which is a weakening of the function of labour and training markets. The time taken before information indicating the needs for new knowledge and skills reflecting new technologies reaches curricula developers in schools and national bodies, via labour and training markets, before curricula are restructured and approved, and before new graduates emerge from the education process, could be so great that employers are already facing a new technological cycle. Even in countries with decentralised curricula planning and corporate arrangements providing for the direct coordination of curricula between employer and school representatives, time delays in adjusting curricula could still be too long. That is why employers increasingly invest in acquiring and disseminating knowledge and skills internally without the accreditation. In the case of firm-specific knowledge, enterprises are often not particularly interested in making it available to outside users, even via State school curricula. The gap between the knowledge and skills developed in companies and that embodied in formally accredited curricula is therefore widening and the need to assess, recognise and certify this knowledge is becoming more pressing.

Even if the problem of the slow inclusion of new knowledge into official curricula was resolved, there is a further complication. More or less continuous technological change requires permanent retraining and increasingly also the systematic reeducation of employees. This normally requires them to be absent from work or leave their jobs. The first is undesirable for employers because it disturbs the production process and incurs costs. The second is unacceptable for employees because social security and employment institutions in most countries do not provide safe enough transitions from work to training and back. This is why employers are increasingly upgrading their workplaces with places for continuous learning (Lopez et al., 2006), while effective national institutional arrangements for employee lifelong learning are still being sought. The merging of learning and work in the workplace is exacerbating the gap between the knowledge

created and disseminated in work environments and that embodied in formal curricula. This all amplifies the need for ARCNIL.

From the economic perspective, ARCNIL is also needed to make the labour market more transparent. What employers are seeking is real employee knowledge and skills. If these are not reflected in valid certificates such as diplomas and diploma supplements then employers need to invest more in their recruitment procedures. The generally desired mobility of labour is therefore reduced.

Social reasons for stronger attention to ARCNIL

From the social perspective, ARCNIL could be a useful tool to combat social exclusion and improve social justice. For various reasons, many citizens may not continue their initial education up to the level of their potential yet some could develop such potential later while working or participating in other forms of informal or non-formal learning. ARCNIL provides the opportunity to compensate for what was not achieved in the earlier phases of one's life cycle (Lopez et al., 2006). Such groups are early school-leavers, the unemployed who have lost their jobs, migrant workers, people with special needs and so on.

Another group is workers who have acquired many firm-specific and industry-specific skills which are not always formally recognised even by their employers. Workers could become tied to certain jobs and employers, making them feel insecure in the event of a radical technological change or the closure of a company. For well-functioning systems, these workers need a high level of employment and unemployment protection (Estevez-Abe et al., 2001, p. 154), part of which could include ARCNIL. It raises their formal qualifications and thus contributes to their employability and the opportunity to move to other employers. It also gives good grounds for claiming better remuneration.

Challenges to certification

Assessing, recognising and certifying non-formal and informal learning is not without challenges. First, many groups and organisations may not be interested in them; this might include well-organised professions from higher education which usually control schools whose monopolies ARCNIL may endanger. Formal education often serves as a means of controlling entry to certain professions including

direct or indirect decision-making on numbers of new entrants. Managers and teachers in schools have vested interests in providing formal education yet ARCNIL could serve as a side route into a certain profession without formal schooling. Representatives of professions and schools would claim that they are maintaining the quality standards of their professional practice and thereby protect the interests of their clients and the public. They would speak less openly about protecting their own special economic position in the division of labour. There is a dilemma whether ARCNIL should be run in cooperation with professions and schools or without them. If ARCNIL lies in their hands for quality control reasons it may function in a partly restrictive way or could be blocked for self-protection reasons. If ARCNIL is established parallel to formal education it would require greater institutional investment; it may face a lack of expertise, may lead to double qualification standards, and create conflict with the organised professions. Therefore, an agreement and partnership with professional organisations and schools would probably be the best, if not an unavoidable solution ⁽³⁾.

Another less interested partner in ARCNIL could be employers who invest a lot in developing firm-specific knowledge and skills through which they seek competitive advantage. The certification of knowledge and skills obtained in companies by employees could increase their employability and propensity to move on. Companies could lose some of their investment in human resources and let their specific knowledge be disclosed to competitors. Another disincentive for companies is potential claims for higher wages based on publicly recognised qualifications. These reasons may produce some hesitation from employers to support ARCNIL, although they could benefit from the higher labour mobility and transparency of qualifications. Certification makes recruitment procedures easier and cheaper, and more workers are available in the market. However, this argument holds more for firm-unspecific jobs where the supply of labour is insufficient than for the core ones. To cope with this challenge, an agreement with employers is needed, although one can only expect their selective support.

⁽³⁾ In Slovenia, for instance, the system of ARCNIL was implemented by law in 2000. However, it functions only in certain segments of middle range qualifications, where education is usually not provided by secondary schools. Although legally possible, implementation beyond secondary level has not been attempted due to anticipated opposition of professional organisations and schools providing formal education.

Two further challenges are linked to the content of ARCNIL. It serves as a vehicle to promote informal and non-formal learning and publicly recognise knowledge and skills acquired in this way. It offers an additional way to grasp, make visible and valid concrete and uncodified knowledge created while solving problems in various work and life situations by self-learning, learning in teams and groups, in organisations, etc. It could add further knowledge to that formally acquired, which could have a similar yet possibly quite different quality enriched by competences. However, ARCNIL can only be a supplementary mechanism to formal education and training and not an alternative to it. It is less effective than formal education with respect to how much knowledge can be put in an explicit form and conveyed to others in a certain period of time, and in how much knowledge can be acquired while working or carrying out other activities in comparison to systematic and methodical formal education. It seems that a good balance between traditional education and training focused on the systematic dissemination of disciplinary structured knowledge and skills via lecturing and experiential and problem-focused knowledge is needed even in formal education (Allen and Velden van der, 2008). A similar balance can generally be expected between formal education and learning outside formal education and training institutions.

Attempts to make non-formally and informally acquired knowledge and skills explicit through assessment and certification clearly have virtue. However, one should not forget that certain types of learning and knowledge creation can only flourish if they remain informal and are very difficult if not impossible to be explained (Nonaka et al., 2003); teaching relationships between masters and apprentices or knowledge creation in a team are examples. Too strong and too direct interference with work and social problem-solving situations by standardisation, knowledge portfolio making and counselling might even hamper their proper functioning and reduce their innovation potential.

For ARCNIL to be successful, good quality, fixed standards of knowledge assessment and certification are essential. They should be equal for a certain qualification irrespective of formal or informal acquisition of knowledge and skills, a requirement that is not easy to meet in practice. Usually, there is a difference between the learning outcomes of formal education and of learning by doing in the work process. While formal education involves more systematic and

disciplinarily structured knowledge and fewer practical competences, the opposite is true for the work process. This is why school-leavers are additionally trained by employers after they start working and why workers who had their qualifications recognised need to take some general courses to obtain a certain education. It is also why education and qualifications cannot always be equated with each other.

The other important factor of success is the strict use of established standards, which gives ARCNIL the requisite credibility. Enough time, money and other resources should be devoted to counselling potential ARCNIL applicants, elaborating knowledge portfolios, training counsellors and assessors as well as the assessment itself. A social partnership approach to ARCNIL is desirable, if not unavoidable, to ensure well-coordinated activities and the sharing of responsibilities and costs.

Conclusion

One could conclude that ARCNIL is returning to the stage due to deficiencies in formal education systems which do not meet all the requirements of modern economies and societies. In particular, they cannot embrace much of the knowledge and skills that are created in various life and work environments and therefore cannot disseminate it. Since modern economies and societies are increasingly knowledge-based there is a thirst for all sorts of knowledge and skills including informal and non-formal ones. Companies and societies as a whole might acquire some competitive advantage in the global economy by having a greater volume of up-to-date – additional to formal – knowledge and skills. ARCNIL is becoming a desirable tool but it can only supplement formal education and training and can replace it only marginally. Its implementation should pay attention to various stakeholders, such as schools and companies, and should be partnership based.

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Learning outcomes in validation and credit systems

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SUMMARY

Instruments and arrangements supporting transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes, such as validation and credit systems, form an important part of European and national lifelong learning strategies. Debate has largely focused on separate initiatives and failed to address how these may interact and could create synergies.

A starting point for the analysis is the continuing shift to learning outcomes taking place in most European education and training systems. This is exemplified and supported by the introduction of comprehensive qualifications European (EQF) and national (NQF) frameworks, by increased use of validation of non-formal and informal learning and by the development of credit systems in education and training (ECVET). The article addresses the possible relationships between validation and credit systems, how they may contribute to lifelong learning by aiding recognition of all forms of learning outcomes, irrespective of their origin in formal, non-formal and informal settings. The review on existing patterns and future developments ends by identifying several issues which would need further research and policy-development.

Keywords

Learning outcomes, governance, EQF, ECVET, learning pathways

Introduction

Instruments and arrangements supporting transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes – notably validation of non-formal and informal learning and credit systems – form an important part of European and national lifelong learning strategies. They aim to open up, and increase the flexibility of, qualifications systems ⁽¹⁾ by aiding recognition of learning experiences acquired outside traditional formal education and training. Typical examples are foreign qualifications, qualifications or learning outcomes achieved in another education and training sector, and learning outcomes acquired in the past, at work or in leisure-time settings. The development of validation and credit transfer and accumulation arrangements is an effort to broaden the range of knowledge, skills and competences valued in society and to make it easier for individuals to make progress in learning and work. Consequently, the term ‘validation of learning outcomes’ is used here to signal the need for greater integration of instruments and initiatives, underlining that all learning experiences – irrespective of their origin in formal, non-formal or informal settings – need to be made visible and valued.

These developments have gained speed in recent years and are now making a real impact on national qualifications systems and individual learning opportunities. A growing number of countries have implemented national systems for validating non-formal and informal learning, opening up opportunities for a wide range of learners and workers. The European credit transfer and accumulation system for higher education (ECTS) has been operational for many years and the new European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) is now entering a test phase. These developments can (partly) be explained by the following factors:

- demographic and economic changes are forcing countries to adapt their education and training systems to the reality of lifelong

⁽¹⁾ In this article, we distinguish between qualification systems and qualification frameworks. The EQF recommendation provides the following definition of these terms. A ‘national qualifications system’ means all aspects of a Member State’s activity related to the recognition of learning and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. A ‘national qualifications framework’ means an instrument for the classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for specified levels of learning achieved, which aims to integrate and coordinate national qualifications subsystems and improve the transparency, access, progression and quality of qualifications in relation to the labour market and civil society.

learning (the population is getting older, changes in occupations are becoming more frequent, labour and learning mobility have increased; Cedefop, 2008a);

- education and training systems have difficulty in meeting the learning needs of parts of the population (the labour market vulnerability of low skilled persons is increasing, the percentage of drop-outs from upper secondary education is causing concern; European Commission, 2008a);
- national lifelong learning policies are increasingly being complemented by a common European approach, notably taken forward through the Bologna process and the Education and training 2010 programme (European initiatives introducing frameworks and common instruments are increasingly acting as catalysts for national developments).
- While developments in recent years point towards more open and flexible qualifications systems, European and national debates have largely focused on separate initiatives and less on how these could interact and create synergies. This is well illustrated by the work on validating non-formal and informal learning and credit systems, where debates and developments have not been systematically linked. Meanwhile the ECVET recommendation (European Parliament, Council 2009) makes explicit references to validating learning outcomes.

This article addresses the relationship – and possible synergies – between arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning and credit systems. The continuing shift to learning outcomes in most European countries (Cedefop, 2009a) provides an opportunity and to address the relationship between the different instruments and arrangements and how, in combination, they may contribute to the opening up of qualifications systems. This integrated perspective implies that we should start using the term validation of learning outcomes rather than distinguish instruments and initiatives according to particular settings or contexts (formal, non-formal and informal). This signals that all learning outcomes – irrespective of where they were acquired – can in principle be identified, assessed and recognised and can result in a qualification.

Validating non-formal and informal learning

The development of systems for validating non-formal and informal learning can be explained by the wish to make visible the learning outcomes acquired outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in voluntary activities and during leisure time. Many countries emphasise (Cedefop, 2009a) that these learning outcomes and experiences should be valued in the same way as formal learning and should, in principle, provide the basis for awarding a qualification. Validation is gaining ground (Souto Outero et al., 2008; Cedefop, 2008b; European Commission DG EAC and Cedefop, 2009a; Cedefop, 2009a) and is moving up on the policy agenda.

Yet, the development of validation in Europe is a multispeed process where countries are at different stages of practical implementation and overall acceptance. Some countries, for example Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal, use validation as an integrated part of their qualifications systems. Although many European countries have yet to reach this stage, this 'mainstreaming' of validation seems to be on the agenda of an increasing number. Cedefop (2008b) distinguished between three groups of countries: those countries where validation has become part of learners' reality; countries where validation was emerging; and countries where validation was being considered with some scepticism and as a new feature of the qualifications systems.

While most activity has been at national, sectoral and local levels, European initiatives play a part. A particularly important contribution has been made by EU education and training programmes (notably Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates and Grundtvig) providing financial and institutional support for extensive experimentation and testing since the early 1990s. This means that most national actions have reference to European and international developments. The adoption in May 2004 of the principles on identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2004) reflects this extensive cooperation and is an important step towards positioning validation in the political context of lifelong learning. The aim of these principles was to establish a common (minimum) basis for strengthening cross-border comparability, compatibility and transparency of validation processes. These principles are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. **Common European principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning**

1. **Validation must be voluntary.**
2. **The privacy of individuals should be respected.**
3. **Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.**
4. **Stakeholders should be involved in establishing validation systems.**
5. **Systems should contain mechanisms for individual guidance and counselling.**
6. **Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.**
7. **The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.**
8. **Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation.**
9. **Validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.**
10. **The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.**

Source: European Commission DG EAC and Cedefop, 2009a.

National developments after 2004 show that these general principles are considered useful and have made an impact on national developments. An example of this is the Netherlands where the principles provided input to the quality code for the system of *Erkennen van Verworven Competenties* ⁽²⁾. However, it was clear already from the beginning that these principles only provide a starting point. Consequently, and following intensive cooperation between Member States during the period 2006-08 ⁽³⁾, a set of detailed European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning, building on common principles, were developed. These guidelines are important as they try to clarify how validation of non-formal and informal learning is (and could be) linked and aligned to the formal qualifications system. The following schematic diagram (Figure 2) identifies the different stages of the validation process. Its major contribution is to focus on validation as an integral part of existing qualifications systems. According to this perspective, qualifications can be awarded in two main ways:

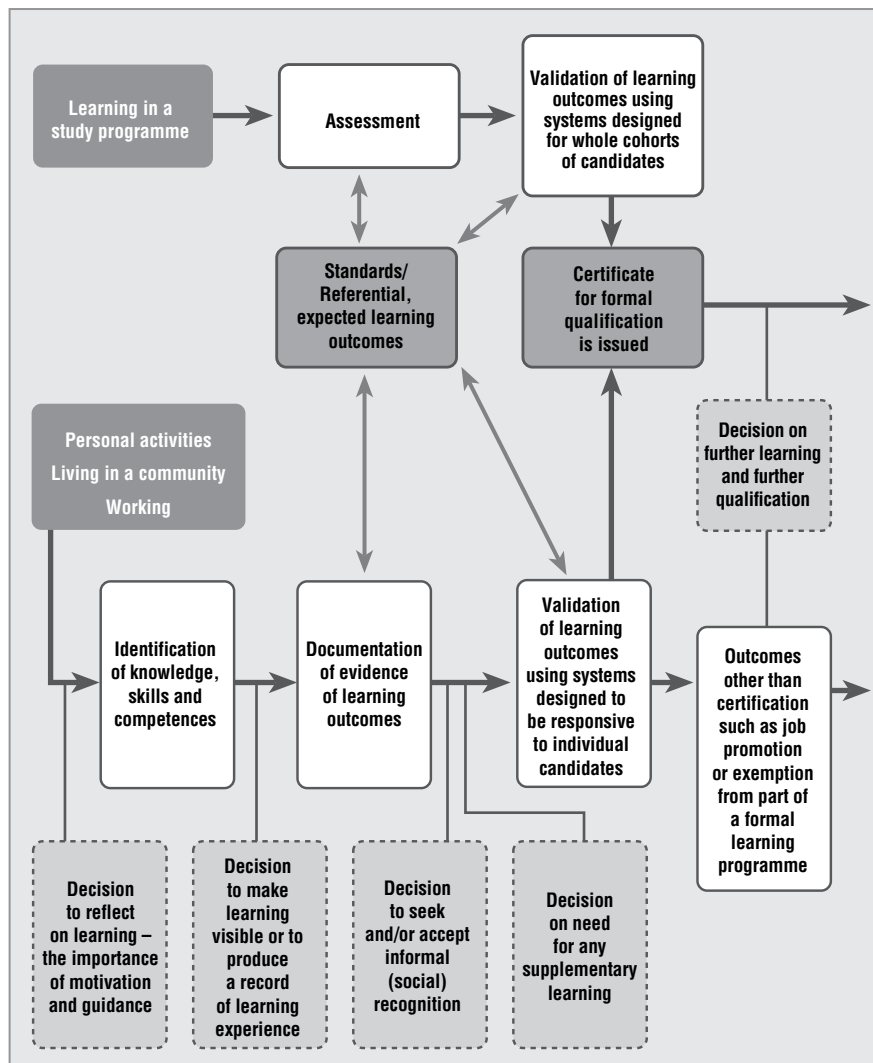
- using processes designed for the formal education and training system, addressing whole cohorts of candidates (see upper part of Figure 2);
- using processes designed to be responsive to individual candidates learning in non-formal and informal settings (see lower part of Figure 2).

⁽²⁾ Accreditation of prior learning.

⁽³⁾ In the context of the Education and training 2010 programme and its cluster on recognition of learning outcomes.

According to this figure, and assuming that arrangements for validation are established as an integrated part of the qualification system, individuals can choose between different routes to qualification. These choices will reflect their background (prior learning), their current life and work situation (in education, at work, unemployed, etc.) and their needs (for initial education and training,

Figure 2. **Routes from learning to certification**



continuing training, career progress, etc.). Generally, validation of non-formal and informal learning presents many more choices for the individual. The process varies according to the purposes and needs of each single candidate; some may be satisfied with identification of prior learning for career development purposes, others may seek a full certificate or diploma. The complexity of the process reflects that individuals have their specific personal learning experiences – there is no standard learning pathway or career – and the methods used to validate need to be sufficiently sophisticated to capture this complexity.

The core element of the diagram, and crucial to an integrated system guaranteeing the recognition of all learning outcomes irrespective of their origin, is the reference to a shared standard for expected learning outcomes. This means that while learning routes may differ, the expected content and level outcomes should be the same. This perspective has been introduced to several national qualifications systems: Finland, France and the UK are good examples. It underlines the need to speak about validating learning outcomes rather than distinguish between certifying formal learning and validating non-formal and informal learning.

Whereas the first route (learning in a study programme) leads to recognition in the form of a certificate ‘for formal qualification’, the second option (personal activities, living in a community, working) leads either to recognition via award of a formal qualification, or social/peer recognition in the form of job promotion or exemption from training programmes. This underlines the need to distinguish formative from summative validation approaches. The primary objective of summative approaches is to identify and assess a learning experience and outcomes according to set standards and (potentially and eventually) award a certificate or diploma. The core objective of formative approaches is to support the learning process and allow learners to widen and increase their learning. Formative approaches, for instance, provide feedback on weaknesses or strengths as a basis for personal and professional improvement. Figure 3 presents a synopsis of both approaches. It is worth noticing that within the pathways to qualifications, summative and formative functions are not mutually exclusive; the learners’ choice might include combining both in the course of their learning pathways.

Figure 3. **Assessment inside the validation process**

	Summative function	Formative function
Learner's objectives	Award of qualifications (certificate, title or diploma)	Widen and deepen own knowledge in the course of personal development projects, career development or human resource development (in enterprises)
Structures	Qualifications and awarding bodies	Diverse
Standards	Certification standards within education and training or the national qualifications framework	Depends upon the objectives

Successful validation of non-formal and informal learning seems to require a double strategy. First, the quality (reliability and validity) of the methods for identifying and assessing non-formally or informally acquired learning outcomes must be guaranteed. The non-standardised character of this learning complicates this 'competence measurement' and priority has to be given to developing and improving tools and methodologies guaranteeing validity and reliability. Second, the relationship between validation arrangements and the national qualifications system needs to be clarified, in particular for referencing to standards and norms. In Figure 2, these standards are seen as common to both the formal and informal routes and as a powerful mechanism for integrating different forms of learning in a learning outcomes perspective. In practice, however, not all European countries have accomplished this integration of validation by shared standards. Validation of non-formal and informal learning – and the change towards validating learning outcomes – is changing continuously. This relates mainly to the development of national qualifications frameworks, responding to the EQF (see also Section 4). Several countries (for example Germany and Austria) are currently considering how to integrate validation of non-formal and informal learning into their (developing) national qualifications frameworks.

Credit systems

Two credit systems have developed in Europe and are applied respectively in vocational education and training (the European credit system for vocational education and training, ECVET) and in higher education (European credit transfer and accumulation system, ECTS). ECTS was introduced following the recommendation by the European Parliament and the Council on 10 July 2001 for students, persons undergoing training, young volunteers, teachers and trainers. The European Parliament and the Council approved the proposal for recommendation on ECVET on 17 April 2009; ECVET aims to aid the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes of individuals who want a qualification (European Parliament, Council 2009), promoting learner mobility, lifelong learning, development of mutual trust and cooperation between VET providers in Europe. Both credit systems ⁽⁴⁾ have been evolving over the years following the growing importance of the learning outcomes approach in education and training. Cedefop (2009b) defines a credit system as ‘an instrument designed to enable accumulation of learning outcomes gained in formal, non-formal and/or informal settings, and ease their transfer from one setting to another for validation and recognition’. Formal recognition is ‘the process of granting official status to learning outcomes either through the award of qualifications (...) or through grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained learning outcomes’ Cedefop (2009b). Although in some Member States validation and recognition might be a single process, this definition draws our attention to the fact that validation is part of the recognition process (as far as both are differentiated) and that the ultimate objective is to grant official status to the learning outcomes by qualification award.

The rest of this article will concentrate on the development and implementation of ECVET. While this does not question the importance of ECTS in European higher education, it reflects that ECVET from the very beginning has been based on a learning outcomes perspective and thus provides a good case for analysis ⁽⁵⁾. ECVET development may be viewed from two angles: the general principles established

⁽⁴⁾ For a detailed synopsis of the significance and role of both credit systems (in EQF context), see Dunkel and Le Mouillour, 2008, p. 184-202.

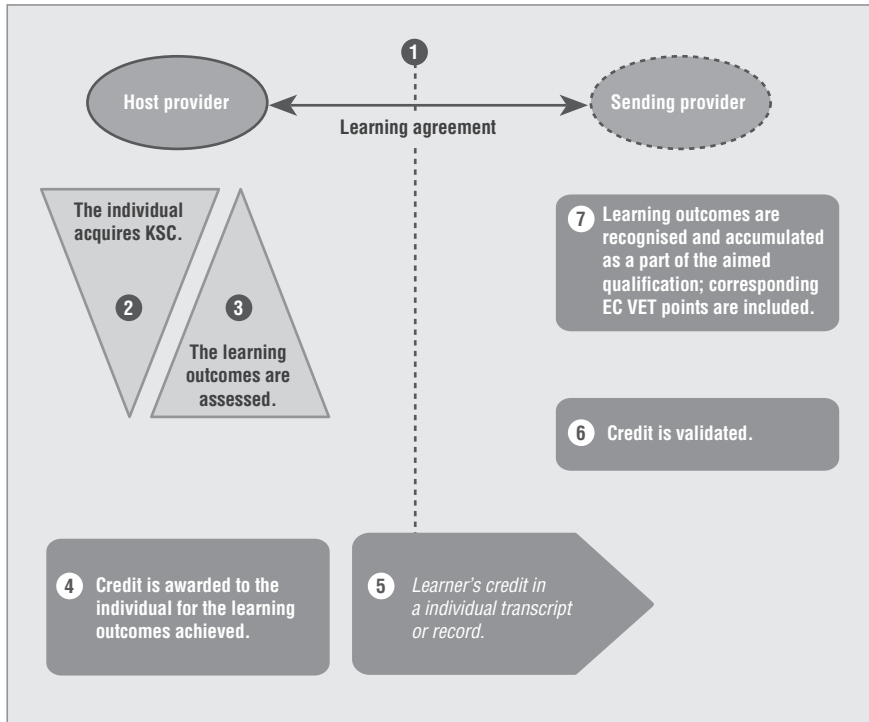
⁽⁵⁾ There is a clear need for a systematic debate on the relationship between ECTS and ECVET. Initiatives taken by Cedefop in 2009 support such a debate.

at European level and their actual and practical implementation at national, local and/or sector levels. The ECVET testing phase (2009-12) aims to link European and national levels, establishing a feedback loop between practice, research and policy-making, thus moving from metalevel European principles to concrete local practices. Many countries are looking at ways of introducing credit transfer and accumulation processes (and thus flexibility) into the qualifications systems (European Commission DG EAC and Cedefop, 2009b).

The described ECVET process does not start from scratch but builds on a significant amount of experience gained over many years (also preceding the 2002 Copenhagen declaration launching the initiative). Examples of this are provided by Belgium (Flemish community), Denmark, Spain, Sweden, and Scotland. As the work on ECVET has moved on, further national developments have been triggered, for example in Germany (Decvet) and in Finland (Finecvet). The new qualifications framework for England and Northern Ireland (qualifications and credit framework, QCF) strengthens the role of credit transfer, an approach largely followed by Scotland (Scottish credit and qualifications framework, SCQF) and Wales. Luxembourg, Belgium (Walloon community) and Latvia are updating their national regulations to accommodate credit transfer and accumulation. In total, while only a few Member States have implemented credit transfer mechanisms in VET, this combination of European and national initiatives underlines the increasing importance of the approach. The fact that systems and arrangements are still unfinished can be seen as an opportunity for analysing potential links to, and synergies with, other instruments and initiatives; these include validation or Europass, the single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences.

The core of ECVET is the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, based on the categories set within the EQF (knowledge, skills and competence: KSC). Organised in units, these learning outcomes can be transferred and accumulated towards qualifications. While existing credit systems have largely referred to learning input (duration and workload), ECVET introduces learning outcomes as the exclusive basis for the award of credits and – eventually – for a qualification. For many education and training institutions, this represents a new and innovative approach, forcing them to consider whether alternative learning forms can result in outcomes equivalent (although not similar) to those of their own courses. Transfer and accumulation learning outcomes are presented in the following figure.

Figure 4. Transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes



The proposed transfer and accumulation processes rest on two main elements:

- units of learning outcomes. These are the building blocks of a given qualification, a coherent ensemble of knowledge, skills and competences that can be submitted for assessment and validation. A unit can be specific to a single qualification or common to different qualifications. ECVET points provide a numerical symbolic value of the relative weight of units or learning outcomes to the full qualification;
- credits for learning outcomes achieved. These correspond to the assessed learning outcomes acquired by an individual. They can be accumulated towards the award of a qualification or transferred to other learning programmes or qualifications, thus leading to exemption of part of a study programme or grant of equivalences.

Units of learning outcomes refer directly to the validation process as they are 'constructed in a way that enables discrete assessment

and validation of learning outcomes contained in the unit' (European Parliament, 2008, Annex 2; Commission, 2008b, p. 19). For validation and recognition, qualifications need to be expressed in terms of learning outcomes, and units (linked to qualifications) will carry a reference to the qualification according to the EQF level.

It follows that credit systems such as ECVET question the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning, the basic assumption being that all learning may lead to qualification. Given that an individual has achieved learning according to a given standard, it should not matter where and how she or he has acquired these outcomes. This, as indicated by Figure 1, underlines the relevance and strength of validation of learning outcomes. We may conclude – at that stage – that ECVET very much pursues the same objectives as those pursued by existing and emerging systems and arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning. Both instruments open the possibility that learning outcomes acquired outside traditional pathways (abroad during a mobility period or at some time during a professional and occupational career, etc.) result in a qualification.

Validation and learning outcomes-based credit systems

The emerging (and in some cases embryonic) character of validation and credit systems provides a good opportunity to reflect on how to promote links and synergies between them. The fact that both validation and ECVET aim at valuing learning outcomes originating from diverse contexts (non-formal or formal for validation, VET system different to one's own for credit systems) further underlines the opportunity and need for links. We can identify three key areas where the two instruments could interact: assessment methodologies, qualifications standards and qualifications frameworks.

Assessment methodologies

The development of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe has gradually refined a range of different tools and methods for assessing learning outcomes (European Commission DG EAC and Cedefop, 2009a, p. 59). These tools capture different aspects of the outcomes in question, reflecting practical skills or theoretical deliberations in varying degrees. As in formal education, the individual specificity of the learning outcomes may require more than one tool,

such as a combination of written tests and practical challenges. These learning outcomes may also require tools able to capture specific elements, through practical demonstration, simulation or gathering of evidence from past practices. A main challenge faced in validating non-formal and informal learning is that it addresses individual learning experiences and thus needs to be sensitive to their specific character. This differs from assessment in formal learning where the tools are applied across a large cohort of students, making them less adaptable to the needs of a subgroup or an individual.

These experiences will be important when ECVET is implemented since ECVET is not a validation process in itself but offers a reference frame for carrying out validation. It has to be completed by adding and making available assessment and validation methodologies relevant for different stages of the ECVET process. As illustrated in Figure 4, ECVET requires validation in two phases of its process: the award of credits in the host country and the validation of the credits in the home country, when it is to be applied in the context of geographical mobility and in formal education and training. The first validation phase is formative and originates from an assessment of the learning experiences and outcomes in the host country and institution. This is recorded in a common – although not formally certified – format (for example Europass mobility). The second phase takes place when the candidate returns to his or her home country. The learning outcomes (recorded by the host institution) are validated according to the relevant formal standard and, if deemed to be at the appropriate level, are recognised against the qualification standards in use in that country. Consequently the learner could be granted, for instance, an exemption from courses or training units. It is very important in terms of quality assurance that the formative evaluation (taking place abroad) is carried out in a transparent way which can be trusted by others.

It will be important to see how the experiences from validating non-formal and informal learning can feed into these two stages and to what extent methodologies and approaches can be directly applied. It must be understood that assessment in VET might follow a logic very specific to VET systems, their understanding of qualifications or the objectives linked to education and training programmes. The ECVET ‘connexion’ study identifies different patterns here; assessment will be differently conceived if programmes are more theoretical or workplace-oriented, if practitioners or teachers are involved in the learning/teaching processes, and if sector representatives are part of assessment processes (Gelibert and Maniak, 2007).

Qualifications standards

Standards will play a key role, as illustrated by Figure 2, in deciding the relationship between validation and credit system. For validation, it is crucial that these standards are formulated in terms of learning outcomes; progress in adopting the outcomes approach by standards is summarised in Figure 5. If they are too closely embedded in particular education and training provision, this may reduce their relevance as reference points for non-formal and informal learning. This issue is partly reflected in the combination of education (learning) and occupational standards in different countries (Cedefop, 2009c, forthcoming).

Figure 5. **Progress in implementing outcome-based qualifications standards**

Qualifications standards are outcome-oriented		Introduction of outcome-oriented standards in process	No formulation of outcome-oriented standards / no information
Belgium	Lithuania	Austria	Cyprus
Denmark	Malta	Bulgaria	Greece
Estonia	Netherlands	Czech Republic	Liechtenstein*
Finland	Norway	Italy	Slovakia
France	Poland	Luxembourg	
Germany	Portugal	Romania	
Hungary	Slovenia	Turkey	
Iceland	Spain		
Ireland	Sweden		
Latvia	Switzerland		
	United Kingdom		

* as far as the national vocational school is concerned, standards are input-oriented.

Source: Cedefop, Study on the dynamics of qualifications – the definition and renewal of occupational and educational standards (2007/08).

The European guidelines for validation distinguish ‘occupational’ and ‘educational’ standards. Both are primarily concerned with the content (or knowledge, skills and competence) of learning, although from the different perspectives of education and training and the labour market. In some countries, specific standards for assessment exist (European Commission DG EAC and Cedefop, 2009a, p.35).

Within ECVET, occupational and educational standards are explicitly referred to in the mobility agreement between provider and learner. This makes it possible to identify the learning outcomes forming the core of the mobility project. During the mobility period, the assessment standard in the home country (used on the learner’s

return) as well as its counterpart in the host country will be used. In the context of institutionalised/organised mobility, these standards provide important (and existing) reference points ensuring that assessment and recognition of credits can be trusted. ECVET offers an institutional framework and a set of principles which allows these different national standards, and the accompanying assessment methods, to interact. ECVET will thus not seek to develop its own standards and assessment methods; its challenge is rather to make use of and seek to integrate what is already there.

In Member States where validation of non-formal and informal learning is already established as an integral part of the qualification system, credit systems could encounter fewer obstacles. Such integration would be based on an agreement that there is no single route to a qualification and thus be part of a culture change signalling greater tolerance towards non-traditional learning routes and pathways (Fietz et al., 2007). This is exemplified by France, where the incremental development of validation (since the 1980s, and in particular since 2002) implied a broadening and diversification of potential routes to qualifications and the recognition of professional experience as a basis for qualification award (Vanags and Natter, 2007). The same applies in the Nordic countries where most validation is carried out in the education sector and it has been accepted that learning from outside the formal sector might lead to admission to studies and/or to a reduction of the time to achieve formal study qualifications (Hult and Andersson, 2008).

