

Study undertaken at the request of the Nordic Expert Network on Validation by:

NVR – The Danish Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning
Denmark

E-tools and Validation

– areas of significance and dilemmas



Report of the study

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”E-værktøjer og realkompetence – betydningsfelter og dilemmaer”

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Preface

E-tools and Validation

Electronic tools often occur in the context of valuation and recognition of real competencies / validation processes. They are sometimes used as a tool for self-assessment or otherwise, in order to identify prior learning, other times as an instrument for the assessment of real skills and sometimes as a way to document previously acquired knowledge.

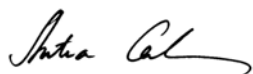
The Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL) www.nordvux.net has through the Nordic Council of Ministers received funding to conduct a survey on a range of electronic tools used in the work with valuation and recognition of real competencies. A pilot study was conducted in spring 2009 and published on the NVL's website in August that year.

NMR subsequently granted additional funds for an in-depth study, the results of which are presented in this report. The study is conducted by Håkon Grunnet and consultant Anne-Marie Daler Larsen, assistant lecturer at the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR), Denmark and in close cooperation with the NVL Nordic expert network on validation.

The report presents five mutually different e-tools that were examined. To use only e-tools to achieve a score and recognition of real competencies / validation process of high quality is not enough. There are no such technical or electronic shortcuts. Appreciation and recognition of real skills requires professional counselors and experts, but the e-tools can be an excellent tool in the process, the researchers note.

The report will be presented at a Nordic Expert Seminar in Copenhagen, 3-4 March 2010 and will after that be available on the NVL's web.

It is our hope that the study results will contribute to the development and improvement of e-tools and increase the ability of individuals to get their real skills valued and recognized.



Antra Carlsen
Coordinator NVL

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1. Introduction

Background and aim of the study

This report communicates the results of a study on selected e-tools used in relation to validation of prior learning in the different Nordic countries.

The project is undertaken by The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR) on the request of the Nordic Expert Network on Validation, under The Nordic Network of Adult Education (NVL).

The report takes as its point of departure a pilot study of e-tools in the Nordic countries, which was carried out in the fall of 2008. The pilot study is a desk study, which had the aim to map out and get an overview of e-tools used in relation to documentation and assessment of prior learning in the Nordic countries. The e-tools of the pilot study were selected by the country representatives within the Nordic Expert Network on Validation, with a view to present a wide range of different types of e-tools. Accordingly in the selection of e-tools were examples of e-tools developed by national educational authorities, of agencies, of branch organizations, of authorities, by associations from third sector etc.

On the basis of this pilot study the Nordic Expert Network on validation has selected 5 different e-tools for a more in-depth study. The 5 tools are:

Skinna (Iceland)

www.osaan.fi/www.jagkan.fi

www.vigo.no and partly www.vilbli.no

The third sector tools: www.realkompetence-forening.dk, www.realkompetence-fritid.dk and <http://www.realkompetence-folkeoplysning.dk>

www.aks-international.com

The latter, "Accumulated Knowledge and Skills", is the result of a Leonardo da Vinci-project within the EU, and has, during the course of the study turned out to be out of use, at least in the Nordic countries. Thus it will only be examined to a limited extent.

The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth description of selected Nordic e-tools used in relation to validation of prior learning. The different tools differ in a number of ways, e.g. regarding which type of software is used, the aim of using the tools, and the role and significance the tools have in the process of validating prior learning. Thus the aim is not to make a

comparative study of the tools, but rather through an in-depth description of the different tools to draw attention to a wide range of areas of significance, dilemmas and issues, that in a formative way can be included in developmental work in the field of e-tools and validation of prior learning.

In the study emphasis is on describing the practice in which the tools are embedded, and which role and significance each e-tool has in relation to validation of prior learning as a process. In relation to this, the organizational and institutional context for the use of the e-tool is examined – to the extent it is possible on the basis of the data.

Both the individual as well as the enterprise- and labour market perspectives are included, in the sense that attention is paid to whether the tool is designed for contributing to the clarification of own competences or processes of reflection, or whether it is designed to create an overview or develop the competences of an enterprise or the like.

Types of e-tools and comprehension of competences

E-tools, which in one way or another are a part of or supports validation processes, cover a broad and varied spectrum of tools, both regarding which type of software is used, and regarding the (possible) comprehension of competence which is built-in in the tool. The e-tools which this study comprise represent different types of e-tools, from tools for clarification and documentation to databases; a few tools have potentially more functions, and it is so that the function of the tools in some cases are defined by the usage of the tool.

It's the case – in relation to tools for competence clarification in general, but also in relation to tools that are a part of validation processes – that there is a substantial variation in the comprehension of competences, on which the tools are based.

The tools that, among other things, are used in HR contexts to make outlines of the competences of the employees are very much oriented towards psychology/ personality, while other tools are more specifically oriented towards a branch/trade and measure very specific vocational qualifications. Furthermore some tools are developed to cover different functions, as for example clarification, exposure, test, evaluation and development. In other words we are dealing with a broad and varied field.

Thus the study is at risk for appearing as a series of arbitrary examinations of very different types of e-tools which in different ways are a part of or support validation processes, which not necessarily are based on the same comprehension, neither of validation and assessment of prior learning, nor of the concept of competence per se.

Thus the ambition of the study is not to compare or find differences and similarities, but to utilize the variation within the data of the study to point out and examine issues, dilemmas and areas of significance linked to common features of the tools that cover 1) that they are e-tools, 2) and that they are linked to the process of validation of prior learning.

The descriptions of the tools include the context regarding educational policy which relate to the national strategies for implementing validation of prior learning. In this context one must emphasize that the intention is not to compare the national approaches, but to highlight the context which the different tools are used in and related to.

The course of the study

At the meeting of the Nordic Expert Network on Validation in Helsinki in June 2009 it was decided which tools should be a part of the study. The course of the study was planned during the summer of 2009. In September interviews were carried out in respectively Reykjavik (Skinna), Skien and Bodø (www.vigo.no and partly www.vilbli.no) In October interviews were carried out in Helsinki (www.osaan.fi / www.jagkan.fi) and in November and December in Denmark (the third sector tools). The data have been transcribed gradually, and analyzed and reported in November and December 2009.

The country representatives of the Expert Network have contributed as contact persons/ informants and have, to a varying degree, been in charge of setting up meetings/ interviews with the relevant players in relation to the different tools. To get through the project within the timeframe of the project this has been necessary, but it has also meant that generating data has varied in relation to each tool, both regarding the number of interviews, the position and the perspective of the interviewer and regarding the nature of the data (interviews/ oral or written presentations). The interim results of the study have been presented to the expert network at its meeting in Malmø in November 2009.

The written report of the study

After part 2 the design and methods of the study are described. There after a systematic description of each tool is given, focusing on 1) the tool, 2) the process, 3) organizational and institutional conditions for using the tool, 4) counseling and 5) other factors. In the part of the study called "Review, summary and themes for discussion" the issues, dilemmas and areas of significance pointed out as key issues of the report are discussed.

2. Review, summary and themes for discussion

The five e-tools selected for and examined in this study are different. They are different as regards which target groups they are aimed for, as regards the organizational placement and which institutional and educational policy context they are to be used in. They are also different as regards how much they are being used, and not least they are different as regards which comprehension of prior learning and which concepts of validation of competences the design and use of each tool is based on.

For a start at a general level it should be noted that e-tools cannot be used for assessment or recognition of prior learning. A technical or electronic short cut for assessing and recognition of prior learning does not exist. Assessment and recognition are processes based on professional judgment and requires a choice that only can be made by counselors, specialists and administrative staff. This might be obvious, but never-the-less it is an important comprehension, which can point out and clarify for developers of e-tools used in relation to validation of prior learning and for the users of e-tools.

E-tools can be used for different things, and it is important to make it clear that they – independent of their aim, target group, institutional placement etc – in general and often with good results, support the process of assessment and recognition of prior learning for the individuals wishing a validation process. This happens in different ways which will be described in the sections describing each single e-tool; first as a short summary in this part of the study, then more in-depth in the following parts of the study.

In this part of the study a number of issues related to the use of the five e-tools in relation to validation of prior learning will be presented and discussed, such as it appears in the data from the interviews. On the basis of the data, it is not possible to give an unambiguous and complete description of each tool and the issues relating to it, but with the point of departure in going through the five tools, some issues can be pointed out in relation to the usage of e-tools in the processes of validation of prior learning.

SKINNA - Iceland

SKINNA is an educational database which is under development and which is being built on top of existing databases and on systems that are local and specific to educational programs and on other types of e-tools.

In Iceland - as in many other countries – a myriad of e-tools have been developed over the last years in order to support, handle, spread and present data for the educational sector, covering labour market training and education, inclusive adult- and further education, linked to specific branches and trades. It could be e.g. 'Student management systems' (SMS), or 'Learning

Management Systems' (LMS). It could be information databases for career guidance and educational counseling or tools for identification and clarification for the individual user, where the e-tool is supplied by an agency or an educational institution. In Iceland they have e.g. "Mentor" to be used by primary and lower secondary schools. In upper secondary education and/or in relation to admission courses for further education, the systems "My school", "Moodle" and other LMSs are used. They include different possibilities for identification and clarification and registration in relation to validation of prior learning connected with admission for or shortening of study period.

Educations and institutions using these e-tools and systems – such as for the upper secondary educations - are in the future obliged to feed data to the common database, SKINNA. This database is being developed and will in the long term become a common, national education- and competence database.

Many initiatives have been taken in Iceland to develop the work with identification, documentation and assessment and recognition of prior learning, but as yet no e-tool have been developed to support these processes. Identification and clarification of prior learning is included in several of the LMS and SMS systems used by the educational sector, and in relation to dissemination of practices for validation of prior learning it is likely that e-tools will be developed to support the efforts.

Discussion theme 1:

On inconsistencies and possible conflicts in connection with developing centralized data- and administrative systems in relation to local and sectorial e-tools for identification, clarification, registration and administration.

Strong points in centralized systems can be:

- Focus on uniform, national e-tools which in a targeted way endeavor to include the perspective of the individual, the perspective of institutions and the societal perspectives
- Linking together educations, labour market experience, prior learning and the requirements of the labour market
- Aim for one entry for all users. All adult citizens have, in principle, access to validation of prior learning and subsequently further training and education.
- Uniform and professional administration and assessment of all adult applicants. The user of the systems are most often not the individual user or citizen, but professional counselors and specialists whose education and training and systematic approach guarantee the quality.

Weak points in such centralized e-tools can be:

Opposition at school/institutional and branch level in relation to using common systems, when own e-tools are available and own traditions, routines, standards and needs have been developed.

- As centralized (national) systems are developed for political purposes, control purposes, economical and statistical purposes their structure, design and way of functioning can collide with the wishes of the institutions for own systems that provide better local or sectorial/branch specific solutions. The functionalities of the e-tools that collect/accumulate data for external players and the central levels are not necessarily the same as the ones being in demand from the decentral players. These could be, e.g. to administrate local activities such as registration, group- and class allocation, drop-outs etc.
- Double work is a risk, as counselors, administrative staff and specialists may still use their own system, even while they now are obliged to feed into external and national databases.
- The autonomy of the schools and institutions can be conceived as threatened by other societal considerations, most often related to policy, control and economy.
- Possible ethical problems can be related to centralized systems, e.g. regarding anonymity
- As there is a need for – and wish for – professionalism at user level, the usage of the systems depends on training, support systems, manuals and network, that is: time and resources.

More of these arenas for conflict are to be found in Iceland in relation to establishing the future SKINNA, but also in Norway some of these, if not all, problems can be observed in relation to the e-tool VigoVoksen – www.vigo.no

www.osaan.fi / www.jagkan.fi

www.osaan.fi / www.jagkan.fi is a nation-wide e-tool which is owned and run by the Finnish National Board of Education. It is a "tool for mapping vocational competences" and the e-tool is addressing both individuals and users looking for information about education and administrative staff and specialists counseling at institutions with the right of providing the competence test¹ for adult users. The cohort of end users is thus twofold and comprise both the individual applicant and the professionals, but instructions and the facilities for self-assessment of the e-tool can, as a matter of course, be used by applicants wishing identification and clarification of his/ her competences in relation to a validation process and to a possible competence test. User identification and a password issued by the schools and institutions providing the competence test are mandatory.

¹ The competence test is described more in detail in the later section of this study examining [osaan.fi](http://www.osaan.fi) / [jagkan.fi](http://www.jagkan.fi)

The e-tool is a support tool for preparation, identification and clarification for the user. It is aimed at recommendation for the competence test, which in the Finnish system with the competence-based qualifications system is parallel to the mainstream curriculum-based educations. Thus recognition of prior learning is done by doing a test at the three described levels of a basic-, vocational- or specialist vocational education.

The e-tool is a tool for information and clarification for the end user. The aim is exact as it is to explore and clarify in relation to predefined educational plans and tests, the competence tests. None, or only a limited degree of attention is paid to "all you can do", understood as prior learning, which cannot be translated in a direct fashion into the modular, competence-based qualification tests. The educational objectives are the focal point, and little or no attention is paid to competences which not are described in the terms used in the descriptions of the competence tests.

The e-tool can thus be used in one of the three following ways:

Firstly anyone with a user-ID and password can use the e-tool for self-assessment of one's own competences in relation to the approximately 360 educations towards which one can do a competence test. It comprises the three mentioned competence levels within all branches and trades. The self-assessment can be concluded with a printed report which, via graphs and an outline of points, describes to what extent one meets the demands for a chosen education; that is, a status and an outline of what one lacks, so to speak, and what tests are needed to get a final recognition.

Secondly the e-tool can be used as a tool of information for educational counseling and career guidance of the individual. The e-tool is a database of educational provisions for adults who want to investigate which competences are demanded for which test. The e-tool and its database is meant as a possibility for the user "to browse the competence requirements", and it is maintained by the National Board of Education and is as such up-to-date and quality assured.

Thirdly the e-tool is used by the providers of the competence tests, which are schools and other institutions, as a tool for identification and clarification together with the applicants. The e-tool is a part of the process leading to deciding which test the applicant can be recommended for. The tool is not a tool for assessment, but its usage and the report that is the result of the process, forms a part of the material for documentation in connection with the competence test.

The e-tool is not linked with other systems, but the report that is the result of the self-assessment process can be forwarded to authorities and employers and the like. However it does not have an official status as a recognized document. The recognition first comes when the user has passed the competence test. The Department of Education can make downloads of data from the e-tool, but only concerning statistics, log-ons etc.

Discussion theme 2:

The e-tool defines the limits for recognition of prior learning to learning outcome in a competence-based qualifications system. Generic competences (personal and social competences, "all you can do", 3. sector competences) are not or only to a small extent assessed.

Strong points in such an e-tool:

- The e-tool is a well established, nationally used system which works both for the individual user and for the professional specialist or administrative staff.
- The e-tool is easy for the user to understand and use. It is immediately self-explanating and provides both the user who wants the competence test and the specialist and administrative staff working with it professionally, a tool for documentation (reports) and a tool for dialogue about competences or lack of competences.
- The e-tool helps to place the user at the centre of the process.
- The e-tool is developed as an extension of, and works closely together with the Finnish, national system of the competence tests.
- The information database of the e-tool comprises 360 well defined educations at three levels which gives the user easy access to a comprehensive and quality assured set of data.

Weak points of such an e-tool:

- The e-tool does not or only to a small extent include competences that are beyond the educational objectives described in the competence-based qualifications system.
- The e-tool can emphasize attention to what the individual is "lacking", which is in contrast to the positive purpose of giving the individual recognition for "all you can do". Instead, the identification and the clarification via the e-tool is an examination of "all you are lacking"
- When the e-tool is aimed at and fitted to such a high degree for the individual user the functionality of the tool for other players becomes limited. Both centralized, that is national, and decentralized players, such as schools and institutions, have to use additional tools for statistical, administrative or other purposes

The mentioned weak points, though can, on the whole be related to the comprehension of validation of prior learning on which the Finnish system of competence-based qualifications is based. When validation of prior learning is done by assessment via the competence tests, it probably is not meaningful to criticize the e-tool for not or only to a small extent paying attention to other types of competences?

Vigo Voksen(RealDok) www.vigo.no

Vigo Voksen/ Vigo Adult (previously RealDok) is an administrative system for mapping out and documentation of prior learning for individuals who wants adult education and/ or a validation process. The system is based on officially approved educational plans towards certificate of completed apprenticeship or study competence at further educational levels. 16 out of 19 counties in Norway are using the system, so if not a national system it is widespread and used in most parts of the country. The system is developed for using Windows in a web environment.

The applicants for further education are thus with Vigo Voksen presented for a coherent, (almost) nationwide, county-based system, which generates data on competences and education, monitors applicants and students in the system towards end competence and registers issuing of competence certificates.

Only administrative staff has access to the system thus there is no individual end user access.

RealDok is the data system used for handling applications for the adult education of the counties. The system can receive, register and monitor applicants. Furthermore one can download overviews from the system for internal use at county level and for centralized reports, for example by Statistics Norway and other authorities.

What makes Vigo Voksen special is, the whole aim of the administrative system, the extent of the system, its range and its ability to generate data used at both decentralized (county) level and at centralized level (by e.g. SSB (Statistics Norway) and national educational providers etc)

It is not a completely nationwide database for descriptions of competences within further education for adults, but it is a tool that supports the efforts in that direction. Furthermore the tool – because it is the first step/ entry into validation of prior learning – can contribute to attracting attention to validation of prior learning as an advantage for the individual citizen as well as supporting flexibility and linking educations and the labour market together.

In general Vigo Voksen is not used as an e-tool during the interviews taking place on the basis of the collected documentation. The assessment of the competences, level and educational needs of the applicant is based on these interviews (and the collected documentation) and the results are subsequently typed into Vigo Voksen/RealDok.

Vigo Voksen works as a support tool in the process of clarification, as the counselor/ specialist refers to course contents, possibly via support questions, and refers to the educational descriptions, but these have often been forwarded to the applicant in advance. Thus Vigo Voksen/ RealDok strictly speaking is a tool for registration and administration.

Vigo Voksen cannot be said to be a tool for assessment of prior learning. The assessment is taking place between the applicant and the assessor (specialist), who is employed at a further educational institution or at a centre run by the county.

As an e-tool Vigo Voksen can neither be described as convergent or divergent, in the sense of a tool solely assessing competences narrowly in relation to educational objectives. The system Vigo Voksen is based on "officially approved educational plans to be used within further education at the level of certificate of completed apprenticeship or study competence", and thus in its comprehension of prior learning is described as limited and convergent. At the same time this study of how the e-tool is used in practice shows extensive considerations for the informal and non-formal competences of the applicant in the actual dialogue between the applicant and the specialist.

Vigo Voksen / RealDok represent a compromise between different players in the field. The e-tool's nature of being an administrative system, that all the time must be able of generating data and securing dataflow between different authorities and players, makes it suitable and usable for documentation, statistics and control for agencies, authorities and politicians. If – or rather when – the e-tool will cover all the 19 counties and it will be the first entry in all counties and seriously used for registration, for monitoring the development of all applicants and students at further educational level – when all this is in place, it really will contribute to the development of competences at county and at national level. As such it can contribute to assure that the educational sector and the labour market support each other and the actual competences of the individual will be utilized.

Discussion theme 3:

The e-tool is a tool for identification and clarification, but also an administrative system. How to balance the time and resources of the specialist between these two applications? How to avoid that the obligation to register and the demands of the system overshadows "the user as the centre of attention" and the good process of validation?

Strong points in such an e-tool:

- The e-tool has distinct strengths for central and regional authorities who can directly download educational data and statistical information for political or control purposes.
- The identification- and clarification processes for recognition of prior learning are supported by e-tool links to course registration and registration of the educational plan. That is an important advantage of the tool.
- The e-tool links decisions on recognition of prior learning together with available courses in a quick and clear user-friendly process.

- Even though the e-tool is not accessible for the individual user, clarification, administration and decisions appear very user-friendly.

- The e-tool can contribute to attract and retain adult users, who wish education. This is due to its clarity and clarification.

Weak points in such an e-tool (partly the same weak points as were listed under the Icelandic SKINNA):

- As central (national or common regional) systems are also or primarily designed for political, control, economical and statistical purposes, the structure, design and way of functioning can collide with the wishes of the institutions for simple solutions that provide better local/regional solutions or sectorial/branch specific solutions.

- The functionalities of the e-tools that generate data for external players and centralized levels are not necessarily the same as what the decentralized players want. They could e.g. be more concerned with administering local activities, which is registration, group- and classroom allocation, drop-outs etc.

- Double work is a risk, as counselors, administrative staff and specialists in the institutions while still using their own systems, now furthermore, via the e-tool, have to make reports in a system, that in reality consist of external and regional or national databases.

- Counselors, administrative staff and specialists are concerned about their subject matter and about the work related to individuals and users who wish a validation process. These considerations can collide with the time and resources spent on learning how to use the e-tool, to meet the demands of the tool regarding documentation and to understand and 'translate' between the actual competences of the users and the terminology of the system.

Realkompetenceforening.dk – www.realkompetenceforening.dk

The e-tool www.realkompetenceforening.dk /prior learning-association is an on-line tool for clarification and description of prior learning. It is a self-assessment tool, but when launching, it is recommended that persons trained as sparring partners of the users are available. The service of the sparring partner or counselor is viewed as a key aspect of the clarification and documentation of prior learning.

In the Danish – The Danish Ministry of Education's – definition of prior learning, a number of competences are mentioned – alongside with the competences from the educational system and working life – from leisure time activities, which can be included in the description of the total competences of the individual, among these practical and academic competences – from non-formal study associations or folk high schools, management – via courses or voluntary work in

associations or clubs, co-operation – via voluntary work in associations and clubs and language and communication – via work, living or studies abroad.

Within non-formal adult education it is especially the day folk high schools that have been involved in and use the tool. 2/3 of these schools have had their staff trained in courses for sparring partners/ prior learning-guide. It varies to which extent the day folk high schools use it. It is evident that the schools find it extremely relevant to clarify and describe prior learning, and the tool works well. But it is a pedagogical challenge to make it fit in and it is difficult to use. In many cases the counselors of the schools are the ones that use it, but on an experimental basis it is also used in groups with the students helping one another and the teacher working as a consultant. Positive experiences have come from this.

When using the e-tool it is pointed out that the clarification process is useful in relation to job seeking. Employers are really not interested in a piece of paper/ documentation of the prior learning of the job-seeker. But they are interested in people who can verbalize what they can. And when the applicants have been through a process of clarification they are much better at telling about it when job-interviewed. So it is the process more than the paper/documentation that matters.

In general the agenda of validation of prior learning is considered important in relation to third sector, and the third sector tool is considered good and useful in the process of clarification. But in relation to the formal educational system there is, among others, the barrier that the tool produces descriptions of generic- or key competences, such as social competences, intercultural competences, creative-innovative competences, while the educational system primarily is concerned with competences corresponding to specific educational objectives.

The e-tool is used to a varying degree by the different types of non-formal schools connected to DAEA², but the interest in using the tool seems to be decreasing within e.g. Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations³. This could relate to the fact that the tool is based on a broad or generic comprehension of competence, whereas the competences being described are general societal competences, and not e.g. specific competences referring to specific educational objectives. This relates to the phenomena which Aagaard and Nordentoft⁴ called the first step in the validation process, in which "the broad concept of competence" is used. In this phase "the point of departure is all the competences of the individual" – a divergent approach with an explorative and open aim.

² DAEA: Danish Adult Education Association. Umbrella organization for 33 non-formal organizations in Denmark, www.dfs.dk

³ DGI – Danish Gymnastics and Sports Association, www.dgi.dk

⁴ Aagaard, K. og A. Nordentoft (2008)

The legislation on validation of prior learning in Denmark is worked out in such a way that it is the educational institutions which hold the authority to assess prior learning, with reference to objectives and competence descriptions of the educational system. This entails that the educational system is not necessarily concerned about descriptions of generic competences, but demands documentation that the applicant knows exactly that which is described in the educational competence objectives.

Even though the e-tool thus is launched by the Ministry of Education and is backed up by the organizations it is developed for, it seems that its actual use in relation to documentation and ultimately recognition of prior learning in relation to the educational system is limited. On the other hand it seems e.g. in the work of the day folk high school to have great value for the individual in relation to clarification, reflection and communication of one's own competences when seeking a job.

Discussion theme 4:

The e-tool is a tool for identification, clarification and documentation which can be used directly by the end-user or be used in connection with counseling and learning activities. However the comprehension of competence within the tool – a broad, divergent or generic comprehension of competence – matches poorly with the comprehension of competence within the mainstream educational system.

Strong points in such an e-tool:

- The tool is directly accessible and usable for the end-user, the individual (together with a sparring partner/ counselor).
- The broad comprehension of competence of the tool in which general and societal competences (generic) play a part, contribute to highlighting specifically these competences and thus the importance of the activities of the non-formal sector in general which contributes to the growth of the societal competence account.
- Using the e-tool in education in different non-formal learning contexts contributes to the individual learner's awareness of his/her own acquired competences which places him or her in a better position in relation to education and the labour market.