Qualifications frameworks

In the preparatory work to ECVET, it was apparent that a framework is needed to permit reading qualifications and their related units in terms of proficiency acquired by the learners (Cedefop, Coles and Oates, 2005). Assessing non-formally acquired learning outcomes or learning outcomes acquired abroad requires information on levels. This reinforces the added value of qualifications frameworks; transparency for individuals as well as education and training stakeholders. It is also related to the pivotal role played by standards; frameworks will aim to clarify which standards apply and how different forms of learning relate to them.

The work on national qualifications frameworks in response to the EQF (European Commission DG EAC, 2009c) can be seen to respond to the above issues, with the introduction of NQFs intrinsically linked to the shift to learning outcomes. Defining qualifications levels

in this way could open up a broader set of outcomes, including those acquired through learning in non-formal and informal settings, in more European countries. NQFs can be used further to develop explicit and coherent learning outcomes-based standards and references for qualifications that could accommodate outcomes of learning in non-formal and informal settings. It will be crucial that the definition of these national, regional and sectoral standards for learning outcomes takes into account the particular requirements posed by validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The main functions of national qualifications frameworks can be considered the following (according to European Commission DG EAC, 2009c):

- to aid establishment of national standards and references for learning outcomes (competences);
- to relate qualifications to one another and to pursue permeable qualifications systems;
- to promote access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learning;
- to promote the quality of education, training and learning.

Each of these may be directly related to the further development of methods and systems for validating non-formal and informal learning and credit systems.

A common objective of emerging national qualifications frameworks is to reduce barriers between education and training, promoting access to education and training, and transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. Validation of non-formal and informal learning and NQFs have a common objective: enable individuals to make progress in their learning careers on the basis of their learning outcomes and competences, not on the basis of the duration and location of a particular learning programme. Access, transfer and progression link directly to the challenge of developing validation and credit transfer and accumulation at national and European levels.

The development and implementation of European and national qualifications frameworks (Cedefop, 2009d) have thus increased focus on integrating ('mainstreaming') validation of non-formal and informal learning in the overall qualifications system. The same trend can be observed for credit systems, although currently less so. There is no doubt, however, that the work on frameworks offers an opportunity to consider how validation and credit transfer and accumulation, can contribute to a more comprehensive strategy on validating learning outcomes.

Perspectives

Validating learning outcomes is becoming more important in European education and training. This incremental development is partly inspired by European initiatives like EQF and ECVET but is primarily a reflection of the need for more flexible and effective lifelong learning approaches. Developments are rapid, potentially turning validation of learning outcomes into a trusted, normal and accepted way of acquiring qualifications. We consider this approach to be important as it stresses the importance of neutral (from particular education and training providers) qualifications levels, opening up a wider range of potential pathways to a certification.

In the feasibility studies on ECVET (2008 ⁽⁶⁾) long-outstanding issues and challenges linked to the coordination and governance of education and training systems are brought to the forefront. Examples are cooperation between stakeholders, lack of transparency, fragmentation and segmentation). Some of these challenges can be met, in ways which are immediately beneficial for individual learners, notably by establishing a closer link between validation and credit system mechanisms within the new context provided by qualifications frameworks. Validating learning outcomes is thus about enabling learners and workers to access education, training and learning when they need and to value the outcomes of this learning in a consistent and fair way.

The purpose of this article has been to open up the debate on the relationship and possible interaction between current different national and European instruments and principles. This is a discussion which needs to be continued, not least by considering the role of other instruments not discussed here (for example ECTS). The following questions may indicate where to start:

- vision and limits: to what extent will lifelong and lifewide learning need to be complemented with lifelong recognition (through validation and credit transfer and accumulation)? What is the balance between costs and benefits of validation and credit systems?
- needs: instruments like validation and credit systems are being developed to serve individual citizens. How can the current diversity

⁽⁶⁾ Both ECVET Reflector and ECVET Connexion reports are available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/moreinformation139_en.htm [cited 23.4.2009].

of non-related instruments be turned into a seamless service easily and directly accessible to everybody?

- governance: a seamless structure serving individuals requires a debate on governance and coordination. Can European and national qualifications frameworks establish a political and institutional context allowing a diversity of institutions and stakeholders at different levels to interact according to shared objectives and a common direction?
- standards: will we need to redefine qualifications standards to serve a strategy on validation of learning outcomes? How should standards be designed and described in terms of capturing the highly diverse learning experiences and outcomes of individuals?
- education and training provisions: what kind of flexibility in programmes and teacher and trainer competences are required to deal with different proficiency levels and professional experiences of non-traditional learners?

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Accreditation of prior experiential learning in France: an evolving system with national characteristics

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Public policy, accreditation of prior learning, formal and informal learning, qualifications, stakeholders' strategies, education and qualification system, societal context

SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is to examine the French system of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) in the light of experiences elsewhere in Europe. We shall do so by determining the extent to which the institutional characteristics of the system and the way in which it is put into practice reflect some of the main French societal characteristics of the training and certification system and its place in the labour market. However, we shall also consider the extent to which this new system departs from the traditional system and meets new socio-political and economic challenges. The article is based on a reading of the law and on the initial analyses and data available.

Recognition of non-formal learning is a tool that many European countries are using in the context of lifelong learning. It may vary in form radically from one country to another. Each system is based on 'the organisation of political principles, the strategies of stakeholders and the rules and instruments. That system is then structured societally, in other words it takes on the form of a particular society' (Verdier, 2008).

APEL is not an entirely new concept in France. It is based on the traditional qualification system and has developed from the initial learning accreditation systems dating back to the 1980s. However, APEL has a number of new features. It opens up a new

pathway towards certification, which is in principle compulsory for all recognised forms of certification. It enhances the role of professional experience.

This article will report on the French APEL experience in the light of experiences in other European countries. We shall examine how far it is possible to talk of a French model of APEL, how far the institutional characteristics and methods of implementing APEL fit into the existing education and training system, and also how this innovation departs from that system and labour market rules. The article is based on a reading of the law and on the initial analyses and data available. It is not an evaluation of the APEL system, since the system was only developed between 2002 and 2003, its effects are still new and uncertain, and precise data are not yet available.

Although there is consensus on APEL among the various institutional stakeholders, the operation and use of this new system are still not clearly defined, allowing each of the partners to redefine their roles in the certification system (Part I). Individual access, results, achievements and filtering processes are indicative of the problems with the system (Part II). In a comparison with other European countries, the relationship between this new form of access to certification and the role of certificates in the training system and on the labour market can then be considered (Part III).

Strong consensus between stakeholders, different strategies

The principles embodied in accreditation of prior experiential learning are more or less common to all the stakeholders. However, the application and uses of the system are still ill-defined. Learning processes are being developed, allowing the various stakeholders to redefine their roles, and that process is not without its problems.

Principles of accreditation of prior experiential learning

In 1999 the Secretary of State for Vocational Training, Nicole Péry, took up the idea of accreditation of prior learning suggested by Michel de Virville in a report to the Ministry of Labour in 1996. The accreditation of skills, however they were acquired, needed to be promoted in order to improve access to qualifications and their award. Several arguments were put forward in the parliamentary debates (Assemblée nationale, 2000; Terrier, 2002). Access to

certification, whether through initial or continuing training, is very uneven. Certification is now a major factor in sustainable integration into working life. At the same time, with the rapid changes in the employment market, work experience is not sufficiently recognised by certification. Individuals and enterprises nevertheless need sound criteria for the assessment of skills and knowledge, particularly when a person is moving from one employer to another. There appears to be a need for tools to make the procedures more reliable. Thus APEL serves the dual purpose of combating uneven access and making the labour market more flexible.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning, based on the 2002 Social Modernisation Law (Law No 2002-73, 17 January 2002, Chapter II), in principle enables all individuals (employees, the self-employed, jobseekers, volunteers, civil servants) who can provide proof of at least three years' personal, professional or voluntary experience, whether continuous or intermittent, to have that experience recognised by a certificate without having followed a training course. That includes all certificates, vocational qualifications and other forms of certification included in the RNCP (*Répertoire national de la certification professionnelle* – National Register of Vocational Certification) set up at the same time as the APEL system.

The decisions taken on that occasion sum up the French model (Assemblée nationale, 2000; Terrier, 2002):

- Not introducing specific certification for the accreditation of prior learning; that is consistent with the French certificate model (contrary to the proposal by Michel De Virville). The APEL rules are to be incorporated in the Education Code, a clear indication of the priority given to the educational dimension.
- The idea is not therefore to create a separate system but to rely on the existing certificates listed in the RNCP, in order to make the system clearer. The aim is, firstly, to avoid competition between forms of certification and, secondly, to make certification available in a form that is systematically accessible via APEL.
- All existing certifications will in principle be eligible for accreditation, thereby avoiding conflicts between possible competitors in the certification system.

APEL is therefore an additional fourth method of certification, in the same way as initial school education, apprenticeship and continuing training. However, even if there is more or less a consensus on the principles of APEL, the same does not necessarily apply to the implementing arrangements and the allocation of roles and resources between the institutions involved.

Trade unions and employers: consensus on APEL principles, but not without debate

Trade unions and employers' organisations have supported the principles of APEL since 2002. In 2003, when the National Multi-Industry Agreement on access to lifelong learning for employees was signed, that concept was seen as an opportunity and as a means of promoting individual professional development. Under a supplement to the agreement (supplement 2 of 20 July 2005) APEL and the conditions for its implementation are to be developed, in particular through access to CQPs⁽¹⁾, opportunities for special APEL leave, and the possibility for company expenditure on APEL to be charged to the firm's training budget and/or an *Organisme Paritaire Collecteur Agréé* (Approved Joint Collection Body).

Most trade union organisations see APEL as a benefit for employees, particularly from the point of view of protection and promotion. They encourage access to APEL, provide funding and devise policies to support those involved in the procedure. Nonetheless, there has been – and still is – opposition in some sectors and for some occupations, especially those subject to 'occupational' access rules (where a qualification or certificate is required): concern that certificates will be devalued and a wish to adhere strictly to procedures, particularly in order to avoid the accreditation of 'unauthorised' experience.

For employers' organisations, APEL would make it easier to control training costs. Employees can gain accreditation of their professional experience without attending formal training sessions. Furthermore, even if the person gains partial rather than full accreditation for the certificate through the APEL procedure, a shorter period of training might be needed to obtain the rest of the certificate.

(¹) CQP: *Certificat de Qualification Professionnelle* (Vocational Qualification Certificate), introduced and awarded by industrial sectors and recognised by the collective agreement or the industry-wide agreement to which it relates.

In firms or sectors where a qualification is an important indicator, APEL is therefore a sensible alternative to formal training. In some undertakings, promoting an APEL policy might improve access to vocational training leading to a qualification and encourage internal mobility. Furthermore, since the emphasis is on work experience, APEL could become part of skills management policy and even an essential tool of that policy. Nonetheless it is not certain that APEL is accepted by all employers, especially when they are concerned that qualified workers will leave or be poached.

Similar problems arise with CQPs. Some CQPs are known to be very specific and others fairly general, competing with public certifications (Veneau, Charraud, Personnaz, 1999). Some trade unions and employers' organisations have expressed reservations about the inclusion of CQPs in the RNCP. Firstly, they objected to the procedure by which public qualifications would automatically be included in the RNCP and CQPs would not, on the grounds that certifications had to be treated equally since, in both cases, it is their involvement (vocational advisory committees, joint industry committees) that has given partial or full legitimacy to these certifications. Secondly, they do not want the control of CQPs to be removed from their industry, at the risk of some being abolished since they duplicate other qualifications in the RNCP. At present, at the request of the trade unions, CQPs may be obtained through APEL without having to be registered in the RNCP. The conflict seems to have abated since the first CQPs were registered. A number of industries now support and encourage APEL as a pathway towards a CQP.

Training and certificate providers: fear of competition for training

In most cases, training and certification providers have quickly managed to open up access to certification via APEL. This was mainly due to the fact that the changes to the design of qualifications had started well before that (especially the design of occupational and skills reference systems (Möbus, Verdier, 1997)) and systems pre-dating APEL had already been tested. In other organisations, such as the Ministry of Health, the change began more recently, but is progressing rapidly. In that case too, however, there have been and still are problems, reflecting both the priority given to initial

education and training in France (with which APEL is potentially competing) and the knowledge transmission/acquisition model, which is strongly biased towards formal training.

When the 2002 law was being drawn up, the Ministry of Education expressed serious reservations (Merle, 2007). Some of those problems stem from the lack of progress in developing APEL at university level. In some disciplines there is a 'not in my backyard' attitude: some feel that APEL is fine and appropriate for related disciplines but not their own. Some teachers and trainers see APEL as devaluing qualifications; the lack of formal training would mean that the standards of the knowledge and skills acquired could not be guaranteed. This was a particular concern when major social value is attached to the certification, for instance the qualifications obtained from the *Grandes Écoles* and *Écoles d'Ingénieurs* (Feutrie, 2003). Encouraging people to obtain partial certification might then be a solution, since candidates would have to follow training courses. As M. Pons-Desoutter (2007) pointed out in a Breton university, 'the panel system is essentially geared to partial accreditation'. Some training providers also fear that the APEL system will be more attractive than training courses. Young people might prefer to gain professional experience and only go back to obtain accreditation at a later date, a few years after failing the initial training. APEL would then reduce the flow of trained staff and hence of financial resources.

H. Lenoir (2002) further confirms the problems that have arisen in the universities. The system interferes with practices and a culture that have existed for centuries. Firstly, APEL alters how knowledge is acquired since it is now acquired through professional experience as well as formal training. Those two avenues now lead to equal recognition. New occupations and methodologies are emerging, such as support staff who specifically help candidates to present their experience. The issue is one of the legitimacy of the certificate obtained by APEL. The relationship to the public is also changing. Older and more experienced people with very different career paths will be applying to universities. The universities' relationship with the business world also has to change, as evidenced by the need to relate knowledge acquired at university to knowledge acquired through practice, and the requirement for professionals to sit on APEL panels.

The APEL law sets out the legal conditions for access to APEL, but it does not suggest ways in which the system might be operated in order to address the changes we have just outlined. The universities have therefore had to develop their practice at the same time as they deal with the large volume of APEL applications. That is why there are currently so many different practices, in terms of duration, information and support methods and also price (from EUR 100 to EUR 1 000).

APEL policy: government coordination needed

In view of the objectives set and the problems in implementing APEL, it became clear that coordination was needed (IGAS, 2005). An Interministerial Committee was therefore set up in 2006, with responsibility for planning, coordinating and monitoring the implementation and development of policy on APEL.

An APEL development plan has been drawn up. It provides, firstly, for the launch of a national information campaign in particular on the APEL procedure and on information points. The campaign targets not just individuals but also enterprises, to encourage joint APEL initiatives. The aim is also to simplify and coordinate the administrative procedure, in view of the differences in practice between the various certifying bodies. A national application form was therefore introduced. However, that by no means met with general approval, since all the certifying bodies had already introduced their own forms locally based on their own understanding of the APEL scheme. A support plan clarifying the role of support for accreditation departments and candidates was drawn up. Also with a view to increasing and facilitating access to APEL, a decree was proposed to enable panel members to be paid from vocational training funds. One of the main obstacles to the development of APEL is the difficulty of recruiting panels, since there is no provision in the law for them to be remunerated. Lastly, the State is targeting its financing policy for APEL procedures on the unemployed. Only unemployed workers receiving payments from UNEDIC (Unemployment Insurance Scheme) are eligible for funding. The Ministry of Labour is therefore to offer financial assistance to unemployed persons not in receipt of allowances. A budget of EUR 10 million has been announced.

As regards assistance for enterprises, the State does not provide specific APEL support. The main objective is to run a campaign to raise awareness, provide information and simplify the APEL scheme, as well as to publicise examples of successful collective APEL schemes in particular firms. To that end, a national framework

agreement on the development of APEL was signed on 15 February 2007 by the State, MEDEF, CGPME, UPA, UNAPEL ⁽²⁾ and 16 business sectors. The signatories recognised that APEL could be an important tool for dealing with the challenge of economic competitiveness and hence recognition of skills.

The State therefore has a specific and targeted involvement in the operation of the APEL system. APEL practice is being developed by the various participants in the system (such as the universities, regional authorities and support institutions). As will be explained below, it is therefore difficult to coordinate the various stakeholders and ensure that APEL practice is consistent nationally.

Regional authorities: managing a new system

A whole range of partners are involved in the vocational training system, at many different levels. A recent report raised the 'fundamental question of control of the vocational training system' (Sénat, 2007). APEL comes within the scope of vocational training policy and is a State initiative; it is an integral part of the system and is similarly multi-level and multi-partner. It therefore faces the same problems, ranging from conflicting prerogatives to mobilisation of various sources of funding.

Steps were taken to decentralise APEL policy from 2002 to 2004, but the regional authorities applied themselves to the task in different ways and at different rates. The 2004 Law on local responsibilities (Law No 2004-809) reiterated that regional authorities were to organise the information, advice and guidance network in their areas. Thus the regional authorities are theoretically in charge of coordinating APEL policy locally, but that is far from easy.

Various information, employment policy and training institutions provide information and guidance (stage 1 in Figure 1). Some come under the State, others under the regional authorities, others under local authorities or the social partners. The certification providers are also involved, since firms and individuals may apply to them direct (when stages 1 and 2 in Figure 1 are combined).

In order to merge some of those institutions, an official information and guidance network for APEL and continuing training has been

(2) MEDEF: *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* – Association of French Enterprises; CGPME: *Confédération Générale du Patronat des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises* – General Confederation of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Employers; UPA: *Union Professionnelle Artisanale* – Professional Union of Craftsmen; UNAPEL: *Union Nationale des Professions Libérales* – National Union for the Professions.

set up, initially mainly State funded and then gradually under the control of each region.

To take the example of the Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur region (PACA), this had 17 advice points in its area, mainly funded by the State. The regional authority decided to take over full responsibility for this policy only in 2006. It abolished the advice points in order to create a more extensive network in the area (80 institutions at stage 1; 100 for stages 2 and 3, see Figure 1 below). Most of the institutions are now funded mainly by the region. For instance it gives a fixed sum to the university to set up a counselling system (in evaluation stage 3) for jobseekers. The PACA region has decided to target the unemployed and issue chequebooks to pay for support, thus competing with/complementing State employment policy. However, support is a new activity that is still at the development stage. Hence financial assistance for support is in no way an indication of the quality of the service, particularly since that part of the scheme is still fairly unclear in the 2002 law. The Ile-De-France region, persuaded of the essential role played by support, supplemented by APEL chequebooks, is asking providers to explain the content of their support services to financial backers and beneficiaries, although without imposing any methodological rules (Micheau and Szatan, 2007). Some regions are focusing their efforts on other important aspects of schemes. The Centre region, for instance, aims to encourage a partnership approach, based in particular on a technical body whose role is to organise a technical dialogue on APEL between regional partners, and on a political body that is in formal charge of the technical work and validates processes as they are under way (Aventur, 2007). The object is to coordinate the work of the various APEL partners locally, in order to improve procedures and reduce the dropout rate.

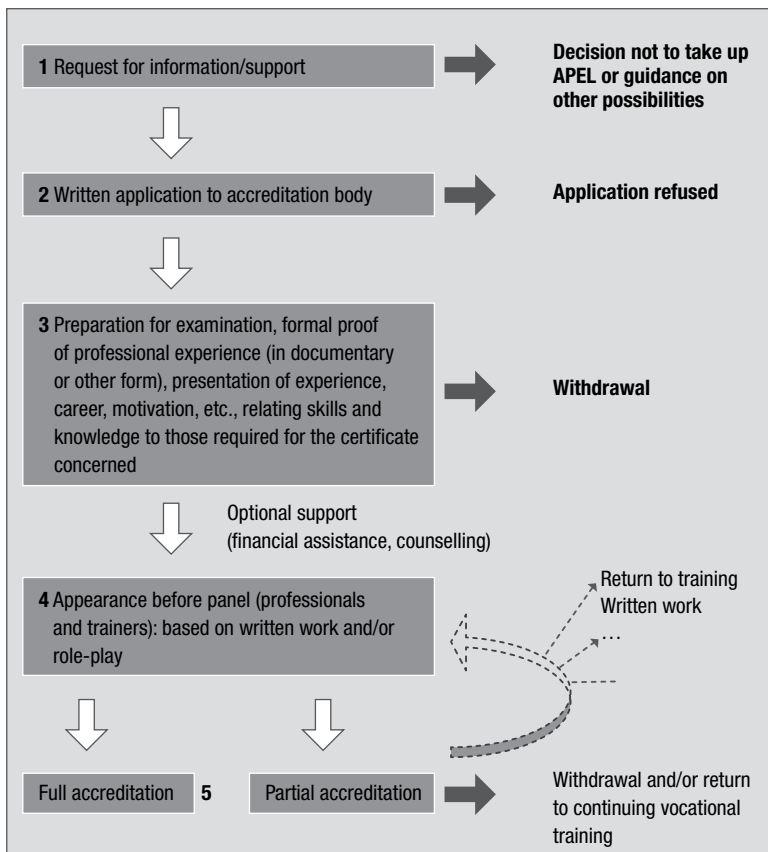
This complex picture results in a system that is still not clear to individuals or enterprises. It is difficult for them to find out with whom they should be dealing; there are overlaps between the institutions and their responsibilities, and financial support is sometimes unreliable. Thus there is consensus about the values of APEL, but a number of issues and problems still have to be resolved.

Individual APEL procedures

The APEL procedure can be broken down into several stages (Figure 1). Individuals usually begin the procedure by seeking

information (stage 1) from the bodies managed by the regional authorities or from the information services of the certifying bodies themselves. They then apply to a department that awards the qualification required (e.g. ministries and decentralised departments, chambers of commerce and industry) (stage 2). If the application for the required qualification is accepted (stage 3), applicants begin the process of obtaining accreditation for their experience, with or without support (preparing the application, presentation of experience, procedure, motivation, etc.). They then appear before a panel (stage 4) of professionals and trainers to explain their work (oral presentation and/or role-play), after which they obtain full or partial accreditation of his experience. In the first instance, the person leaves the APEL scheme and then takes further steps to

Figure 1. **APEL procedure: entering and leaving the scheme**



make the most of their qualification in employment and/or the training system (further study). In the second instance, if the knowledge represented by the experience appears insufficient, the person will have to appear before the panel again, having first carried out its instructions (written application, training period, etc.). A counsellor is sometimes appointed for that stage.

It is possible to leave or withdraw from the scheme at any stage.

Lengthy and difficult procedure

APEL is a 'lengthy and complex procedure, with uncertain results' (Kogut, 2006; Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005). As shown in the table below, not all applicants reach the stage of appearance before the panel. That suggests that there are several reasons for drop-out rates during the procedure and the APEL success rate.

We note, first of all, that requests for information and certifications awarded increased at the same time (by over 50 % between 2003 and 2006). Those figures point to increasing awareness of the scheme. The trend is also partly due to the extension of the range of possibilities (more ministries joining the scheme and new APEL certifications available). Furthermore, there was some concern as to the ability of the panels to deal with this new procedure. Questions might also be raised as to the risk of 'over-selectiveness' by panels, given the reservations of some trainers. That does not appear to be the case. Other more complex factors are at work to account for the dropout rate in the APEL process. When the number of certifications obtained is compared to the number requesting information, only 30 % of candidates validated the procedure by obtaining the required certificate. In view of the dropout rate at the various stages, the initial objectives are far from being achieved. Which seem to be the decisive stages?

In 2006, 20 % dropped out between acceptance of the application and appearance before the panel. That stage seems decisive. However, the rate is now going down by comparison with previous years. The scheme is becoming more efficient. Few candidates are dropping out between acceptance of their applications and appearance before the panel. In stage 3, are the candidates more competent than before? Are the participants more professional, is the support better, is the scheme easier to understand? Or are the candidates being more carefully selected when applications are assessed? On average, the dropout rate between the request for

	2006	2005	2004	2003
Stage 1: Number of requests for information at advice points	90 000	79 950*	79 907	44 714
Stage 2: Number of acceptable applications from people directed to APEL	60 000 33 % fewer than Stage 1	57 674	NA*	NA*
Stage 3: Presentation of experience/support	-	-	-	-
Stage 4: Number of applications considered by a panel	48 000 20 % fewer than Stage 2 47 % fewer than Stage 1	44 301 23 % fewer than Stage 2 44 % fewer than Stage 1	36 530 54 % fewer than Stage 1	24 900 44 % fewer than Stage 1
Stage 5: Number of certifications obtained	26 000 46 % fewer than Stage 4 71 % fewer than Stage 1	22 622 49 % fewer than Stage 4 72 % fewer than Stage 1	17 724 51 % fewer than Stage 4 77 % fewer than Stage 1	10 744 57 % fewer than Stage 4 75 % fewer than Stage 1

Source: Data from DGEFP report 2007 and works by Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005.
Source obtained from certifying ministries – DARES and CEREQ processing.

***Note:** Qualifications are being opened up gradually to APEL and certifying bodies have therefore introduced the APEL scheme at different rates. This makes it difficult to obtain complete figures from all ministries at every stage in the scheme, year by year. In addition, the trend in the figures can sometimes be attributed to a decline or improvement in data collection.

Interpretation: In 2006, the advice points received 90 000 requests for information and 60 000 applications were then submitted and accepted by a certifying body, i.e. 33 % of requests for APEL information are not followed up by entry to the scheme. 48 000 applications were then considered by the APEL panels, 20 % fewer than had joined the scheme at the beginning. Finally, we note that 26 000 candidates obtained certification; 46 % of the candidates who appeared before the panel failed and 71 % of those who had requested information withdrew.

information (stage 1) and appearance before the panel (stage 4) remains steady (about 50 %).

However, if the retention rate is increasing in the scheme between the acceptance of the application and appearance before the panel (stages 2 to 4), one of the issues crucial to the APEL scheme

therefore probably relates to the initial stages, the request for information and advice and the assessment of applications.

Requests for information do not necessarily lead on to the next stage. Although we have very few data for that stage, we note that, in 2006, 33 % of potential candidates withdrew between the information stage (stage 1) and the application assessment stage (stage 2). They decided not to proceed with APEL (through choice or because they were discouraged) or they were not directed towards or accepted for APEL because it was not appropriate for them (lack of experience, unsuitable project, etc.). Hence candidates are filtered out right from the start. Unfortunately we have very little information about that stage.

Finding one's way around the system and the range of possible certifications is still a difficult challenge for individuals and enterprises and appears to be a deterrent (Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005; Kogut, 2006 and DGEP, 2006). With such a wide choice of qualifications, it is not unusual for them to choose or be directed by an adviser to the wrong procedure or wrong qualification.

Enterprises also have internal selection procedures to ensure that the process is successful. They can filter out and select only the best candidates on the basis of personal records, standard of professional experience, difficulties with written and oral communication and so on.

Furthermore, the presentation of experience (stage 3) is a complex task, which might account for the fact that some candidates start the process but do not get as far as the panel. That stage raises the problem of 'recognition of skills applicable in the training world and those required in the world of employment' (Mayen and Métral, 2008). In their presentations (written work or role-play), the candidates, with or without support, have to explain the skills, abilities and knowledge they have acquired through experience and then relate them to the reference system for the required qualification. Thus the panels of professionals and trainers ultimately become a forum for debate between the two worlds (Mayen and Métral, 2008). Let us take a few examples. If candidates have not had the opportunity to use an essential resource in their work (relevant knowledge, correct equipment, correct method), they cannot show proof of the relevant skill when presenting their experience, but that does not mean that they do not possess that skill. Panels will have to find other ways of enabling them to demonstrate it (interview, document, etc.). They

will also have to agree on the significance of a particular ability (such as analytical ability). Throughout the discussion the panels will therefore list and indicate the significance of the skills and knowledge required to obtain the relevant qualification. Candidates will have to prepare for all this. It therefore seems entirely understandable that some are discouraged by the preparation (stage 3) even before they appear in front of the panel, given that the assessment criteria for the panel appearance are sometimes not clear. It is not clear how to prepare for something that the panels themselves are changing and adding to as they go along. Thus support for candidates seems vital for the presentation of experience, to enable them to prepare as thoroughly as possible for their panel appearance.

One of the main issues arising at this stage is whether or not this process is formative. If it merely 'formalises' knowledge already acquired, APEL is a process of identifying skills. If the process of presenting experience at that stage actually enhances the skills of employees and improves their cognitive and subjective abilities, giving an indication of their knowledge and skills (Lepître, 2005), then APEL is also a productive process and not simply a formalisation of knowledge. The latter view was already supported by some of the work on the old Validation des acquis professionnels (Accreditation of Prior Learning) scheme (Clot, 1999).

Comparing the success rates for the different qualifications sought by APEL candidates, it is noticeable that the rates vary considerably from one qualification to another and one speciality to another within the same qualification. For instance the success rate for CAPs ⁽³⁾ awarded by the Ministry of Education in 2005 is 71 % (DGEFP, 2007), as against 54 % for the BTS ⁽⁴⁾ from that Ministry. However, those success rates are very similar to those for continuing vocational training. Thus in 2005 (DGEFP, 2007) 81 % obtained a Ministry of Education CAP through continuing training, whilst 54 % obtained a BTS though continuing vocational training. However, the rates are sometimes less satisfactory for APEL, particularly for the *Brevet Professionnel* (41 % through APEL, compared with 70 % through continuing training). We note that those figures do not include partial accreditations. If these are not regarded as failures, the results with APEL will be even better.

In short, success rates are increasing and APEL is achieving

⁽³⁾ CAP: *Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle*, first level of qualification.

⁽⁴⁾ BTS: *Brevet de Technicien Supérieur*, two years after the school leaving certificate.

similar results to continuing vocational training. It might therefore be assumed that panels are not more selective than they are for continuing vocational training. It might also be suggested that the selection process prior to appearance before the panel is more rigorous with APEL and hence that the candidates are 'better' than those in the 'continuing training' system. However, it is impossible to test either of those assumptions on the basis of the data available at this stage.

The previous data and the work done on the APEL procedure (Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud; 2005; Kogut, 2006) show that success depends on a sensible use of resources in order for the process to be completed. The personal and financial investment it requires represents a considerable deterrent.

A supportive environment is essential. Candidates need sufficient information to decide on the right qualification and obtain support from enterprises and APEL institutions, especially in the complex stage of presenting the experience appropriate to the certificate required: counselling, financial assistance, self-confidence, a secure position. Clearly the negative effects of unemployment, such as lack

Financial and time costs

The length of the APEL procedure varies. It depends on individual choices and on institutional constraints. One of the main problems is the availability of panels in the final stage. Sometimes they meet only once or twice a year. The 2002 law does not provide for them to be paid, which tends to limit their availability even more. Several studies have shown that the APEL process can last from several months up to a year.

The process also requires a serious personal commitment, which will depend on the background of the individual, the type of qualification required and the assessment methods used (role-play or written work). The presentation of experience (stage 3) requires from 50 to over 100 hours' work. For candidates who are already in employment, a small part of that time can be taken from working hours, using special training leave. When the firm supports the procedure it will have no objection to the person taking leave. Other candidates will have to use their evenings and weekends to do the work.

The financial cost also varies, according to the type of qualification being sought and the situation of the candidate (working, unemployed, etc.). Candidates have to pay to register for the certificate, in the same way as students obtaining certificates through any other channel (from EUR 100 to over EUR 500). Added to that is the cost of support (stage 3), which, as explained earlier, helps to ensure the success of the APEL procedure. The cost varies; it may be free for some individuals whose circumstances qualify them for assistance, or may be as much as EUR 500 or more. That depends mainly on the institution that is providing the service and the methods (individual or group) used by the support staff, and on the duration (between a few hours and over 10 hours).

These financial and time costs might be met by candidates themselves or subsidised by the local authority (e.g. the APEL support cheques issued to the unemployed by the PACA Regional Council), or by the enterprise (the APEL costs will then be deducted from its statutory expenditure on vocational training).

of self-confidence (fear of failure) or domestic problems can be an obstacle to commitment to APEL. Some candidates will postpone the procedure until their circumstances improve.

Withdrawal by candidates might also be connected with their original motivation. If they were unemployed and the main aim was to find work, they might decide to drop out if they find another job during the procedure.

Finally, it must be emphasised that, when a candidate obtains a partial certification, he often returns to traditional formal training (Liaroutzos, Paddeu and Lozier, 2003). In fact, as is shown by the debates on individualisation (Correia, 2004 and 2005) and reliable procedures, the training available and the support arrangements are now proving very unsuited to modular training requirements linked to complex personal plans and partial accreditation of experience.

Personal motivation focused mainly on the labour market

In 2006, the qualifications most often applied for through APEL were in the field of personal services, at the lowest levels of certification (25.5 %). Unlike those for other certifying bodies (higher education, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Youth and Sport), the applications were mainly from women with few or no qualifications, reflecting the predominance of women in that sector. 8.2 % applications were for the BTS (Ministry of Education) and 2.5 % were applications for the qualification for work in the security sector (police option, Ministry of Education). It seems very clear that the APEL applications are aimed at directly improving the person's employment opportunities, since many of these qualifications are mandatory for such jobs.

In 2006 (DGEFP, 2007; Labruyère, 2006), one-third of the applicants were unemployed. The proportion of unemployed applicants is naturally higher for qualifications from the Ministry of Labour, which has concentrated its system and funding mostly on that section of the population. That confirms that the aim is directly to improve employment opportunities (protection and entry into working life for the unemployed and casual workers, as explained by Personnaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005).

Employed and already qualified candidates are more common at the Ministry of Education and particularly in further education (mainly Baccalauréat (*school leaving certificate*) level + 3 and Baccalauréat level + 4). These are often people who are changing jobs and wish to obtain social recognition and reduce the disparity between their actual work and their initial level of training. However,

although they are focused on direct benefits in the employment market (promotion, change of job, job security), they might also sometimes wish to undertake further studies, which are shorter under the APEL system (Pons-Desoutter, 2007).

In fact, those who have had initial training sometimes prefer the APEL route to the continuing vocational training route for obtaining certain qualifications. When the two are compared for Ministry of Education certificates in 2006 (DGEFP, 2007), most of those awarded a hotel and catering BTS (53 %) followed the APEL procedure. APEL accounts for a significant proportion of other certificates (37 % for the electrical engineering BTS and 42 % for the childcare CAP). Those figures can be explained partly by the fact that employees already working in the sector concerned have to obtain the qualification if they are to continue working. APEL would then seem more appropriate for them, especially when the certifying body has opted to use the role-play method in the appearance before the panel, for level V applications in particular (roughly equivalent to CAP, BEP).

Hence the main motivation of candidates is directly related to the labour market. It appears, therefore, that the role of the certificate in sustainable integration into working life and external mobility is generally accepted. However, other motivations more or less unrelated to the labour market, such as further study or the need for social recognition, are also involved. Thus APEL corroborates the model of the French certificate, in terms of both its external value and its internal value in the educational system.

According to a study by M. Pons-Desoutter (2007), APEL candidates at the universities are similar to continuing training candidates. They have initial training to a high level and also far more professional experience than the statutory three years. Finally, the motivations of university APEL candidates for all the certificates eligible for APEL are largely vocational (change of job, development, returning to work or continuing work) and the object is to save time. It is estimated that the time saved in obtaining the certificate is one year (Pons-Desoutter, 2007).

New rules in the job market

So how should the scheme, its characteristics and practices be assessed in the light of the main societal features of the training system and the labour market?

Let us look first of all at APEL in the European context. European schemes for the accreditation of informal learning are all aimed at greater recognition of the formative nature of work. However, their acceptance is slow and gradual and national experience varies widely (Feutrie, 2007). For instance, the schemes in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Greece are not yet operational. In Member States such as Hungary, Poland and Romania, the principle of accreditation is accepted but it is still at the trial stage. Experience in Germany and Austria, particularly with unqualified sections of the population, is targeted and not comprehensive. Spain, Italy and Estonia have gone further with their trials, but they are currently in need of methodology and specialised professionals. Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands favour the local, decentralised approach (Feutrie, 2007). The accreditation of learning is not a new concept there, but their practices have only some principles in common and are therefore very diverse. Other countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Finland, Portugal, Sweden, Norway) have managed to set up comprehensive schemes, but these are still in the early stages.

The effect of national training cultures seems to be the deciding factor. According to Feutrie (2007), this depends chiefly on the relationship between training and employment in the country concerned. That results in different forms of accreditation in terms of its results (special access, exemptions, credits and modules, award of certificates or certification) and the subject of the accreditation (knowledge, know-how, learning, general ability, etc.). The evaluation tools used will depend on those characteristics (compilation of supporting evidence, portfolio, records, on-the-job observation, interviews, traditional examinations). At the same time, the authorities operating the accreditation system vary from one country to another (reference institution, regional, national or sectoral authority).

Like most of the other European accreditation systems, the French APEL model therefore has two aspects.

The first relates to the type of skills/knowledge to be accredited. Schemes whose ultimate aim is in principle focused on the labour market may therefore be contrasted with those of a more educational nature.

In the first case, skills and knowledge are considered to have an immediate value in the labour market. Generally the aim is the accreditation of components of skills relating to basic tasks or functions. The elements are not necessarily connected to each other

or to the certification system involved in formal training. The British NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) are typical examples (Bessy, 2000). However, the trial scheme being developed in the Netherlands also appears to have the same characteristics, which are very different from those in the initial and continuing training system (Duvekot, Van Raai, 2007; Cedefop, Colardyn, Bjørnåvold, 2005). Cyprus is developing a system based largely on the British NVQ system (Isaias, 2007).

In the second case, although the 'labour market' objective still applies, accreditation is part of the national system of qualifications and certificates, the aim being to give equal status to accreditation and other avenues of formal training. One result is that the components of skills to be validated are generally broader and/or more interconnected. Partial accreditation is certainly possible (in France), but the main object is to obtain a qualification equivalent to initial training. That is the system in Norway and Sweden (Cedefop; Colardyn, Bjørnåvold, 2005; Bjørn, 2007; Fejes, 2007). There is continuity between the choices made for accreditation and those made previously for initial and continuing training.

The French APEL model is consistent with that approach, in that it does not introduce specific APEL qualifications. The main objective is to obtain a qualification equivalent to initial training. Nevertheless there is a slight difference, due to the internal variations in the system of qualifications and certificates. We know that a notable characteristic of the certificates awarded by the Ministry of Education is their dual purpose (education and the labour market). That will be less true of Ministry of Employment qualifications, which are geared solely to the labour market. However, the fact that these two types of certification coexist (with others) in a single national register and they are all classified by level, with a form of implicit equivalence allowing a diploma to be placed before a vocational qualification or vice versa, suggests that they should be equated.

The second aspect is the method of social recognition of qualifications and certificates. In some countries that is based chiefly on 'market' rules. The certifying bodies are part of a certification market. They are often independent of the training organisations. Confidence in their qualifications is based on a dual process: quality control, which is often undertaken by a different stakeholder (ISO standard quality control) and acceptance by the labour market. That model too is typical of the United Kingdom. In other countries, legitimacy depends on a form of regulation by central bodies,

whether it is the State, the social partners alone, or a more complex combination of the two. The design of qualifications and certificates in Norway, Sweden and France is more akin to this second model, although with significant differences that cannot be discussed here. Cyprus still appears to have strong central regulation, although it uses the NVQ model. The French APEL system is inspired by that model.

Thus the choices for the APEL model (e.g. no specific certification, a single RNCP, panels of similar composition, etc.) do indeed reflect the main societal characteristics of the French training system and the way in which it fits in with the labour market. However, APEL departs from the French model, notably by linking continuing training, accreditation of experience and a system of certification more characteristic of initial training, with a strict separation of initial and continuing training (Verdier, 2008). That difference, which, as we have seen, creates problems, relates mainly to the procedures for acquiring knowledge and skills. In the French 'educational' model (of which formal continuing training is an extension), knowledge is built up only through training. APEL offers a different route. It breaks away from the predominant idea of work that 'consumes' or even 'destroys' knowledge and suggests a different way of looking at work and accreditation of the skills acquired. In that sense, it challenges the French certificate system.

Conclusion

APEL is still a new policy, but its development is very much influenced by some of the main societal characteristics of the training and certification system and the labour market. That accounts for the difficulties experienced, the successes and failures.

Acceptance of the APEL certificate is based on the traditional French certificate model. APEL has inherited the problems caused by the dual value of the certificate, which explains, for instance, the numerous objections from the educational system and the different motives that can be identified for participation in APEL schemes (direct improvement of employment opportunities or other motivation).

APEL is also an integral part of public policy. It is one of the tools of active public employment policy. It follows the rules for the operation of the labour market and its recruitment policies, boosting

the role of the certificate. Finally, APEL is also influenced by the new stage of decentralisation of the education and training system, which reassigns the different roles.

However, this new system is a departure from the certificate system and thus meets new socio-political and economic challenges. It appears to go hand in hand with changes in the operating rules for the labour market, which in France has traditionally been dominated by the internal market. At a time of high unemployment, APEL could therefore be a way of responding to those trends as part of a policy for increasing external opportunities and possibly running down internal markets, whilst helping to make the procedure more reliable by formalising and reporting on experience. This individually focused system could change the position of workers, especially unemployed and unskilled workers, in the labour market and might (as explained earlier) offer a solution to manpower recruitment and redeployment problems (Triby, 2005).

However, in view of the failure rate and dropout rate throughout the APEL procedure, we have to consider the importance of individual responsibility in 'lifelong learning'. Especially since, as we have pointed out, very few firms have so far taken advantage of the scheme and the vast majority of applications are from individuals. Special attention therefore needs to be paid to support, both individually and in groups, when assessing the uses of APEL.

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APEL pathways: a passport to employment?

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SUMMARY

It would seem that most policies to promote the use of APEL as a certification method parallel to that offered by formal education and training systems are based on the belief that it is a less costly and shorter method, which is more attractive. Few countries, however, have convincing surveys or observations of the real advantages of APEL for individuals, employers or society as a whole. On the basis of a survey conducted by Dares (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques), Drees (Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques) and Céreq (Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications), this article aims to fill this gap by pinpointing some of the real benefits which applicants gain from embarking on and/or successfully obtaining APEL and the circumstances in which they obtain these benefits.

Keywords

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), France, employment, unemployment, labour market, data, quantitative survey

Introduction

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and its many terminological and conceptual variants (!) seems to be high up the political agenda in many countries. While the challenges are the same everywhere (immigration, mobility of students and workers,

(!) Validation of learning from experience or recognition of non-formal and informal learning are alternatives.

demographic decline, planned increases in working life around retirement age and the concomitant need for retraining, etc.), the way in which they are being met often differs. Two main features seem, however, to emerge from all the international literature on APEL: 1) most of the policies and programmes implemented are based on the belief that accreditation of prior experiential learning is useful for individuals and the various institutions in the broad sense: education and training systems or the labour market for instance (at best, there are pilot experiments and programmes, but without any real evaluation); and 2) there are almost no data to bear out or belie the merits of recognising knowledge and skills by accrediting prior learning ⁽²⁾. Here we are genuinely in the realm of faith.

There are ad hoc databases in many countries. These data are only rarely used to shed light on the benefits that people have gained from the accreditation of prior experiential learning and are never data from any representative survey of a particular population group, even if marginal. They are often data collected for administrative purposes, at best containing some information on candidates' profiles and futures. They tend to be compiled by people working in the field who are highly involved in their work rather than the fruit of a coordinated resolve to understand the mechanisms of accreditation of prior experiential learning and to pinpoint their potential benefits. The longitudinal dimension, which is the only way to find out whether there has been a return on the investment in APEL in the longer term, is, for instance, completely lacking.

While the concept of APEL seems to be an interesting, even promising, approach in various cases where there are problems in terms, for instance, of equity (right to a second chance and so on), there seem to be no arguments in support of its effectiveness in most other cases; these arguments nevertheless exist but have not so far been clearly demonstrated. If there is no evaluation of the benefits gained from accreditation of prior experiential learning, it could well come to grief if the visionaries, enthusiasts and other pioneers who are in practice keeping it afloat were to become weary of doing so because of a lack of supporting evidence based on objective benefits and to give up.

In this international landscape, France is an exception from various points of view. First, it has opted for a system in which any form of certification listed in the RNCP (*Répertoire national de la certification*

⁽²⁾ See Werquin (2007) for a discussion of the comparative costs of training and APEL.

professionnelle – National Register of Vocational Certification) may be obtained by APEL methods as well as by following courses in the formal education and training system. Not all countries have gone as far (although South Africa has opted for something similar), even those which, like France, are relative pioneers in the field of APEL (Norway and Australia for instance).

In France, APEL was initially introduced for people lacking qualifications recognised in the labour market where certification has tended to become more rather than less important (Dupray, 2000; Gautié, 2004; Giret, 2005). Recognising years of occupational experience has to be seen as a way of improving the labour market situation of workers in enterprise and unemployed people looking for work. That is in any case what seems to emerge from social rationales for embarking on APEL observed in qualitative terms (Quintero and Séchaud, 2006). If these tools are to be evaluated, statistical data are obviously needed. Ad hoc longitudinal data are the best way of testing some hypotheses of the effects that APEL may have on career paths from both an objective point of view (finding a job in the case of those of who do not have one, obtaining a pay rise) and a subjective one (how people feel about their experience of the procedure). This is the aim of this article.

The survey ‘Candidates’ pathways to accreditation of prior experiential learning’ conducted by Dares⁽³⁾, Céreq⁽⁴⁾, and Drees⁽⁵⁾ in 2007 made it possible to test some of these hypotheses. The survey undoubtedly broke new ground, as the data, because they were longitudinal and because the stress was placed on the APEL procedure and the earlier occupational situation, made it possible to go some way towards measuring what an APEL system can contribute to people’s careers. People who had been deemed eligible in the first half of 2005 for APEL for a level V diploma⁽⁶⁾, chiefly in the field of social work and healthcare, were interviewed for the survey in 2007. To be deemed ‘eligible’, applicants have to have

⁽³⁾ *Direction de l’animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques* (Directorate for Research, Studies and Statistics), Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity.

⁽⁴⁾ *Centre d’études et de recherches sur les qualifications* (Centre for Qualification Studies and Research).

⁽⁵⁾ *Direction de la recherche, de l’évaluation, des études et des statistiques* (Directorate for Research, Evaluation, Studies and Statistics) answerable to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity, the Ministry of Health, Youth and Sport and the Ministry for the Budget, Public Accounts and the Civil Service.

⁽⁶⁾ ISCED Level 2; chiefly the CAP (*Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle* – Certificate of Vocational Proficiency) and the BEP (*Brevet d’études professionnelles* – Vocational Studies Certificate).

worked on a paid, unpaid or voluntary basis, whether continuously or not, for a cumulative total period of at least three years in the field of the diploma, vocational qualification or vocational qualification certificate for which they are applying.

This survey provides a starting point for this article as it goes some way towards filling the vacuum surrounding evaluation and knowledge of the benefits of APEL. The question is then one of attempting to measure potential individual benefits from APEL (Section 5). Prior to that, the process by which prior experiential learning is accredited will be described and analysed (Section 2), positioned with respect to existing economic theories (Section 3) and data on APEL presented (Section 4).

Accrediting learning: context

Since measures to accredit prior experiential learning with a view to recognising and certifying experience gained in the labour market were introduced in 2002 under the Law on Social Modernisation, few statistical data have been produced to corroborate the real effects of this new instrument for enterprises and individuals. The lack of a standard system for data collection and processing of statistics common to the various certifying bodies also hampers quantitative analyses of applications for qualifications and their acquisition by this method (Labruyère, 2006).

In 2005, fewer than 58 000 of the over 70 000 applications lodged with the five main certifying bodies (Ministry of Education: from the CAP ⁽⁷⁾ to the BTS ⁽⁸⁾), as well as the Ministries of Labour, Social Affairs, Youth and Sport and Agriculture), were deemed eligible. 12 000 applicants, i.e. 17 %, were thus eliminated by the eligibility criterion (three years of work) which is common to many countries and is often formulated in the same way – or also in terms of age. In that same year, close on 21 000 diplomas or qualifications were acquired from these ministries by APEL. Internationally, all the countries which have introduced procedures of the APEL type have obviously done so because they believe there may be benefits for individuals, enterprises and society as a whole. Research work to test the accuracy of such hypotheses has to rely, however, on very

⁽⁷⁾ Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle, ISCED Level 2.

⁽⁸⁾ Brevet de technicien supérieur (Advanced Technical Certificate), ISCED Level 5B.

few data. Even those countries with the most advanced statistical systems (Norway, for instance) still have no survey of this issue and only a few local initiatives (in Australia, for instance) have managed to shed a very partial light on the ins and outs of APEL procedures.

In the first instance, even in the case of the survey used here, which nevertheless represents major progress, it is difficult to provide figures for APEL because the data are not comparable as they come from different certifying ministries whose collection methods have not been standardised (Labruyère, 2006). Surveys by private certifying bodies present even more problems, especially as they are in no way mandatory (DGEFP, 2007).

A first level of statistical information concerns the volume of requests for information on this new way of obtaining qualifications and certificates. Potential applicants can follow two avenues: the PRCs (*Points relais conseils* – Advice Points) set up to meet the growing demand for information on APEL, and the information services of accrediting bodies. Close on 80 000 people requested information and advice on APEL from the PRCs in 2004, half of whom were helped to embark on an actual procedure (Labruyère, 2006, 2007). Qualitative investigations show that people who had requested information, but did not take the process any further, did so largely for reasons to do with financing the APEL procedure (Personaz, Quintero and Séchaud, 2005). From the point of view of the information departments of the Ministry of Education's specialist divisions (DAVA, *Dispositif académique de validation des acquis* – Academic System for Accreditation of Prior Learning), again in 2004, close on 85 000 people requested information on APEL and over 50 000 dossiers were compiled, some 36 % of which were examined by a panel (Labruyère, 2007). To place these figures in context, it should be borne in mind that in 2004, taking all certifying ministries together, some 38 000 people applied for APEL (Labruyère, 2007). The main certifying ministry is the Ministry of Education: some 19 000 applications were lodged in 2004 with a success rate of 56 % (Labruyère, 2006). In 2006, taking all ministries together, some 60 000 applications were eligible and over 26 000 certificates were obtained by APEL (DGEFP, 2007). Overall, one-third of applicants were jobseekers (Labruyère, 2006). The proportion of jobseekers nevertheless varies depending on the qualifications for which people are applying. At the Ministry of Labour, 7 out of 10 applications for APEL came from jobseekers (Bonaïti, 2005).

The main levels for which people apply for APEL are levels V and IV ⁽⁹⁾, although it is often possible to gain certification at level III by APEL ⁽¹⁰⁾. In the local education authorities, 58 % of applications were for a level IV or V qualification. The figure varies for the different certifying ministries, and may be as much as 100 % (Labruyère, 2007). Overall, level V seems to attract most applicants for APEL, accounting for 40 % of applicants in 2004 (Labruyère, 2006). This seems to show that APEL is being used to meet the certification needs of people initially having few qualifications and its use would therefore seem to be in keeping with the goals laid down in the 2002 Law on Social Modernisation. Around 50 % of applicants successfully obtain certificates, although the figures vary for the different certifying ministries (Table 1) and for different qualifications.

Even though the demand for APEL seems to be growing and is heavily concentrated on some level V certificates such as the CAP in nursery nursing, the vocational qualification for care workers and the DEAVS ⁽¹¹⁾ (some 20 % of accreditations in 2005 were for the DEAVS), it is still not possible to speak, in the case of level V

Table 1. Levels of certification by APEL by ministry, 2004

Overall, diploma success rates are quite variable

Certifying ministries	Success rate (as %)
Ministry of Education	
• Local education authorities	56
• Higher education	28
Labour	39
Social Affairs	48
Total (including Youth and Sport, Agriculture)	49

Source: Labruyère (2006).

qualifications, of a certification route which clearly rivals the continuing training route which remains the main way of obtaining a certificate outside the initial education and training system. The vocational baccalaureate is perhaps the qualification for which the number of certificates issued by APEL methods offers the most competition to

⁽⁹⁾ ISCED Levels 2 and 3.

⁽¹⁰⁾ ISCED Level 5. A very diverse range of certification is available and varies considerably in terms of level in different sectors.

⁽¹¹⁾ *Diplôme d'Etat d'auxiliaire de vie sociale* - State Diploma for Social Care Workers.

the more conventional route of continuing training, although there are still major disparities (APEL accounting for 22 % and continuing training for 47 %, Labruyère, 2007). Labruyère (2007) notes that APEL accounts overall for 12 % of certificates of the vocational baccalaureate, CAP, BEP, *mention complémentaire* (one-year top-up course) or BTS type. Although the goals set out in the 2002 Social Modernisation Law are geared towards developing certification through the accreditation of learning, this kind of certification continues to be marginal. This has to do, however, with broader concerns such as improving access to qualifications and the goal that French education policy has been pursuing for some decades now of stepping up the number of qualified people among the population which, from the point of view of APEL, cannot but raise questions about the value of certificates awarded by this method (Maillard, 2007). This goal of increasing the proportion of people/workers certified by APEL is an attempt to provide more of a match between qualifications and work (Maillard, 2007), although the work that Céreq has been conducting for many years, especially on the first few years following completion of initial education (Giret, 2005), tends to show the ongoing lack of any strict match in the training/work relationship.

Accrediting learning: theoretical avenues for interpretation

According to the foundations of human capital theory, an increase in the quantity of knowledge, skills and competences should be reflected by an increase in individual productivity and therefore by an increase in pay. While human capital theory has been drawn on extensively to explain the return from participation in continuing training courses, it only touches on the nature of the relationship between training, employment and pay and does little to explain this relationship. In the case of accreditation of prior learning, there is no investment, properly speaking, in human capital but rather a recognition of knowledge, skills and competences by certification, clearly demonstrating the dividing line between training and certification. In theory, in the APEL process, there is no production of human capital which would give applicants cause to hope for a pay rise. From a strictly theoretical point of view, there is a basic difference between the anticipated effects of taking part in continuing training and registering for a learning accreditation procedure. This

is also true from the point of view of enterprise, which is likely to see productivity gains if continuing training is developed within the organisation (Delame and Kramarz, 1997; Aubert, 2006), even if, from the point of view of the individual, the pay return is low. Since there is no increase in individual productivity in APEL processes, they are likely to have an impact elsewhere, probably on human resource allocation in the enterprise and the reorganisation of continuing training policy, especially for people who have not obtained full certification. This could bring about a divide between certified and non-certified workers within organisations, especially in those trades covered by regulations requiring workers to obtain a diploma or to possess a certified qualification. Moreover, continuing vocational training practices in enterprise could be affected because they are competing with another certification method (Lecourt and Méhaut, 2009), especially if continuing vocational training is geared more to short training schemes for adaptation to a job (Source: *Enquête 'Formation continue'* 2000, INSEE, Céreq).

For individuals, the award of a certificate, like currency which can be spent in the labour market, should lead them to hope for gains from the point of view of external mobility. It is because people who have just been awarded a certificate are making their knowledge, skills and competences visible to enterprises in the market that they are in practice likely to obtain a better wage in a different enterprise. APEL could then offer a point of reference in opening up a new channel for transferability of qualifications (see also Labruyère and Rose, 2004). However, from the point of view of human capital theory, if the applicant for APEL stays in the same enterprise after receiving a certificate, there is in theory no reason for the enterprise to award a pay rise since there is no increase in human capital and therefore in individual productivity, unless the enterprise offers a pay rise through some kind of mechanism to encourage loyalty. APEL may also be considered to be a learning process in itself and thus becomes a mechanism for revealing latent productivity which had up to then been overlooked. In any case, it is clear here that it becomes even more difficult to distinguish between a human capital effect and a signalling effect, as explained by Spence (1973), in the market (Willis, 1986).

If there is an information imbalance between employers and people seeking to accredit their learning, obtaining a certificate should resolve this problem. Employers would be better able to gauge the competences of applicants and therefore to filter the labour supply. It would thus be in the interests of enterprise employees

to have their experience accredited so that they can send a better signal of themselves in the labour market with a view to internal or external mobility. For jobseekers, failing to find work may be the result of shortcomings in the signals they send to employers. In their case, accreditation of prior learning would be a way of acquiring a signal which removes doubts about their personal competences (knowledge, skills and competences) and therefore increases their chances of finding a new job.

From the point of view of this signalling approach, certification as the production of a signal of transferable skills should lead employers to re-allocate their workforce through promotions or movements within the enterprise, since the accreditation of learning should make the market more fluid because it makes transitions easier (Labruyère, 2007). At the same time, people are better able to apply for other posts in the enterprise as they know more about their own competences, although a competence is not fundamentally defined by the award of a certificate or qualification. In the context of learning accreditation, there is a growing link between competences (seen as a set of skills) and qualifications (level of certification needed to occupy a post), especially in a context in which wages are becoming more individual, length of service is playing less of a role and competences are to some extent becoming more important than systematic advancement based on length of service (Béret and Lewandowski, 2007; Labruyère, 2007; Lemistre, 2003).

The job-competition model (Thurow, 1975) offers a different kind of argument with similar consequences. In this set of theoretical hypotheses, productivity is not individual but inherent in the occupational post. Employers then have to adjust individual abilities to the abilities required by the post. In this particular model, employers will obviously attempt to minimise adjustment costs and recruit those applicants with the best qualifications whose adaptation and training is likely to cost the least. In this framework, qualifications are felt to be more valuable than experience of the activity. Certification by APEL may then mean that people start to compete for jobs which are not open to them because they do not possess the required qualification or certificate attesting to the required abilities and signalling their ability to adapt to the post, even though these applicants had and continue to have these individual competences. Employers then re-evaluate the individual abilities (knowledge, skills and competences) of their employees on the basis of the training that they have attended and/or, for our purposes here, a learning accreditation procedure.

There should therefore be greater prospects of mobility for applicants who have successfully completed the process as well as internal promotion in the enterprise. On the one hand, enterprises prefer to reduce recruitment costs by promoting in-house employees and, on the other, the range of jobs available increases and opens up prospects for external mobility.

Both employed workers and the unemployed can weigh up benefits and risks (Eicher and Mingat, 1975), starting from the assumption that not everyone with the same abilities will embark on an APEL procedure. Those less averse to risk and, perhaps we can moot the hypothesis, those with the best initial education, will be more inclined to embark on an APEL procedure because they feel that the return from doing so outweighs the assessed/potential risks of failure. Generally speaking, in the case of continuing training, those with the highest standard of education seem to benefit the most from continuing training policies, as employers prefer to invest in employees whose ability to learn raises fewer doubts (OECD, 2003 and 2005). The argument in favour of this trade-off between benefits and risks is also borne out by the fact that, if employers are averse to risk, training efforts will be focused on populations for whom the marginal return from training will probably be low but 'assured'. i.e. those populations who are already well trained, rather than non-qualified people for whom an investment in human capital would undoubtedly be more profitable but would be riskier.

As a result, it is likely that selection, or even self-selection, mechanisms will play a part in qualifications or certificates awarded by APEL methods and it will be necessary to measure the effects of APEL if these selection effects are to be monitored. That is the purpose of the econometric work presented below.

A pioneering survey system: the Céreq-Dares-Drees survey

The survey 'Candidates' pathways to accreditation of prior experiential learning', conducted in January 2007 in the context of a tripartite project involving Céreq, Dares and Drees, was intended to describe applicants for APEL preparing for a level V qualification, their career path and the stages of their pathway through the APEL procedure. In doing so, the survey helped to shed light on the discrepancies observed between the number of eligible applicants and the number

of certificates awarded. Bearing in mind the problems raised by any evaluation of the success of APEL schemes because so few data are available (the various ministries' monitoring systems are not at all standardised), this survey system was also intended to measure the effects of APEL on applicants' occupational situations after they had completed the APEL procedure. The sample was drawn from applicants eligible for APEL for the level V qualifications and certificates of the Ministries of Education, Labour, Social Cohesion and Housing and Health between 1 January and 30 June 2005. The survey thus covered a period ranging from 18 to 24 months, during which the applicants were undertaking their accreditation procedure. At the end of the period, there were several main cases depending on whether accreditation was total or partial, whether applicants were waiting to sit examinations or had abandoned the procedure. A questionnaire covered their occupational situation on the date of the survey and made it possible to compare occupational situations before and after the APEL procedure.

In this sample, 87 % of applicants were women with an average age of 40 (35 for men). The certificate for which they were preparing was often a State diploma for social care workers (30 %) or healthcare assistants (28 %), women accounting for the vast majority of applicants. More or less the same proportion of people were preparing for a Ministry of Education level V qualification or diploma in some cases concerning personal services trades (14 % were preparing for CAP in nursery nursing with additional home care or a BEP in health and social careers). Close on three quarters of applicants had left the initial education system at level V, V with diploma or Vbis ⁽¹²⁾, and 12 % had no qualification chiefly because they had found a job and/or did not wish to continue their education.

At the time of embarking on their accreditation procedure, 88 % of applicants were in employment and 11 % were unemployed. Of the applicants in employment, 40 % were direct personal services employees, 54 % of whom were working for associations and 39 % were civil employees and public service workers (mainly in the public hospital service). On average, they had entered the labour market at the age of 19, and 50 % had been in their jobs for more than nine years when they embarked on their accreditation procedure. Applicants who were unemployed when embarking on the accreditation procedure had been looking for a job for an

⁽¹²⁾ Level V diplomas: 28 %; below level V: 57.3 %.

average of one year following redundancy (38 %) or termination of a contract (32 %). 70 % of applicants said that they were looking for a job linked to the qualification or diploma for which they were seeking accreditation and 30 % were looking for any job whether or not linked to the qualification or diploma.

In the case of employees, the initiative to embark on the procedure had often come from the employer, either as a result of information which the enterprise had received (32 %) or because the procedure had been proposed directly by a hierarchical superior (26 %). In 35 % of cases, the initiative had not come from the employer, but was down to personal choice (62 %) or the result of advice from friends and family (18 %); advice from a training body was relatively rare (5 %). When the initiative had come directly from the enterprise, it was often the case that other enterprise employees had also embarked on an APEL procedure, although the decision to do so was not the result of any dissemination effect. Employee applicants had, moreover, embarked on an APEL procedure chiefly to obtain better recognition in their job or career advancement.

Personal choice also played a major role in explaining why people had embarked on an APEL procedure among the unemployed (50 % citing this reason), although employment intermediaries played a role which was almost as important. The hope of better chances of finding a job or a new job or the fact that the job being sought required a particular qualification or diploma provided the motivation to embark on an APEL procedure in many cases.

Ultimately, at the time of the survey, after two years of the APEL procedure, 41 % of applicants had obtained the qualification or diploma they were seeking; the best success rates had been for the other Ministry of Education level V qualifications (60 %), the CAP and BEP outside the health and social field, the care worker's diploma (53 %) and the social care worker's diploma (45 %). Among applicants preparing for a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma (DPAS) only 15 % had obtained accreditation, although this low rate can be explained by the fact that a large number of applicants were waiting to sit examinations at the time of the survey (45 %); 30 % had nevertheless obtained partial accreditation. The applicants who had obtained their qualification or diploma tended to be younger than the average (36) and already to have a level V diploma. The success rate of applicants already possessing a level V diploma from initial education was 47 % in comparison with 32 % for applicants embarking on an APEL procedure with no qualification. Mentoring

of applicants by a specialist body during the APEL procedure also tended to improve the chances of obtaining certification. Among applicants who had been mentored, 51 % obtained their diploma, whereas if they had not had any mentoring, the success rate fell to around 35 %. This indicator shows that applicants often find these APEL procedures to be 'complex and difficult' (Quintero and Séchaud, 2006).

At the time of the survey, 90 % of people embarking on APEL had a job. For the most part, applicants who were in employment when embarking on APEL were still employed at the time of the survey (94 %) – whether or not they had obtained the qualification or diploma they were seeking – and 17 % had changed employer or post. Around one-third of applicants in employment at the time of the survey said that they had received a pay increase, their work was more interesting or they had more responsibility in comparison with the last job that they had occupied. Pay increases were especially frequent if applicants had obtained their qualification or diploma by APEL: 47 % said that they had received a pay increase when they obtained accreditation, whereas 23 % had not had a pay increase. Lastly, in the case of unemployed applicants, less than two-thirds had found a job and 38 % were still unemployed.

Measuring the effects of APEL: proposals and evaluation

The effects of APEL can be measured in many ways from different indicators. People unemployed at the time of the procedure have been analysed separately, since a return to work is a natural way of measuring the effect of APEL. In the case of employed workers, APEL has more of an effect on internal or external mobility, job promotion or increased satisfaction from the post occupied. It is not possible to measure the effects of APEL without addressing the tricky problem of the endogenous selection of applicants. In all likelihood, those who embark on an APEL procedure are more likely to succeed in developing their careers. However, tackling this question would make it necessary to obtain information from people undertaking APEL and people with similar profiles who have not undertaken APEL. The data used relate only to eligible applicants. Part of this endogenous selection obviously eludes modelling, but an effort has been made to control differences in pathways between

those completing their APEL procedure and those abandoning it. Without this control, it would be possible to attribute a positive effect on careers to APEL without running the risk that the effect on career paths is down to the characteristics of those successfully completing APEL procedures. Although imperfect – like many databases – the data used make it possible to go some way towards demonstrating that APEL generates positive effects irrespective of applicants' characteristics.

APEL as a factor in returning to employment

At the time of embarking on an APEL procedure, 11 % of people were unemployed; 38 % of these had found a job during the survey period. What effect did the award of certification have on the speed of return to employment? To answer this question, we estimated a model of length of unemployment from information about the length of unemployment at the time of embarking on APEL and the length of APEL. The outcome of the period of unemployment is given by the situation at the time of the survey, i.e. a return to employment or continued unemployment (censoring).

A non-parametric estimate of the speed of exit from unemployment is given by the survival function (Graph 1) and the risk function ⁽¹³⁾ (Graph 2), depending on whether the qualification was obtained (qualification=1) or not (qualification=0). Applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL methods ⁽¹⁴⁾ gained employment more rapidly, at least in the first year and a half of unemployment. Moreover, the increasing form of the risk function of exit from unemployment of applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL shows that exits from unemployment increase as the length of unemployment increases and that probability levels are higher than for unemployed people not obtaining a qualification.

In order to measure the dimensions which have an impact on the probability of exit from unemployment, a parametric model with proportional risks (of the Weibull type) was estimated (Table 1). In addition to control variables such as the qualification or diploma targeted by the APEL, the level of initial education, gender and age, several other explanatory dimensions were introduced to test the effect of APEL on exits from unemployment. First, a variable

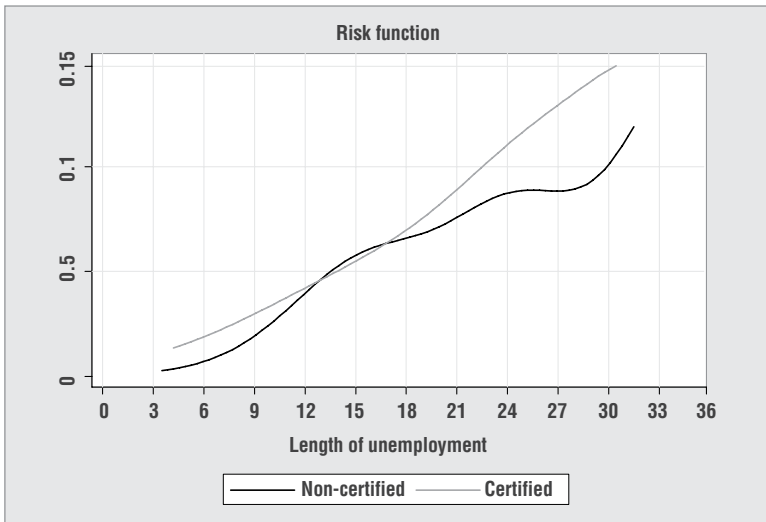
⁽¹³⁾ The risk function is smoothed in this case by the core technique.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Tests of survival difference according to the stratification variable (certification in this case) show that survival functions differ substantially from one another at a threshold of 5 %.