Weak points in such an e-tool:

- The e-tool stems from the tradition of liberal/ non-formal education. In this qualifications and competences are valued and assessed differently from the way the mainstream educational system does it and from the way the existing legislation and practice of validation of prior learning does it. This is a condition the tool (and liberal/non-formal education in general) is subject to and which represent a barrier for the spread of the use of the tool.

Accumulated Knowledge and Skills – www.aks-international.com

The project AKS-International and its e-tools for validation of prior learning is a branch-specific approach to the use of e-tools for identification, clarification and recognition of competences, and has as such no link to an educational institution within the mainstream educational system.

It is an e-tool which stems from a specific branch and a specific trade. The e-tool intends at the same time to consider both the specific branch approach and the needs for qualified staff of the enterprises and the individual employee's wish for clarification of competences and possibility for competence development.

The e-tool itself is an on-line tool which requires UserID and password. It is the individual enterprise that issues UserID and password, and the e-tool is thus closely linked to employed individuals and employed in a specific enterprise. It is both a tool for mapping – for the employee and for the enterprise – and a tool for documentation used in connection with assessment, e.g. in relation to Staff Development Interview (SDI/MUS). In this way the e-tool also works in relation to a process of recognition and assessment by the management of the enterprise.

The e-tool as it is presented on the website comprises 4 parts:

1. CV, accumulated knowledge and skills. Forms for documentation: personal data, education up to now, work experience, experience, command of languages, organizational experience, IT-knowledge
2. A branch specific part, with registration of specific competences within the electricity branch. This tool is made as a "competence test" in which one on a scale, indicates to which degree a competence is mastered
3. A part 3: "The ability to take action" which consist of "awareness and assessment of own ability to take action" via a questionnaire regarding "social, learning, method and professional competence". There is a total of 40 statements/ competences which one marks in on-line on a scale from 1 to 10 (Does apply for me – Does not apply for me)
4. Development plan for the individual employee (see below)

After part 3 a Staff Development Interview is carried out which subsequently can result in a development plan for the employee. Thus this is a total documentation of professional, learning, personal and social competences, which are summed up in an action plan for the individual employee and for the enterprise.

It is a matter of taste if one will regard the AKS-tool as a tool for development for the employee, primarily designed as a portfolio of the electricity branch or one regards the e-tool as a tool for management and control for the HRM-director of the enterprise.

Discussion theme 5

This e-tool is linking together personal, social, professional and developmental competences in a common tool for employees and enterprise. Is it possible both to consider the individual employee's individual wishes and the demand for competence development and human resource management of the enterprise when using an e-tool for competence identification, clarification and documentation?

Strong points in such an e-tool:

- The e-tool links together the personal, social and professional competences of the individual employee with a personal development plan and career wishes.
- The e-tool provides a total outline of and insight into the enterprise's total competences, resources of the employees and career wishes of the employees - an HRM tool.
- In principle the tool can be developed to cover all types of branches in which the professional competences are described.

Weak points in such an e-tool:

- The strong points of the tool are likely also to be its weak points. The employees are interested in identification, clarification and documentation of their competences and linking these to their individual development and career plans. The enterprise is interested in a HRM tool, which can be used for identification, maintenance and development of competences in relation to the strategy and needs for development of the enterprise. These two types of needs/ interests are very likely to collide. The e-tool is intended to be owned by the individual enterprise.

As a separate theme for discussion finally the importance of counseling is presented:

Discussion theme 6:

The importance of counseling in relation to using the e-tools as support for validation of prior learning. Can the use of e-tools minimize the need for counseling?

E-tools can, as pointed out in the previous parts of the study, potentially support the process of validation in many ways. When it comes to e-tools supporting the process of identification and clarification, the e-tool contributes to – via a structured questionnaire – setting a frame for and structuring the process. The use of e-tools can qualify the process because it contributes to ensuring that the relevant areas are covered and furthermore that a certain degree of standardization in an otherwise complex process is maintained.

One of the points that become obvious across the descriptions of the e-tools is that they are only to a limited extent used by the individual applicant, while they are used by counselors/

administrative staff/ guides or are used in a dialogue between the applicant and the counselor. Thus the counselor becomes a key factor in relation to using the e-tools in the process of validation. This probably is related more to the fact that identification of prior learning is a complex matter, both related to the competences and identity of the individual, and also related to an in-depth knowledge about the possibilities of the educational system and of the labour market, than it is related to the e-tools itself.

In relation to the third sector tool one has as a point of departure, given counseling and sparring, a significant role in relation to clarification and documentation, and during the development of the tools it was emphasized that the members/ course participants should not work with the tool or document their competences on their own. In connection with the tool, procedures for a sparring partner have been made, materials for the sparring partners have been developed and provision of courses for sparring partners has been established. A key argument for this has been to assure validity and reliability of the competence description, but experience has shown that an equally important role for the sparring partner is to encourage or contribute to reflections of the individual regarding what one can and how it has been demonstrated in different contexts.

Regarding identification and clarification of prior learning it is a far bigger problem that people underestimate themselves than they overrate themselves. This is the case for people doing association work, and it is in particular the case for a big part of the target group of the day folk high schools, whose participants often have had or have a marginalized position in relation to the educational system and the labour market.

This problem is also mentioned in the interviews from Iceland and Norway respectively, and in relation to adults applying for recognition of their prior learning to have a study period shortened. It is in the course of the interview, when administrative staff, a specialist or a counselor or the like is talking with the applicant, that the individual becomes aware of and able to verbalize his /her own competences. Probably this, in particular, is the case when the people going through a validation process are not used to (have the ability/ competence of) articulating his/her own competences, but it is also related to the very concept of competence itself.

Exactly because prior learning, besides covering formal learning, also covers non-formal and informal learning, a person in the process of validation is dealing with competences which to some extent are "tacit". The concept of tacit knowledge is used to describe the following:

"Different types of knowledge which for principal reasons cannot be articulated fully by means of verbal-linguistic means. This is the case for certain types of knowledge or insight, which in its essence is of a practical nature, among others for skills, and these are related to " a horizon consisting of an immense variety of practices" [...]

Knowledge acquired through practice and which are expressed through the proficiency in which we deal with the phenomenon's, the knowledge is about, e.g. awareness of/ "an eye for" certain contexts in which we have knowledge about something.[...]

Knowledge which often in daily life remains uncategorized, because one normally does not have a need for expressing it specifically. [...]" ⁵

We are talking about knowledge or competences which are not so simple to describe, but where reflective types of counseling can possibly contribute to articulating them. No matter how advanced e-tools one is offered, it is pointed out in connection with more of the e-tools that counseling and the interview with the applicant can have decisive importance in relation to identification and clarification of prior learning. Regarding the tool itself, in the interviews it is expressed that the decisive factor is not exactly how the tool is designed, but that the use of it for one thing structures a process, for another forms the point of departure for an interview/ provides something to start on. The counseling interview plays a decisive part in relation to using the e-tools to support a process of validation, and on the basis of the data one can almost claim, that counseling is far more important for the process of validation than the use of e-tools – in particular in relation to identification and clarification.

⁵ Lauvås, P. & Handal G.

3. The design, methods and materials of the study

The study is to provide an in-depth description of the selected Nordic e-tools used in relation to validation of prior learning. The different tools differ from one another in a number of areas, e.g. in relation to which type of software is being used, the aim of using the tools and the role and significance that the tools have in the validation process. It's, as mentioned, not the aim to make a comparative study of the tools, but rather through an in-depth description of the various tools to point out a range of areas of significance, dilemmas and issues, which in a formative way can be included in developmental work in the field of e-tools and validation of prior learning.

In the study emphasis is placed on describing the practice in which the tools are embedded, and which role and significance each e-tool has in relation to validation of prior learning as a process. In relation to this the organizational and institutional context for the use of the e-tool is examined – to the extent it is possible on the basis of the data.

A flexible design

The conditions for the study have been that the country representatives of the Expert Network on Validation have established contact with relevant informants – and thereby also selected who they are – in relation to the different e-tools. The fact that the representatives have established the contacts and in some instances made a schedule of research, interview or meetings, gives the study a pragmatic element, both regarding selection of informants or the format and focus of the interview. Some informants have, on the basis of their own comprehension of the aim of the study/ the researchers visit, prepared final versions for presentation of their own institution, of the work with validation in their own institution or in general and/or of the specific e-tool. The presentations (Power Points) have in these cases formed the basis for the interview/ dialogue about the e-tools and are included as data of the study.

In the draft for the study it was intended that besides interviews with administrative staff and other staff who are using the tools, also interviews with individuals/applicants, who had gone through a process of validation supported by the specific tool should be done. However it has only been possible in a few cases. When not possible we have aimed to cover the perspective of the applicant through second-hand reports from the interviewee.

In total, 22 interviews have been carried out with a total 35 individuals. As mentioned some of the interviews have had the character of a presentation with an ongoing dialogue.

The approach of the study is qualitative, that is bringing into focus the relation between a larger numbers of significant signs in relatively few units of research ((Hansen og Andersen, 2000, s. 22)⁶. For qualitative studies it applies that they

”... operate with a flexible research design, because the most important categories of the study are not predefined. On the contrary the categories develop as a function of the course of the study itself. This can be large categories as for example of what a certain social problem actually consist, or it can be small categories as e.g. which answers some interviewee possibly will give to a certain question” (Dahler-Larsen, 2002)⁷.

This means that it is not predefined which issues, dilemmas or areas of significance the study will bring into focus. The persons administering, working with and using the different e-tools will be the ones pointing out what is relevant and meaningful to them in relation to the tool – still though within the framework of the overall objective of the study.

Methods and data

The study is based on presentations, interviews, telephone interviews and documents which have been generated in relation to the specific e-tools. The interviews are carried out individually or are group based and are in general planned as open, semi-structured interviews. That the interviews are being open means that they not are standardized, that it is the informants that decide what to say and when (which especially is the case when the informants have structured the interview with prepared presentations). That the interviews are semi-structured refers to an interview guide has been made in which the themes of the interview are sketched out in order to focus the interview in accordance with its purpose. Thus the interviews are based on an interview guide comprising the following themes:

Description/ demonstration of the tool

By whom/ in which organizational and institutional context is the tool used?

What is the aim of using the tool?

Which role does the tool play in relation to validation of prior learning?

Which outcome can be had in relation to validation of prior learning?

How is the whole process organized?

⁶ Hansen, E.J. & Andersen, B.H.

⁷ Dahler-Larsen, P. (2002)

The result of the process (admission, certificate)

Who addresses whom / how does a process of validation start?

Who are the target groups for validation of prior learning? (voluntary?)

The extent of validation of prior learning

Documentation (extent, width ("all you can do?"), methods, contents, validity)

Assessment (objectives, basis, criteria)

Who assesses?

Which possible counseling support is available for the applicant during the process?

The competences of the counselor?

How is the process experienced? (learning)

The questionnaire is not followed slavishly; in part some themes/questions have not been relevant in relation to all the interviews, and partly to a high degree it has been the interviewees who have set the agenda for the interviews and they have pointed out themes which were relevant and significant from their point of view.

In addition to the interviews, data in the form of information materials, brochures, booklets, PowerPoint presentations, written notes, statements etc. relating to the individual e-tools have been collected. Interviews and presentations have been recorded on a M3-recorder and have subsequently been transcribed.

Data processing

The analysis of the data is structured in such a way that each single tool is intended to be described in its context regarding the educational policy in which it is developed, because that is important for understanding what each tool is supposed to be able to do and which role it is intended to play in the general work with validation of prior learning. Starting from the model of Rie Thomsen on the process of validation it is described which phases or elements in the process each tool especially is developed for or suitable for to support.

Considerations on the importance of counseling in relation to using the e-tools in the validation process are emphasized, because it is an issue which the analysis of the data has proven significant. To the extent it has been addressed in the interviews and is relevant in relation to each tool, the experience by the applicant of the validation process is described. The tools are based on

more or less explicit comprehensions of what competence is. To the extent that the data makes it possible the comprehension of competence is described in terms of four factors, which according to Herman (2005) are common in different identifications of the concept of competence, that is that competences are seen in active action (in contrast to qualifications, which one can possess without transformation); competence presupposes and transforms knowledge; competences are situative, contextual; and finally competences are not based on a specific role or function, but related to an individual (Herman 2005,p. 9)⁸.

4. Skinna – a database under development

In this part of the study "Skinna" is highlighted as an educational database of which the development is not finalized. Skinna represents e-tools that support validation of prior learning at a societal level and is not directly included in the validation process as it is experienced by the individual. It must be stressed that Skinna as such is not developed to support validation of prior learning, but that it is in this perspective that it is a part of this study. In the following the context regarding educational policy for the development of the e-tool is described, including the work done in Iceland with validation of prior learning.