Figure 1. **Time unemployed function**
People accredited by APEL are unemployed for shorter times



Figure 2. **Unemployment exit risk function**
People accredited by APEL generally exit unemployment more quickly



relating to award of the certificate, expected to have a positive effect on exits from unemployment. The length of the APEL procedure may have an effect on the return to employment and two underlying factors may also be involved. On the one hand, it can be assumed that the longer the APEL procedure takes in terms of time, the more the chances of certification decrease. On the other hand, when the length of the APEL procedure increases, the length of unemployment also increases. It is then possible to cite the more conventional link between length of unemployment and probability of a return to employment to explain the lower chances of returning to employment as time passes. Lastly, it is likely that applicants with more experience of employment gain employment more rapidly, i.e. either here again by means of the certification variable – more experienced people will have better chances of obtaining certification – or because of the positive relationship between experience and exits from unemployment irrespective of any link with APEL.

The model estimation tends to bear out the hypotheses that have been mooted. In other words, obtaining a qualification or diploma by APEL has a positive impact on exit from unemployment: applicants obtaining full accreditation for their diploma have 33 % more chance of finding a new job than those obtaining partial accreditation or no accreditation at all. From this point of view, accreditation of prior experiential learning is an asset when looking for a job. It should also be borne in mind that nationally, taking all certifying ministries together, around one-third of applicants for APEL are looking for work, which shows that the APEL system is very attractive to jobseekers whose main goal is to return to work (Labruyère, 2006). However, when the procedure starts to lengthen, the positive effect of certification diminishes with the result that a 'successful' procedure has to be both short and culminate in the award of the diploma. It is possible to add to this rather general comment that younger applicants – as well as older applicants to a lesser extent and for different reasons, motivation being the main factor for younger people and experience for older people – exit unemployment more rapidly than the intermediate age groups. Experience in terms of employment has effects opposite to those that might have been expected. It is the least experienced who exit unemployment most quickly. The hypothesis here is that competition for jobs may work against older people who may be seen to be less adaptable to changing activities and for whom too much experience may mean that knowledge, skills and competences have been wiped out or have become obsolete. It can also be seen that

the estimation of the Weibull model scale parameter shows that the risk function first tends to increase then to decrease ($\rho > 1$): i.e. the unemployment exit risk starts to increase and then decreases if no job is found. There is therefore a threshold effect which has been observed on many occasions as regards data comparable with length of unemployment. In reality, the estimated form of the risk function probably comes from a mixture of different forms of risk for applicants obtaining certification and those not obtaining it. In the first case, the function tends to grow more, while for applicants who have not obtained a full qualification, the unemployment exit risk continues to be constant with the length of unemployment.

Table 2. Estimation of the unemployment exit risk – Time model
 Obtaining certification by APEL makes it easier to exit unemployment more quickly but the longer the APEL procedure continues, the longer unemployment continues

Weibull model, n=509	Risk ratio	P > z	Mean
Certification	1.33**	0.029	0.38
Length of the APEL procedure	0.91***	0.000	9.8
State diploma for social care workers (DEAVS)	1.23	0.260	0.12
Vocational diploma for healthcare assistants (DPAS)	1.16	0.531	0.08
Ministry of Education diploma	1.26	0.105	0.43
Care worker and other qualifications (reference)	-	-	0.37
Initial level of education 3 or 4	0.979	0.925	0.18
Initial level of education 5 bis	1.32	0.205	0.24
Initial level of education 5 with diploma	1.14	0.570	0.20
Initial level of education 5 without diploma	1.18	0.446	0.26
Initial level of education 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Age between 20 and 39	1.41**	0.019	0.25
Age between 40 and 49 (reference)	-	-	0.50
Age over 50	1.33*	0.067	0.25
Man	1.09	0.605	0.20
Lives with partner	1.14	0.329	0.70
Occupational experience of less than 5 years	2.14***	0.000	0.27
Occupational experience of between 5 and 10 years	1.34**	0.044	0.35
Occupational experience of more than 10 years (reference)	-	-	0.38
Choice of qualification being studied	1.88***	0.000	-
Scale parameter (P)		-415.7	-
Log-likelihood value			

***: parameter significant at 1 %; **: parameter significant at 5 %; *: parameter significant at 10 %

Effect of APEL on pay increases: a recognised channel of certification (Table 3)

Competing theoretical hypotheses (human capital theory, filter or signalling effect) together help to forge the idea that certification by APEL could be expected to have a positive effect on pay. While the survey did not include information on pay levels before and after the APEL procedure, whether or not applicants received a pay increase is nevertheless known from a qualitative point of view. Such an increase may be the result of success with the APEL, the APEL procedure itself or length of service. To try to separate out these effects, the model then includes a variable indicating APEL certification and a variable measuring length of service. It may also be argued that applicants with the most experience of the job for which they were seeking to have learning accredited had, as a result, the best chances of success with the APEL procedure, which would interfere with the estimation of the parameters relating to certification and length of service. A solution to this problem is jointly to estimate two equations, one estimating the probability of obtaining the qualification or diploma (taking account of length of service) and the other estimating the probability of a pay increase (taking account of the award of certification and length of service). In the second equation, length of service is eliminated from the effect of certification. This estimation method – a recursive bivariate Probit model (Table 3) – also makes it possible to take account of the fact that, potentially, the characteristics which have an impact on obtaining the diploma are to some extent the same as those explaining pay increases and therefore to remove these common dimensions from the estimation of the probability of a pay increase ⁽¹⁵⁾. The estimation shows that the error term correlation is significant and positive ($\rho > 0$), with the result that the same unobserved characteristics help to improve the chances of certification and pay increases (motivation, etc.).

Let us look in the first instance at the variables which have an impact on the probability of obtaining the qualification or diploma being sought. First, depending on the diploma for which applicants are studying by APEL methods, there are unequal chances of obtaining it. Fewer people managed to obtain a State social care worker's diploma and/or a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma; one reason, in the case of these diplomas, may be that examinations had not all been held at the time of the survey. For some diplomas,

⁽¹⁵⁾ Bear in mind that these common dimensions may be observed (and controlled in the model) or unobserved (in which case they are controlled by the error terms of the two equations).

this means therefore that APEL is not harder to obtain, but that the procedure may be lengthier. Among the people studying for a vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, almost half were still waiting to sit examinations. The level of education nevertheless has a clear impact on the probability of certification. The better educated (level III and IV) and those holding level V vocational education and training diplomas obtain certification more easily than those who left school with a lower level of education. This would tend to show that APEL does not make it possible to correct differences in educational pathways but rather reinforces the disparities between those with and without diplomas, even though the need to offset unequal access to education and training was one of the main goals to be achieved by introducing the system of accreditation of prior learning (Lichtenberger and Merle, 2001). Mentoring during the procedure may nevertheless counterbalance the effects of initial education, since there is a positive coefficient which is among the highest in the estimation. Successfully obtaining APEL, considered to be difficult, is thus conditioned to a large extent by the possibility of mentoring during the procedure. Moreover, a long APEL procedure is symptomatic of lower chances of obtaining the diploma, undoubtedly because people may become discouraged and abandon it ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Taking this a step further, the role played by the circumstances in which people embark on an APEL procedure also differs if applicants were in stable employment in the labour market or if the initiative for the procedure essentially came from their superiors. While, in this case, the effects are positive, when applicants are choosing between several diplomas for accreditation purposes and have decided to embark on an APEL procedure on the advice of their family and friends or their work colleagues, the chances of success are smaller. These indicators may point to people embarking on APEL procedures for reasons which are less structured around a career plan which, as we know, plays a key part in assessment by APEL panels ⁽¹⁷⁾. It would seem that the reasons for embarking on APEL are crucial

⁽¹⁶⁾ If the mentoring rates of applicants for an APEL procedure are compared with those who have taken examinations, it seems that mentoring plays a role in the length of the accreditation procedure: 51 % of those interviewed by the panel had been mentored in comparison with 44.1 % among all applicants deemed to be eligible.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Other investigations would be helpful here since procedures of different types are involved: either mentoring by the employer or individual mentoring not supported by the enterprise, each of which involve very different levels of mentoring. One key factor is probably the allocation of funds and resources.

to the success of the procedure, and these reasons may involve promotion, retraining, protection or integration, to take up the terms used by Séchaud (2007). While Séchaud (2007) points out that people embarking on APEL tend to be in unstable or insecure situations – especially those embarking on APEL for reasons of protection – the survey data show that APEL has the most beneficial effects among people in the most stable employment.

Once the differences explaining the achievement of APEL certification have been controlled, the method used here makes it possible to measure the effect of certification on chances of pay increases. It is interesting to note that applicants successfully obtaining their diplomas then saw a positive trend in their pay whether or not certification was obtained earlier or later in the APEL procedure, although this effect increases with the time that has elapsed since certification. This may point to a time delay effect which can be measured as the time that has elapsed between the date of completion of the APEL procedure and the date of the survey. The more rapidly certification is obtained after the beginning of the procedure (between 12 and 24 months prior to the date of the survey), the longer the time between the completion of certification and the survey and the more positive the effect of certification on the probability of obtaining a pay increase.

Several effects may be combined here: the effect of certification itself, positive in all cases, a length of service effect, which is not completely controlled in the survey as it is not known at what point the pay increase was awarded, and an internal or external mobility effect which is nevertheless controlled. In this case, internal mobility (change of post) or external mobility (change of employer) pays off in terms of pay increases. If the time which has elapsed between certification by APEL and the change of post is relatively short, then the impact on pay can be attributed chiefly to APEL. Otherwise, it can be attributed directly to the change of post itself. Ultimately, with both a positive effect from certification and a pay advantage from mobility, applicants obtaining their qualification by APEL and having moved internally or externally have an opportunity to increase their pay level. For these applicants, accreditation of prior experiential learning therefore leads to certification which is socially accepted and recognised in the labour market in particular.

Table 3. Estimation by a recursive bivariate Probit model
 Better qualified people have more chance of APEL certification
 People obtaining certification by APEL have more chance of a pay increase

Sample size: n=4 250	Coefficient	P> z	Mean
Equation 1: certification=1/0			
Constant	-0.18	0.186	-
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.44***	0.000	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	-0.46***	0.000	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-1.28***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	0.10	0.240	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	0.49***	0.002	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.34***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	0.07	0.364	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	0.27***	0.001	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	0.08	0.320	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.04	0.533	0.13
With mentoring	0.41***	0.000	0.43
Age under 30	0.02	0.873	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.14**	0.014	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.2	0.733	0.25
Length of APEL procedure	-0.009**	0.040	10.7
Number of dependent children	0.002	0.922	1.38
Information on APEL obtained from superiors	0.23***	0.000	0.44
Information on APEL obtained from friends and family	-0.13**	0.025	0.19
Information on APEL obtained from the media	0.15**	0.026	0.13
Information on APEL obtained from labour market intermediary bodies (reference)	-	-	0.24
intermediary bodies (reference)	0.21**	0.027	0.80
Stable employment	0.07	0.475	0.14
Unstable	-	-	0.06
Stable unemployment (reference)	-0.09**	0.034	0.41
Choice of diploma for study			
Equation 2: gain=1/0			
Constant	-1.00***	0.000	-
Certification 0 to 6 months before the survey	0.31**	0.025	0.09
Certification 6 to 12 months before the survey	0.40***	0.003	0.10
Certification 12 to 24 months before the survey	0.42***	0.001	0.21
Certification not obtained (reference)	-	-	0.60
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.10	0.426	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	0.19**	0.017	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-0.39***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	-0.52***	0.000	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09

Initial education level 3	0.27*	0.089	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.07	0.422	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	-0.15	0.841	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	-0.05	0.558	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	-0.05	0.499	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	0.09	0.195	0.13
Age under 30	-0.41***	0.002	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	0.03	0.620	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.10*	0.079	0.25
Occupational experience of less than 5 years	0.005	0.927	0.19
Occupational experience of 5 to 10 years	0.12**	0.013	0.35
Occupational experience of over 10 years (reference)	-	-	0.46
In employment at time of procedure	0.43***	0.000	0.93
Change of employer or post	0.64***	0.000	0.23
Selection bias (Rho)	0.15**	0.041	-
Log-likelihood value	-4 861.8		-

***: parameter significant at 1 %; **: parameter significant at 5 %; *: parameter significant at 10 %

Subjective effect of APEL (Table 4)

While the indicator tested above focuses more on the objective elements of the evaluation, a more subjective analysis of applicants' experience of APEL may help to supplement and flesh out the approach examined above. The subjective impact of APEL was measured by putting a question to all the applicants, whether employed or unemployed at the beginning of their procedure. There were three possible replies to the question 'overall, would you say that the APEL procedure ...': 'gave you more confidence in yourself and made you feel more self-assured', 'tended to demoralise you or was problematic from time to time', or 'had no particular effect'. The proposed measurement differentiates a positive impact (first reply) from the other two: 65 % of applicants said that their APEL procedure had helped them to become more confident and self-assured. At first glance, candidates successfully obtaining qualifications by APEL did not seem to be more satisfied than the others since, among all the applicants stating a positive impact, 49 % had obtained full accreditation. A bivariate analysis of the probability of certification and a positive experience of APEL shows that, all things being equal, obtaining the qualification leads to greater satisfaction. The type of qualification targeted by APEL may well modulate this result. Applicants for the vocational healthcare assistant's diploma were

probably more satisfied than all the other applicants, whereas reactions were unenthusiastic in the case of Ministry of Education diplomas. Moreover, the higher the initial education level of applicants (except for level III – few in number), the less they stated a positive impact. The form of the career path does not seem to have an impact in either direction, except for applicants unemployed when embarking on an APEL procedure and still unemployed at the time of the survey, who were less satisfied than the others by their APEL procedure. Lastly, in comparison with the younger and older age groups, it was the intermediate age groups (aged 40-49) who said that they had gained most confidence.

This model (Table 4) shows that the variables which have an impact on applicants' feelings as regards APEL differ to some extent from those having an impact on the pay increase indicator and that the same variables have different effects. It can be seen, for instance, that the best qualified from the point of view of their initial education have their qualification accredited more easily and obtain more than the others in terms of pay increases, even though they say that they are less satisfied than the other applicants. This observation highlights differences in terms of personal expectations of the system, even if it has positive effects on career paths.

Comments and prospects

Some concluding comments and prospects for development can be put forward at this point. As mentioned several times above, there are few data linking APEL procedures and career paths. France is something of a pioneer in this field. The analysis nevertheless came up against a number of limits which need to be pointed out.

First, and this is something regularly reported by researchers working with longitudinal data, especially when evaluating how effective a system is on career paths, the time period is undoubtedly too short fully to measure the effects of APEL on career path changes and for all the applicants to have at least completed the assessment process inherent in an APEL procedure. As well as data over a longer period, more data covering other qualifications should be collected and the questionnaire refined, especially from the point of view of the employment situation prior to the procedure and, in particular, after the procedure, possibly by collecting more information on the kind of work in which individuals are engaged.

Table 4. Estimation by a recursive bivariate Probit model
Better qualified people get more satisfaction from their
APEL procedure

Sample size: n=4 752	Coefficient	P> z	Mean
Equation 1: certification=1/0			0.42
Constant	-0.31**	0.014	-
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.34***	0.004	0.06
State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	-0.41***	0.000	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	-1.19***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	0.19**	0.020	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	0.41***	0.005	0.02
Initial education level 4	0.30***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	0.03	0.646	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	0.27***	0.000	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	0.08	0.309	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.07	0.289	0.13
With mentoring	0.46***	0.000	0.43
Age under 30	0.002	0.989	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.14***	0.009	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.009	0.872	0.25
Employed at the time of the survey	0.26***	0.000	0.90
Born in France	0.004	0.939	0.78
Length of APEL procedure	-0.009**	0.018	10.7
Information on APEL obtained from superiors	0.22***	0.000	0.44
Information on APEL obtained from friends and family	-0.09*	0.065	0.19
Information on APEL obtained from the media	0.09	0.132	0.13
Information obtained from labour market intermediary bodies (reference)	-	-	0.24
Experience of less than 5 years	-0.12**	0.020	0.19
Experience of between 5 and 10 years	-0.06	0.138	0.35
Experience of more than 10 years	-	-	0.54
Employed by an individual at the time of the procedure	-0.13*	0.061	0.08
Employed in the public sector at the time of the procedure	-0.06	0.224	0.33
Employed in the private sector at the time of the procedure	-0.03	0.611	0.27
Employed in the voluntary sector at the time of the procedure (reference)	-	-	0.32
Number of dependent children	0.02	0.210	1.37
Equation 2: positive impact =1/0			0.65
Constant	-0.06	0.675	-
Full validation	0.62***	0.000	0.41
Other Ministry of Social Affairs qualification	-0.08	0.477	0.06

State social care worker's diploma, DEAVS	0.12	0.108	0.30
Vocational healthcare assistant's diploma, DPAS	0.55***	0.000	0.28
Ministry of Education diploma	-0.32***	0.000	0.27
Care worker's diploma (reference)	-	-	0.09
Initial education level 3	-0.10	0.490	0.02
Initial education level 4	-0.38***	0.000	0.12
Initial education level 5 bis	-0.03	0.708	0.25
Initial education level 5 with diploma	-0.27***	0.000	0.28
Initial education level 5 without diploma	-0.18***	0.008	0.21
Initial education level 6 (reference)	-	-	0.12
Man	-0.11*	0.076	0.13
Age under 30	-0.24**	0.024	0.03
Age from 30 to 39	-0.12**	0.025	0.19
Age from 40 to 49 (reference)	-	-	0.53
Age over 50	-0.18***	0.000	0.25
Unemployment to unemployment	-0.09	0.183	0.83
Unemployment to employment	0.019	0.851	0.05
Employment to unemployment	-0.21*	0.051	0.07
Employment to employment (reference)	-	-	0.05
Selection bias (Rho)	-0.65***	0.000	-
Log-likelihood value			-

***: significant at 1 %; **: significant at 5 %; *: significant at 10 %

Then, the work carried out here needs to be placed in a more international context at a time when there is little real information on the real and proven benefits of APEL (Werquin, 2008), not just for individuals – since APEL is an individual procedure within a career path – but also for the production organisations surrounding individuals, and on the value of certification in the qualification and certification market. Are we moving towards various kinds of market segmentation between certified and non-certified people? Is the value of qualifications acquired from learning which is essentially formal changing? Can we really differentiate formal learning from learning which is not? Many questions remain in abeyance and, overall, little is being done to answer them: this is rather surprising as at a time when almost all the countries of the OECD, for instance, are placing APEL high on the political agenda surrounding lifelong learning.

Lastly, and in particular, and although it undoubtedly plays a positive role, can it really be argued that APEL is a second chance strategy, bearing in mind the level of the applicants successfully obtaining and benefiting from it?

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Recognising and certifying lifelong skills: impact on labour market integration of the unemployed

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SUMMARY

The process for recognising, validating and certifying (RVC) non-formally or informally acquired lifelong learning, launched in 2000, is now part of mainstream education and training policies in Portugal.

This article aims to determine how much the labour-market behaviour of the RVC-certified unemployed differs from that of other unemployed persons, using an econometric estimate of conditional and unconditional models, supported by a purpose-built longitudinal database.

A comparative analysis of the certified unemployed from 2001 to 2003 and those registered at job centres at the end of 2003 supports the hypothesis that RVC favours the transition between unemployment and employment, especially where (very) long-term unemployment is concerned.

The role of RVC in encouraging the unemployed to transit to inactivity to undertake formal learning, however, is less clear.

Keywords

Skills recognition, validation and certification; unemployment; transitions between labour-market states; unemployment duration models.

Introduction

The Portuguese skills recognition, validation and certification system (SRVC) was set up in 2001 (under Order in Council No 1082-A/2001 of 5 September) to guide adults of over 18 years of age who do not have the ninth year of schooling – ISCED 2 (Unesco, 2006) – towards processes allowing their non-formally and informally-acquired lifelong

learning skills to be recognised, validated and certified. The ultimate objective was to reduce shortfalls in educational qualifications and to help to eliminate the ‘undercertification’ prevalent in Portugal that was partly responsible for the very unfavourable national education attainment indicators recorded since 1986 by the OECD (2007) (MTSS/ME, 2005).

The first steps in setting up the SRVC system were taken in 2000, with an invitation from ANEFA (Agência Nacional de Educação e Formação de Adultos ⁽¹⁾), the national adult education and training agency) to 10 very diverse types of organisation (schools, training centres and NGOs) with the objective of setting up the first SRVC teams. This led to the creation in 2000 of six SRVC centres with observer status whose pioneering work was crucial in designing and making the SRVC system operational, notably in developing the first guidance documents supporting recognition of non-formally or informally acquired lifelong learning skills (CIDEC, 2004).

Originally developed along bottom-up and decentralised lines, an approach typical of the Leader and Equal Community initiatives (rural development and the promotion of equal opportunities respectively), the SRVC system matured and consolidated during the structural funds programming period 2000-06. Funded by the education operational programme (Prodep III) under the Community support framework for Portugal, the SRVC system developed rapidly from the six initial centres to 22 in 2001, 73 in 2005 and 182 in 2006 (OQCA, 2007 b) (Education OP, 2007).

In parallel, in the first two years (2001-02) some 3 754 adults were certified (CIDEC, 2004), a figure that rose in 2003 to 8 570 (CIDEC, 2007). From 2001 to 2004 the total number of people certified was 24 659, reaching a cumulative total by 2006 of 64 943 (CIDEC, 2005) (Education OP, 2007). This highlighted the Portuguese government’s strong political commitment to SRVC.

The SRVC system took on a much higher profile from 2005 with the new opportunities initiative, which was part of the national employment plan and the technology plan. The expansion of the network of SRVC centres – meanwhile renamed new opportunities

(¹) In 2002 ANEFA’s responsibilities were transferred to the Ministry of Education’s Direcção-Geral de Formação Vocacional (DGFV, the Directorate-General for Vocational Training), and since 2007 have been managed by the ANQ – *Agência Nacional para a Qualificação* [National Qualifications Agency], overseen by that ministry and by the Ministério do Trabalho e da Solidariedade Social (the Ministry for Labour and Social Security).

centres – became a national priority, a target of 165 centres in operation in 2006 being established (and largely exceeded), then 500 for 2010.

At the same time, and for the same target date, the new opportunities initiative established the ambitious objective of certifying 650 000 adults (in accumulated terms), 345 000 with secondary education-equivalent diplomas (ISCED 3). Hence the objective was set of expanding the SRVC process (and the respective key skills benchmark) to the 12th year, based on the premise that the ‘fundamental investment’ to be made in Portugal in connection with education and training was ‘secondary level schooling’ (MTSS/ME, 2005).

The secondary level key skills benchmark was ultimately adopted in 2006 (Education OP, 2007), while in 2007 the human potential agenda – one of the three thematic agendas of the national strategic reference framework 2007-2013 – enshrined lifelong learning and SRVC in particular as core elements of Portuguese human resources development policies (OQCA, 2007a).

SRVC became part of mainstream education and training policy in Portugal due at least partly to its positive effects both on adult self-esteem and on adult relationships with the labour market and with lifelong formal learning.

In 2003 the national authority responsible for adult education (the DGFV, now the ANQ; see footnote 1) carried out a preliminary study (CIDEDEC, 2004) on the impact of SRVC on the post-certification pathway of the first adults to complete the respective SRVC process (in 2001-02). It used a postal survey to identify the SRVC beneficial effects in reinforcing personal variables (such as self-esteem) and in adult relationship with the labour market. In 2004 the same (slightly improved) questionnaire was used with adults certified in 2003, the respective results (CIDEDEC, 2007) confirming the information collected previously.

The results of these two studies emphasised the capacity of the SRVC process to activate the unemployed. Around one third of the adults certified, whether in 2001-02 or 2003, who were unemployed when they enrolled, were in paid employment six months after completing the process; others were studying or on training courses and were therefore activated. As an econometric model estimate showed, such activation of the unemployed was brought about by strengthening certain personal variables – such as self-awareness, self-esteem or the definition/reconstruction of career plans – which

the SRVC process makes possible and promotes (CIDEDEC, 2004 and 2007).

These results suffer, however, by not being cross-referenced with other unemployed persons. It is, therefore, important to ask whether the labour-market behaviour of the SRVC-certified unemployed is different from that observed for the unemployed as a whole.

This article seeks to provide fundamental answers to the question through comparative study of labour-market behaviour by SRVC-certified unemployed and the unemployed registered at IEFPP (Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional, the Portuguese public employment service) job centres.

The first step was to identify the reference framework for the research (Section 2). The following two parts (Sections 3 and 4) describe the econometric models adopted and the data used in the respective estimates. The principal results of the research are presented in Section 5 with Section 6 setting out concluding remarks.

Reference framework

The methodology for testing whether two (or more) labour market states are behaviourally identical uses longitudinal data and was originally formulated by Flinn and Heckman (1982 and 1983). The idea underlying the test is very simple: duly controlling for individual differences, if the transition rate from state x to state z is the same as the transition rate from state y to state z (for destination state z as a whole), then the origin state (x or y) is irrelevant in determining the rate at which individuals enter z (as a whole). An application of this methodology to the study of the labour-market behaviour of the unemployed and the inactive in Portugal can be found in an article by Centeno and Fernandes (2004).

In this application a four-state model is considered: employment (E), SRVC-certified unemployment (R), other unemployment (U) and inactivity (N). In this model the unemployment states R and U will be equivalent if at the same time:

- the transition rate from R to E is equal to the transition rate from U to E :

$$h_{re} = h_{ue}$$

- the transition rate from R to N is equal to the transition rate from U to N :

$$h_{rn} = h_{un}$$

As an initial (null) hypothesis, it was considered that SRVC certification does not introduce a positive behavioural differentiation in the unemployed. The econometric model described in the following section seeks to test that hypothesis in the light of an alternative hypothesis in which at least one of the two above conditions is not fulfilled. This would lead to an acceptance that the SRVC-certified unemployed behave differently from other working-age people who do not have a job.

Econometric models

The two conditions referred to in the previous section were tested using two types of analysis. First, the empirical transition rates from unemployment (R or U) to states E and N were calculated, and were then adjusted in a second model for observable individual characteristics and unemployment duration.

In the second analysis model the likelihood ratio test was applied. This compares the maximised values of the log likelihood function under the null hypothesis – $L(H_0)$ – of states R and U being the same and under the alternative hypothesis – $L(H_a)$ – of the states being different, based on the following statistic (Griffiths et al., 1993):

$$(1) \quad \lambda_{LR} = 2[L(H_a) - L(H_0)] \sim \chi^2_{(G)}$$

where G is the number of restrictions in the model under the null hypothesis.

The starting point was to estimate, for men and women separately, two variants of a duration model: a first associated to the null hypothesis (restricted model), in which the regression parameters relating to the variables of individuals belonging to the two origin states being tested (R and U) were forced to equality; and a second variant relating to the alternative hypothesis (unrestricted model), in which the regression parameters can vary freely between the two origins. The respective values of the log likelihood function were then used to calculate statistic (1), the behavioural identity of the two origins being verified by comparing that statistic with the critical values of the χ^2 distribution with a number of degrees of freedom

identical to the number of parameters which, in the restricted model, did not vary freely compared to the unrestricted model ⁽²⁾.

A competing risks model was estimated with a constant 'baseline hazard' by spells (see Kalbfleisch and Prentice, 1980, and Fernandes, 2004) using the Gauss programme for that purpose.

Data

Calculation of transition rates between states and the estimate of a competing risks model required a special database to be set up with longitudinal data that would enable the SRVC-certified unemployed to be compared to other unemployed persons.

Two sources of information were used for this: one was the data collected by the CIDEDEC (2004 and 2007) in the postal surveys of adults certified between 2001 and 2003 (above), and the other was the individual records previously anonymised in the database of the unemployed registered at the IEFPP job centres, stored in the respective *Sistema de Informação e Gestão na Área do Emprego* (SIGAE, the employment information and management system).

To ensure maximum compatibility between information from two different sources, the unemployed who had only completed basic education recorded in the SIGAE at the end of 2003 were considered, noting that many of the transitions observed by the CIDEDEC occurred between 2003 and 2004, given that the majority of certifications (prior to 2004) occurred in the final quarter of 2003 (see CIDEDEC, 2007). In both cases only the transitions occurring over the same duration (six months) were considered.

Identical quality control procedures were applied for both sources of information, notably in the treatment of either left-censored observations (in which the duration of unemployment is unknown) or right-censored observations (unemployed who were no longer observed, without knowing whether they transited in the meantime to employment or inactivity states).

As can be seen from Table 1, the 598 SRVC-certified unemployed are essentially females (around 72 %) of at least 35 years of age (59 %), who are married (65 %) and have children (69 %). The 72 000-plus unemployed registered at job centres are more

⁽²⁾ This econometric implementation strategy has been used by Jones and Ridell (1999, 2000, 2002).

Table 1. **Descriptive statistics from the database of the unemployed**

Variable	SRVC-certified unemployed		Unemployed registered at job centres	
	No	%	No	%
Men	166	27.8	32 377	44.9
Women	432	72.2	39 728	55.1
Under 25 years of age	59	9.9	23 298	32.3
25-34 years of age	184	30.8	19 925	27.6
35-44 years of age	231	38.6	13 346	18.5
45-54 years of age	102	17.1	10 163	14.1
55 and over	22	3.7	5 373	7.5
Married	390	65.2	31 496	43.7
No children	184	30.8	59 329	82.3
One child	177	29.6	7 360	10.2
Two children	201	33.6	4 190	5.8
Three or more children	36	6.0	1 226	1.7
Total records	598	100.0	72 105	100.0

Sources: CIDE (2004) (2007) and IIEFP – SIGAE.

balanced in terms of gender (55 % women) and civil status (44 % married). This sample is also younger (60 % under 35 years of age), and a lack of children predominates (82 %).

This heterogeneity between the two samples led to analyses that were conditional on the individuals' observable characteristics (competing risks duration model, see Section 3), with a view to filtering the results obtained from the differences observed.

Empirical results

Analysis not conditional heterogeneity

Table 2 shows unemployment exit rates for SRVC-certified individuals and those registered at job centres transiting to employment or inactivity, split into men and women ⁽³⁾.

⁽³⁾ The empirical transitions presented in Table 2 were calculated as:

$$h_{ij} = d_{ij} / r_i$$

where: d_{ij} ≡ Number of individuals initially in state i who transit to state j ; r_i ≡ Number of individuals initially in state i ; $i, j = E, R, U, N$ with the notation interpretation introduced in Section 2.

Table 2. Unemployment exit rates (%) by gender according to the destination state for the SRVC-certified unemployed and those registered at job centres

Gender	% of SRVC-certified unemployed who transited to states of:			% unemployed registered at job centres who transited to states of:		
	Employment (hRE)	Inactivity (hRN)	Total (hR.)	Employment (hUE)	Inactivity (hUN)	Total (hU.)
Men	27.11	6.63	33.74	15.29	2.92	18.21
Women	26.85	3.70	30.55	13.80	3.79	17.59

NB: the rates refer to six-month observation periods.

Sources: CIDECE (2004) (2007) and IEFP – SIGAE.

The first results to be noted concern the greater probability of the SRVC-certified unemployed transiting to employment compared to the unemployed registered at job centres, either for men (27.11 % compared to 15.29 %), or for women (26.85 % compared to 13.80 %). In other words, on average and disregarding the heterogeneity observed for the two samples, the completion of an SRVC process seems to have a favourable effect on the ability of the unemployed to find work, irrespective of gender.

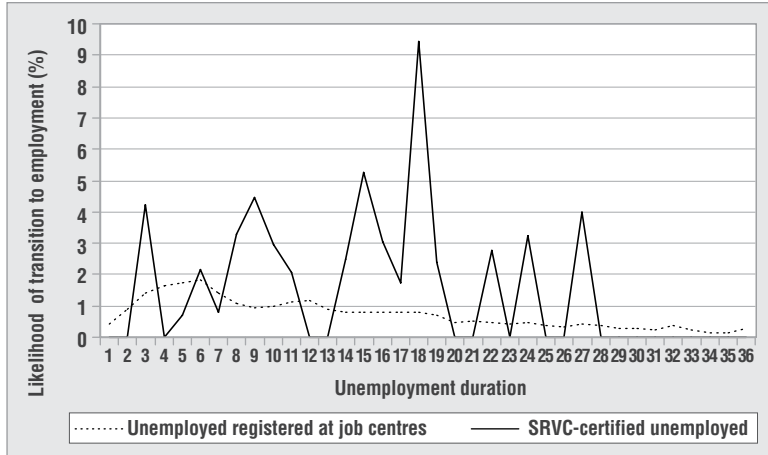
This type of beneficial effect of SRVC is also observed for exits to inactivity, but only for men (6.63 % compared to 2.92 %, see the same table). Exit rates to inactivity for women are similar, and are slightly higher for women registered at job centres (3.70 % compared to 3.79 %). SRVC, therefore, seems to favour transitions in particular to formal learning (studying and/or training) only for men.

Calculations of exit rates to employment conditional on unemployment duration (Kaplan-Meier estimators, see Kalbfleisch and Prentice, 1980) are shown in Figures 1 and 2 respectively for men and women.