The context regarding educational policy

The work with validation of prior learning started in Iceland in 2004, and is rooted in Fræðslumidstöð Atvinnulífsins (FA) (the Education and Training Service Centre). FA is owned by the social partners. The developmental work is based on a service agreement with the Ministry of Education in which it is pointed out that the work must be carried out as a collaboration between FA, the Ministry of Education, the labour market and the educational institutions, and that the aim is shortening of the study period, improved position in the labour market and a general build-up of competences in the labour force:

To develop methods for the assessment of informal education and learning results in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, industry and teaching establishments, as well as to develop methods for assessing the real competence of individuals. FA shall work with the Ministry of Education towards strategy formulation, the building up of a system and the testing of such a system for both people in the labour market who have limited formal education as well as for skilled employees in the labour market. Work shall be carried out on all components of real competence assessment, towards the shortening of study periods, towards an improved position in the labour market as well as a general build-up of competence. The FA shall also develop methods towards the building up of education records (student accounting) in collaboration with educators

⁸ Hermann, Stefan (2005)

and the Ministry of Education, where the reference point will be an assessment of limited formal education and of real competence. (Excerpt from a service agreement) (Quoted from FA's annual report to the Expert Network on Validation of NVL, 2009)

One of the factors FA puts emphasis on is that knowledge recognized through validation of prior learning must be valued in the same way as knowledge acquired in the educational system (ibid).

During the period 2005- 2007 one has worked to develop and test methods for validation of prior learning and providing courses and projects within the different trades.

In 2008 legislation was passed which gives applicants for upper secondary education a right to validation of prior learning

"Article 31 of the Act provides for the right of students matriculating in upper secondary schools to have their real competence assessed and evaluated towards study courses and credit units, provided that the assessed real competence is comparable to the curriculum and study program descriptions of the school in question. An accredited real competence, falling outside the framework of a core study program should be assessed as an optional subject" (Ibid).

In addition an act was proposed regarding validation of prior learning in relation to adult education (further education), but it was not passed – not because there was no support for it, but because of the financial recession (ibid). It is expected to be passed later on.

Validation of prior learning in practice

The work with validation of prior learning in Iceland is organized with branch specific projects in such a way that groups of persons working within specific branches have been offered a process of validation. Recognition of prior learning is connected to the educational centre's of the branch organizations and is carried out in collaboration between these and educational institutions/ vocational schools. In IDAN⁹, which is a competence development centre for an association of branch organizations, one has worked with validation since 2007. It started with 4-5 branches and is currently (September 2009) covering 13 different branches (Interview, Is 1). Within each branch a project is established, e.g. in the food branch, partly based on permission from ESC (Education Training Service Center), and partly based on agreements with the relevant partners and educational institutions.

⁹ *The role of IDAN - Vocational Education and Training Centre is to improve the capabilities of companies and employees in the food and culinary branches, printing and media branches, automotive industries, building and construction branches, metal and machinery branches and industries. IDAN seeks to support companies in the development of knowledge and skills among its employees and takes active part in various developmental projects (from www.idan.is)*

The target groups for validation of prior learning in IDAN are unskilled adults. As a point of departure it is required that the individual is above 25 years and has worked for 5 years in the field in question. According to a counselor/consultant with IDAN in Iceland they have:

„ ... a lot of good workers, who didn't finish their school. They all say they are drop outs, and their experience with school is very bad. And if you are a good worker, the industry needs you, so it is no problem to get a job ..“ (Interview IS 1)

Many in the target group have bad experience from school and some are dyslectic, according to the interviewee. Most of the applicants who sought out validation are employed, but due to the financial recession more of the current applicants are out of work.

The validation of prior learning is as mentioned organized as projects in which one gathers a group of individuals in the same branch and offer them a group validation. It is advertised in free newspapers - that reach everybody – that a project is established in which it is possible to have ones prior learning validated and to participate in tailormade educational programs leading to certification of one's individual competences (interview, Is 1). The counselor/consultant from IDAN tells that when the first validation project was established, one expected 5 – 15 persons at the information meeting, but 90 showed up. In other words a massive interest in validation of prior learning has occurred.

In IDAN one emphasizes having a close contact with the applicants via telephone interviews, mails and in-person meeting. When validating the competences of the individual a check list is used referring to educational plans, but is first filled out after the assessment interview; IDAN's attitude is to make the situation as little like school or exams as possible, exactly because many applicants have negative experiences with the school system. The counselor/consultant from IDAN carries out the clarifying interview and after that the counselor/ consultant and the applicant meet two assessors/ validators. The assessment itself is done by teachers from vocational schools, from professional committees or from the Ministry (Interview, Is 1). For each module of the education the assessment lasts approximately 1 – 2 hours, possibly followed by a practical test (Interview, Is 3).

The result of the assessment is a certificate, which is not legally valid yet, but is generally accepted within the educational system (interview, Is 1).

A validation project from the initial first group meeting until the process is finalized lasts approximately 8 – 10 weeks.

To the extent the applicants choose the same educational institution they are encouraged to form groups in relation to following the same subjects/classes. The group aspect is considered important in relation to the process of validation and in relation to the subsequent educational program. Experience shows that both belonging to a group and the close follow-up during the

course of the validation process are very important for the individual actually starting education after the validation of his/her prior learning.

The counselor/consultant from IDAN point out that 75% of the individuals who have been through a validation process subsequently start an education. According to a counselor and an assessor from one of the receiving schools (upper secondary school) the validated students do well during their education (Interview, Is 3).

To IDAN the relation between the counselor and the applicant is the key to the successful process of validation, and the use of structured questionnaires and IT is only getting little attention – besides from being a means of communication. In the organization in charge of the further education of electricians – Frædsluskristofa Rafidnadarins (FR) – they have, like IDAN, done projects of validation for the last two years, and like IDAN, they have announced the programs and made registration into groups. Using the educational objectives of the training and education of electricians as the point of departure, they have developed a self-assessment questionnaire in which the applicant is to evaluate his/her competences at a detailed level within the profession of electricians. The scale of assessment goes from 1 to 4, where 1 corresponds to no or little knowledge and 4 corresponds to knowledge at a level at which you are able to teach others. After filling it in, the questionnaire is examined with the counselor who asks questions about the answers. In relation to each subject matter an average is calculated which is normative for determining if further education in the subject is necessary.

Even though each applicant collects documentation widely, that is e.g. on prior learning from third sector, it is strictly professional or technical competences that form the basis for the assessment of prior learning (Interview, Is 2).

The form used for the self-assessment is a Word-document, which can be saved on-line and sent via the net. Calculations of the average are made by hand and are thus not integrated into the form. The representative from Frædsluskristofa Rafidnadarins, who has developed the form, is planning to develop the technical side of the form, with among other things, including a calculation function (Interview, Is 2), and in general he is very engaged in how to use IT in relation to validation of prior learning.

On the background of the answers, individually targeted educational programs are set up in collaboration with two vocational schools. The target group for FR is identical with the one for IDAN that is unskilled adults with 5 years of work experience in the branch of electricians. Also here some in the group are dyslexic, and in cooperation with the vocational schools, special courses have been set up, e.g. in Danish and English with the aim that the applicant can read Danish and English, but not necessarily have to master writing the language: "One must be able to read manuals in Danish and English, but ... not to write a letter in Danish. Someone else can do

that for you” (Interview, Is 2). In other words, the educational program is tailor-made for the students”.

In relation to validation of prior learning the focus in Iceland has been on developing guides and procedures rather than on e-tools applicable directly in the process of validation.

IDAN does not use e-tools in the validation of prior learning, e.g. tools for clarification, and they stress the importance of nothing being written down during the interviews with the applicant.

Frædsluskristofa Rafidnadarins have developed their own tool which is linked closely to the profession of electricians and which cannot yet be regarded as an e-tool.

The assessors of the educational institutions uses a checklist which is related to each module of the education towards which one is applying for validation, but one cannot regard it as an e-tool as such (Interview, further basic education).

Counseling

Frædslumidstöð Atvinnulífsins (FA - The Education and Training Service Center) issues guidelines for validation of prior learning, and is supplying funding for projects in the field. In the FA-booklet „Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland“ the importance of counseling in relation to validation of prior learning is underlined: „It is important that there is always good access to a counselor who can guide and support through the whole process.“ (p. 7) In addition to this it is described how the work is distributed between the counselor and the assessor, and which educational requirements the counselor and the assessor must fulfill (p.10). At a general level it is pointed out that the counselor „Should be an Educational- and vocational counselor, or someone that has been trained in the methodology of validation“, while the assessor „should be a professional in the relevant field“ (10). The descriptions are closely related to „Common European Principles for validation“ (p.9).

The description of the conditions for validation of prior learning weights quality and professionalism, among other things, with a focus on the counseling, and shows that e-tools have not been a point of attention in itself when developing methods and models for validation of prior learning in Iceland.

E-tools supporting validation of prior learning

A counselor from Island (Is 3), however, emphasizes the importance of the LMS system of the school – Inna – in relation to validation of prior learning and especially in relation to planning the subsequent educational program (Interview, Is 3). In the LMS system the modules the applicant gets recognized are registered as passed. After that one cannot see whether it is passed via the traditional educational path or via validation of prior learning. In the system they count equally. Teacher/counselor can use the information available in the system on previous education, breaks

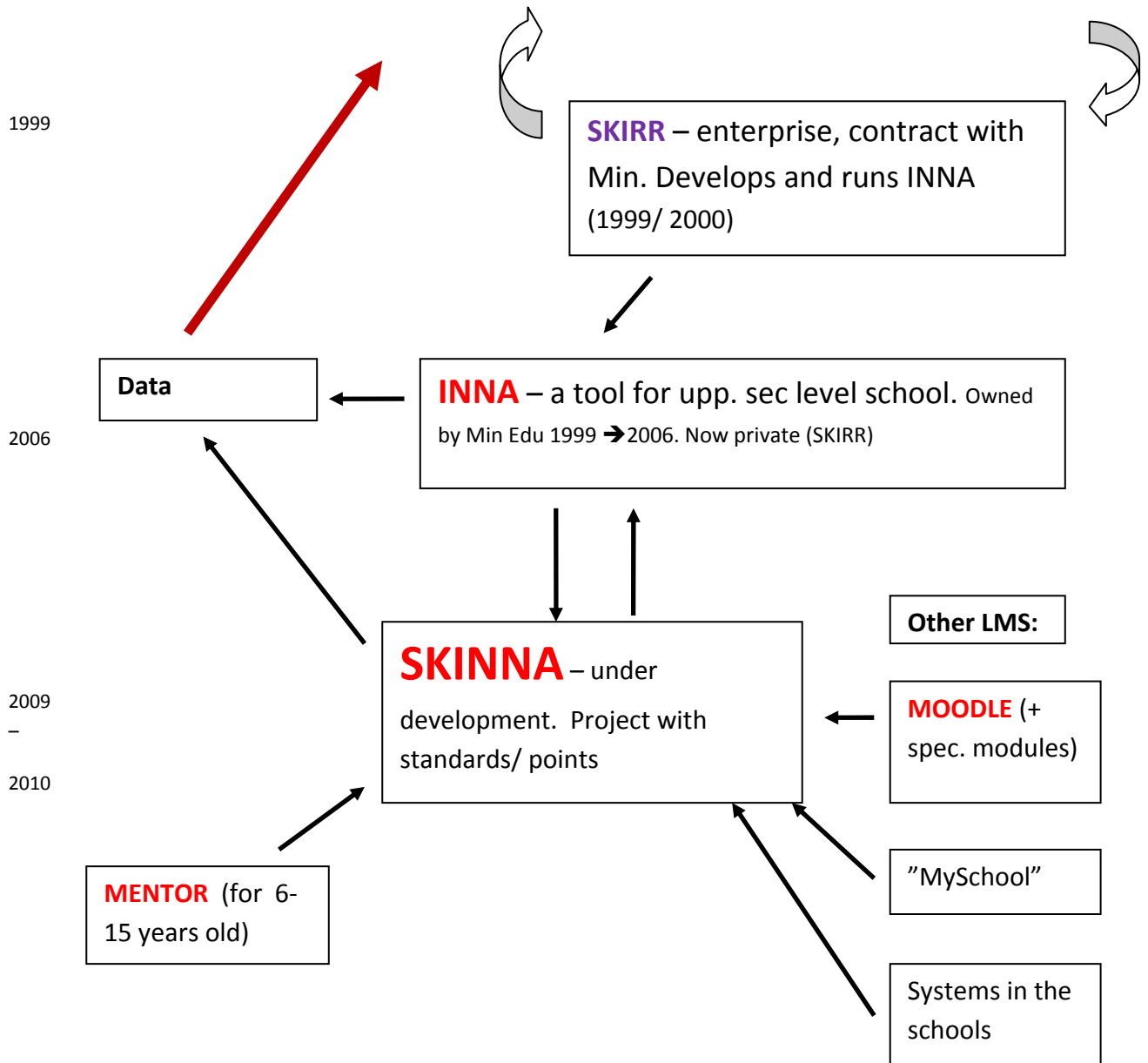
in educational programs, grades etc. e.g. to figure out – via an interview with the applicant – how many modules he or she can do at the same time and at which levels, that is in relation to individual educational planning.