Both figures show that work is generally found in the first six months of continuous unemployment for most of the unemployed registered at job centres (basic education only). In the particular case of SRVC-certified adults, however, the most significant transitions occur for individuals who have been unemployed for over 12 months, this result being particularly evident for women (Figure 2).

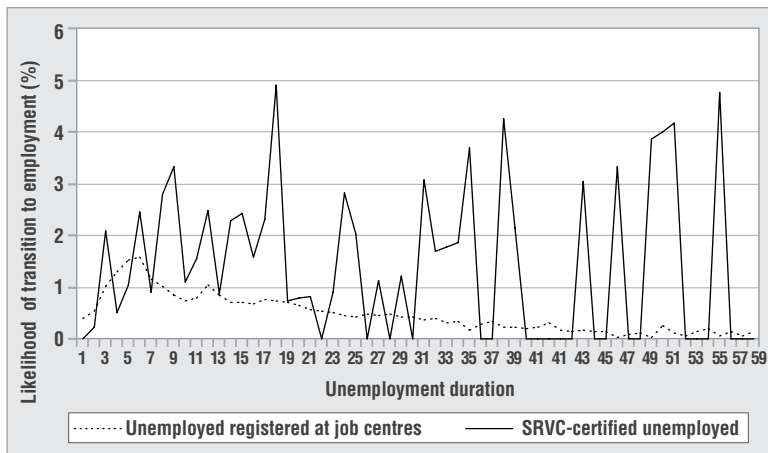
This significant result confirms the evidence collected previously in studies (CIDECE, 2004 and 2007) suggesting that the effects of the SRVC process were particularly intense in activating the long-term and very long-term unemployed.

Figure 1. Transition rate to the state of employment (%) given the duration of unemployment (Kaplan-Meier estimators) for the SRVC-certified unemployed and those registered at job centres: men



Sources: CIDE (2004) (2007) and IEFP – SIGAE.

Figure 2. Transition rate to the state of employment (%) given the duration of unemployment (Kaplan-Meier estimators) for the SRVC-certified unemployed and those registered at job centres: women



Sources: CIDE (2004) (2007) and IEFP – SIGAE.

Analysis conditional on heterogeneity

Table 3 shows the estimates of the coefficients and percentage values (*p-values*) ⁽⁴⁾ for the variables considered in the unrestricted duration model (whose parameters vary freely between states *R* and *U*) for men. These estimates are organised in linear form by competing destination (*E* and *N*).

The sign and statistical significance of the coefficients (the latter measured by the percentage values indicated in the final column of Table 3) show that age and married status generally reduce the probability of exiting from unemployment, either to employment or to inactivity (negative sign significant to 1 % or 5 %). However, family responsibilities (number of dependent children) increase the likelihood of those transitions (positive sign significant to 1 %).

The fact that the unemployed person has been SRVC-certified has a beneficial effect on the transition to employment, provided the man is married (negative sign significant to 10 %), as occurs

Table 3. **Estimated coefficients by destination state of unemployment exits: unrestricted duration model, men**

Exit destination	Variable	Coefficient	Standard deviation	T-ratio	P-value	
Employment (<i>E</i>)	Age	-0.0532	0.0016	-32.955	0.0000	***
	Married	-0.2335	0.0305	-7.644	0.0000	***
	Children	0.6679	0.0164	40.653	0.0000	***
	SRVC-certified – Age	0.0032	0.0131	0.247	0.4026	
	SRVC-certified – Married	-0.0189	0.2249	-0.084	0.4666	*
	SRVC-certified – Children	-0.4964	0.1248	-3.978	0.0000	
	SRVC-certified – Constant	0.9629	0.4186	2.300	0.0107	**
Inactivity (<i>N</i>)	Age	-0.0350	0.0028	-12.713	0.0000	**
	Married	-0.0475	0.0575	-0.825	0.2048	***
	Children	0.4227	0.0330	12.794	0.0000	***
	SRVC-certified – Age	-0.0062	0.0344	-0.180	0.4284	
	SRVC-certified – Married	-0.0023	0.6318	-0.004	0.4985	
	SRVC-certified – Children	-0.0066	0.3303	-0.020	0.4921	
	SRVC-certified – Constant	-0.0012	1.1814	-0.001	0.4996	

NB: ***, ** and * denote non-acceptance of the null hypothesis for a level of statistical significance of 1 %, 5 % and 10 % respectively.

Sources: CIDE (2004, 2007) and IEFP – SIGAE.

⁽⁴⁾ The *p-value* is a statistic indicating the probability of the null hypothesis being rejected in relation to a particular coefficient, even though it is true. Thus the lower its value, the stronger the evidence favouring the rejection of the hypothesis of a particular coefficient differing from zero.

in most cases analysed. An effect specific to the certification was also isolated (associated to the SRVC-certified – constant variable), with a negative sign (significant to 5 %).

Certification does not appear to influence the transition of unemployed men to inactivity, since none of the coefficients associated to SRVC-certified are statistically significant (see Table 3). The unconditional result obtained in Section 5.1 – which suggested a beneficial effect of SRVC in terms of exit to inactivity – is not confirmed after filtering the heterogeneity observed for men in terms of age, civil status, number of children and unemployment duration.

Generally similar results were obtained for women (see Table 4). In particular, certification also does not appear to influence transitions to inactivity (in this case it is consistent with the unconditional results of Section 5.1), although it encourages placement in employment (the coefficient of the SRVC-certified – constant variant is positive and significant to 5 %). SRVC also influences women’s transitions to employment when associated with dependent children, inhibiting such transitions (the respective coefficient is negative and significant to 1 %).

Table 4. Estimated coefficients of unemployment exits by destination state: unrestricted duration model, women

Exit destination	Variable	Coefficient	Standard deviation	T-ratio	P-value	
<i>Employment (E)</i>	Age	-0.0532	0.0016	-32.955	0.0000	***
	Married	-0.2335	0.0305	-7.644	0.0000	***
	Children	0.6679	0.0164	40.653	0.0000	***
	SRVC-certified – Age	0.0032	0.0131	0.247	0.4026	
	SRVC-certified – Married	-0.0189	0.2249	-0.084	0.4666	
	SRVC-certified – Children	-0.4964	0.1248	-3.978	0.0000	***
	SRVC-certified – Constant	0.9629	0.4186	2.300	0.0107	**
<i>Inactivity (N)</i>	Age	-0.0350	0.0028	-12.713	0.0000	***
	Married	-0.0475	0.0575	-0.825	0.2048	
	Children	0.4227	0.0330	12.794	0.0000	***
	SRVC-certified – Age	-0.0062	0.0344	-0.180	0.4284	
	SRVC-certified – Married	-0.0023	0.6318	-0.004	0.4985	
	SRVC-certified – Children	-0.0066	0.3303	-0.020	0.4921	
	SRVC-certified – Constant	-0.0012	1.1814	-0.001	0.4996	

NB: ***, ** and * denote non-acceptance of the null hypothesis for a level of statistical significance of 1 %, 5 % and 10 % respectively.

Sources: CIDE (2004, 2007) and IEPF – SIGAE.

As was observed for men, age generally hinders women's unemployment exits, a contrary effect being observed when there are dependent children. The woman being married also discourages transitions to employment and to inactivity, though in the latter case the coefficient is not statistically significant (see Table 4).

Table 5 shows the *p-values* of the likelihood ratio test of the statistic (1). Both for men and for women, there is evidence for rejecting the (null) hypothesis of behavioural identity between SRVC-certified unemployed and the unemployed registered at job centres.

The evidence is stronger for women because the *p-value* is close to zero. Even for men, however, the null hypothesis for a level of significance of 7.1 % is rejected.

Conclusions

Studies (CIDEDEC, 2004 and 2007) had already suggested the positive effects of the SRVC process in activating the unemployed after strengthening certain personal characteristics of the individual such as self-esteem, self-respect and self-awareness, and after life and/or career plans were reconstructed. Those studies, however, did not compare the results obtained with the labour-market behaviour of the other unemployed.

Table 5. Test of the likelihood ratio of behavioural identity between SRVC-certified unemployed and the unemployed registered at job centres

Gender	No of observations	χ^2	Degrees of freedom	<i>P-value</i>	
Men	32 543	14.3498	8	0.0710	*
Women	40 160	33.8158	8	0.0000	***

NB: *** and * denote non-acceptance of the null hypothesis for a level of statistical significance of 1 % and 10 % respectively.

Sources: CIDEDEC (2004, 2007) and IEFPP – SIGAE.

This article sought to remedy that shortcoming by applying a methodological approach that has already been applied in various contexts to test behavioural identity between the SRVC-certified unemployed (2001-03) and the unemployed registered at job centres (at the end of 2003).

The results confirm the beneficial effects of SRVC in the transition of the unemployed to paid employment, in particular, with transition rates for both sexes significantly higher for SRVC-certified adults. In addition, the highest transition rates between these adults are recorded for long or very long-term unemployment (over 12 and 24 months respectively), whereas this occurs for durations close to six months among the unemployed registered at job centres.

These results are robust insofar as, even when the heterogeneity of the unemployed (in terms of age, civil status, number of children and unemployment duration) is controlled, the positive effect of SRVC in transitions to employment continues to be observed.

The role of SRVC in encouraging the unemployed to transit to inactivity, particularly to pursue formal learning, seems less clear. Some evidence was collected for men but, after controlling heterogeneity, it was diluted. This result may arise from expectations that the SRVC process was to be extended to secondary level skills, since they already existed in 2003 and may have restricted the pursuit of studies and/or the uptake of vocational training courses by adults certified up to 2003 (see CIDEDEC, 2007).

Nevertheless, the application of a statistical test provides empirical evidence for rejecting the hypothesis of behavioural identity between the SRVC-certified unemployed and other unemployed persons. SRVC introduces a differentiation in the unemployed that favours their labour-market activation, even for more problematic segments such as women and/or the long and very long-term unemployed.

Care should be taken in interpreting these results since they refer to adults certified up to 2003. Since that time, not only has the universe of SRVC-certified adults expanded substantially – with the expansion of the new opportunities centres network and extension of the process to the 12th year – but also labour market conditions in Portugal have deteriorated.

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Skills recognition and validation – complexity and tensions

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Keywords

Skills recognition, accreditation and certification, adult education and training, experiential learning, assessment, ethnomethodological perspective, Portugal

SUMMARY

This article seeks to identify and examine the reasons for the complexity and tensions underlying the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme (SRAC) that has been in place in Portugal since 2001. Empirical data were collected through semi-directive interviews with staff in three Centros Novas Oportunidades [CNOs] [New Opportunity Centres] (organisations delivering the SRAC process), and biographical interviews with adults who have completed the scheme. The complex nature of the assumptions associated with skills recognition and accreditation practices and the tensions raised by their underlying paradox are important factors. It is the particular features of the aspects that SRAC practices analyse and assess, i.e. prior experiential learning, that generate this complex nature. These practices are marked by a paradox that arises because these processes, initially based on a humanist approach, are currently linked to a very different ideology. This complexity and these tensions are reflected in the way skills recognition and accreditation schemes are organised and function, and are evident in the comments of staff in the CNOs studied, who play a key role in managing such complexities and tensions.

Introduction

This article is based on data compiled for a doctoral research project in education sciences and adult education. The principal objective of the project was to understand the rationale behind the education and training initiatives undertaken by adults with little schooling in a particular region of Portugal. The research took an ethnomethodological approach and was based on a regional case study.

The article focuses on one area of this research – skills recognition, accreditation and certification practices. In interviews with CNO staff it became apparent that their work is complex and involves tensions. The aim of this article is to identify and analyse why it is complex and why tensions arise, and data were therefore analysed with a view to understanding and justifying the reasons for these phenomena, drawing wherever possible on the relevant theory.

The analysis of skills recognition, accreditation and certification practices shows that tension is generated largely by the ‘paradox that lies in the fact that a humanist spirit is associated with policies and practices which run counter to that founding spirit’ (Canário, 2006, p. 35). Meanwhile, the nature of what is being analysed – prior experiential learning – also explains the complexity of the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme. This complexity has an impact on all aspects of the process and is particularly evident in its organisation and functioning and in the tools used in the recognition stage. As can be seen throughout the article, the comments of staff in the Centres studied very clearly reveal the tensions and dilemmas raised by these factors.

The first part of the article identifies the methodology used to collect the empirical data that helped to structure this analysis. The second part is a brief overview of the skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme (SRAC). The third part outlines the stages of the SRAC process. The fourth part identifies the assumptions behind SRAC schemes and examines how they make the practices involved more complex. The fifth part establishes the predominant logic on which SRAC schemes are based and its implications for their organisation and functioning. The sixth part explains some of the consequences of the complex nature of the tools used at the recognition stage and the tensions that they create. The seventh and final part is the conclusion.

Methodology

The discussion of the issues set out in this article is based on empirical data collected in three CNOs that came into operation between 2001 and 2002 in the Alentejo (a region in the south of Portugal). In empirical terms the research into the SRAC process looked at three levels of analysis: the macro, the meso and the micro.

At macro-level the aim was to identify policy guidelines on skills recognition, accreditation and certification at international, European and national level and to examine its link with lifelong learning. At meso-level the aim was to characterise SRAC practices in the three Centres under study in order to examine the organisation and functioning of the scheme (e.g. the difficulties, constraints, potential and outcomes associated with it). At micro-level the aim was to find out about the adults awarded certificates through SRAC processes (their life path, their knowledge, their interests), and their perceptions of these practices (reasons for enrolling, perceptions of the various stages, perceptions of outcomes).

The macro-level analysis was essentially a desk review (e.g. legislation and reports on international, European and national policy guidelines). At meso-level data connected with the implementation of the SRAC practices used in the three Centres under study were analysed (e.g. number of adults involved, number of adults awarded certificates, age, gender, occupational situation), and semi-directive interviews were carried out with the respective staff (eight SRAC practitioners, seven SRAC trainers and three coordinators). The micro-level analysis was based on biographical interviews with 14 adults awarded certificates by the Centres under study.

The skills recognition, accreditation and certification scheme

The SRAC process came into effect in Portugal in 2001 with the creation of the *Centros de Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências* [Skills Recognition, Accreditation and Certification Centres], now the New Opportunity Centres. These Centres recognise, accredit and certify skills acquired by adults throughout life in various contexts (family, social, occupational and educational/vocational training).

The SRAC process is geared towards adults over 18 years of age who have not completed the 12th year of schooling. The certificates awarded refer to level B1 (4th year of schooling), B2 (6th year of schooling), B3 (9th year of schooling) and B4 (12th year of schooling). This analysis focuses only on the basic level scheme (up to the 9th year of schooling).

Some CNOs currently also offer a scheme providing for the recognition, accreditation and certification of vocational skills. The 269

CNOs, distributed throughout Portugal, are overseen by the *Agência Nacional para a Qualificação* [National Qualifications Agency] (a body supervised jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour), and are hosted by public organisations (e.g. schools, training centres) and private organisations (NGOs, companies, associations). Each CNO has a team consisting of a coordinator, SRAC ⁽¹⁾ practitioners, SRAC ⁽²⁾ trainers and administrative staff.

The key skills reference framework is the tool around which CNO staff organise and develop the SRAC process. The basic education framework used in the Centres consists of four key skills areas (maths for life, language and communication, citizenship and employability and information and communication technologies). Each key skill involves three levels of complexity that represent the three levels of schooling that can be certified (4th year, 6th year and 9th year).

The decision on the level of schooling to be attributed to the adults concerned depends on two factors in particular: their level of schooling on enrolment and the skills they are able to demonstrate throughout the various stages of the process. The organisation and functioning of the SRAC scheme is defined at national level in specific legislation. The infancy and complex nature of this policy area, however, allow CNO staff to exercise a certain degree of independence.

Stages of the scheme

The scheme consists of five stages: the first involves enrolment, diagnosis and guidance, the second relates to recognition, the third focuses on accreditation, the fourth concerns training and the fifth covers certification. In the first stage (enrolment and guidance), CNO staff seek to assess whether or not the adults involved have the profile to undertake the SRAC process. If on enrolment the staff consider them to have a profile allowing them to undertake the process, they go on to the second stage (recognition), and if not they are directed towards other more appropriate education and/or training opportunities.

During the recognition stage they attend a series of individual and/or group sessions in which they organise their portfolio, together with

⁽¹⁾ SRAC practitioners are higher education graduates in the social and human sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology, education sciences).

⁽²⁾ SRAC trainers are qualified to teach in each key skills area.

CNO staff. To build this portfolio the adults identify and bring together information on their life paths, and reflect upon and describe their experiences and prior experiential learning. Recognition is the longest stage of the process and is the one that demands greater involvement and commitment on the part of the adults concerned. It is also at this stage, in which methodology, tools and monitoring are crucial, that the complexity of the SRAC process and the tension caused by the two strands underpinning the scheme become more evident.

The third stage (accreditation) is divided into two parts. The first part, overseen by the team of practitioners in the Centres, involves a skills assessment based on a comparison between each adult's prior experiential learning, identified during the recognition sessions, and the reference framework skills. The second is an open session before an accreditation panel whose task is to formalise the accreditation. It is made up of an external assessor who acts as chair, and the SRAC staff who worked with the adult throughout the process (SRAC practitioners and trainers).

As a rule, only adults considered to be in a position to obtain full accreditation are invited to appear before the panel. If they wish, however, they may apply for partial accreditation. In this situation they can return to the Centre for two years to obtain full accreditation, which gives them a qualification certifying a particular level of education. This only occurs from time to time in the CNOs in question because adults who do not have the right profile to obtain full accreditation are directed towards other education and training opportunities.

The fourth stage (training) takes place between the first and second parts of the accreditation stage. It is undertaken only by adults who cannot demonstrate a number of skills during the recognition process. Training involves a total of 50 hours for the four key skills areas as a whole, and is delivered by the respective trainers. Trainers in the Centres under study usually opt to organise and promote activities that allow trainees to demonstrate their skills. They seek to keep the presentation of information to a minimum, but when they do present information, they try to ensure that it is backed up by these activities.

The fifth stage (certification) is the final stage. Certificates are awarded to adults who obtain full skills accreditation before the accreditation panel. The certificate is issued by the Ministry of Education and is to all intents and purposes equivalent to that obtained in the regular education system.

Assumptions – reasons for the complexity of practices

SRAC policies and practices are essentially based on two key ideas. They start on the one hand from the assumption that people learn by experience. It is crucial, on the other, for such learning to be socially visible. Underlying these ideas are assumptions that people generate what they know throughout their lives and that such knowledge, resulting from prior experiential learning, may be subject to an accreditation process. These two apparently simple notions have a range of implications in terms of the organisation and functioning of prior learning recognition schemes, and contribute greatly to the complexity of the practices involved. This is the context in which Pineau (1997) considers that the ‘two simple ideas inherent in recognition raise complex problems’ (p. 12).

These two notions raise the question that is felt to be fundamental in reflection on the meaning, relevance and feasibility of prior learning accreditation policies and practices: ‘Can experiential knowledge be transformed into academic knowledge?’ (Jobert, 2005, p. 12). Prior experiential learning accreditation policies are based on the principle that such a transformation is possible. In allowing the knowledge arising out of action to be exploited, and in establishing links between the latter and theoretical knowledge, SRAC practices are underpinned by very difficult processes which raise questions for CNO staff.

Theoretical know-how and know-how arising from action are very distinct in nature and involve irreducible differences, making any process that seeks to merge or superimpose them problematic and artificial. The recognition of prior learning, based on the match between experiential know-how and the skills listed in a reference framework, is a rather complex task about which very little is known. This also raises other questions: ‘What do we know how to do? What do we know about the nature of this type of process?’ (Jobert, 2005, p. 12). What risks are associated with it? How can we develop in this area? The obstacles, difficulties and doubts inherent in the recognition of prior learning encountered every day by staff in the Centres under study are largely a result of our ignorance of experiential learning processes and of the ‘epistemological touchstone of knowledge about knowledge, or of the sparse knowledge about our knowledge’ (Pineau, 1997, p. 12).

These questions lead back to the complex nature of the work carried out by CNO staff. The comments of staff in the CNOs under study reveal the difficulties inherent in the process of accrediting prior experiential learning. These practitioners face difficulties deriving from the specific nature of what is being examined and assessed – life experience and skills. The limited knowledge of experiential learning processes and of the nature of the know-how resulting from action hinder the recognition and accreditation process. The need to establish links between know-how arising out of action and academic know-how (reference framework skills) make this process highly complex.

The elements of complexity underlying the process of accrediting prior experiential learning require CNO staff constantly to construct and reconstruct their work practices. The difficulties in completing the process and the need to find appropriate solutions to problems and to make constant adjustments are aspects highlighted by interviewees. A CNO coordinator said that *'it was obviously a real nightmare for us to set up; and keeping it running smoothly is just as bad'*. This is corroborated by a SRAC practitioner: *'when I got here I came up against a wall that I could only get over by working at it, with teamwork and then with experience with the adults themselves and the process itself, because it was difficult'*. In trying to overcome the difficulties, staff often reformulated the scheme's organisation and functioning: *'we're always changing things, I've been here for two years and we've changed dozens of times'* (SRAC practitioner).

What CNO staff have to say bears witness to how difficult it is to draw out skills from each adult's life path, based on the key skills framework: *'It's been a constant battle, that's the really hard thing for me. We have to be able to recognise prior know-how rather than academic know-how'* (SRAC practitioner). The need to analyse and establish links between different elements (know-how arising out of action and theoretical know-how) makes staff members apprehensive and anxious: *'[our main difficulty] lies in particular in the tools that we use, that transition between the life history, the person's path and the framework skills'* (CNO coordinator). Vincent Merle (2005, p. 55) states with respect to this process that 'rather than thinking about transubstantiation between know-how acquired through experience and academic know-how, as if they were identical substances, we should instead be thinking about forging links'. CNO staff should not try to establish comparisons between elements which are incomparable from the outset, though they do need to find such 'links', which is neither an easy nor an immediate task.

From humanism to individual responsibility

SRAC schemes involve a paradox arising from the coexistence of two opposing ideologies – humanism and individual responsibility. The most recent policy documents on the accreditation of prior learning draw largely on the latter ideology. Public policies seek to extend and raise the profile of prior learning accreditation processes as active employment strategies supporting human resources management. In this case, such policies and practices form part of lifelong learning and are governed by the values of individualism, responsibility and competitiveness.

These policies and practices are part and parcel of a broader strategy in which adults are held responsible for *managing themselves*. ‘Biographical solutions’ (Lima, 2005, p. 54) are used to try to resolve structural problems, such as the low level of schooling of the Portuguese population and unemployment. In this case, the harnessing of adult experience is seen from a managerial perspective, and the political commitment to SRAC practices is largely a result of the fact that they allow more adults to be certified in less time with fewer (human and financial) resources in comparison with other options that are available.

The first prior experiential learning accreditation practices were based on humanist ideology. Now, although the purposes of the policies and practices concerned are dominated by the ideology of individual responsibility, the influence of humanism on the methods and tools adopted remains significant. These methods and tools are based on an epistemological reappraisal of adult experience, and as they focus on reflection upon and explanations of experience, they have the potential to foster the personal development of the adults involved.

The prior experiential learning accreditation practices that have appeared in the last decade take a dual approach which draws on ‘different conceptions of man’ (Berger, 1991, p. 241). Two types of thinking coexist in the respective practices and policies: a thinking modelled on the humanist perspective, according to which it becomes possible and relevant, societally, to develop prior experiential learning accreditation schemes that make it possible to make the most of people, their practices and their life paths, and another type of thinking modelled on the ideology of individual responsibility, according to which the schemes are used to enhance human resources management and competitiveness and to increase social control over people.

The SRAC practices emerging in Portugal in recent years fall within education and training policies geared towards human resources management, yet are based on innovative methods of exploiting people's experience. The coexistence of these two types of thinking causes tensions and contributes to the increasing complexity of these social practices, as can be seen from comments by CNO staff:

'The Centre has targets to meet, we work with people, we take a humanist approach to work [...] it's no good thinking that I have to reach 300 by the end of the year, that's it for me! We work with people, and having a figure that I don't agree with foisted on me doesn't suit the type of work we do, which has to be people-centred. [...] I want to be happy in my work and ethically happy' (*SRAC practitioner*).

The following comment from another interviewee also highlights this tension:

'It's impossible to guarantee quality in mass production work. The team sometimes works much longer than its [normal] working hours to achieve acceptable levels of quality. Either we forget quality and meet the targets, or we forget targets and maintain quality' (*SRAC practitioner*).

The coexistence of these two perspectives within the framework of prior learning policies and practices has a direct impact on methods and tools, as can be seen:

'some people probably need a longer process, even if it's just to try out other approaches, to try to do things differently – if it doesn't work that way, try it another way. [But] there's not much leeway for doing that [due to the imposition of quantitative goals]' (*SRAC practitioner*).

It is essential for these teams to be committed to reflection, exploration and experimentation if they are to overcome the complex nature of practices and to adapt methods and tools to the unique nature of prior learning accreditation. The tensions referred to above, however, influence the thinking of CNO staff and the process by which methods and tools are adapted, as the following shows:

'We can change according to people's needs, we work with people, not with paper. As far as the methods are concerned, we always try

as hard as we can to adapt them to people, but we can't adapt them to everybody, we can't do that. We have targets to meet, we have to make sure people come to the Centre, we try to do the best we can' (SRAC practitioner).

The tension between respect for each person's specific circumstances, seeking to adapt methods and tools accordingly, and meeting targets is clear:

'If instead of having 300 people with certificates, which is this year's target, we only had 200, we'd have more time to analyse certain adults' cases and to think about what the best approach would really be [...] And that's where the system goes wrong [...]' (CNO coordinator).

Some CNO staff recognise how important it is to be able to adapt the process more closely to each adult's particular situation:

'I feel strongly with some people that I'd like the process to last longer so that I could feel more confident about the decision I take' (SRAC practitioner).

These comments reflect the complexity, concerns and dilemmas experienced by CNO staff, who have the difficult task of managing the tensions in the scheme and of trying to strike a balance between the different perspectives that influence it. Although interviewees said that they were worried about achieving the numerical goals, they regard the quality of the SRAC process to be the most important aspect since quality has a direct impact on the social visibility and credibility of these practices. The staff of the Centres studied favour a humanist approach and take the view that the process, besides awarding certificates, should allow personal development, which is reflected in the organisation and functioning of the scheme and in outcomes for adults. The adults interviewed often refer to the high demands of CNO staff and say that they are happy with the situation, since they understand that it has an impact on the social value of the certificate obtained, as is very clear in this comment: '*they gave us a certain responsibility, they made us realise that it's not just a matter of getting the certificate for the sake of it, most of all it's done with some dignity*' (adult awarded a certificate).

Mediation tools and tensions

The objective of mediation tools is to help to identify and describe life experience. These tools are geared towards explaining experiential learning, which is essential if adults' prior learning and its link with the reference framework skills are to be understood. In the three Centres under study, mediation tools have become increasingly important in assessing skills in the recognition stage and in obtaining the information required to justify the decision in the accreditation process. Their central position is evident in the power each Centre's staff have to plan and change these tools, and in the time set aside for completing them in the recognition stage.

The starting point for most mediation tools is the adults' life history and experience. In some of these tools, after describing the aspects of their life (what they have done, how they did it, what results they obtained), they have to provide evidence of the 'links' between their prior experiential learning and the reference framework skills. The tools focusing on the life path as a whole seek to capture the adults' experience as exhaustively as possible, and therefore require a retrospective description and reflection based in the present and, in some cases, looking towards the future. These tools boost self-recognition and allow adults to take ownership of their life paths, and take an approach geared towards personal development and emancipation.

Following a different rationale, the reference framework skills are the starting point for other mediation tools. In this case the adults identify the moments/situations/tasks in which they developed such skills on the basis of their life path. These tools make it easier to link their life history and the reference framework skills, though their completion requires greater detachment from and a greater capacity to reflect upon and analyse their experience.

Although the entry points are different, mediation tools that start from the life history as well as those that start from the reference framework skills seek to help adults to reflect on the skills they have acquired throughout life on the one hand, and to explain and take ownership of their experience on the other. Staff in the Centres under study obtain information with which to carry out the assessment from this detailed explanation of experience, which involves positioning the adult against the level of certification to be obtained.

This type of explanation of prior experiential learning and its comparison with reference framework skills offers potential in terms of self recognition, which the teams intentionally capitalise upon, as

can be seen from this comment: *'It's not enough for us to recognise their skills, they have to be the ones who recognise them and include them in their file'* (SRAC practitioner). Mediation tools are a *'stimulus for taking ownership of what is theirs'* (SRAC practitioner). They also help the adults involved, who are not very well educated, to internalise and understand the logic of the process, factors which are essential for motivating them and for enabling them to construct a narrative from their life experience.

Staff have two types of concern when reformulating and planning the mediation tools: they have to ensure, on the one hand, that they allow the individual to be involved in the task, which is why its completion has to be accessible and meaningful to them, and on the other they have to facilitate the staff's work in matching each adult's life experience with the reference framework skills. They must therefore capture their life experiences, i.e. their know-how and skills, as exhaustively and in as much detail as possible. Guaranteeing these two conditions in these tools as a whole is a difficult task, and particular tensions and dilemmas that have to be addressed sometimes arise and represent a constant challenge for CNO staff.

In many cases these dilemmas reflect the tensions caused by the coexistence of two theoretical strands in prior learning accreditation practices, and they are addressed by staff in the three Centres when they reformulate, plan and apply the tools. They are interlinked and the most evident are: complexity/simplicity, speed/quality, exhaustiveness/privacy, stability/change, individual/peer group and early/late selection.

In the complexity/simplicity dilemma, complexity on the one hand arises because there is a need to capture experiences and skills as exhaustively and in as much detail as possible, making the tools complex and difficult to complete, while simplicity on the other derives from the need to make completion of the tools accessible in order to allow the adults to be involved in the process and to allow them to take ownership of and reflect upon it.

The speed/quality dilemma is connected on the one hand with the need to ensure speed in completing the tools in order to comply with quantitative targets ⁽³⁾, and on the other with the need to ensure the quality, image and credibility of the process, the institution and the practitioners who work in the Centres.

⁽³⁾ The supervisory body establishes targets relating to the number of enrolments and adults certified; failure to meet the targets may have an impact on the financial appropriation awarded to the New Opportunity Centre concerned.

The exhaustiveness/privacy dilemma is related to the fact that the information must be guaranteed to be exhaustive so as to capture the entire life picture as fully as possible and to ensure that skills are meticulously identified. However, the more exhaustive the collection of information, the greater the risk that issues concerning each adult's privacy will arise, i.e. personal aspects relating to emotions and feelings, leading to situations which are difficult to manage in the recognition sessions.

The stability/change dilemma is related to the need to ensure the stability of the tools as a way of ensuring that the best use is made of the Centres' time and resources, and that targets are met. At the same time, however, they have to be reformulated constantly because the practitioners involved are concerned about the quality of the process and seek to make the most of their accumulated experience and critical reflection, and to adapt the process to the adults' particular circumstances.

The individual/peer group dilemma is related to the fact that, according to the type of tool to be completed and the profile of the adult undergoing the recognition process, it is sometimes considered more appropriate to provide individual personalised sessions. The shortage of human resources on the other hand, however, the need for the Centres to meet targets and the synergies generated by a peer group justify collective sessions.

The early/late selection dilemma arises because staff have to establish, as quickly as possible, whether the adults do or do not have the profile to obtain a certificate. Early selection is essential if the adults are not to be exposed to adverse situations. Early selection also involves risks, however, since in some cases the adults may be directed towards other opportunities because they are unable to demonstrate particular know-how and skills in their first meetings with staff in the Centres. This can arise when the adults underrate their know-how or do not understand the logic of the process, and therefore cannot produce information geared towards its aims. Establishing that an adult does not have the skills regarded as necessary to complete the process successfully, or realising on the other hand that, although they have such skills, they are unable to demonstrate them, is a difficult task. Late selection, meanwhile, provides a better basis for the decision when the adult has to be guided towards another type of opportunity. In this case the staff have already been able to collect more information. The longer the adult spends in the process, however, the greater the

risk that they will feel that recognition is being denied, with all the negative effects associated with that situation.

These dilemmas are addressed on a case-by-case basis according to the Centres' specific nature, the adults undergoing the process and the approach of staff. Points of balance, which have to be managed by staff both in terms of the planning and the application of the tools, nonetheless have to be found.

Conclusion

Prior learning accreditation practices are marked by complexity and tensions generated essentially by the two theoretical strands on which they are based, and the specific circumstances deriving from their underlying assumptions. This has a range of implications for the organisation and functioning of the schemes concerned, particularly the tools involved. Interviewees' comments highlight the presence and influence of two ideologies in the SRAC process delivered in the Centres: on the one hand, the humanist ideology that still currently moulds the specific features of the methods used, and on the other the ideology of individual responsibility geared towards human resources management and the meeting of policy targets defined at national and European level. Prior learning accreditation practices are based on innovative methods and are underpinned by a personal development perspective, but at the same time their purposes 'functionally subject those methods to the production of more individuals who are more competitive and who produce and consume more' (Canário, 2006, p. 45).

CNO staff responsible for prior learning accreditation practices thus face a paradox that is difficult to resolve and that may have consequences at several levels: i) a reduction in opportunities for staff to discuss and reflect upon the scheme, something the complexity and infancy of the process renders essential; ii) a decrease in the quality of the SRAC process in favour of the number of adults certified (e.g. decrease in enrolment standards, less investment in adapting methods and tools to the characteristics of the adults and the specific features of the process), which has a direct impact on the social credibility and acknowledgement of these practices; iii) an increase in the number of adults who abandon the process without obtaining a certificate, which may have personal consequences which are difficult to overcome, i.e. as regards self-esteem, self-

confidence and the relationship with knowledge in general and training in particular.