The LMS system Inna is developed by a private enterprise Skirr, but is initiated and funded by the Ministry of Education (Interview, Is 4). For the Ministry it primarily was intended to be a school administrative system, from which the Ministry could also download data. However the system has been developed to meet the needs of the individual school rather than the needs of the Ministry in relation to overall planning purposes. Inna is used by approximately 30 educational institutions in Iceland, but a number of other LMS systems are also used in the educational sector. Not all the schools have wished to invest in Inna.

The Ministry of Education desires a common system comprising educational data on all students and all educational institutions, and with this point of departure one is developing the system, Skinna. Skinna which has been developed during the last two years is a linkage of all the LMS systems used in the educational sector. Instead of demanding all schools to use the same system (Inna), in the future the requirement from the Ministry to the schools will be that their LMS system can fulfill certain standards of compatibility and supply data to Skinna, in accordance with the figure below. The idea is that Skinna comprises educational data on all pupils and students, on schools, educations and modules in Iceland – from basic school to university. In principle one can, on the basis on data from the system, make a type of competence account on the whole population. One of the representatives from the educational system commented on it in the following way: „Big Brother is coming. Definitely!“ (Interview, Is 3). Skinna is purely a database without containing tools as such. It is intended to provide data to a data warehouse, from which the Ministry can make its downloads. For the Ministry the main interest is linked to planning and control of the educational sector (Interview, ministry). But it also is a vision that Skinna via a bridge can provide educational data to the individual citizen.

The vision is to establish a portal at www.iceland.is, where all Icelandic citizens are able to download information themselves via login/digital signature. Among other things one will have access to a type of CV comprising educational history, work experience etc. Money has been put aside for the project, but due to the financial crisis it is temporarily set on hold (Interview, Is 4).

Menntalamálaráðuneytid – Ministry of Edu, Sci & Culture



Vision for the future:

www.island.is

????

Electronic portfolio for all Icelanders. Education, competences, working life etc.

Competences

The comprehension of competences which forms the basis for validation of prior learning in Iceland is described in the FA-booklet „Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland“. The concept of competence is used synonymously with learning, such that competences for example are called formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. Validation of prior learning is described in the following way:

„Validation of non-formal and informal learning is a confirmation and validation of competence regardless of how or where an individual has acquired it. The goal is that the purpose of not having to acquire education in what he/she already knows or in order to gain recognition that leads to job development at the work place“ (p. 4)

Prior learning is thus assessed and recognized explicitly aiming at participating in education or development at work:

“Validation of non-formal and in-formal learning used for shortening a study path within the formal education aims to validate competence as equal to specific subject standards or part thereof and to organize the continuing education of the individual in this respect.

[...]

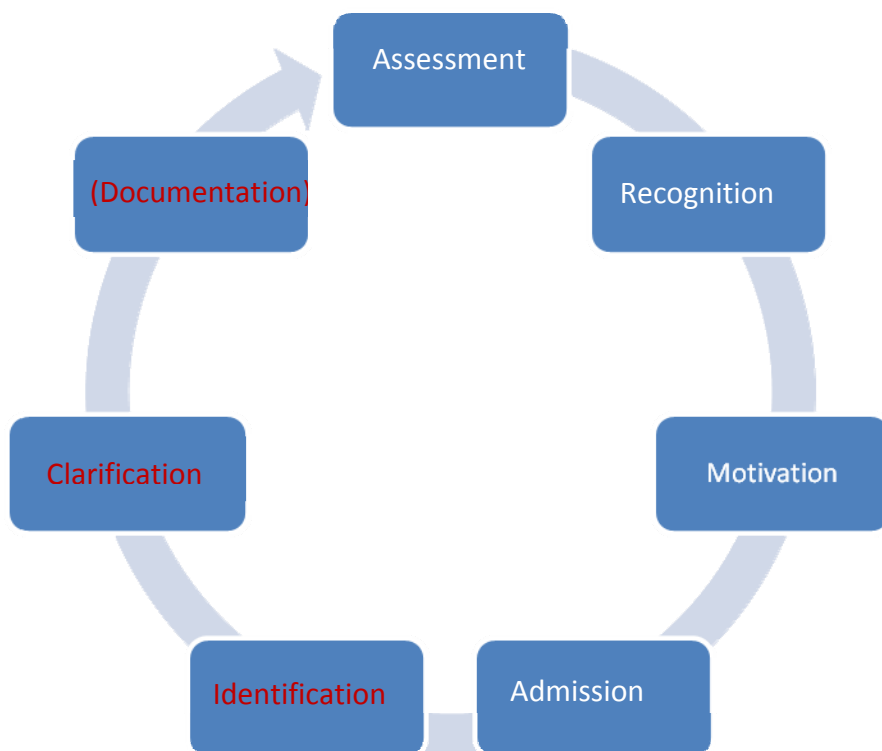
“Validation of non-formal and in-formal learning on the labour market aims to document and validate competence for the individual to gain recognition and enhance job development at work and in finding a suitable job.” (p.4)

In relation to the educational system it seems that the competences are assessed closely in relation to the educational objectives of each education. In relation to each education check-lists have been made to be used by the assessors in relation to the assessment of the individual applicant. Thus the assessment is convergent with the educational objectives. It is these actual results of the assessment and tests that are registered in the LMS system, and which in the future are included in the educational database Skinna. The competences which are recognized by the system are competences described in the form of educational objectives related the specific educations.

Concluding remarks

Skinna is a database under development, and the plan is that it will comprise educational data on all pupils, students, schools, courses etc. in Iceland. In principle the database will contain data on all the competences regarding education acquired by the Icelandic citizens, irrespective of they are acquired through formal education or through validation of prior learning. In this sense one can say that Skinna, at a societal level, contributes to supporting the approach that is the basis of validation of prior learning, and in a wider perspective Lifelong Learning. In the societal account of

competences it is of less importance whether they are acquired in one or another system or when in the lifespan they are acquired. In relation to Rie Thomsen's description of the validation process one can say that Skinna supports (the societal) recognition of prior learning:



Rie Thomsen, DPU (2009)

The competences which can be recognized by the system are the competences which correspond to descriptions of the objectives of the specific educations, and thus not generic competences, such as social or communicative competences (unless, of course, these are a part of the objectives of a specific education).

5. The E-tool www.osaan.fi – www.jagkan.fi

National tool – National Board of Education

This part of the study is on the e-tool [osaan.fi](http://www.osaan.fi). Or as the website is called in Swedish, [jagkan.fi](http://www.jagkan.fi) (“I can”). This e-tool is “a tool for mapping of vocational competence”, and both the homepage and the facilities attached to the site are owned and run by The Finnish National Board of Education. The homepage and the e-tool are presented this way:

“Recognition of competence– General instruction

With the help of this tool you can assess your competences in relation to a profession of your interest (the competence test). You can choose either to look through the competence demands or to assess competences. You can look through the demands of different tests. If you assess your competences your answers will be in relation to the competence demands of the education you have chosen, and you will, in the end get a report on your answers and a graphical presentation of the average of the competence demands.”

According to this the e-tool was visualized and developed as a national and recognized tool in relation to the competence demands of various trades and vocational educations. The e-tool is developed both to explore – “browse the competence requirements” – and/ or to assess one’s own competences.

Thus the e-tool is intended as a tool for preparation and exploration by the user, for the individual. It is aimed at gaining a certificate, via a so called “competence test”, in a specific branch at a specific level.

The e-tool thus appears as a support tool, which the applicant can use in the process of clarification leading to the test. The test and what is meant by “the competence test” will be described below.

Context regarding educational policy

The e-tool www.osaan.fi/ www.jagkan.fi works as a support tool for the individual to explore which competences he/she still lacks in order to pass specific exams in the educational system. Since 1994 Finland has had a comprehensive and well defined national competence based system of qualifications which gives adults a right to – free of charge – take part in an examination to demonstrate his/her skills and competences. This competence based qualifications system thus approaches validation differently than e.g. the Norwegian system: The competences of the individual are not recognized in their own right irrespective of where and how they are acquired, but will be tested in a system of examinations and tests. This system exists parallel to the mainstream educational system, and it is called “the competence test” to which everybody can apply for a test at one of the following three levels:

- Basic test (equivalent to the level of 2- 3 years of upper secondary vocational education)
- Vocational test (equivalent to the level of a skilled person with work experience)
- Specialist vocational test (equivalent to skilled or highly qualified work experience)

On the homepage of the Educational Agency the competence based qualifications system is described in this way in English:

“Competence-based qualifications

Finland has been developing competence-based qualifications since 1994. This system is intended to enable working-age adults to gain qualifications without necessarily attending formal training. It is possible to take competence-based vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and special vocational qualifications or only parts of them through the competence test system, within which competence acquired through various ways is recognized and validated. The competence test is completed by demonstrating competence required in the profession. Although taking part in competence tests does not require formal preparation, about 95% of candidates attend some training, in which they are provided with individual learning programs. Upper secondary vocational education and training provides preparation for upper secondary vocational qualifications and additional vocational training prepares for further and specialist vocational qualifications.

In 2007, nearly 64 000 people participated in the competence test; some 32 000 obtained their vocational qualification (all three levels of vocational upper secondary qualifications, further vocational qualifications, and specialist vocational qualifications included) through the competence-based qualifications system and nearly 15 000 a part of it.

There 53 vocational upper secondary qualifications (qualifying for jobs in the relevant field) and some 300 further vocational qualifications (providing vocational skills required of professionals in the field) and specialist vocational qualifications (those who obtain these are competent in the most demanding tasks in the field) on offer.

The requirements are outlined in the official requirements for competence-based qualification defined by the Finnish National Board of Education. The main principles regarding competence tests are the following:

- *cooperation between employers, workers, and education sector when the qualifications framework and requirements of competence-based qualification are defined and competence tests are organized and assessed;*
- *the independence of a qualification regardless of the way competence has been acquired;*

- *completing a qualification or a module demonstrating competence in a test;*
- *individualization of learning and the completing of the qualification.”¹⁰*

From March 2007 everybody applying for education will have a personal study plan for the educational program, a document for “Personal adjustment”. This document supports and maintains the individual in the educational program. It describes at any time the actual status for the individual and for the counselor/ administrative staff that assist in planning the program. “Personal adjustment” thus works as an action plan or study plan for the educational program of the individual and as documentation of the process.

Description of the e-tool

The e-tool itself thus works as an open possibility for the individual applying for validation of his/her own competences, in relation to the requirements of each specific test, or as a source of information on and descriptions of the single subject matters/ vocational modules. One is also informed about the possibilities of “The competence test”

In relation to this, the e-tool also works as a working tool for the professional and administrative staff involved in planning and conducting the competence tests, which the user first enters himself/ herself, applies for and then conducts.

” With this tool you can assess your competences in a Competence Based Qualification of your choice. You may choose either browsing the competence requirements OR you may choose to make a self-assessment of your competences. The grading is from 1-3, i.e. 1 = I have no skill or knowledge, 2 = I have some skills or knowledge, 3 = I have good skills and knowledge. According to your answers you can print out a listing of your answers and results and also graphs of your average level with regards to the competence requirements.

This tool is used by the potential candidates, guidance and counseling professionals as well as the APL professionals for assessment purposes.”¹¹

In the general the e-tool can be used in three ways.

Firstly anyone can use the e-tool as a tool for self-assessment of own competences within a wide range of trades, branches and educations. User-ID and password is required (not in the version in Swedish, though, jagkan.fi).

¹⁰ Information in English on the homepage of the Finnish National Board of Education:
http://www.oph.fi/english/education/adult_education/vocational_adult_education

¹¹

The self-assessment can be concluded with a report, in which graphs and an outline of grade points in relation to specified educational modules describe to what extent one meets the demands for a chosen education or modules of this education. The report can be downloaded or printed for own use (pdf) and be used as a point of departure for an interview in relation to a later process of assessment or competence test. The report with the results is not per se valid, but can be used as a point of departure for the interview with the providers of the competence test.

Furthermore the e-tool can be used as a source of information for guidance and counseling for the individual user. The e-tool is a database of educational possibilities for adults. It is up-dated and maintained by The Finnish National Board of Education and as such can be regarded as the up-to-date, latest version and in that way quality assured. In so many words the user is encouraged to use it for “browsing the requirements of competences” – to orient oneself prior to applying for a competence test.