The complexity and tensions involved in these practices are addressed on a daily basis by CNO staff, and it is therefore essential for them to have an attitude of critical examination and experimentation and an enquiring mind. They must be aware of the complexity of SRAC practices and of their contribution to the construction of solutions consistent with the assumptions underlying them. The orientation of the methods and tools depends both on the aims of the schemes and on the aims assumed by the various staff members: *'the same tool can be applied in different ways, it depends on who's using it'* (CNO coordinator). This degree of independence gradually won by the staff makes it possible to exploit the potential and limit the risks involved in the SRAC process.

Contrary to what might be thought, the action of staff 'is not determined. Their narrow margin for manoeuvre can be broadened if their practice is accompanied by a clarity that allows it to be placed between instrumental reason and emancipating reason' (Canário, 2006, p. 46). However, at a time when the CNO network is expanding substantially, there is a risk that staff may neglect the importance of reflection, research and experimentation, aspects that require time and which are difficult to reconcile with pressures and competition between Centres.

The autonomy of the Centres is essential for constructing these new social practices, and this is the only way to ensure that staff commit themselves as reflective practitioners, 'capable of producing knowledge that comes from within their professional activity rather than applying procedures dictated by the tools and organisations that oversee them' (Canário, 2002, p. 23). The capacity for critical reflection of the various CNO staff members is extremely important for different reasons: i) the Centres are very recent, which means that their working methods and tools must be consolidated; ii) they function on the basis of a perspective of exploiting the skills of individuals, since they are located on the opposite side of the academic model, and in this case the critical attitude of staff is important for ensuring that the perspective of the SRAC process is not undermined. The process of innovation arising out of the reflective action of staff is essential for constructing new social practices which are complex. In this context the work of SRAC practitioners and trainers is crucial, and 'is constantly condemned to begin again, like the mythical hero Sisyphus' (Canário, 2002, p. 22).

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Informal and implicit learning: concepts, communalities and differences

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Keywords

Learning (formal, non-formal, informal, explicit, implicit, incidental)

SUMMARY

Informal learning and its validation has become a major issue in European and national education policy, raising the following questions. May learning be constituent for political action? Is learning the focus of validation? Is informality a feature of learning? Is implicit learning solely related to informality? To give answers, a general learning concept is introduced, focusing on the acting individual in socioculturally shaped environments. Using this concept, learning is exclusively realised by the individual and therefore may not be a constituent element of political actions. Learning outcomes, not learning, are validated. Implicit learning is not only related to informality, and formality is not a feature of learning. From this perspective, 'informality' and the opposite 'formality' have to be located in conditions external to the learner, characterised by the 'extent of educational arrangement', 'certification' and 'approved public regulations'. Consequently, the term 'informal learning' is triggering inappropriate associations.

Informal and non-formal learning are receiving increasing attention worldwide. *Learning: the treasure within* (Unesco, 1996), *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 1996) and *Qualifications and lifelong learning* (OECD, 2007) have drawn attention to learning outside formal educational institutions. Non-formal learning has been a central issue in European education policy since the 1995 white paper on

education and training (European Commission, 1995) followed by the European year of lifelong learning in 1996. A further stimulus came from the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. They emphasised that lifelong learning 'is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts' (European Commission, 2000, p. 3). This was emphasised further by the action plan and promoted by the 2002 Copenhagen declaration calling for 'a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning' (European Commission, 2002). Progress is documented in the *European inventory on validating non-formal and informal learning* (Cedefop, Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005; Cedefop 2008). The 2007 update states that 'validation of informal and non-formal learning has been found to be an increasingly important area of activity for policy-makers, practitioners and other stakeholders' (Ecotec, 2007).

Formulations like 'learning: the treasure', 'lifelong learning for all', 'lifelong learning as a guiding principle', 'the full continuum of learning contexts' or 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' indicate that the term 'learning' is used differently. Therefore a general learning concept will be introduced to answer the following questions: may learning be constituent for political action? is learning the focus of validation? is implicit learning solely related to learning in non-formality? is formality a feature of learning?

A conceptualisation of learning

Terms like 'viewing a picture', 'comprehending a statement', or 'handling a piece of work' express personal activities. In these expressions, activities are directed toward 'something' (a picture, a statement or a piece of work). From a cognitive perspective, such a 'something' is not in the head of the acting person as an object but as about that object, generated by the individual her/himself. A consequence is that activities are linked to information. Another important feature is that action and information are inseparably connected; there is no action without information and no information without action (Straka and Macke, 2005). This dynamic interplay is nominated an 'action episode'.

From the perspective of an acting person the picture, the statement or the piece of work is located outside the acting individual. Further

examples are other persons (supervisors, colleagues, peers or friends), tasks and requirements on the shop floor, technical equipment, organisational and instructional structures, teaching objectives, social norms and values as part of a culture. According to the notion of Gagné (1973), these features are assigned to the concept of 'external conditions'.

With external conditions, the environmental impact on an action episode is located. But an additional condition – indispensable for action – is still missing. It is the concept of 'internal conditions' introduced by Gagné (1973). These conditions enable a person to act on the basis of personal characteristics such as abilities, skills, knowledge, motivational and emotional dispositions. Giving this conception, a change of actions is only an indicator of learning.

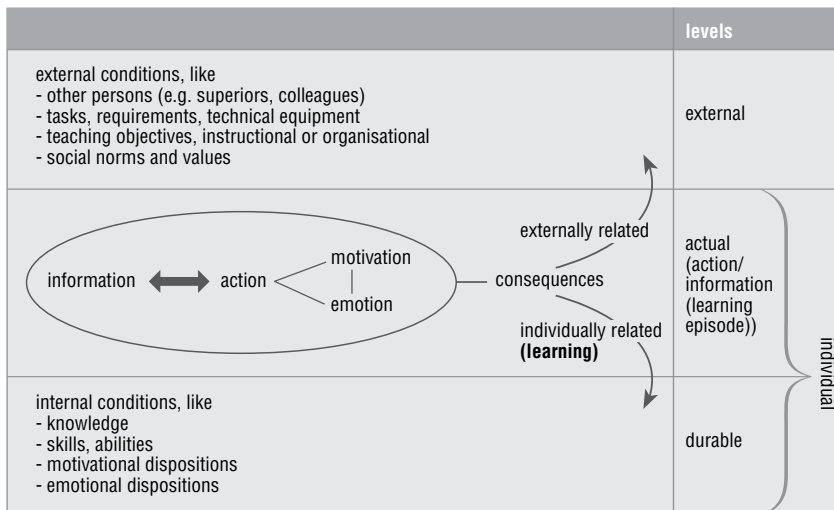
When asked why an individual realises, maintains, discontinues or avoids particular behaviour, or what reasons (conscious or unconscious) are behind it, the motivational part of the action episode is focused. Motivation relates actions to something (such as information), which has a certain intensity either for or against it. Similar concepts were introduced by Weinstein and Mayer (1986) and VanderStoep and Pintrich (2003). Emotion is another dimension of action. It embraces the subjective experience from an affective and non-rational angle, which can be pleasant or unpleasant. Emotion is connected with impressions such as joy or anger, or physical processes like sweating or shuddering, and expressional behaviour such as facial expressions or gestures (Pekrun, 2006; Boekaerts, 1999).

The four dimensions (information, action, motivation, emotion) presuppose one another. They do not exist separately but come into being only by interplay, generating one another. However, this does not mean that one or the other of the dimensions cannot be to the fore during certain phases of an episode. For example, although reading a text considered highly motivating, someone in a bad mood may retain nothing. Later, when feeling better, the individual may read the text attentively, compare what has been read with what is already known, and so add new information to her/his reactivated previous knowledge. This is not surprising, as people more easily understand and retain information when motivated (Figure 1).

An action episode may have consequences for external and/or internal conditions. External-related consequences arise, for example, from handling and transforming a piece of work or giving verbal expressions to transmit potential information. Individual-related consequences are where the interaction between information, action,

motivation and emotion lead to a durable change in the internal conditions of the acting individual. Only in this case has learning taken place (Straka and Schaefer, 2002; Straka and Macke 2005). This means that durable internal conditions or outcomes of learning are validated, not the learning process itself. Yet learning occurs only if the individual is in a specific mode and/or motivational state, factors under the control of the learner. Policy may only indirectly support learning, be it with advocated values and aims or external arrangements for the validation of learning outcomes.

Figure 1. Learning concept



The European concept of formality in learning

The glossary of Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) (Cedefop; Tissot, 2000) and the updated glossary in the communication of the European Commission *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (2001) give definitions of informal, non-formal and formal learning (Table 1).

According to Colardyn and Bjørnåvold (2004) these definitions are based on the intention to learn (centrality of the learner in the learning process) and the structure (context) in which learning takes place.

Table 1. **Formal, non-formal and informal learning**

<p>Formal learning consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.</p>	<p>Non-formal learning consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.</p>	<p>Informal learning is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can be partly understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but it is mostly non-intentional (incidental or random).</p>
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Source: Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2004, p. 71.

Considering these definitions with the learning concept outlined above, indicates that:

- internal conditions, as the constitutive feature for learning to take place, are still missing (Straka, 2002). Learning is an episode – intended or not – whatever the result might be. However, internal conditions might be more implicitly than explicitly addressed with general terms like learning outcomes or results;
- intention may have overlapping with the concept of motivation at first glance, but this link weakens with the formulation 'the intention to learn explains the centrality of the learner in the learning process' (Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2004, p. 71). Considering that only vivid persons can learn, such an expression is redundant. However, if this statement sets boundaries to definitions referring exclusively to external conditions (such as instructional objectives, time admitted for learning), the notion may contribute to differentiation between education and learning;
- apart from some tautological tendencies in these definitions – such as 'learning consists of learning' – an interpretation might also be that it is not learning itself that distinguishes informality from formality. Indications for this conclusion are terms like 'organised and structured context', 'formal recognition' or no 'certification';

- given the phrases ‘incidental from the learner’s perspective’, ‘accidental learning’, or ‘incidental/random learning’ bridges might be built to different learning types, discussed below.

Features of formality

An action by a person is no learning episode per se. Even an episode dedicated to learning gets the attribute ‘learning’ if, and only if, a durable change of internal conditions occurred. To carry the argument to extremes, we state that most parts of the learning episode and the learning result in total are – up to now – not directly accessible for outsiders. As a consequence, formality cannot be grounded in the individual. The key has to be found in the context or the external conditions in which the person’s learning took place. This consideration is supported by Colardyn’s and Bjørnåvold’s formulations: ‘learning that occurs within an organised and structured context’; ‘learning imbedded in planned activities (...) not explicitly designated as learning’; or ‘learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure’ (Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2004, p. 71).

Work and family represent contexts which tend not to be organised for educational purposes. In relation to leisure, this difference between educational and non-educational is blurred. If resources – like the Internet, a CD, a book or television programmes – are used (Straka, 1986), these external conditions are more or less structured for educational purposes. In that case, the term informal education instead of informal learning is appropriate.

Assigning non-educational external settings to informality poses a new problem: what is different about non-formality of learning and are daily life activities, related to work, family, or leisure – informal settings – exclusively unplanned and non-formal ones planned? The answer is that planned and unplanned activities may take place in both settings. A solution for this dilemma might be to use the criterion ‘degree of educational arrangement of external conditions’.

This criterion does not exclude the inconsistency that arises when people spend their leisure time on a history course in an adult evening class, or a volunteer evening history group meeting in their homes (Tough, 1971; Livingstone, 2001). In both settings, arrangements are dedicated to support learning, which is a core function of education. Which criterion is met in these cases: formal, non-formal or informal? If the criterion ‘organised and structured

context' is used, the volunteer evening history group could be a formal environment. Therefore, the additional criterion 'certification' is proposed to differentiate them. This notion is in accord with the European concept of informality that experiential and accidental learning typically does not lead to certification.

Certification may still not be sufficient for differentiating the external conditions for learning, one reason being certificates exist for different public and non-public regulation and approval. Some have beautifully ornamented formats with probably little acceptance beyond the meeting room. Others have a high reputation in the world of work, such as those from large IT-companies but they still lack guaranteed acceptance as of legal status. An *Abitur* (comparable to A-level in the UK) in Germany or *Externenprüfung* (examination for employed persons beyond the German VET system) have different attributes. Compared with certificates of high reputation, the *Abitur* guarantees admission to higher education in Germany. The *Externenprüfung* – if passed – guarantees the employed the craft or employee certificate in a defined domain, which makes her/him eligible for specified salary levels. Both entitlements are valid across Germany and perhaps across Europe via the European qualifications framework (EQF) in the future. Considering these aspects, the criterion 'certification' has to be subset into 'approved by public regulation' which might be the core idea of formal recognition in Colardyn's and Bjørnåvold's (2004) contribution.

Explicit, implicit, and incidental learning

To differentiate their learning types, European concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning introduce additional aspects such as 'intentional from the learner's perspective' or 'non-intentional (or incidental/random)'. They argue that informal learning may be intentional, but in most cases it is non-intentional whereas formal and non-formal learning are intentional from the learner's perspective.

Compared with the introduced learning concept, these formulations focus on the learner. The question is whether the intention of the learner differentiates exclusively between formality and informality in this context. A learning result may be achieved intentionally or non-intentionally in both contexts. Self-directed learning, the prototype of intentional learning, occurs under informal and formal arrangements (Straka 1997, 2000). Knowles (1975) – the originator of the self-

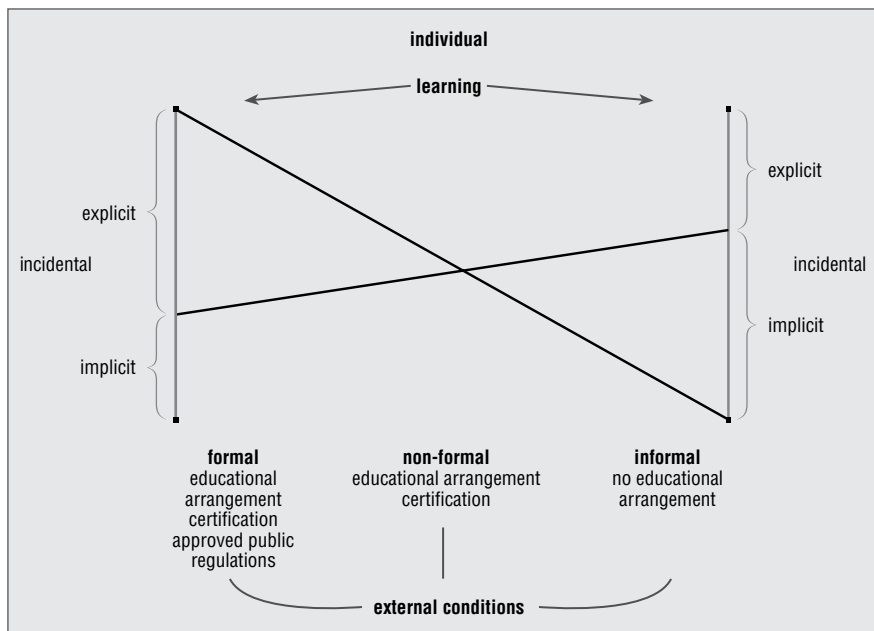
directed learning movement in US adult education – defines self-directed learning as ‘a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others (...)’. Other typical examples of formal environments are teachers or trainers in adult education institutes. Another approach is Tough’s (1971) ‘adult learning-project’ concept whose short version is ‘a sustained, highly deliberate effort to learn’ (Tough 1979, p. 7). Such learning is intentional but takes place in formal and informal contexts. However, non-intended learning results may occur in a formal context characterised by learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support, such as a creative solution not foreseen or planned by the student and/or the coach. Such activity and result are unintended but still largely explicit to the learner. There are also learning results possible which are neither explicit to nor intended by the student. Such issues are discussed under the concept of ‘hidden curriculum’ or the creeping acquisition of values during the lifelong socialisation process.

Considering that the terms intentional and non-intentional are ambiguous, the suggestion is to introduce the concepts of explicit and implicit learning (Anderson, 1995; Oerter, 1997). But there is another learning type used: incidental learning. This can be integrated between explicit and implicit learning, but not on the same dimension, as both explicit and implicit learning may be incidental.

The learning focus of the concepts explicit, implicit and incidental is on the person and not on the attributes of external conditions. A typical example is the peer group in a school, which cannot exist without the formal institution school, but which is organised informally. Interactions in such settings may be accompanied by explicit, incidental and *en passant* (Reischmann, 1995) but, above all, with implicit learning, results of which may not always support the official goals of institutions. The same situation may take place in organisations with formal and informal communication patterns; the informal might be the most successful.

Therefore, the key to distinguishing formality from non- or informality is to be found in the features of the external conditions differentiated according to the degree of educational arrangement, certification and approved public regulations. Combining types of formality of external conditions with types of learning, and referring to Colardyn’s and Bjørnåvold’s (2004) argumentation, produces the result shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. **Types of learning combined with formality of external conditions**



The figure shows that explicit and implicit learning take place in all types of external conditions but tend to be different in importance. Incidental learning may occur anywhere, even under formal conditions.

The focus on external conditions is supported by current conceptualisations (Garrick, 1998). The AERA special interest research group in this domain is called 'informal learning environments research'. According to Livingstone (2001, p. 5) 'informal learning is activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presences of externally imposed curricular criteria'. Because this pursuit of understanding can also take place in educational institutions, the demarcation line is located in the external conditions. In the same way Eraut argues: 'Informal learning is often treated as a residual category to describe any type of learning which does not take place within, (...) a formally organized learning program or event. However, for those who believe that the majority of human learning does not occur in formal contexts, the utility of such a catch-all label is not very great' (Eraut,

2000, p. 12). He recommends differentiation only with respect to formal and non-formal environments, of which formality can be characterised as a prescribed framework for learning (such as school syllabus, training regulations for companies), an organised event or package, the presence of a designated teacher or trainer, external specification of outcomes, award of a designated qualification, credit or certificate, accreditation or recognition of the qualification, credit or certificate, affiliated with the right of access to further education (Eraut, 2000).

Conclusion

Implicit, explicit or incidental learning may occur under any external condition. All provide no criteria for informality in learning. Independent from the types of learning, their outcomes are validated, not the individual process to realise them. Formality is not a feature of an individual's learning but of the socioculturally shaped conditions external to the individual. The latter aspects are to be found in the following statement in the context of validating non-and informal learning: 'With individuals acquiring knowledge, skills and competences in non-formal and informal settings as well as in formal education and training, Member States and the Commission have underlined the importance of recognising and valuing learning outcomes regardless of where and when these have been acquired' (Cedefop; van Rens, 2005, p. 1). Thus instead of informal, non-formal, and formal learning, the terms 'learning in informal arrangements', 'non-formal' and 'formal education' (Figure 2) should be preferred. The last two denominations have been used during the first phase of non-formality and learning that Colley, Hodkinson and Malcom (2003) found out in their genealogy of this concept. At that time, Unesco (1947) advocated non-formal education as an alternative path for persons who are excluded from or could no complete formal education. Such aspects are also part of EU and OECD focus on lifelong learning. However, learning is exclusively the concern of the individual. Therefore informal, non-formal and formal learning are triggering inappropriate associations in the context of policy.

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Continuing vocational training in local government in Portugal, 2000-05 – What has changed?

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SUMMARY

Local government in Portugal had a good opportunity to modernise through the Programa de Formação para as Autarquias Locais (Foral) [Training programme for local authorities], implemented between 2000 and 2005. Substantial financial resources were made available through the programme to retrain local government human resources in order to improve coordination between services, respond to requests from local inhabitants, and equip municipalities with technical and human resources.

The programme was in operation for six years and its development and outcomes can now be assessed.

Starting from an analysis of local authority 'social balance sheets' in two key years (2000 and 2005) and from information obtained as part of a process for assessing the impact of the Foral programme (2006), some of the changes brought about in local government due to the effects of the programme are presented and discussed.

Introduction

Portugal is a constitutional democracy in which central and local government coexist. Central government comes under the authority of the prime minister, who is appointed by the President of the Republic after legislative elections by direct universal suffrage in a secret ballot of resident citizens. In line with the constitution of the Portuguese Republic, the President of the Republic asks the leader of the majority party in the legislative elections to form a government.

Local government is exercised by local authorities, i.e. municipalities, municipal councils and parish councils. These are local, autonomous, decentralised bodies which respond to the collective problems and interests of the resident population in a particular area. Mayors or local councillors, who are democratically elected by direct universal suffrage in a secret ballot of resident citizens, are responsible for implementing local policies.

Recent moves to devolve powers to local authorities are based on recognition of the role played by local government in building democracy and providing an effective response to people's day-to-day problems. In the context of decentralising functions, powers that were previously exercised by central government in areas such as education, medical and social care, culture and sport have been devolved to local government. These new powers require both financial resources and qualified human resources. Financial resources are allocated to local government under the *Lei das Finanças Locais* [Law on Local Finance]. There have been very few municipal initiatives to upgrade the qualifications of local government employees.

The urgent need for qualified employees capable of responding to the demands arising out of the decentralisation of powers by central government, however, led to the creation of a training initiative for local government called the Foral programme under the third Community Support Framework. The programme aimed to help to train local government officials and employees in mainland Portugal so as to reinforce the decentralisation of power and the modernisation of services.

Substantial investments were accordingly made in local government training from 2001 to 2005.

Now that the Foral programme has concluded, several questions arise. Did the investment made grow in a similar way throughout the years of implementation of the Foral programme, and/or act in a similar way in the various regions of the country? Did the Foral

programme produce the expected changes in the qualifications of local government human resources? Have organisational changes taken place in local authorities due to the implementation of this programme? This article seeks to provide answers to these and other questions raised in examining the initial and final situation of local authorities (relating to the years 2000 and 2005 respectively), based on certain indicators.

The first part will set out the state of training in local government in 2000 as the reference framework underlying the subsequent analysis. The second and third parts will analyse the development of local government training activities and of the physical and financial implementation of the programme respectively. The fourth part will present the conclusions relating to the 12 case studies carried out in 2006 as part of the national assessment of the impact of the training delivered under the Foral programme.

The article concludes with a critical reflection on the nature and intensity of the changes experienced in local government as a result of the application of the Foral programme.

Initial situation

In 2002, three researchers from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Lisbon University carried out an extensive study characterising local government training (Canário, Cabrito and Aires, 2002). The activities referred to here as 'training' include all training activities geared specifically towards local government personnel, regardless of the characteristics involved. This study showed that:

- there were significant asymmetries in access to training between employees in different occupational categories, to the detriment of the less qualified 'auxiliary' and 'manual' categories. These two groups, accounting for 56.3 % of local government officials, used a mere 14.0 % of the total training delivered in 2000. On the other hand, the 'administrative' and 'senior technical' categories, representing 24.3 % of these officials, used 51.2 % of the training provided; finally, the 'managerial, technical executive, IT and technical' categories, which represent only 19.4 % of staff, jointly used 34.8 % of the training made available;
- this lack of equality in access to training explains why only 2.3 % and 6.1 % of 'manual' and 'auxiliary' staff were able to undergo training, while for the 'senior managerial', 'technical executive'

- and 'technical' occupational categories, the figures were 100 %, 91 % and 72.1 % respectively;
- the training delivered was mostly of short duration, with 78 % lasting less than 30 hours.
 - the training provided was mostly outsourced, i.e. 77 % of all training;
 - there was a predominance of classroom training, which fosters the passive consumption of training provided and purchased in the 'market';
 - most of the training was made available by local authorities, using training on offer in the market or provided directly by private training companies;
 - in 2000, local authorities were incapable of making strategic use of Foral programme funds, with 81.9 % of training being financed by own resources;
 - the experience of employees and the training potential of work situations and organisational problems in institutions were not exploited;
 - there was a general lack of training plans, consistent needs analyses and human resources training and management services;
 - there was no training culture.

In these circumstances and in view of the financial resources made available by the Foral programme and its objectives, the programme could have been a powerful instrument for expanding and diversifying training initiatives for local government officials.

The development of local government training activities in the period of implementation of the Foral programme is outlined below. It should be noted that the data are aggregated by NUTs, i.e. by aggregated territorial units, the regions involved being the North, the Centre, Lisboa e Vale do Tejo (LVT), Alentejo and Algarve.

Development of local government training, 2000-05

Number of applications submitted to the EU and approval rates

Table 1 shows the number of training applications submitted by local government by region.

In the first two years of implementation, the number of applications submitted was low for various reasons, most notably the lack of a

training culture, the inflexibility of local government structures and the difficulties inherent in the application process itself, which many council leaders complained was difficult, slow and complex. For a significant number of the officials surveyed, in fact, the bureaucratic difficulties of the application procedure made training using the authorities' own resources more attractive.

Table 1. Number of applications submitted

Years	2000-01	2002	2003	2004	2005	2000-05
North	47	40	58	143	178	466
Centre	33	16	67	116	137	369
LVT	37	30	50	71	113	301
Alentejo	11	15	16	41	31	114
Algarve	10	7	11	32	48	108
Total	138	108	202	403	507	1358

Source: Secretaria de Estado da Administração Local [Secretary of State for Local Government] – Núcleo de Coordenação e de Acompanhamento Estratégico do Programa Foral (NCAEPF) [Foral programme Strategic Coordination and Monitoring Unit].

The situation changed considerably from 2003, with the total number of applications submitted in 2004 doubling compared to the previous year.

The factors influencing this change included a high profile national campaign to publicise the Foral programme, the gradual standardisation of application forms, a reduction in the bureaucratic burden and the training courses for local government development officers and training managers proposed by Canário, Cabrito and Cavaco (2002).

Table 2, which shows the percentage development of application approval rates, clearly illustrates this change in training activities in the period, particularly in the North, which had an aggregate implementation rate of 106 % at 31 December 2005.

The dynamism shown by the North, the country's most industrialised region, was not representative of the pattern of training in general, however. The Alentejo and Algarve regions actually had very low figures, due basically to the fact that they are depressed regions with very small local authorities in which it was more difficult to implement the Foral programme. The position of Algarve in the last two years should nevertheless also be noted, a situation arising in part due to the establishment of networks among local authorities that enabled joint applications to be submitted.

Table 2. **Approval rates, aggregate figures as a percentage**

	2000-01	2002	2003	2004	2005
North	12	21	39	71	106
Centre	9	14	32	50	74
LVT	11	16	27	46	64
Alentejo	2	6	10	19	29
Algarve	4	9	14	26	29
Total	9	15	28	48	62

Source: NCAEPF.

The Lisboa e Vale do Tejo region is a special case in which the development recorded was due to the fact that there was already a strong training culture in this area, particularly in the municipalities of Lisbon, Oeiras, Cascais, Sintra and Almada, with countless initiatives financed by own resources.

Applications by type

One of the most consistent characteristics of training in general, particularly in local government, is the predominance of 'training courses' per se, involving classroom training where a relationship of 'dependence' is established between trainer and trainee, faithfully reproducing a now outmoded educational model (Canário, 1999). Training courses were also the prevalent type of training in applications for the Foral programme from 2000 to 2005, accounting for around 93 % of the total, as can be seen from Table 3.

Since one of the objectives of the Foral programme was to help to modernise local government in Portugal by stepping up training activities, and recalling that 'training courses' in general do not provide the desired results, given their cumulative nature external to the problems of trainees, it is fair to question whether that objective has been met.

It should nevertheless be noted that, although restricted in number, new types of training were presented and approved from 2003, following the study by Canário, Cabrito and Aires (2002) and the pressure exerted by local authorities themselves on the European Union and the Secretary of State for Local Government, leading to the publication of legislation allowing applications for new types of training.

Particularly important among these new types is 'practical training', which by its nature simultaneously involves many employees, and which can genuinely give rise to organisational changes. This was

in fact one of the issues focused upon in the case studies. It should also be noted that this type of training is not yet a true alternative to traditional training courses.

Organisations promoting training

In the period under analysis, training was promoted by a diverse range of organisations, with municipal councils and private training companies nevertheless predominating, as can be seen from Table 4.

Although the organisations promoting training were diversified, this did not give rise to significant changes in the types of training on offer, as Table 3 shows. ‘Training courses’ predominated for two basic reasons: on the one hand, private training companies have a ‘catalogue’ of training essentially consisting of the provision of ‘training courses/programmes’, which is the cheapest and most profitable way of delivering training; on the other, because local authorities generally lack training services and pools of in-house trainers, council leaders seek training in the market, where what is on offer essentially consists of training courses.

Table 3. Number of applications by type

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total number	% of total
Distance training	-	-	0	1	1	2	0.2
Advanced training	-	-	1	4	5	10	0.8
Practical training	-	-	0	30	54	84	6.1
Training courses	138	108	201	368	447	1262	92.9
Total	138	108	202	403	507	1358	100.0

Source: NCAEPF.

Duration of training

One of the guidelines in the document *Orientação Estratégica para a Formação na Administração Local* [Strategic guidelines for training in local government], by Canário, Cabrito and Aires (2002), was to favour medium and long duration training courses, since short duration programmes always have very little effect on the people who attend them. Despite this suggestion, however, the duration of training courses run during the period concerned under the Foral

Table 4. Organisations promoting training, 2000-05, as a percentage

Municipal councils	52	Associations of municipalities	11
Parish councils	2	Local authority training centre	5
Municipal undertakings	1	Educational institutions/universities	1
Concessionaires	2	Others	2
Private training companies	23	Development associations	1

Source: NCAEPF.

programme was very short, with programmes lasting less than 40 hours predominating, as can be seen from Table 5:

The figures in Table 5 are clearly indicative of short duration training, which goes hand in hand with the ‘training course’ mode. A total of 40 hours is too short a period in which to try out other types of training, and explains the extremely limited number of long duration initiatives, such as practical training and advanced training. This option will naturally adversely affect the objective of modernising government, and it therefore follows that the effects of training in the public administration in the period were not significant, either at individual or at organisational level.

Table 5. Average duration of training proposed, in hours

Years/Hours	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Average number of hours per programme	30	36	37	40	35

Source: NCAEPF.

In summary:

The implementation of the Foral programme from 2000 to 2005 suggests that:

- there was a significant increase in the number of applications and the number of approvals for training courses from 2003;
- from 2003, new types of training were submitted and approved, particularly practical training;
- in general, the training made available was essentially determined by what was on offer in the market rather than by the diagnosed

- needs of organisations and individuals;
- the training made available was essentially delivered by means of outsourced short duration training in the form of training courses.

Physical and financial implementation of the Foral programme, 2000-05

The analysis of the success of a measure is also gauged by its implementation. Thus in order to assess the success of the Foral programme, besides the indicators already presented and examined, indicators demonstrating the (in)ability of local authorities and the country to ensure the programme's implementation in physical and financial terms are presented below.

Physical implementation

To examine the physical implementation of the Foral programme, an indicator was used that relates the number of trainees approved for training to the number of trainees who actually underwent training.

This indicator is highly indicative of the way the programme was implemented, as it highlights the existence of a considerable shortfall in the number of officials and employees undergoing training, while a much greater number of individuals were approved for training. Table 6 shows these figures.

The figures illustrate the inability of local authorities to provide training for all trainees who apply. This suggests that there are failings in local authority planning processes in terms of the human resources available to deliver training, and the capacity of authorities to make personnel available for training.

These figures indicate the local authorities' initial difficulties in organising training for their officials. While inflexibility and bureaucracy may explain this situation in the first two years of implementation of the programme, after 2003, with the changes introduced into application processes (standardisation of documents, streamlining of the process) and with the provision of new types of training (practical training, distance training), a higher rate of physical implementation of the programme would be expected. In the light of the data under analysis, however, it can be seen that the Foral programme has not made the desired contribution towards new ways of organising and managing training, or towards modernising local government in general.

Table 6. **Relationship between the number of trainees approved and the training implemented**

	2000-01	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Approved (1)	47 764	25 797	65 002	82 094	107 197	327 854
Implemented (2)	9 653	15 905	20 613	29 963	29 943	100 077
(2)/(1)x100	20.2	61.7	31.7	36.5	27.9	30.5

Source: NCAEPF (adapted).

Financial implementation

The deficit in the physical implementation of the programme set out above suggests that the financial implementation would parallel this, and that is in fact the case. The rates of financial implementation, by region and nationally, were very low during the whole period, as can be seen from Table 7.

These figures very clearly illustrate the inadequate effort made by local authorities to train their officials and employees, though a willingness to take advantage of the financial resources available from 2004 can be observed. Combining the poor results for the programme's financial implementation with the results for its physical implementation, however, shows that Portugal missed its 'last chance' to modernise local government.

Table 7. **Rates of financial implementation, aggregate figures as a percentage**

	2000-01	2002	2003	2004	2005
North	1.0	5.7	12.6	16.1	20.6
Centre	1.3	4.1	6.7	10.8	17.7
LVT	1.5	5.6	9.9	17.9	29.1
Alentejo	0.4	2.4	5.6	19.9	25.3
Algarve	2.5	6.9	13.5	19.4	23.3
Total	1.5	5.5	10.8	17.0	23.4

Source: NCAEPF.

In summary:

- the physical implementation of the programme was extremely inadequate, with the delivery of a number of initiatives falling significantly below expectations;
- the financial implementation of the programme was also extremely inadequate, at around 30 % of the volume of capital allocated;

- while the shortfall in the implementation of the Foral programme appears to be 'excusable' until 2003, it is inexplicable from that year.

The Case Studies

Presentation

The need for a qualitative approach

The Foral programme was an important source of financing for the training of local government officials. With the ultimate aim of modernising this part of the public administration, thousands of training hours and events were funded from 2000 to 2005, yet at the same time thousands of individuals also slipped through the net of this training.

As seen above, however, in overall terms the implementation of the programme was very disappointing. Much of the training delivered in the period concerned suffered from the same inadequacies that characterised local government training in 2000, i.e. the fact that it was external to individuals and work situations, trainees' low participation in its planning, its short duration and the predominance of 'training courses'.

This also clearly shows that a significant proportion of the resources made available for training were not exploited, indicating that a range of institutions did not have the capacity to use the enormous volume of capital allocated to the Foral programme and thus to ensure the essential modernisation of services.

Despite the rather negative picture painted by this overall analysis, however, some positive aspects can be identified. Clearly the mere fact that many thousands of individuals were undergoing training was positive in itself, though the shortfall between what was achieved and the expectations placed on the Foral programme is disappointing.

It is nonetheless difficult for the overall analysis to pinpoint particular situations whose distinctiveness may have a positive effect on practices. That analysis does not make it possible to identify improvements that may have been brought about in the organisation, management and planning of training in a particular municipality, or to perceive the changes observed in a particular group of local government officials or employees. In short, the quantitative analysis

does not highlight signs of change (if any), whether in individuals, organisations or practices. Only a qualitative analysis of the process, in the sense attributed by Bogdan and Biklen (1994), can indicate the seeds of change that may develop in the near future.

In this context, an impact evaluation study of the Foral programme was conducted in 2006 (Nóvoa, Cabrito and Canário, 2006), which favoured a qualitative approach close to the case study.

The case study

In this study the research team sought to examine the distinctiveness of each training process rather than the numbers and figures involved to explain the particular features of each process and to identify the signs of change the Foral programme was hoped to bring about. The aim was to build up a detailed picture of certain experiences, and the case study as advocated by Lessard-Hébert *et al.* (2005) was therefore adopted.

The researchers chose to investigate and interpret what took place and how it took place in a restricted number of specific situations, rather than to 'measure' outcomes and organisational changes by means of a questionnaire survey of all municipalities. It was thus decided to carry out qualitative research into a number of cases to be determined, since as Yin (2001) has stated, the study of multiple cases is one of the possible types of case study. The aim was to characterise the training carried out in each case and to compare the procedures relating to that training with the situation diagnosed for Portugal in 2000.

In this way, starting from the analysis of these actual situations in terms of indicators such as the existence or otherwise of a training plan, the accessibility of training to certain occupational categories, the types of training carried out, the establishment or otherwise of networks of municipalities etc., the objective was to understand the changes that took place in local government training processes brought about by the implementation of the Foral programme from 2000 to 2005.

The cases

After opting to carry out qualitative research close to the case study, the number of cases and their identification had to be decided.

At this point, the time and the human and financial resources available were considered to preclude a representative sampling of the universe of several hundred municipalities. It was decided instead to focus on a limited number of municipalities, bearing feasibility in mind and based on the principle that it was not intended to make

generalisations, on the one hand, and that the information obtained from a range of cases could, by saturation, reveal 'generalisable' trends on the other.

In line with this methodology, it was decided to study 12 situations, since the research teams were small, their members were to continue their respective professional activities, and they lived in different areas that were some distance from each other and from the potential cases.

These 12 situations nevertheless had to meet different criteria that would ensure that the situations analysed were diverse. Twelve cases were thus actively chosen for the sample, selected according to regional and geographic distribution, principal economic activities and the nature of the organisation (the municipality and the association of municipalities).

In view of the number of municipalities in each region and the respective population, the first decision was to carry out three case studies in each of the North, Centre and Lisboa e Vale do Tejo regions, two in the Alentejo and one in Algarve.

The nature of the institutions to be studied then had to be determined. The first idea was to study 12 local authorities. In some places, however, their small size means that they have to join together to achieve objectives common to the respective regions and populations. Some municipalities, for example, have joined forces to promote training because their size does not allow them to form the cohort of 15 officials for training laid down by the European Union, or have joined together to share trainers or equipment.

On a day-to-day basis, sometimes diverse municipalities therefore come together to form associations of municipalities, creating a structure that allows their individual members to carry out particular functions common to them all. Considering the total number of municipalities and associations of municipalities in the country, it was decided to study five associations of municipalities and seven municipal councils.

In view of the number of these organisations in each region, it was decided to study:

- two associations of municipalities and one municipal council in the North;
- two municipal councils and one association of municipalities in the Centre;
- two municipal councils and one association of municipalities in the Lisboa e Vale do Tejo region;

- one municipal council and one association of municipalities in the Alentejo;
- one municipal council in Algarve.

After this stage, and in specifying which municipal councils or associations of municipalities were to be studied in each region, the urban or rural nature of the different organisations was also taken into consideration.

Finally, in deciding which cases were to be studied, i.e. in forming the sample, account was also taken of the knowledge available on the training initiatives and experiences delivered by the various municipal councils or associations of municipalities in order to find 'exemplary' cases that could be illustrative of good practices.

It was eventually decided to study the following cases:

Table 8. Cases studied

		North	Centre	LVT	Alentejo	Algarve	Total
Municipal council	Urban	1	-	2	1	1	5
	Rural	-	2	-	-	-	2
Association of municipalities	Urban	1	-	1	-	-	2
	Rural	1	1	-	1	-	3
Total		3	3	3	2	1	12

Data collection

In conducting the case studies, documents were used that enabled to ascertain what training had been delivered and what its nature and justification was. Training application proposals and training plans, if any, were therefore examined, with consideration in the case of training plans being given not only to their content but also to the way they were drawn up.

Since the lack of training plans was one of the dominant characteristics of the organisation of local government training in 2000, it was important to discover whether such planning was now part and parcel of practice in the municipalities or associations of municipalities five years later.

Besides investigating the existence of training plans, the teams also wished to examine how such plans were drawn up in order to gauge the importance the various organisations attribute to making a diagnosis of the respective problems, and to verify the extent to which the training initiatives proposed may contribute towards resolving the problems encountered in the diagnostic stage.

Other documents were examined, particularly the 'planning' of the training made available and the respective curricula, agreements between institutions relating to the sharing of physical and human training resources, documents supporting information networks, statistical data, etc.

In collecting data, in line with the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklen (1994), bearing in mind the wealth of information they make it possible to obtain, semi-directive interviews were held with managers of training services and activities and with the leaders of the municipal councils or associations of municipalities.

The advice of Bardin (1977) was followed in examining the content, the documents observed and the interview protocols.

Conclusions of the case studies

The studies carried out in the various municipal councils or associations of municipalities, notwithstanding each one's specific features, were generally guided by three lines of analysis:

- comparing the current situation with the diagnosis made in 2002 (Canário, Cabrito and Aires, 2002);
- identifying good practices;
- understanding future developments.

As far as lack of equality of opportunity in access to training is concerned, there appears to be a genuine desire to democratise training which is reflected in more equitable access to and use of training. Certain opportunities geared towards the 'manual' and 'auxiliary' categories were identified in the training delivered as a whole, even though training provision for other occupational categories continues to predominate. Training during working hours, in complete days and in a work context was a consistent feature in some cases, with the aim of extending training to all.

The small scale of some local authorities, however, is not conducive to this 'universalisation' of training, especially with respect to the less qualified occupational categories, given the small number of such professionals. In this case two sometimes simultaneous approaches were noted: the pooling of officials from different local authorities to form a cohort of trainees, and/or the delivery of training in a work context.

As to whether training plans do or do not exist, meanwhile, in general it seems that they do, which is a positive development compared to the situation in 2002. In most cases, however, training plans still conform to a cumulative, catalogue-based top-down

approach, with low worker participation. Hence the predominance of short duration classroom training determined by what is on offer in the market, which is very often inappropriate to actual situations.

In associations of municipalities, great stress was laid on persuading the various members to cooperate in drawing up the training plan rather than waiting for the association to present a completed plan.

In some cases, particularly where practical training was involved, there was a genuine willingness to promote the participation of various categories of employee. These cases also involved an embryonic transformation in the organisations because of the introduction of practical training and project work approaches. An attempt to expand training to all employees in all occupational categories could be discerned in these cases, with embryonic organisational change being visible, particularly in relations between employees of different categories, between employees and managerial staff, and between employees and training teams.

It should also be noted in connection with training for the less qualified occupational categories that some organisations have invested in cooperation with Skills Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres, with the aim of simultaneously providing trainees with dual certification training, both academic and vocational. This may help to raise the low educational standard of these employees and thereby help to modernise municipal services, which will create a pool of better qualified officials who are less change averse. In many of these cases, training is thus seen as a way to modernise services and as a strategic investment.

Contrary to the isolation of local authorities noted in 2002, these studies highlight a trend towards the initiation and development of networking, revealed by the formation of intermunicipal information and training networks that seek to increase effectiveness and competitiveness through economies of scale. According to the interviewees, the 30 or so development officers who attended the respective local government course have contributed towards this type of sharing. A very telling attitude was displayed by some local authority leaders who, because of the limited number of development officers, ensured that 'training promoters' were trained who became links in the intermunicipal projects.

Another situation observed in several cases concerns the nature of the training to be made available. Considerable stress is laid on the one hand on in-house training, i.e. delivered in the premises

of the municipality or association of municipalities, by in-house trainers where possible, to ensure that it is more relevant to trainees' problems. Outsourced training on the other hand is encouraged and represents a means to ensure contact with colleagues in other municipalities, with all the advantages arising out of the sharing of information and knowledge.

Networking, the building of partnerships, practical training, attempts to increase the participation of all in drawing up training plans, training as an investment in developing institutions and trainees and coordination with the Skills Recognition and Validation Centres all accordingly came to the fore as good practices to be promoted in all municipal councils or associations of municipalities.

The analysis of interviewees' future intentions shows that some of the concerns set out coincide, particularly the need to adjust training to the problems of organisations and trainees and to break the mould of training driven by technical rationality, the need to move away from the cumulative approach to training, the need to create an in-house pool of trainers and/or a pool of network trainers and to involve employees in planning and implementing training.

Besides issues concerning training per se, other aspects of the future development of training also stand out. These include in particular the consolidation of regional training or information networks, the promotion of cross-cutting approaches, with emphasis on the collective, the easing of the trend to commercialise training, subordinated to the quality, effectiveness and efficiency approaches, the integration and coordination of training with overarching strategies to develop the municipal territory, the stepping up of cooperation with the Skills Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres which bring trainees' academic and vocational dimensions together, and the creation of mechanisms to assess the impact of training, which are lacking in all the cases under study.

Future prospects reveal a commitment to participation in drawing up training plans and programmes, stress on less general training that is geared more towards problem-solving, the approval of new types of training such as vocational and academic training courses, the building of partnerships, particularly with higher education institutions, and the perspective of training as an investment in the organisation and in the personal and professional development of government officials.

In summary:

- Some difficulties persist, notably in connection with the lack of equality between occupational categories in access to training, and in particular as regards the invisibility of the organisational effects of training, which appears to be seen mainly as an action with consequences and implications for trainees considered individually.
- A number of aspects stand out that may represent potential embryos fostering the consolidation of changes in local government vocational training in Portugal. These include certain practical training initiatives which are consistent with forms of training planning in which training is not the sum total of sundry training courses.
- Initiatives to build regional networks among specialists and local authority organisations which are mobilised both in the planning and implementation of training are also in evidence.
- Note should also be taken of the emergence of specialists who act as the ‘persons responsible’ or ‘interlocutors’ for training, raising the profile of this issue within organisations and in relations between organisations, and who may help to encourage the emergence of a training culture.
- Some interlinking between training processes and vocational certification processes through the agreements established with the Skills Recognition, Validation and Certification Centres should also be noted.

Finally, in terms of the future development of training activity, based on the analysis of the cases, the aim is to:

- involve managerial staff in training processes;
- carry out a rigorous and systematic diagnosis of the initial situation in terms of organisations, occupations and individuals;
- create a regulating mechanism during the training process;
- integrate assessment into the training process;
- favour training for the personal development and social recognition of trainees;
- promote the consolidation of intermunicipal training networks.

Conclusion

The development of the implementation of the Foral programme in the period from 2001 to 2005 can thus be summarised as follows:

- there was a significant increase in the number of applications throughout the period; at 31 December 2005, however, the rate of approval was no more than 62 % of the programme's total financial resources;
- stress was placed on introducing new training methods, particularly practical training, though over 90 % of applications submitted concern training courses per se;
- the most important organisations promoting training are local government institutions; the role of private training companies nevertheless grew significantly;
- long duration programmes such as practical training came into being, though short duration programmes predominate;
- the physical implementation of the programme fell well below expectations, as can be seen from the difference between the number of proposals approved and the number of proposals carried out;
- the financial implementation of the programme also fell well below expectations, amounting to 23 % of the available resources in aggregate terms.

Thus although Foral programme financial resources were exploited more efficiently and training methods were diversified, particularly from 2003, the overall analysis of the available data does not bear witness to widespread improvements in training provision in local public administration that could lead to its effective modernisation.

A more detailed analysis of the impact of training under the Foral programme, however, highlights a more optimistic outlook, albeit gauged from the overall figures.

Data obtained from the 12 case studies illustrates the work that has been done in some municipalities or associations of municipalities to diversify training methods, improve mechanisms for building training demand, broaden the section of the public undergoing training, invest in professionals who act as training agents/promoters, establish intermunicipal partnerships and partnerships with training institutions such as universities and Skills Recognition and Validation Centres, and foster networking.

The conclusions drawn on the basis of the case studies nevertheless do not disguise the inadequate training practices in local government. It can be seen from bringing the macro and micro studies together that short duration programmes still predominate, that training plans continue to be drawn up with little participation, that access to training remains unequal, to the detriment of the 'manual' and 'auxiliary' occupational categories, that organisational changes continue to be 'irrelevant', and that as a rule there is no training culture.

It should be noted, in conclusion, that in overall terms the implementation of the Foral programme is marked by tension between what could be called a 'traditional' view of training dependent on formal trainer-centred classroom-based training courses or programmes on the one hand, and a training approach which aims to ascertain the real needs of a particular organisation or group of people on the other. This simply involves contrasting the provision of more or less formal classroom-based training courses and actions which are designed in virtually total isolation from real work situations with the tailoring of training on the basis of a deeper analysis of organisations and work practices, favouring close liaison between training and the work context.

In practice, the macro and quantitative analysis seems to suggest that the former approach prevails, but the more detailed analysis based on the case studies allows certain signs of change and innovation that may fall within the latter approach to be identified. This includes, for example, the approach in some practical training institutions whereby training plans and programmes are drawn up after discussion with and cooperation between various training stakeholders (trainers, trainees, supervisory personnel, etc.), and investment in training geared towards solving problems previously identified in organisations.

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The QIBB quality initiative of the vocational training system in Austria

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SUMMARY

The QIBB quality initiative was specifically developed for the vocational training system in Austria. The quality system is distinctive in that it includes both objectives and survey instruments designed to address the specific concerns of vocational training. There are general quality concepts and instruments that are common to all schools and others that are differentiated according to the type of school. The various school types within the vocational training system use QIBB first of all to conduct system-related surveys, for example to test common quality objectives in connection with national priorities. QIBB also enables schools to conduct internal evaluations. Survey instruments and an automatic evaluation are available from an online database. The test power of the survey instruments made available in QIBB are also verified in empirical analyses. Initial studies indicate that the test power of almost all survey instruments examined is satisfactory.

Keywords

Vocational education, quality development, school development, school quality, quality of education, evaluation

Definition of school quality

If a group of people is asked what they understand by 'school quality', there will probably be as many answers as there are people. In fact, the question cannot be answered with reference to a single indicator and, depending on the approach, different indicators will be arrived

at, focusing, for instance, on outcomes such as performance or competences or on targets such as human resources and budget (see Böttcher, 2002; Fend, 2001; Kempfert and Rolff, 2005; *National Education Association*, 2008; Schratz, lby Radnitzky, 2000). The European Commission defines the core aspects of school quality as follows: knowledge, success and transition (to further education), monitoring education and resources and structures (internal school resources and structures; SEQuALS, 2008).

Classification of indicators of school quality based on a multi-level model

Given the variety of indicators of school quality, a classification system needs to be used to categorise quality indicators. The multi-level model is such a system in that it sorts indicators according to different levels within the educational system (Fend, 2000, 2001):

- level of the school system: this level comprises indicators such as equal opportunities and supply density as well as humanitarianism (regulation of freedoms, participation and obligations) (Fend, 2001);
- school level: this is where indicators such as social climate and working atmosphere in school, satisfaction, student and parent participation or the quality of cooperation with the school environment (Fend, 2001; Holtappels, 2003) are to be found. These are indicators that concern the school system as a global system within which different people move and which is established in a social environment;
- class level: at this level indicators such as performance, learning and social behaviour, social relationships and interaction between students and teachers as well as parents and teachers are located, i.e. indicators that view the class as a learning community embedded in a social environment (Fend, 2001; Holtappels, 2003);
- personal level: this level comprises indicators relating to people. For teachers, this includes competences and attitudes; for students, it comprises attitude to study and work and competences (Fend, 2001; Holtappels, 2003).

Classification of indicators for school quality based on a process model

If educational and training processes are viewed as a chronological sequence in which it should be possible 'to turn schools, for all

students if possible, into productive spaces for learning and their long-term development' (Fend, 2000, p. 56), then indicators for school quality can be classified according to whether they relate to the framework conditions for the promotion of development processes, the actual teaching, learning and development processes or to training and education outcomes.

If school quality is related primarily to the outcomes of education and training processes, first of all quality indicators can be identified on the part of students or graduates. They include not only learning achievements, technical and interdisciplinary skills acquired, personal characteristics and attitudes, but also satisfaction with schooling and the atmosphere in the class or school. Secondly, outcomes can be identified on the part of the parents or the school's cooperation partners, such as parent satisfaction with training or the assessment of training outcomes by cooperation partners such as training firms.

At the process level, various indicators can be discerned relating to the design of organisational, teaching, learning and tuition processes. This category covers teacher-student interaction, support measures and, at school level, personnel development and employee promotion.

By contrast, conditional structures relate to the structural and procedural constraints under which a school – but also the various institutions within an educational system in general – organises its work. The conditional factors at school level include, for example, not only aspects such as formal performance standards, organisational framework and type of school but also external conditions (for example, the job market; Holtappels, 2003).

The vocational school system in Austria

In Austria, compulsory education begins at the age of six and lasts nine years. Secondary school education up to the school-leaving examination is called *Sekundarstufe II* in German-speaking countries. This educational segment is highly subdivided in Austria: the academic secondary school (*Gymnasium* in *Sekundarstufe II*) is distinct from the vocational school in terms of its curricular content and objectives. The vocational school system is divided into part-time vocational schools (*Berufsschulen*) for training as part of an apprenticeship, and vocational middle and upper schools. The training

corresponds with levels 3b to 5b of the international classification ISCED 97 (UNESCO, 2008), (<http://portal.unesco.org>).

The Austrian vocational middle and upper schools cover a range of subjects. The following school types are classified by specialisation:

- technical, trades and art colleges;
- business colleges;
- colleges for occupations in the social and services sector (specialising in fashion, tourism, social services and professions);
- colleges for agriculture and forestry;
- kindergarten training colleges and colleges for social pedagogy.

The vocational schools also participate in the quality initiative. Besides vocational training, they impart theoretical and general knowledge and complement company-based training (bm:ukk, 2008a).

In the school year 2003/04, 25.6 % of Austrian students in the tenth grade – i.e. directly after finishing compulsory education – attended vocational upper schools and 13.2 % attended vocational middle schools. 18.8 % attended academic secondary schools (*Gymnasium*) and 36.9 % part-time vocational schools.

QIBB quality initiative of the vocational school system in Austria

Launching the 'VET quality initiative – QIBB' (QIBB, 2008a) in 2004 was a significant step towards quality development and quality assurance in the Austrian school system. This joint initiative of all Austrian vocational schools marked the development and implementation of a quality system that comprises schools, the school supervisory board and the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture as the highest education authority, and perceives, defines and procedurally describes quality as a complete cycle – from guiding principles through to evaluation and modification measures.

The quality system of the part-time vocational schools

Quality manuals set out the organisation of the content as well as the features of the quality system (Paechter and Mayringer, 2006; QIBB, 2008a, 2008b). Key elements of these manuals are the mission statement, the quality matrix and guidelines on the content of the annual quality reports.

The mission statements express the common self-conception of the training institutions involved. This self-conception is marked, irrespective of the individual school type, by a close alignment on the demands of individual professions. In the quality matrix, the quality fields mentioned in the mission statements are broken down into sub-objectives. Each sub-objective is assigned (pedagogical, didactic and organisational) measures, outputs and indicators for the purposes of evaluation. A further feature of the quality system is that the quality work is conceived of as a continuous, objective-oriented and feedback-based improvement process (Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture, 2008b). In line with this approach, the guidelines, quality objectives and sub-objectives, measures, desired outputs, indicators and evaluation methods and instruments form the framework of the quality work.

The quantity and wording of the quality fields, measures, outputs and indicators can vary according to school type. However, the quality matrices of all school types contain quality fields from four basic areas:

- teaching and learning: this area is divided into different quality objectives. They concern issues such as the quality of vocational training, general and personal development through school and support for students in a stimulating study and work environment;
- administration and quality management: the objectives in this area address employee advancement, quality development in relation to the performance of educational institutions and participation in quality development measures;
- economy and society: objectives in this area concern the innovative potential of training programmes and ensuring practical relevance through theoretical and practical training, the practical experience of teachers and cooperation with industry and other cooperation partners;
- internationality: this area concerns the international dimension of the training programmes and the opportunities to encourage mobility and intercultural understanding among the students.

With the exception of 'internationality', all the objectives formulated in the quality areas fall within the four categories defined by the European Commission as the core areas of school quality. The quality system employs a multi-level approach in so far as it specifies, for each objective (with output and indicators), the level within the school system where appropriate measures for quality development and assurance can be implemented (school authorities or the school itself).

Since the quality objectives are derived from and further differentiate the mission statements, there is always a broad spectrum of quality areas and a relatively large number of sub-objectives. For practical reasons, it is not feasible for all sub-objectives to be evaluated every year. Each year, therefore, a steering committee of school authority representatives and head teachers sets evaluation priorities as binding quality areas. Moreover, each school can work on other quality areas.

Evaluation

In the feedback-based quality system, objective-oriented, systematic, regular evaluation at all system levels is a prerequisite for quality development and assurance. This is based on the following guiding principles (see Holtappels, 2003):

- the evaluation meets the criteria of utility, feasibility, objectivity and correctness;
- it fulfils ethical principles;
- the evaluation is performed on both the processes and the outcomes of pedagogical and administrative action;
- feedback is collected from all groups capable of directly or indirectly evaluating the quality of the school;
- the survey instruments made available have the requisite test power.

The evaluation of part-time vocational schools in Austria exhibits characteristics of both external and internal evaluation. It is external in so far as evaluation instruments such as questionnaires are supplied to schools and then evaluated externally in an online environment. A further feature of external evaluation is that an evaluation is supposed to be made of selected quality objectives for all schools. An internal evaluation characteristic is that schools can define further evaluation areas for themselves, but must use the specified survey instruments. Another aspect that corresponds to internal evaluation is the fact that schools themselves prepare a quality report, that is to say they can interpret and comment on evaluation results (see Kempfert and Rolff, 2005). Also as regards the question of self-evaluation versus external evaluation, the present system uses a mix of methods. Teachers evaluating their own lessons is clearly self-evaluation. If, however, outsiders, such as representatives of industry, provide assessments, that corresponds to external evaluation (see Holtappels, 2003).

Although schools bear the lion's share of evaluation and are viewed as the key players in quality development, thinking about an

overall system is clearly to the fore. For evaluation, this means that it must be possible to compare and aggregate the results in parts. That is why schools are provided with a set of specially developed evaluation instruments and with electronic support for conducting and evaluating the surveys.

Survey instruments

To assist schools with their evaluations, survey instruments were developed that are tailored to the requirements of part-time vocational schools. They include the following types of instruments:

- questionnaires for students, graduates, teachers and parents;
- guidelines for discussions, e.g. with company representatives;
- survey forms for the school, e.g. for statistical surveys of the facilities and human resources.

Like a process model, the instruments target various quality indicators: processes (in the school, in the classroom) and behaviours (school management, teachers, administrative staff and students), outcomes/attitudes (students, teachers) and structural factors (facilities and human resources).

In terms of their specificity, three types of survey instrument can be identified: first, there are instruments that can be employed for all school types; second, there are instruments that are suitable for all school types in their basic form, but which contain some questions (e.g. regarding subjects) that are specifically formulated for each school type; finally, there are instruments that cover the specific structures, processes or results of a specific school type.

The survey instruments of the quality system are designed to ensure that statements or assessments in evaluations made by others never refer to an individual. Students do not assess an individual teacher but rather all their teachers as a whole (example of a questionnaire item: 'my teachers advise me how to improve my performance' – assess on a scale of (1) 'strongly agree' to (6) 'strongly disagree'). Thus, already at the survey stage, the data are not obtained to assess individuals. If possible, each aspect is assessed by a number of groups, e.g. by teachers and students. The survey instruments, which always cover the behaviour of a group of persons, are used to evaluate quality objectives within the context of a system evaluation. In addition, individual schools can also use the instruments for an internal evaluation.

QIBB also contains questionnaires which individuals can use to obtain feedback on their own professional behaviour. Such

Table 1. Overview of topics covered by the survey instruments, ordered by processes and levels

Assessor/Instruments	Structural factors	Process factors	Result factors
Students (questionnaires)	Environment/school: school-entry phase (lower classes) School: facilities	Class: course design (variety of methods, gender fairness, performance appraisal, practical relevance, etc.)	Persons: attitudes, competences Class: atmosphere School: atmosphere
Graduates (questionnaires)	---	---	Persons: attitudes, competences
Teachers (questionnaires)	School: facilities, resources, management of organisational and administrative processes	Persons: Course design School: personnel development, collaboration with colleagues	Persons: satisfaction
Parents (questionnaires)	Environment/school: school-entry phase (lower classes)	Class: interaction	School: atmosphere
School (survey forms)	School: facilities, resources, curricula, training courses, management of organisational and administrative processes	School: personnel development, resources, cooperation with external partners	Persons: certificates, final exams of students
External partners (businesses, etc.) (discussion guidelines)	School: curricula	---	Persons: competences of graduates

questionnaires are available for each level within the school system (teachers, head teachers, school inspectors, etc.). In this way, teachers can have their teaching assessed by the students.

To conduct and evaluate the surveys, schools are provided with an efficient technical infrastructure financed by the school authorities. All survey instruments are available as Web forms that can be processed and evaluated online.

Verification of the test power of the survey instruments using an illustrative sample

During the development of the QIBB survey instruments it was not possible to draw on existing instruments from other surveys or school experiments. There were a number of reasons for this: for example the

quality objectives are specifically tailored to part-time vocational schools. By contrast, initiatives in other countries often view school quality from a global perspective that considers only quality elements common to all school types and school levels (for Germany see: Basel and Rützel, 2005; *Netzwerke innovativer Schulen und Schulsysteme, 2008*; Zöllner, 2005; for Switzerland: *QuiSS, 2008*; for the United Kingdom: *HMIe, 2008*). Such a system would not do justice to the distinctive features of the vocational training system. Furthermore, since there were no models from the vocational training system, not only the quality system itself but also the survey instruments had to be developed from scratch.

This means that the test power of the new instruments had to be verified in an empirical study. Thus when the evaluation was first conducted in the 2005/06 school year, the test power of 12 questionnaires on different fields (e.g. transparency of performance appraisal, gender-neutral teaching, administrative processes, and personnel development) was verified. The following questions were germane to the appraisal of the test power of the questionnaires:

- do the questionnaires or the questions in the individual questionnaires differentiate between varying types of quality?
- is test power of the questionnaires adequate? This question concerns, for instance, whether the items within a questionnaire show inherently valid structures in an empirical test;
- how strongly do evaluations of identical aspects vary from group to group (e.g. teachers and students)?

In the following, the verification of the test power of the instrument 'transparency of performance appraisal' will be presented by way of example. For this quality objective, one questionnaire was designed for students and one for teachers, although the teachers' questionnaire was not used in every type of school. The analysis draws on data for three school types from the 2005/06 school year, the first year of the evaluation. These types comprise schools and colleges for occupations in the social and service sector, colleges of business administration and business schools, and colleges for engineering, arts and crafts. The other school types began the evaluation a year later.

Review of the test power of the students' questionnaire on 'Transparency of performance appraisal'

In the 2005/06 school year, 70 355 students participated in the online survey, of whom 36 217 attended secondary schools and colleges for occupations in the social and services sector [*humanberufliche Schulen*] (1 737 classes, 51.48 % of participants) and 34 138

attended colleges for engineering, arts and crafts (1 800 classes, 48.52 % of the participants).

Table 2 lists mean values, standard deviation and the number of cases for each item of the questionnaire.

Table 2 shows standard deviations of the items with values between 1.18 and 1.45. The rather high standard deviations indicate that the students' assessments span the entire scale. This is desirable because the items in the later evaluation are intended to differentiate between various characteristics (e.g. in teaching behaviour) and facilitate comparisons between various groups and classes within a school.

The first step in examining the test power of the questionnaire

Table 2. Mean values, standard deviation and number of cases for each item of the questionnaire 'Transparency of performance appraisal (students)'

No	Item	M	SD	N	N/A
1	At the start of the school year, the teachers explain to us the knowledge and skills we are supposed to acquire by the end of the year.	2.92	1.36	70 343	12
2	The teachers discuss with us why we require those particular teaching materials.	3.73	1.43	70 335	20
3	The teachers make us aware of interconnections with other areas of life and learning.	3.04	1.29	70 334	21
4	My class teachers tell us how marks are determined (e.g. weighting of questions) in individual appraisals (e.g. schoolwork, test, oral examination).	2.43	1.34	70 331	24
5	My class teachers tell us at the start of the school year how the overall mark is determined for each subject (e.g. weighting of individual performance, importance of class participation).	2.30	1.29	70 331	24
6	My class teachers provide timely information on examination dates and submission deadlines (e.g. for schoolwork, tests, project work, homework).	2.05	1.18	70 329	26
7	My teachers update me on my current performance level if I ask them to.	2.40	1.36	70 325	30
8	The marks I am given reflect my actual performance.	2.64	1.28	70 315	40
9	My teachers advise me how I can improve my performance.	3.07	1.45	70 292	63
10	The teachers separate advice and feedback from the performance review.	2.98	1.30	70 082	273

M=mean value; SD=standard deviation; N=sample size; N/A=number of missing values; all items were answered on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree).

was to investigate whether the individual items were answered in a differentiated manner. To do this, the so-called 'item popularity' was ascertained across the sample of all students (Bühner, 2004). This measurement shows if a question is answered with a desired variance or if all answers cluster around a similar point on the scale so that no differentiation can be made between different qualities. An item popularity of between 0.2 and 0.8 is desirable. In fact, examination of the ten items revealed satisfactory item popularity for all items.

The second step was to analyse relationships between items. To this end, a factor analysis was conducted on all items. During the development of tests and questionnaires, factor analyses are computed to check relationships between items and the dimensionality of a survey instrument. Thus, an extensive number of items can be broken down into homogeneous subcategories and analysed to determine if a number of items include a common latent variable (Bühner, 2004). Since the questionnaires described here were not developed on the basis of an existing and verified theoretical model, an exploratory factor analysis was computed (Bühner, 2004). It seeks to aggregate the items into groups on the basis of the correlations empirically found to exist between them. Table 3 shows the statistical values of the factor analysis.

Two factors were extracted in the factor analysis: items 1, 2 and 3 point to high loads on a common factor (between 0.67 and 0.80; see evaluation of factor loadings in Bortz, 1999). All three items concern whether teachers explain the usefulness of teaching material in real life and the marking system (which is why the factor is called 'teaching material'). All other items (4 to 9) load heavily on a second factor with weights ranging from 0.56 and 0.69. This group of items focuses directly on performance appraisal ('performance appraisal' factor). The joint explained variation of the two factors is 49.8 %. The factor analysis thus shows a very clear structure with two factors that can also be explained by the content of the items. The data of all school types were combined for the factor analysis. A more comprehensive review was carried out to investigate whether the same factor structures are found in the different school types. It was possible to confirm that they are (Paechter and Lunger, 2007a).

Verification of the test power of the questionnaire for teachers on 'Transparency of performance appraisal'

As regards teaching staff, a total of 3 618 teachers took part in the survey; 3 034 from the engineering and industrial colleges (83.9 %), 319

Table 3. Factor loadings of the questionnaire ‘Transparency of the performance appraisal (students)’

No	Item	Load on factor	
		1	2
1	At the start of the school year, the teachers explain to us the knowledge and skills we are supposed to acquire by the end of the year.	0.16	0.75
2	The teachers discuss with us why we require those particular teaching materials.	0.16	0.80
3	The teachers make us aware of interconnections with other areas of life and learning.	0.23	0.67
4	My class teachers tell us how marks are determined (e.g. weighting of questions) in individual appraisals (e.g. schoolwork, test, oral examination).	0.60	0.30
5	My class teachers tell us at the start of the school year how the overall mark is determined for each subject (e.g. weighting of individual performance, importance of class participation).	0.56	0.32
6	My class teachers provide timely information on examination dates and submission deadlines (e.g. for schoolwork, tests, project work, homework).	0.69	0.05
7	My teachers update me on my current performance level if I ask them to.	0.68	0.08
8	The marks I am given reflect my actual performance.	0.68	0.16
9	My teachers advise me how I can improve my performance.	0.58	0.38
10	The teachers separate advice and feedback from the performance review.	0.57	0.36

from secondary schools and colleges for occupations in the social and services sector (8.8 %) and 265 from business schools (7.3 %).

Apart from numbers 8 and 10, the items in the questionnaire for students and teachers have parallel formulations (from the perspective of the student or teacher respectively).

Table 3 shows that, compared to the sample of students, the teachers' self-assessments (as expected) are far more positive (mean values between 1.24 und 2.37). The standard deviation of the items is also considerably lower. Moreover, the item popularities were lower than those of the correspondingly worded items for students.