Finally the e-tool is used by providers of the competence test, that is, specialists and administrative staff who are in charge of and implement the competence tests.

The e-tool was originally developed in connection with a project on competence development at work and in education in the period 1996 – 2000. While doing the project it became apparent that an electronic tool was lacking which could be used to support clarification and identification of competences. The development of the tool was done by a private enterprise, and the process went through several phases starting with the development of a database. In Finland a national project, “Lift Up”, was launched in 2003 – an effort comparable to the Swedish “Competence Lift” – and the development of the e-tool was then included in the overall process and subsequently handed over to The National Board of Education, which now is in charge of running and development of the system. By 2005 39.000 logons were linked to the system, by 2007 the number had risen to 50.000 logons. Up till now in 2009 (Oct. 2009) 87.000 individuals have used the system and the number is approaching 100.000.

The system is aimed at the individual user and at schools and institutions providing the competence tests. External institutions, organizations and authorities are not linked to osaan.fi/ jagkan.fi, but data from it can be transferred into documents and these can be forwarded to external systems and databases.

At present 360 competence based modules of qualifications are described, all of which are accessible via the e-tool to be used by individuals/ users and by the institutions using the system for identification and clarification in relation to competence tests.¹²

¹² Samme

Systems for support of validation of prior learning

Recognition and documentation of prior learning in Finland is based on a right to enter a test, in which the adult demonstrates his/her skills and competences – irrespective of how these have been acquired. The test which often is taking place in the workplace over several days, or even longer, comprises besides observations and assessment of practical skills, a number of different kinds of documentation which are handed in prior to the test or are attached to the test itself as documentation:

“Your performance is assessed on the basis of a collection of materials and documentation of professional and work skills in relation to the vocational requirements and criterions for assessment listed in the basis for the examinations. During the assessment a number of methods, such as observation, interviews, and questionnaires, documentation of previous tests as well as self-evaluations and group-evaluations are used.

Your vocational knowledge is assessed by representatives for employers, employees and educational institutions. You also have to evaluate your own knowledge. After the test you are to take part in an interview with all the assessors present. The assessors will present the report on the recognized or not-recognized vocational and specialist vocational examinations and on the basic examination graded from 1 – 3. The examination committee decides on the final result.¹³

The support for this process of recognition of prior learning is thus a wide range of documentation- and work methods: observation, interviews, presentation of certificates from previous education and other certificates from courses and the like, as well as self-assessment by means of ossan.fi / jagkan.fi. Practical skills tests play an important role, as the course of the examination takes place over time and can be placed at the workplace, where the administrative staff and the specialists from the educational institution will be present on several occasions and continuously assess the performance in collaboration with representatives of the workplace. Though it is, from time to time, discussed in Finland if the system is too tightly tied to forms of testing that require preceding instruction and education at an educational institution and if it, in too small a degree, is able to actually recognize previously acquired competences.

Validation of prior learning in practice. The use of the e-tool

Recognition of prior learning has in Finland gone “from a qualification to a competence way of thinking”¹⁴. Competence assessment takes as mentioned place as an examination in a modular

¹³ www.studieinfo.fi → Fritstående yrkeseksamina/ the competence test

¹⁴ Interview Fi 2

educational program in which the competences of the trade and profession are described in detail as competence objectives at the levels of basic test, vocational test and specialist vocational test.

The applicant who wishes recognition of his/ her prior learning by taking part in a competence test will typically come to the provider of education who is certified to do the competence test via one of the following paths:

- The employment service buys courses from the provider of educations certified to do the competence tests
- The users wishing recognition of prior learning and consequently a competence test come on their own initiative. Some, but far from all, have made a report of self-assessment by means of osaan.fi/ jagkan.fi
- Enterprises send their employees to education and/ or the test, because they want to improve the qualifications of the workforce. (Interview Fi 3)

The users can e.g. be “breakers of the mould of the trade”. They could e.g. be adults wishing a change of career to become a schools assistant, for a technical education or (move) into social and health care. Just as often it might be that the adult has come to a point in his/ her life in which he or she wants documentation of “what I can”.

In 2009 130.000 individuals are engaged in competence based educational programs at the national level. This must be seen in relation to 120.00 at the same time being engaged in the traditional curriculum-based educational system. (Interview Fi 3)

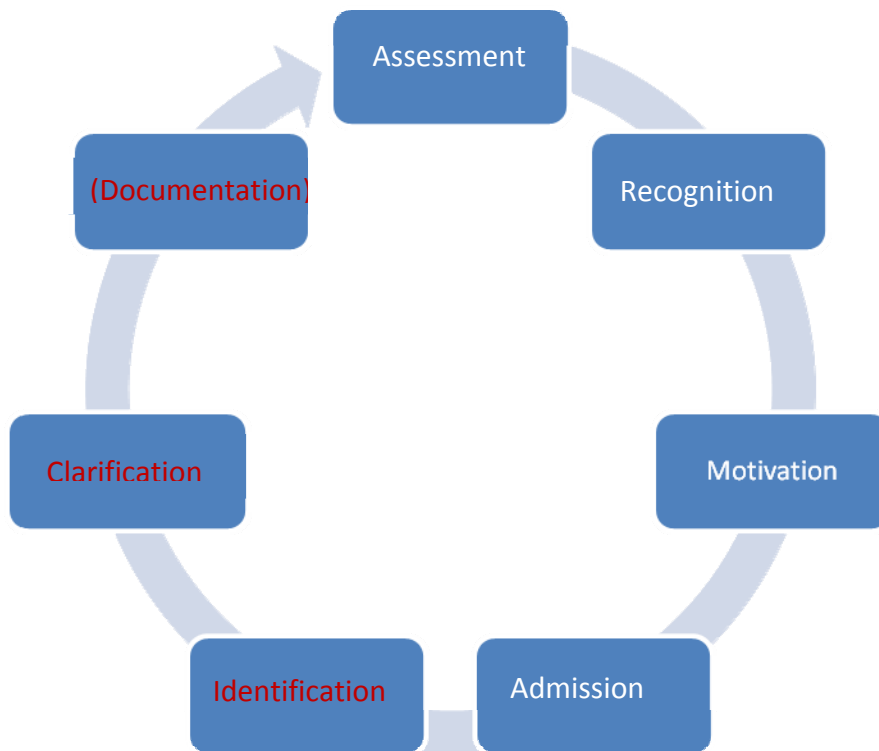
The process of validation and recognition itself will typically be carried out in the following way:

- After the first approach has been made, one way or the other, the system is introduced thoroughly to the applicant, in such a way that the applicant feels familiar with the system and on the way is introduced to various educational modules and the requirements of the test
- After that, the applicant goes through a self-assessment within the subject matter and at the level the applicant wishes to be tested at or which the specialist advises the individual to enter on the basis of documentation of work experience and competence level in the form of previously passed examinations, on the basis of interview etc.
- The self-assessment forms the basis for a 1-2 hours dialogue in which the result is reviewed and the specialist examines the result of the self-assessment to determine which competences the applicant in fact has in the area and what areas are still lacking before a competence certificate can be issued for parts of the education.

- Finally a "Personal adjustment", a study plan for the educational program is made, and the study program can now be initiated.

Parts of the educational program, and in some cases all of the educational program, can be done at a workplace, but as preparation for the competence test it is often a mixture of school based education and preparation and on-the-job training. For the competence test at the basic level the amount of time used typically is measured in weeks. For the vocational test it is typically some months and for the specialist vocational test a/ some year(s). (Interview Fi 3)

The use of the e-tool osaan.fi/ jagkan.fi can be illustrated by the figure below:



Rie Thomsen, DPU (2009)

www.osaan.fi/ / www.jagkan.fi is partly a database for descriptions of competences at various educational levels and modules, and partly it is a tool for identification of the educational wishes of the applicant and the competences of the applicant which have been developed prior to the application, via education, work and other things.

But it also is a tool that generates a material which partly can be included in the process of recognition as an enclosure, when and if it gets verified by a specialist. This can contribute to shortening the study period of the education in question or it might give admission to examination

at a higher level than the level first suggested. Or it gives the applicant the right to enter the competence test right away, without prior preparation, neither at the school nor at the workplace.

The process of identification and clarification itself through use of the e-tool often gives the applicant a positive experience and to a high degree of satisfaction. This is the case because the applicant both has his/ her competences described in an official system and in an official language (“school language”), and experiences that these competences or work experience, which are acquired outside the world of education, also have value. Formal recognition means improved self-esteem for many of the individuals applying for validation of prior learning. They do not necessarily have the most positive experiences from formal education and maybe on this basis are extraordinarily excited to have competences from working life recognized. (Interview Fi 4).

This is, as such, not included as a part of the recognition of prior learning, but it might have significance in relation to motivation for completing an education and the competence test.

Counseling and sparring

Counseling is offered at different times during the usage of the e-tool. As mentioned osaan.fi/jagkan.fi are available free of charge on the net, but a user-ID and password is required for using it.

Counseling takes place when the applicant first approaches the educational institution he/ she are approaching for validation of prior learning via the competence test. It is the individual himself/ herself that uses the e-tool, both to get information on the knowledge requirements for each test and to do a self-evaluation process. The user has the rights to the reports resulting from the self-assessment and can use them as he/she sees fit. But the guide on how to use osaan.fi/jagkan.fi of course tries to secure that the applicant is counseled as precisely and correctly as possible to make the self-assessment on a true basis for a clarification leading to the competence test.¹⁵

An important part of the counseling is “translation” of the material describing specific competence objectives, modules and educations. The applicants are not used to the language and the concepts of educational plans and descriptions of modules, and it is a problem of its own to create harmony between the applicant’s own experience and the competence requirements which the competence based descriptions of qualifications comprise. And vice versa: it takes a bit of translation to explain to applicants what module descriptions really mean, in the sense of actual competences that work in working life. This task of counseling and interpretation is an important part of the specialist’s work.¹⁶

¹⁵ Interview, Fi 2

¹⁶ *ibid*

Furthermore it is important at all times to develop concrete practical tests tailored for the individual workplace and still reflecting the requirements of the trade and the relevant test level.

Competences – the concept of competence

As mentioned the Finnish system of validation of prior learning has gone "from a qualification to a competence way of thinking". The competences of an individual are measured by the individual's capability of and success in passing the competence test, and thus the concept of competence is unambiguously tied to the national competence based qualifications system, which exists in Finland. Competences might be acquired in working life or other places, but they first get assessed and first get value and status, when they are tested and documented through an examination. An individual's prior learning does not per se give admission to education or is regarded equivalent with education. It is the other way around: prior learning is acquired and recognized because of tests passed in the competence based qualifications system.

The role of the e-tool osaan.fi / jagkan.fi is thus to contribute to the competence level of the individual in relation to which test he/ she wants to enter and pass.

Concluding remarks

"The Finnish system in which the prior learning of an individual is assessed through the competence test in relation to the competence based qualifications contributes to make the educational system more efficient"¹⁷, but an evaluation of the system shows that "by far the majority of the participants to some extent have participated in courses or educational programs prior to entering to examination".

The course of the competence tests typically lasts "weeks for examination at level basic test; months for examination at level 2, vocational and year(s) at level 3, specialist vocational test"¹⁸.

The identification and clarification of the competence level which typically is done in groups by the provider of competence tests, which is most often at an educational institution, is a smaller part of the total process of validation. In this identification and clarification process, the e-tool osaan.fi / jagkan.fi plays an important role and contributes to both giving the applicant and the specialist/ administrative staff an image of the actual competence level of the individual and his/ her wishes regarding examination.

The self-assessment and reports from osaan.fi / jagkan.fi are important documents and are attached to the action plan, "Personal adjustment", which follows the individual throughout the educational program, and the report and its results are used both as the basis for the dialogue

¹⁷ Rapport: "Forstudie om validering af realkompetence i de nordiske lande", Nordisk Ministerråd, 2004. Ramböll, s. 15

¹⁸ Interview, Fi 1

between the specialist/ administrative staff and the applicant in the beginning of the process and as documentation in relation to the tests themselves which often are taking place in a workplace.

On the other hand, one cannot say that either the self-assessment or the subsequent identification and clarification which are made together with the specialist/ administrative staff of the institution providing the competence test and results in the actual competence description of the applicant, can replace recognition of prior learning. The recognition of the individual's prior learning can solely be obtained through a competence test.

Thus in Finland validation of prior learning is done in an educational context and linked to the competence based qualifications system, which exists parallel to the mainstream curriculum based educational system. The e-tool osaan.fi/ jagkan.fi is adjusted to this comprehension of competence and plays an important role in the process of identification and clarification for both users/ applicants and for specialists/ administrative staff working in the competence based qualifications system.

6. The E-tool VIGO Voksen (RealDok) www.vigo.no

Context of educational policy

Vigo Voksen (previously RealDok) is an administrative system for mapping out and documentation of prior learning for individuals who want adult education and/ or validation of prior learning. The system is based on officially approved educational plans towards a certificate of completed apprenticeship or study competence at further educational levels.¹⁹ 16 out of 19 counties in Norway are using the system, so if not a national system, it is widespread and used in most parts of the country.

From the start RealDok was developed by the institution Jærtek, in collaboration with the county of Rogaland and others. Later on RealDok has been taken over by and included in Vigo Voksen, which is the name of the e-tool being examined in this section. Vigo Voksen is a part of VIGO which in the counties is the search- and report system for further education.

The adult applicant – the user – can apply for education and/ or validation of prior learning by registering on www.vigo.no. Here one can type in personal data which are transferred electronic to the county of the user. The user receives an answer to confirm that the application is received via mobile phone or e-mail, and after that the process of validation is started by a counselor/ specialist at a centre / a school in the county.

In this section the parts of Vigo Web addressing adult applicants who wish further education and validation of prior learning, is examined. The web-page www.vigo.no also gives possibilities for young people to apply for further education in a school or enterprise or to enter a vocational education.

In this study it is, as mentioned, adult education and validation of prior learning that is the focus.

The system has a long history, but is basically established on the basis of the recommendation of the report “The validation project 1999 – 2002 – at the end or the starting point. Final report”²⁰, in which there is reference to: “The Parliament asks the Government to establish a system in which it is a right of an adult to have his/ her prior learning documented without following the path of traditional tests”. The validation project is thus the initiative of the Government in accordance to a resolution of the Parliament.

The validation project 1999-2002 was included in a wider group of reforms initiated in 1999 on the basis of a general political desire to raise the level of competences with respect to adults in

¹⁹ Further education (VGO) in Norway is the level after basic school (10 years) and is provided by schools for further education (VGS). School based VGO is of 3 years and provides both “study competence” subjects and vocational competences. Alternative: 2years of school and 2 years of work based learning in an enterprise.

²⁰ “*Realkompetenceprosjektet 1999-2002 – i mål eller på startstreken. Sluttrapport*”

Norway, The Competence Reform 1999²¹. The Competence Reform is through different areas of effort both a reform of the labour market and of the educational system.

The Competence Reform comprised a number of areas of action:

- Competence development program (KUP)
- The validation project (RKP)
- Basic school project
- Motivation, counseling and information (MOVI)
- Educational leave of absence
- Analysis of funding

One result of the reform is that adults are given an individual right to basic education (2002) and to further education (2000) and to validation of prior learning.²²

The validation project (RKP) included a wide range of developmental projects in the counties, in working life and in the 3. sector, which were collected, examined and resulted in a number of recommendations in the above mentioned report.

Having the responsibility for further education, the counties played a key role from the start and all 19 counties took part in establishing an organization at county level, while 14 of the counties developed projects with a view to developing methods and tools.

Subsequently the majority, 16 of 19 counties, formed a common system, Vigo Voksen, which now (2009) is an e-tool used as an administrative system.

Vigo Voksen has links and refers to www.vilbli.no. Vilbli.no is a web-based information service which can be used for general information and descriptions of educations, subject matters, courses, regulations etc, as well as the specific possibilities for the young and the adults (and for counselors and teachers):

"The counties, KS (the interest and employer organization of the counties and municipalities) and the Department of Education have made joint efforts in establishing an information service for applicants for further education – www.vilbli.no. Here the applicants at any time can find up-to-date and quality assured information on further education. On the basis of this information the applicants should be able to make their choice."²³

²¹ Conference presentation at TEC April 30 2009 ved seniorrådgiver Bente Søgaaard, Vox. Se også: http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kd/tema/utdanning_og_kompetanse/kompetansereformen.html?id=213306

²² Retten til videregående opplæring og realkompetancevurdering er regulert i opplæringsloven, § 4A.

²³ [www.Vilbil.no](http://www.vilbli.no) : http://www.vilbli.no/4daction/WA_Forsiden?ASP=4367405&Ran=45629&Niva=V&Tid=V2010&TP=16-12-09

Vilbli.no is continuously up-dated and quality assured, and thus the web-page at any time provides news, overviews, relevant courses and the total educational provision of the counties etc. for the users. In this way the users can be guided in a web-based guidance and counseling database prior to choosing courses and own education and also during the course of e.g. a validation process.

The validation project from 1999 – 2002 resulted in a common national agenda regarding validation of prior learning.

Vigo Voksen is a part of the total efforts which shall contribute to improve the competence level in further education. As yet the system does not work in all counties and in some counties partly in a paper version.

Taken together the applicants are presented with a coherent, almost nationwide, county-based system which generates data on competences and education, monitors the applicants and students in the system towards end competence and registers the issuing of competence certificates.

Below, the system is described in more detail and a number of aspects in relation to the use of the system relative to validation of prior learning will be examined on the basis of the interview data.

Description of the e-tool – Vigo Voksen

The data-tool RealDok, which is a central part of Vigo Voksen, is developed for using Windows in a web-environment and is used by 15 (16) of the 19 counties of Norway.

It is the administrative staff that has access to the system and thus there is no individual access to RealDok/ Vigo Voksen. RealDok is the data-tool which is used for rational handling of applicants for the adult education of the counties. The system can receive, register and monitor applicants. Furthermore one can download summaries from the system for internal use at county level and for centralized reports, such as Statistics Norway and others

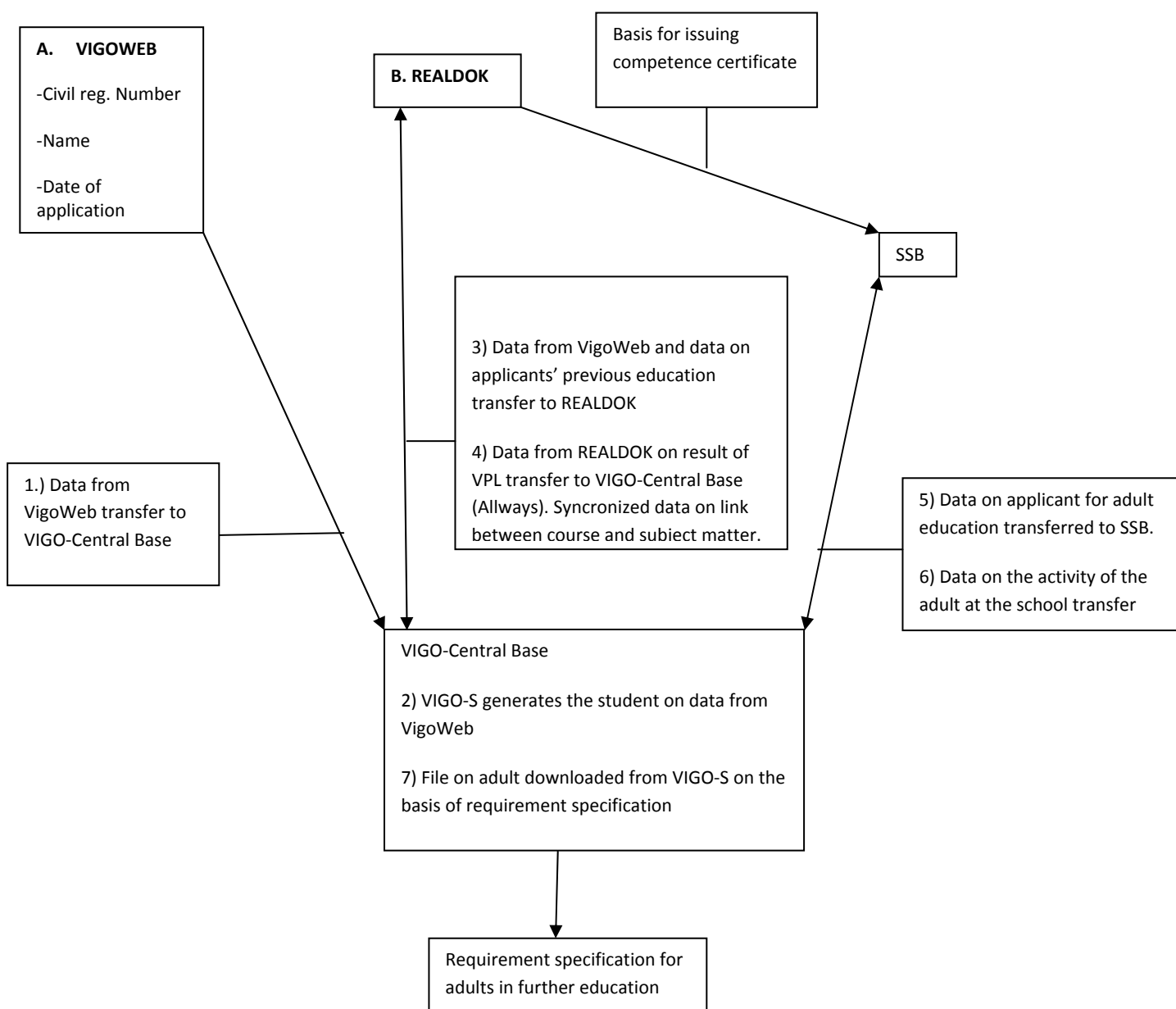
From January 1 2008 adults are to apply via Vigo Web, www.vigo.no, which is the national search registry owned jointly by the counties.

The requirement specifications from SSB (Statistics Norway) to Vigo Web are based on the following conditions being available in the counties: Vigo Web is used by all, RealDok is used by all and the data flow, which will be sketched below, is used. The reports from the counties are done in the Vigo-system and are published in KOSTRA (KOMMUNESTATRAPPORTERING), which is handled by SSB.

That it is an administrative system is probably illustrated the best way via the figure below. The figure describes the relationships and data-flow between the different players, institutions, authorities and users who are using RealDok/Vigo Voksen.

The basic data of the applicant (start at 'A') is typed into the system via VigoWeb. From there data are transferred to Vigo-Central database, in which a 'student' is generated. From here data goes to RealDok together with possible data on previous education in the system.

The result of the validation of prior learning on the basis of the collected documentation and assessment leads to issuing of a competence certificate (if possible), which is transferred to both SSB and to Vigo-Central database. Subsequently the applicant can use the competence certificate in relation to further education in his/ her own county.



Dataflow mellem VIGO-Web, RealDok og Statistiske Sentralbyrå

On route the data on the applicant's further education is transferred to SSB.

What makes Vigo Voksen special is, the whole aim of the administrative system, the extent of the system, its range and its ability to generate data used by both decentralized (county) authorities and by centralized (SSB, educational providers etc.) authorities. It is not a complete nationwide database for descriptions of competences within the further education for adults, but it is a tool that supports the efforts in that direction. Furthermore the tool – because it is the first step/ entry into validation of prior learning – can contribute to attracting attention to validation as an advantage for the individual citizen as well as supporting flexibility and linking educations and the labour market together.

On the basis of statements from one of the interviewees one can on the other hand maybe say that "Vigo Voksen is not good enough. It is designed for and considers the needs of SSB too much, that is, data out of the system. In the counties we do not necessarily have the same needs". Vigo Voksen's nature of being an administrative system with extensive requirements for downloading of data for others than the directly involved partners hamper and overshadow possible simpler and easier solutions for counselors and assessors? Anyway this critique was expressed by more of the interviewees saying the system is "heavy" and that you, as a counselor/ assessor of prior learning, are forced into double work. "It just simply is not a system for validation of prior learning, but also for registering of where in the process the adults at any given time are, we have to know date of completion etc. Registrations must be transferred to Vigo Voksen and then on to SSB – In Norway the registration of the adults is poor – (but) we have ongoing trials for improving and updating the systems. More over some of the counties (still) have different/ their own systems for registration. We have great potential for registration of adults" and further "The biggest problem is in relation to the end users at the schools: to establish coherence between the systems, to create motivation and knowledge to use them".

Systems for support of validation of prior learning

Vigo Voksen refers to www.vilbli.no, which is an "information service for applicants for further education". This information service is developed by the counties, KS and The Department of Education and "here the applicants find up-to-date and quality assured information on further education".

Users or applicants can in their search for possibilities and looking for specific educations or courses be supported by a quality assured information system for applicants (and for counselors who wish to update their knowledge of the system, of education, of new requirements and regulations etc) in the web-based guidance and counseling database www.vilbli.no.

According to informants (No, 1, 2, & 4) of this study counselors and specialists also use www.vox.no. Here is information on regulations in relation to validation of prior learning, a web-

based handbook for validation of prior learning, right of the adults, competence clarification and tools for clarification of competences etc.