Tests were also conducted to see how the various questionnaire items relate to one another and an exploratory factor analysis on all items was computed.

The factor analysis shows two groups of items that match the structure of the questionnaire for students. As in the students' questionnaire, items 1, 2 and 3 are grouped into one factor ('teaching materials'). All items have a high factor loading (between 0.56 and 0.80). Items 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 can be grouped together into another factor ('appraisal

transparency”). They have a medium to high factor loading of 0.47 to 0.68. Item 10 comprises a factor on its own. No – loads on both factors – does not have a simple structure – cannot be interpreted. In terms of content, it cannot be assigned to the other items. However, it was left in the questionnaire for future use because it reflects an important aspect of the professional behaviour of a teacher.

Table 4. Mean values, standard deviation and case numbers for each item of the questionnaire ‘Transparency of the performance appraisal (teachers)’

No	Item	M	SD	N	N/A
1	At the start of the school year, I explain to my students which knowledge and skills they are supposed to acquire by the end of the school year.	1.70	0.92	3 615	3
2	I discuss with my students why they require those particular teaching materials.	1.67	0.85	3 615	3
3	I make my students aware of interconnections with other areas of life and learning.	1.59	0.77	3 615	3
4	I tell my students how the marks are determined (e.g. weighting of questions) in individual appraisals, (e.g. schoolwork, test, oral examination).	1.42	0.75	3 615	3
5	I tell my students at the start of the school year how the overall mark is determined for each subject (e.g. weighting of individual performance, importance of class participation).	1.39	0.73	3 615	3
6	I provide my students with timely information on examination dates and submission deadlines (e.g. for schoolwork, tests, project work, homework).	1.24	0.63	3 615	3
7	I update my students on their current performance level if they ask me to.	1.30	0.63	3 614	4
8	I use the information and early warning system consistently and in good time.	1.64	0.96	3 612	6
9	I advise my students how they can improve their performance.	1.63	0.84	3 603	15
10	I stay abreast of the legal provisions governing performance appraisal.	2.37	1.31	3 579	39

M=mean value; SD=standard deviation; N=sample size; N/A=number of missing values; all items were answered on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree).

The factor structure for the teachers’ questionnaire is on the whole very clear and intrinsically consistent. Nevertheless, this survey instrument should be viewed with caution. The mean values and the low standard deviations of the items show that the teachers exercise little self-criticism in assessing their own behaviour, and their

judgement is on the whole uniform. Used alone, this questionnaire does not lend itself to assessing the quality of teaching. It should instead be used in conjunction with the students' questionnaire as a complementary instrument.

Comparison of the item mean values for students and teachers

A comparison of the item mean values in the questionnaire for students and teachers can shed light on the extent to which the assessments are similar. It is to be expected that the students' assessments will be 'stricter' since they represent an assessment of other people, whereas the teachers are judging their own behaviour. It would be preferable, for each item, for the assessments to run in parallel as far as possible. Figure 1 shows, for the items with a parallel formulation, the mean values of the assessments of both students and teachers.

As expected, the teachers' assessments are lower than those of the students. As an assessment of their own actions, they are more positive than the external assessment of the students. Apart from

Table 5. Factor loadings of the questionnaire 'Transparency of the performance appraisal (teachers)'

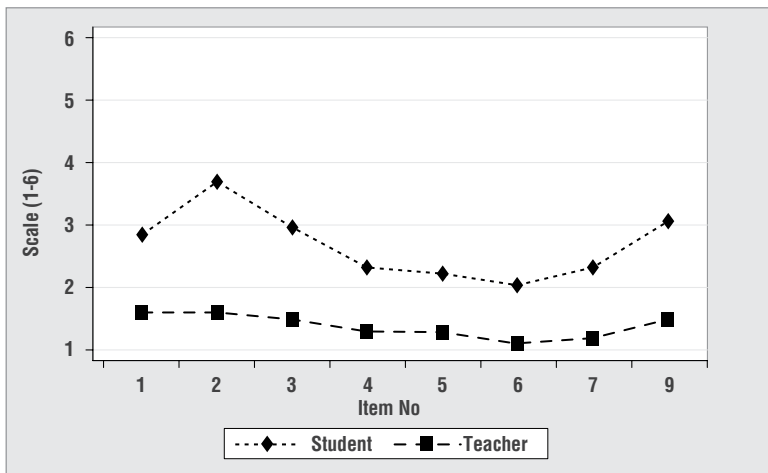
No	Item	Load on factor	
		1	2
1	At the start of the school year, I explain to my students which knowledge and skills they are supposed to acquire by the end of the school year.	0.19	0.70
2	I discuss with my students why they require those particular teaching materials.	0.05	0.83
3	I make my students aware of interconnections with other areas of life and learning.	0.12	0.65
4	I tell my students how the marks are determined (e.g. weighting of questions) in individual appraisals, (e.g. schoolwork, test, oral examination).	0.68	0.13
5	I tell my students at the start of the school year how the overall mark is determined for each subject (e.g. weighting of individual performance, importance of class participation).	0.61	0.22
6	I provide my students with timely information on examination dates and submission deadlines (e.g. for schoolwork, tests, project work, homework).	0.68	0.00
7	I update my students on their current performance level if they ask me to.	0.53	0.17
8	I use the information and early warning system consistently and in good time.	0.64	0.12
9	I advise my students how they can improve their performance.	0.47	0.43
10	I stay abreast of the legal provisions governing performance appraisal.	0.40	0.40

item 2, however, all items for both the teachers and the students are positive (scale range of 1 to mid-scale 3.5). The assessments of students and teachers largely run in parallel.

Conclusion of the verification of the test power of the survey instruments

The statistical analyses outlined above were carried out for 12 survey instruments in order to verify the test power of the questionnaires. On the whole, the analyses show that the test power of almost all instruments is satisfactory. In the case of only one instrument, it was clear that it could be shortened by eliminating a number of similarly formulated items (Paechter and Lunger, 2007a, 2007b).

Figure 1. **Assessments by students and teachers (mean values by item)**



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Regional educational strategies – methods to promote human resource development in small businesses

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SUMMARY

Over the next few decades, demographic change will cause significant changes in the working population. How businesses prepare for these changes will have a decisive impact on whether this transformation has a beneficial or detrimental effect on the economy. Small and medium-sized businesses do not possess the resources required to develop and implement sustainable human resource strategies and thus face particularly significant challenges. This article aims to outline the strategies that small and medium-sized businesses can implement to avert the dangers facing personnel management in the future. Expanding training advisory services and developing regional networks play a pivotal role here. While training advisory services can help to develop and implement the necessary measures, regional networks can support this implementation.

Demographic change and the challenges facing small and medium-sized businesses

Demographic change and the resulting shifts in the age structure of the working population will become ever more apparent in the years to come. On the one hand, the age of employees will rise and, on the other hand, companies will find it increasingly difficult to satisfy their demand for relevant qualifications and competences. European companies must remain competitive on the global market with an increasingly ageing workforce. To cope with the challenges posed by demographic change, the EU aims to increase the employment rate of 55- to 64-year-olds to over 50 % by 2010, thereby extending the average working life of employees and thus safeguarding the European Economic Area's skilled labour base (see European Council, 2001). As a result of changes to national legislation, and not least the positive economic conditions of the last few years, the goals of the European Employment Strategy appeared to be within reach. Since 1996 the employment rate of the over-50s in the EU-27 rose from 36.3 % to 45.8 % in the second quarter of 2008 ⁽¹⁾ (see Massarelli and Romans, 2008, p. 3). It remains to be seen how this figure will develop in view of the difficulties in the current and more difficult economic climate.

In order to ensure a rise in the employment rate of the older population of working age it is essential to sustain their employability until they reach retirement age. Employability means 'a person's capacity to offer his or her manpower as a worker on the basis of his or her expertise, occupational competence, ability to create value and be productive, and thus enter the workforce, retain his or her job and, where necessary, seek new employment' (see Blanke; Roth; Schmid, 2000). According to this statement, the concept of employability is not solely defined by the employee's performance in the workplace. Possessing excellent working skills alone does not suffice to guarantee a worker's survival on the labour market. Therefore it is also necessary to take into account the requirements of jobs on the labour market above and beyond the specific demand of the current employer (see Naegele, 2005, p. 214).

(¹) The employment rates in the EU-27 differ greatly in terms of gender, level of education and the percentage of those working part-time. A person is classified as employed if they are engaged in some kind of employment for more than one hour a week (see Massarelli and Romans, 2008).

Faced with an ageing working population, employees must remain in employment for longer in order to safeguard the skilled labour base in a sustainable manner. Thus, in view of demographic change, extending a person's average working life would seem an obvious choice. However, the pressures of working life present an obstacle to this strategy. Employees in the EU-27 feel they are exposed to dangers in the workplace (27 %) and an increase in the intensity of labour, in terms of the pace of work and time pressures (see Parent-Thirion et al., 2008). The risks associated with this cannot be counteracted by healthcare and fitness courses alone. Various pilot projects and pilot studies have demonstrated that well-thought-out training and development processes can counteract these risks (see Ilmarinen and Tempel, 2002; Naegele and Walker, 2007; Gottwald and Knapp, 2008). In view of this, the significant reduction in in-company vocational continuing training in the last few years is problematic. These cutbacks are demonstrated by various statistics ⁽²⁾:

- On average, participation across the EU in continuing training financed by companies has dropped recently. In 1995, 30 % of employees participated in this form of continuing training. After a temporary rise in 2000 to 30.6 %, the figure fell to 27.3 % in 2005 (European Foundation, 2005, p. 5). Even though participation in continuing training programmes rose in 2007 in terms of continuing training days from 11.4 in 2005 to 13.6, the fact remains that participation in continuing training remains relatively low (see Eurostat, 2009). This statement also applies to individual countries such as Germany, where 30 % of employees participated in job-related continuing training in 1997. In 2003 and 2007 this figure stagnated at 26 % (see von Rosenblatt and Bilger, 2008);
- As the CVTS 3 supplementary survey demonstrates, figures concerning continuing training vary greatly across Europe. While over 40 % of employees in Scandinavian countries participate in continuing training programmes, this figure is below 20 % in several new acceding countries, putting them at a major

⁽²⁾ Although various surveys have been conducted, no up-to-date statistics are available on participation in and funding for continuing training programmes. The third Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS 3) is based on data from the reference year 2005. The European Foundation's follow-up study (CVTS 4) will commence in 2010. The Adult Education Survey (AES) is based on data collected up until 2007 and thus represents the most up-to-date data pool. This survey will be mandatory for all Member States from 2011. The lack of up-to-date data and the lengthy intervals between the reporting periods could warrant critical assessment.

disadvantage. All the same, the 33 % average in the EU-27 countries indicates that two-thirds of employees do not participate in continuing training (see Eurostat, 2009);

- The currently worsening economic climate has led to debate on increases in State funding for continuing training. While this will result in a boost in participation rates, it will prompt companies to cut back on funding of initial and continuing training even further, a trend which goes back as far as 1995;
- In-company continuing training is still rare in small companies and for particular target groups, such as the poorly qualified, migrants, women or older workers (see Bellmann, 2008). In this context, it is particularly noteworthy that younger workers by far outnumber older workers in continuing training programmes, and this is the case in nearly all European countries (OECD, 2008, p. 398). Skilled personnel who have completed vocational training or a university degree and are employed in a company with a workforce of over 250 are particularly overrepresented (see European Foundation, 2005).

Safeguarding the employability of the workforce in a sustainable manner demands extensive and long-term efforts on the part of businesses. When they recognise that maintaining their employees' performance levels is also in their interests, businesses are increasingly prepared to undertake these efforts. There are many reasons which make this a judicious approach (see Naegele and Walker, 2007, pp. 7-9). Firstly, faced with the shortage of skilled labour arising from demographic factors (see The Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 25) it is not only necessary to recruit employees from all sections of the working age population, but also to help employees maintain their performance. Secondly, elimination of State aid to those leaving employment can result in employees remaining in companies for longer periods. Thirdly, businesses rediscover the potential and characteristics particular to older employees. A knowledge society increasingly requires integrative competences such as the ability to work with others, experience-based knowledge, being able to make decisions and act autonomously and possessing an awareness of quality (see Brandenburg and Domschke, 2007, p. 83; Frerichs, 2005, p. 51). In spite of the view of personnel managers that these competences are more prevalent in experienced employees, their competences are still significantly underexploited in businesses (see Gottwald and Keck, 2008, p. 97).

In this regard it is necessary to invest in the employability of staff to enable them to adapt their skills in line with technical and organisational requirements. This results in enhanced flexibility and performance and thereby boosts operational productivity (see Bellmann, 2008). In spite of the fact that sustainable human resource management is, in principle, in the interest of businesses, its implementation can often be problematic. While large businesses have their own department with designated skilled workers and considerable resources for human resource development measures at their disposal, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) ⁽³⁾ lack the necessary resources in temporal, personnel and structural terms (see Bellmann, 2008). SMEs particularly face the following problems:

- As a result of short internal decision-making processes, SMEs are able to run their operations in a flexible manner. However, the advantages of their open structure at a functional level become a disadvantage when they have to make information- and knowledge-based decisions about the future which comprise long-term and complex human resource planning (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, p. 103 et seq.). This means that the organisational structure which guarantees the success of the SME impedes the systematic development of sustainable human resource management. Accordingly, the shortage of resources in terms of time and personnel in SMEs can make it incredibly difficult to plan and realise comprehensive strategies adjusted to individual needs. In explicit terms, the problem lies in the fact that there is often a lack of necessary expertise to support a systematic age management (see Döring, 2008, p. 167; Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, p. 109 et seq.);
- Secondly, SMEs may fail to implement measures because comprehensive measure packages tie up financial and personnel resources. When order books are empty, companies lack the financial means to invest in continuing training and healthcare measures for employees. During times of economic prosperity, on the other hand, manpower is stretched to such an extent that employees are tied up in work processes and they lack the time to participate in continuing training measures (see Hölbling, 2007, p. 6). As such volumes of work often have limited time-frames,

⁽³⁾ According to the European Union's definition, small and medium-sized enterprises employ fewer than 250 workers and have an annual turnover not exceeding EUR 50 million or an annual balance sheet not exceeding EUR 43 million. Partner companies or affiliated companies are not included in these calculations.

companies shy away from undertaking the time-consuming and cost-intensive business of recruiting external skilled personnel – in particular when there are so few skilled personnel who possess the necessary qualifications. Even if it is possible to plan comprehensive human resource development strategies, it is often not possible to implement them.

SMEs require support as they are not in a position to realise strategically oriented human resource management which is tailored to individual company needs and addresses the challenges of demographic change. Without this support, SMEs are more susceptible to the effects of demographic change than large companies. The disadvantage they are under compared with their larger competitors is already apparent in the recruitment of skilled personnel (see The Gallup Organization, 2007, p. 25).

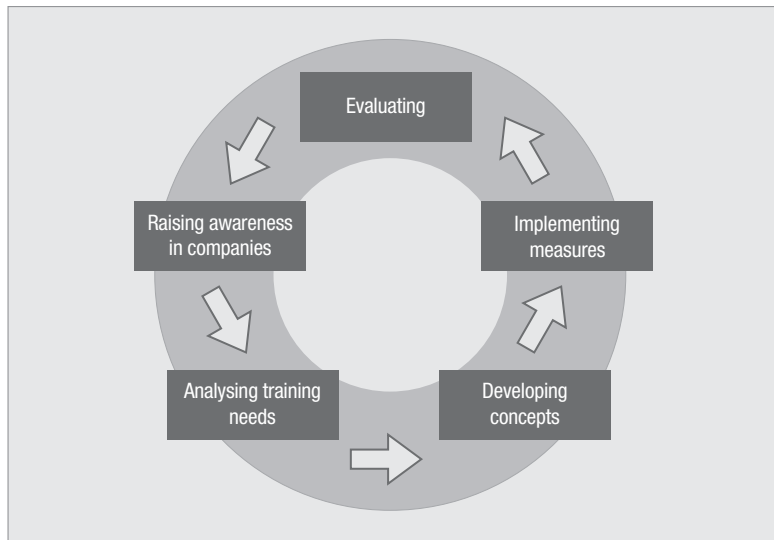
The following sets out two strategies which can help SMEs achieve the aim of sustainable human resource practices. Firstly, training advisory services can be used to complement human resource development processes. To this end it is necessary to enhance the profile of training advisory services, promote the services they provide and make their benefits more transparent (section 2). Secondly, regional networks can provide key structures and partners to help realise measures, some of which may be complex in nature (section 3). Following the discussion of these solution strategies, the article goes on to look at the way the measures can supplement one another (section 4).

Training advisory services

Training advisory services help SMEs realise target-oriented and systematic in-company continuing vocational training (see Löffelmann 2009). The role of training advisory services, however, goes far beyond that of a middleman, as they flank the process of in-company training. 'They aim to make the diverse range of providers, topics and methods in continuing training more transparent and manageable and to link continuing training more closely with corporate objectives.' (See Döring, 2008, p. 168) Accompanying the training process encompasses a number of tasks, ranging from raising awareness among company players with regard to analysing training requirements and developing concepts, to implementing the measures and the subsequent continuing training assessment (see Fig. 1). The fields of activity

involved in training advisory services systematically build upon each other inasmuch as each step forms the basis of the subsequent step. It is a cyclical process as the evaluative impact analysis of continuing training measures can be used as the foundation for embarking on a renewed training process (see Döring et al., 2008).

Figure 1. **The training advisory services consultation process**
(see Döring et al., 2008, own diagram)



In so far as training advisory services support the process of in-company continuing vocational training as a flanking measure, they can be regarded as a key strategy for supporting SMEs in continuing vocational training matters (see Döring et al., 2008). As demonstrated, the obstacle facing many SMEs is their lack of competences in the field of human resource development. Training advisory services lay claim to eliminating this deficit in companies and thus differ from learning and vocational advisory services, which are geared towards individual players (see Cedefop; Sultana, 2004). Whereas these types of guidance focus on individual learning requirements and educational biographies, training advisory services primarily take into account training processes that will produce sustainable benefits for companies. In a similar way to learning and vocational advisory services, training advisory services are provided by external service providers. These advisory services may only be developing at a gradual pace, but it is already clear that consulting

firms, associations and chambers are generally aware of this field's potential. Education service providers also see potential new market opportunities, a point which will be elaborated upon later. This may result in conflicts of interest and thus warrants critical examination (see Döring et al., 2008, p. 16).

As external service providers, training advisory services must possess great skill if they are to gain a foothold within companies as – in practice – businesses often fail to recognise training requirements as such. Problems within companies that could be solved by means of training and competence development are often viewed as technical or organisational problems (see Döring et al., 2008). These complex requirements must be taken into account. The following points are particularly important if training advisory services are to strategically meet the requirements within SMEs. This is not an exhaustive list (see Döring, 2008, pp. 172-188):

- Professionalism: the tasks performed by a training consultant are complex, diverse and thus very demanding. Consultation entails planning, creating and assessing learning processes under market conditions. Expertise from various academic disciplines (e.g. Educational Sciences, Sociology, Business Administration) is just as essential as practical business knowledge and personal skills (e.g. the ability to communicate, reflect and learn). The training consultant's broad-based knowledge enables the planning and conception of effective measures to safeguard employability in the SME, which are needs-based and can be implemented at a strategic level. Only a combination of market knowledge, professionalism and practical expertise can ensure provision of the services required (see Döring, 2008, p. 172-175);
- Far-ranging impact: sustainable human resource management strategies can only have a major impact if they are coordinated with the corporate strategy. This comprises issues concerning human resource planning and development, healthcare and time management and also the company's long-term market positioning. For this reason, it is vital that the consultation addresses the individual needs of the company and develops strategies in close coordination with corporate goals. Introducing far-reaching and sustainable human resource management thus requires close and process-oriented cooperation with the company (see Rump and Eilers, 2007, p. 55);
- Neutrality: Training advisory service providers must be independent if they are to offer consultation that puts the company's interests

first. In particular when those involved in consulting also sell services as education service providers – this perhaps even being their main source of income – obtaining advice that focuses on company needs is not an easy task. In line with this, companies also state in surveys that neutrality is an important attribute for a consultant (see Döring, 2008, pp. 180-175). Nevertheless, it is primarily education service providers which offer training advisory services, as demonstrated by a study of the German education area (see Niedlich et al., 2007, p. 218).

Uniform quality standards allow potential users of training advisory services to gain an overview of the range of continuing vocational training programmes available and guide them in the implementation of measures. Training advisory services which primarily target SMEs must widen their scope and satisfy the necessary quality standards if they are to become a strategy to combat the effects of demographic change. Achieving this will require continuing efforts.

Practical example: training advice as a service for companies

The 'Landesagentur für Struktur und Arbeit Brandenburg GmbH' (LASA) [The Federal Agency for Structural and Employment Affairs] has functioned as a labour-market policy service institute in the German *Land* of Brandenburg since 1991. LASA's wide range of consultancy work and services, needs-based tailored concepts and effective implementation of financial support programmes help the adaptation processes on the labour market. In addition to individuals (employees, jobseekers and the unemployed), it particularly targets SMEs with the aim of providing information on the current situation concerning skilled personnel, identifying needs and raising awareness of the necessary training strategies. Particular emphasis is placed here on the challenges of demographic change. Training advisory services help develop competences and skills in companies, observe the current situation concerning skilled personnel in companies, in the sector and in the region, solve issues regarding retaining skilled personnel when investing in locations or expansion, and provide information on securing funding within the scope of in-company human resource development measures. A comprehensive continuing vocational training database complements these advisory services. It contains well over 15 000 continuing vocational training offers – ranging from short seminars and a combination of e-learning and in-company face-to-face learning phases to longer-term retraining courses for a diverse range of

sectors and professions. This combination of database and training advisory services helps realise innovative human resource and organisational development strategies in this structurally weak German *Land*. Some 300 companies receive training advice each year (see www.lasa-brandenburg.de) [24.09.08].

Regional networks to promote employability in SMEs

The collaboration of various players in networks can result in synergies that help enhance employability in SMEs in a range of fields of activity. In this way, companies, education service providers, business associations, unions, municipal institutions and players from the regional labour market can share their competences. A regional network opens a range of new opportunities to create sustainable human resource management and to develop regional learning cultures (see Hagen, 2006, p. 212). Quality standards here can be safeguarded by the regular application of instruments such as those utilised to analyse requirements. Collaborating with numerous partners makes it possible to extend the respective portfolio of measures and ultimately cuts the cost of integrated continuing vocational education and training measures (see Gnahs, 2004, p. 196; Howaldt, 2001, p. 23). Furthermore, networks can help propagate the benefits of sustainable human resource management with the aim of thus raising awareness of the challenges of demographic change among both managers and employees in SMEs. Information sessions, workshops and regional pilot projects are well-suited to this purpose. This can be supplemented with in-company implementation tools such as age structure analyses, region-specific labour market forecasts, communication strategies, guidelines or job placement services (see www.demotrans.de; www.rebequa.de; www.m-e-z.de [19.03.09]).

Key to a network's success is not only that all participants benefit from working together, but also that the interaction within the network demands a certain level of dependability and that mutual trust develops between the players (see Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006, p. 80f; Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 30). Companies active in the same market must look beyond their competitive relations and network partners must put aside possible discrepancies arising from conflicting aims. The network can only work effectively if diverging interests

are merged into a common goal. To this end, the various interests must be brought in line with each other (see Hagen, 2005, p. 232; Howaldt, 2001, p. 26). This goal requires a network manager to perform supervisory and organisational tasks, a role which can be adopted by one of the partners. This partner will have an external role as a contact person and an internal role coordinating relations between players. In principle, any partner in the network can adopt this role. However, players whose positions enable them to exert a balancing influence are particularly suited to this role. This is often the case with public institutions, or, depending on the network's structure, associations (see Howaldt, 2001, p. 24 et seq.). Even if a partner assumes an intermediary role, it is still important to retain the network's fundamentally egalitarian structure and transparent decision-making processes (see Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006; Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 28).

In addition, the partner responsible for coordination can make it easier for future partners to join the network and is a plausible candidate for ensuring that the respective interests are taken into consideration (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 134-136). Regional governments and local authorities can set important benchmarks here and, furthermore, can help networks make the transition from projects to organisations with permanent structures (see European Foundation, 2007, p. 38; Dobischat, Stuhldreier, Düsseldorf, 2006, p. 63). In this respect, they represent important strategic partners as they not only boost general recognition of the network and have financial means at their disposal, but also have insight into long-term structural developments. Regional networks, for their part, are key to long-term structural developments as they can play a significant role in shaping regional and municipal development.

Joint ventures between various regional players 'have the advantage that they create precisely the structures and conditions required for innovation to flourish and are thus able to systematically enhance the innovative power of the partners involved. These types of networks are open to the interests, needs and potential of the various partners and do not make participation subject to any pre-formulated conditions or rules.' (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 69).

Regional networks are structured in such a way that collaboration between players gives rise to new ideas, strategies and structures which correspond to regional needs. The fact that regional players organise the network themselves and are linked to regional structures and processes makes it possible to initiate measures and strategies

which are both target-oriented and recognised (see Dobischat et al., 2006, p. 28 et seq.). Innovations emerge and pilot projects gain stability at the regional level and, as a result, each regional or municipality develops in its own individual manner.

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Practical example: regional networks as a means of supporting in-company training processes

European Union support programmes, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), grant aid to regional development partnerships that help improve working conditions, eradicate discrimination and promote active ageing (see the Community initiative EQUAL).

Cooperation between social partners, research and educational institutions and State institutions often strengthens SMEs at regional level ⁽⁴⁾. The ESF also allocates funds directly for Article 6 innovative measures with the aim of promoting local employment initiatives via transnational partnerships ⁽⁵⁾. National programmes ⁽⁶⁾ have given rise to regional networks whose primary goal is to safeguard the employability of workers in SMEs in a sustainable manner.

The 'Learning Network Region Rheingau-Taunus' in Germany is one of the networks granted funding. This network provides an example of how companies can safeguard and enhance the employability of workers by cooperating with regional partners. This region offers workshops, organised by the regional continuing vocation training provider, the adult education centre 'Volkshochschule Rheingau-Taunus e.V.', which helps SMEs and public administration implement sustainable human resource management. Managers receive further training on issues concerning human resource practices, while older employees take a direct look at topics relating to the promotion of employability. These training schemes, planned and organised by the network, along with workshops and experience-sharing sessions, specifically equip SMEs to support their (older) workers. The Volkshochschule has a pool of professionally qualified trainers at its disposal who are able to put into practice programmes developed in a target-oriented manner. Needs are defined on the basis of demands formulated by local businesses, regional business development agencies, officials responsible for municipal demographic affairs or by direct consultation of regional players. Strategically important multipliers and regular public relations work via relevant regional media ensure that information is disseminated in a targeted manner. This results in transparent structures in which SMEs can quickly locate contact persons who can provide direct assistance with solving problems or recommend measures to support human resource management. Regional SMEs benefit from this insofar as close networks between regions reduce the interval between identification of needs and implementation of the necessary continuing training measures. The network which, above

⁽⁴⁾ cf. MAYDAY in Poland, AGES ET TRAVAIL in France, OCCUPABILE in Italy, cf. http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/equal/ [24.09.08].

⁽⁵⁾ cf. ARES in Denmark, MATRI in France, CHRONOS in Spain, BASE in Greece, ARTES in Italy, OWLNet in the United Kingdom, cf. European Commission 2007.

⁽⁶⁾ cf. Learning Regions in Germany, FINPAW in Finland, New Deal 50 plus in the United Kingdom, the 11-point programme to improve health in the workplace in Sweden and senior citizen networks in the Netherlands.

and beyond this topic, monitors the entire process from start to finish with regard to educational issues, received funding from the EU via the European Social Fund and from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the scope of the ‘Learning Regions’ federal programme (For more information: www.lnr-rtk.de; www.uebergangsmanagement.info) [24.09.08].

Training advisory services in regional networks

Partners in the regional networks can assume the role fulfilled by training advisory services. Regional education service providers often perform this function (see Niedlich et al., 2007, p. 218). While it is likely and possible that conflicts of interest may arise with regard to education service providers providing both neutral advice and selling their own continuing training programmes, the process of exchange within a network keeps this in check. If education service providers are integrated in the network into this way, they can make an important contribution towards sustainable age management (see Stahl and Schreiber, 2003, pp. 111-117). Implementation can be viewed as a cyclical process:

- A training-needs analysis is required in order to plan an individual portfolio of measures (see Geldermann, 2007, p. 32 et seq.). Instruments that can be useful here include age structure analyses, risk analyses or competence inventories (descriptions of these instruments and guides on how to implement them can be found at www.filip-toolbox.de [18.03.2009]). Such instruments can be used to identify and document pressures within the work process. They can be used to anticipate future personnel management developments or to compare employees’ existing competences with current and future needs. These instruments, which can be combined in numerous useful ways, offer a variety of different methods to establish the actual existing training requirements within a company (see Döring et al., 2007);
- The needs analysis must be combined with an effective package of measures which addresses problems facing the company. These must incorporate teaching and learning arrangements geared towards the specific learning requirements of older employees, some of whom will have become unaccustomed to learning. Examples of these kinds of arrangements include personalised, workplace-based or modular forms of learning (see Rump and Eilers, 2007);

- Regional education service providers belonging to the network can carry out the planned measures in close proximity to the company and the workplace. This ensures the direct application of the benefits of continuing vocational training measure content and the realisation of structural and organisational innovations (see Geldermann, 2007). Consultation, concept development and measure implementation all come from the same source. As mentioned previously, the potential for conflicts of interest in the case of service providers offering both consultation and selling their own services within the network warrants critical examination;
- If the structures of this network-based cooperation remain in place in the long-term, education service providers can examine not only the short-term effects but also the long-term achievements of the planned and implemented measures. Checks undertaken at frequent intervals can also establish whether the measures implemented have resulted in sustainable changes and thus whether they have been a success. This type of quality assurance makes it possible to halt potentially undesirable developments at an early stage or cut/modify inefficient measures (see Hartz and Meisel, 2006, p. 7).

This four-stage process to develop out-of-company training consultants creates the conditions required to implement sustainable personnel and age management. Geared towards employees' varying professional and biographical life phases, the individual stages build on each other and can thus help safeguard workers' employability.

Practical example: networking and educational advisory services for SMEs

The 'Zentrum für betriebliches Weiterbildungsmanagement' (zbw) [Centre for in-company continuing vocational training management] represents a particular synthesis of networking and training consultancy services. The purpose of this centre, which is financed by an alliance of associations from the Bavarian metalworking and electrical engineering industry, is to assist the companies within the alliance in their efforts to create sustainable human resource management. The zbw functions as a point of contact for SMEs which require information or educational advisory services. The zbw organises both public events on topics relating to competence development in all regions of the *Land* of Bavaria and as a platform

which provides information on additional contact persons. The zbw thus contributes towards the establishment of a network between the companies concerned, hereby enabling direct support for continuing vocational training in the companies. For instance, the service provided by the zbw led to an electrical company increasing its budget for continuing training after the human resources department proved the need to do so on the basis of benchmarking statistics. These statistics were obtained using a diverse range of tools, strategies and instruments which were made available in workshops to promote sustainable continuing vocational training management (for more information: www.zbw-bayern.de; www.f-bb.de).

Instruments to promote sustainable human resource practices

The previous sections outlined two strategies – training advisory services and regional networks – that help SMEs tackle the challenges of demographic change. While training advisory services compensate for the knowledge deficit relating to sustainable human resource management which is often present in SMEs, regional networks enable implementation of the planned measures. A common factor of both strategies is the way in which they both help realise integral age management in companies. For measures to have an impact, they must comprise five fields of activity (see Gottwald and Zschunke, 2008, p. 4 et seq.; Morschhäuser, Ochs, Huber, 2008). Firstly, it is necessary to implement new forms with regard to recruiting and retaining skilled personnel in order to draw upon the regional labour pool, or establish creative strategies within the network in order to deploy personnel in other jobs or companies. Secondly, preventative healthcare measures can be introduced into businesses at regional level. Thirdly, the expertise which exists within the network or can be achieved by means of training advisory services can be used to organise the work itself, the working environment or working hours in a manner that enables a healthy and productive working life up until the standard age of retirement and – where it is necessary or desired – allows workers to be active beyond this point in voluntary roles such as consultants or mentors. Fourthly, developing individual competences helps enable older workers to remain competitive in the working world: if employees participate in education processes on an ongoing basis throughout their working life, they are more

likely not only to be capable of learning in the long-term, but also to remain productive in the workplace when faced with varying working conditions (see Rump and Eilers, 2007). Regional networks can also play a supporting role in realising this lifelong education, which can also be integrated in a direct and practice-oriented manner into the working process. Since an environment which is conducive to learning is necessary to achieve this goal, the fifth required field of activity comprises a corporate and management culture that supports and promotes active ageing. Work in these five fields of activity requires a far-ranging process of raising awareness within and providing information to businesses. As demonstrated, this can be achieved using both training advisory services and regional networks. Planning and implementing the necessary strategies in the fields of activity must, however, not be viewed as a one-dimensional formula for success. It is necessary to differentiate between workplaces, employers and the regions within Europe. To ensure success, however, it is invariably necessary to plan a wide-ranging portfolio of measures tailored to the respective needs of individual businesses and implement these measures in the long-term (see Naegele and Walker, 2007, p. 37; Morschhäuser et al., 2008).

Practice has shown that training advisory services vary in terms of programmes and quality and that the emerging regional networks are in danger of petering out after a short funding period. Political efforts to support training advisory services and regional networks are important as they can help promote the employability of staff in SMEs. Developing training advisory services into a high-quality service for SMEs and supporting the regional networks in their sustainable work will be key to ensuring the competitiveness of SMEs. If these endeavours are successful, SMEs will be able to tackle the consequences of demographic change in a preventative and demand-oriented manner and look to the future with confidence.

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