Furthermore some counties have made guidelines on the use of the system, as well as providing courses for counselors on how to use the system.(No 3)

In some counties Vigo Voksen is only used for registration of applications for validation of prior learning. "I use our school's own system "It's Learning". All the documentation is collected and forwarded for approval at central level in the county, where they type in the collected documentation in Vigo Voksen itself". (No, 4)

In other counties staff is hired by the schools, so "I recommend that one does not have to type in during the interview with the applicant. Now they (the counselors) have a clerk who types in and journalize on the basis of notes and questionnaires to the educational plan, (from the previous system), so it is demanding in time. A new version from August 2009 is now available. It is a burden for the schools, but in the least we are given resources (by the counties). So the problems regard the end users!" (No, 4)

Validation of prior learning in practice. The use of the e-tools

On prior learning and validation of prior learning in further education it is said (VOX)²⁴:

"Prior learning is all the knowledge and skills acquired through education, paid or voluntary work, experience from organizations, leisure time activities or in other ways.

Validation of prior learning can provide a user with formal documentation, a competence certificate, by assessing the user's own prior learning towards educational plans in further education. The educational objectives which eventually get recognized are included in the competence certificate with the mark "Approved". The competence certificate can make the user more attractive relative to the labor market or can lead to a shortened study period.

*The competence certificate is free of charge for adults holding the right to further education. Adults without this right can have their expenses covered by NAV, who for this purpose has its own routines for payment"*²⁵

In the guidelines by VOX the process of validation of prior learning is described as a step-by-step process as follows:²⁶

²⁴ VOX on validation of prior learning: <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=2805>

²⁵ VOX om realkompetencevurdering: <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=2805>

²⁶ <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=2807>

Steps in the practical process for the user

1. Preparation for a validation of prior learning
2. Application for validation of prior learning
3. Contact between the user and the county
4. Assessment of prior learning
5. After the process of validation

The assessment itself (point 4) is described in more detail in this way:

"A specialist assesses the knowledge of the user towards current educational plans in the subject matter the user has wished. The specialist assesses whether the competence of the user covers the competence objectives and competence certificate with the assessment "Approved"

The assessment is carried out using different methods:

- *Assessment of documentation, that is CV, certificates and references²⁷.*
- Dialogue based assessment that is an interview between the specialist and the user.
- Vocational tests that is an assessment of the user's practical skills within a vocation
- An assessment of prior learning as a rule comprises assessment of documentation, dialogue and elements of vocational testing.

After the assessment of prior learning a competence certificate is issued for the user when some of the competence objectives have been approved.

It may take three months from the time of application until the competence assessment is completed. It may vary depending on which subject matter the user wishes to apply for and which time of the year the user applies.

The user has a right to complain about a process of validation of prior learning. The complaint is addressed to the county."

The interview is a key element in the validation of prior learning (note above point 3) with or without computer and e-tools being used during the interview.

One of the interviewees states the following about the process of validation of prior learning:

"Assessment of prior learning is done in relation to educational plans. If the application does not go directly to the school, I (with the county) forward the papers to a specialist who is trained to do assessment of prior learning (in the specific subject matter). Then this person takes contact to the

²⁷Vitnemål/ Eksamensbevis/ Certificate

applicant. I also send information material to the applicant: What is going to happen? What comprises a validation of prior learning? What consequences it might have? I also send the curriculum. Or I start with having the applicant here for an interview. It depends. After that the specialist starts to assess, that is the mapping/ clarification process is initiated. My recommendation to most of the specialists is not to use the tool while they are interviewing, but to do the interview and then use it subsequently for the assessment, as that gives the most natural situation.” (No, 1)

One of the informants (No 2), though, uses the computer during the interview – does it consciously and feels at ease with it. It saves time, and there is not too much time available for validation of prior learning: ”I sit at my pc. And that I am very conscious about ... doing the interview at the same time. And as we go along they figure out what they have to know and that they have to take classes in it.... Then one moves what they think they can. Some try to make themselves better than they are, bluffing me a little. Then I test them. That is not an easy way. It is people we are working with, who have to pass a vocational test. We are very much in agreement on how to do it, creating a dialogue.”

One (No, 3) pays a lot of attention to the introductory clarification of what prior learning is and what the process is all about. She says about the interview:

”First we have an information phase in which we talk to people and explain what the validation is all about, and then we have a short interview with the individuals on what they want it to end up with, in the least if we approach them before they have started in a course. If it, for example is healthcare, we fetch the educational plan and a little on how they imagine to work with it, on the net or courses during the day or the evening, and then we move on to looking at the educational plan in order for them to prepare themselves for what they are expected to do during the assessment interview, and then we call them in for assessment.” This means that in reality two interviews are taking place, at different times to give the applicant time (and peace) to become familiar with what is required and maybe what she can do in advance. This in particular is the case for individuals not mastering Norwegian so well ” if they maybe are able to do something, but just cannot understand it. Then we explain it thoroughly and they get a little more time to consider it.”

Earlier, supporting questionnaires were used (which were included in RealDok and which could be printed). But they were far too detailed: ”earlier, one could do that, and they were very detailed, so the applicant got scared/ confused and also could not understand all the questions”.

In certain densely populated areas/ counties the process is carried out somewhat differently. It could, as an example, be described in the following way:

The application is still done via Vigo Voksen, but after that the county is in charge. All the documentation material is collected and organized by the county, who scans and uploads it all,

after which selected specialists get access to it and do the assessment. Often it is carried out without the applicant and the specialist/ counselor actually meeting each other. As a principal rule exploratory questions and the interview are done via telephone (due to geography and distances), but mail is also used:

”So everything is done via paper and telephone? – Yes, for some it may take a whole day just to get here, because we cover such a large area. If people by chance are in the city then they might come here, but generally it is done via telephone. And then we in the county, who are working with validation of prior learning have made some rules on what it takes to get validation of prior learning, to secure that it is pretty much the same for all”. (No, 4)

Vigo Voksen thus, as a principal rule, is not used as an e-tool during the interviews which are carried out on the basis of the collected documentation. The assessment of the individual’s competences, level and need for education is based on these interviews (and the collected documentation) and the results are finally typed into Vigo Voksen/ RealDok.

Vigo Voksen can be described as a support tool in the process of clarification, as the counselor/ specialist refers to educational plans, possible questionnaires and educations, but these are very often sent to the applicant in advance. Thus we again can conclude that Vigo Voksen/ RealDok is a tool for registration and administration.

Counseling and sparring

Counseling of the applicants for validation of prior learning takes place several times.

Firstly one counsels if there exist a possibility for, or if there is a direct requirement for validation of prior learning. It is, even though the work with validation of prior learning has been going on for ten years in Norway, still not generally known by the public that a possibility exists for recognition of the competences not acquired through an educational program. The applicants are informed about the possibilities when they go to the employment services looking for a job. In a number of cases the administrative staff and guides and counselors at the employment service or at schools explain the matter and sometimes even help filling out the application for validation of prior learning – on paper or in Vigo Voksen (or in the local school based system).

Secondly counseling is taking place during the interview(s) in relation to the application for prior learning and/ or tailoring educational programs e.g. with a view to establishing the relevant documentation. Especially among immigrants and refugees you have cases in which no documentation exists, or only can be procured with great difficulty (No, 2, 4, 5).

Counseling to establish an understanding of the educational plans takes up a lot of time in the dialogue, a process which all the specialists and counselors point out as an important part of both clarification and the subsequent assessment. Many of the applicants are unfamiliar with the language used in the world of education. In connection with that, applicants are often

underestimating their own competences, which cause special counseling problems and underline the importance of successful interviews for understanding about and experiences from previous employment.

Some specialists/ counselors emphasize the importance of a balance between on the one hand the applicants who almost cannot get started – here you need intuition, in fact empathy, while at the same time keeping a critical eye. And on the other hand very talkative and unrealistic applicants (e.g.: immigrants, often men, unaccustomed to Norwegian mentality) who can be difficult to assess (No, 2, 3, 4, 5)

The training and competences of the specialists and counselors

For the specialists and counselors working with validation of prior learning, a short period of training is provided, especially for newcomers to the job. "We invest somewhat in educating the administrative staff and specialists in validation of prior learning"... "We include programs on validation of prior learning in the beginning of courses funded by the county ... We have become better at providing tailored courses, that comprise the lacking educational objectives and individual solutions".

Not much funding is available for training of counselors and specialists and thus learning on the job from your colleagues is used a lot: " At first I was in the office with xx where she explained how this should be done. Then I was with a colleague doing an assessment, so I could hear how it goes on. And then it was just "Out and play"! ... It is a long time ago since I had a course in how the system as such works."

Especially change to new and up-dated versions of the e-tools – and that goes for Vigo Voksen as well as for the local tools – causes problems and frustration: "We just observe that new versions are installed, but we do not get any explanations or training. I have attended a course a long time ago, but a lot has happened since then.... I do not always feel secure regarding the lists of students registered into the system. Some errors have occurred".

It is emphasized about recognition of prior learning..."it is a very lonesome job". Even though many are working on it at a school, it is often with different subject matter and therefore one must find networks across the schools. In case of doubt, you call and talk together and it is emphasized that xx in the county always can be reached by phone if one needs to discuss a problem. "He knows everything!"

Specialists and counselors doing assessments of prior learning are only employed part time with validation of prior learning, e.g. 20%, which is one day per week. They are not trained as counselors and depend on network and support from the counties. "Then we discuss it at network meetings once a year. We take up issues and different themes. Then we harmonize in between us

regarding the work of validation. And then we get to know one another, so we can call each other after the meeting". (No, 4)

A representative from the counties says, that "resources must be prioritized and used in a balanced way. One must balance between ordinary courses, education as well as validation of prior learning. We could use all the funding on courses, validation of prior learning, processes of clarification/ mapping etc. But we have to concentrate on the concrete training of the adults".

Competences

It is not directly clear from www.Vigo.no, which concept of competence explicitly forms the basis for validation of prior learning. At www.vox.no prior learning is described in the following way:

- **"Prior learning** comprises all knowledge and all skills acquired through education, employment and voluntary work, experience from organizations, leisure time activities or in other ways.
- **Formal competence** is competence documented through certificates and other papers from official schools and educational institutions
- **Informal competence** is knowledge and skills acquired in a learning situation from which no official certificates are issued. These could be courses provided by schools, institutions, adult education associations or voluntary organizations, or organized learning through paid or unpaid work. Informal competence might be documented.
- **Non-formal competence** is knowledge and skills e.g. acquired outside organized learning from participating in leisure time activities, voluntary work, and through paid and unpaid work. As a main principle non-formal competence is not documented"²⁸

This or similar descriptions can be found in information material from the individual counties, for example in handbooks, manuals for administrative staff and counselors²⁹. The comprehension of competence takes its point of departure in the educational plan and objectives of subject matters, and earlier it used to be so, that the specialist or the counselor assessed towards fixed descriptions of objectives (with questions and guidelines), but the informants of this study say, in agreement, that they act more freely, explanatively inquiring and questioning than the previous descriptions of objectives and questionnaires invited to. A relatively wide scope for the actual practice of validation which seems to exist was described by a representative from a county with the following words:

"Validation of prior learning is a question of attitude: "you must have and show respect in relation to the applicant". We must demand something of the applicants: they have to wish it themselves and they must have knowledge about how the vocation is practiced in reality.

²⁸ VOX: <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=1679&epslanguage=NO>

²⁹ Fx "realkompetencevurdering. En håndbok for sagsbehandlere og rådgivere", PEDLEX, 2007

The specialists and the counselors must meet the demands of interview technique and be trained to carry out interviews. They must know something about communication. They must be able to translate competence – in the sense that they must be able to make themselves acquainted with how actual job situations in a private enterprise or activities in the 3. sector possibly can match objectives of the educational plan.

We have subject matter specific to improve the quality of the counselor's assessment, but still many do not understand recognition of prior learning. 'Lived life' is not good enough – it has to be measured up against something (the educational plan)...

Everything you bring with you: formal education, informal practice. Work activities, private life all have to be fitted into the educational plan" (No, 8)

It is a rather wide concept of competence which one cannot describe in a narrow and convergent understanding of competences, governed only by the educational plans and descriptions of objectives.

What is interesting here is the meeting between on one hand the categorical claims of the e-tool for documentation, that is certificates, grades, references etc. which can match the objectives of the educational plan, and on the other hand the approach and practice, which the specialists and counselors seem to demonstrate.

Concluding comments

Vigo Voksen cannot be said to be an e-tool for assessment of prior learning. The assessment is taking place between the applicant and the assessor (specialist) employed at a further education institution, or at centers run by the individual county.

As an e-tool Vigo Voksen (RealDok) can neither be described as convergent or divergent, in the sense of a tool assessing prior learning closely against the objectives of the subject matters – solely. Of course the system Vigo Voksen is based "on officially approved educational plans for further education towards certificate of completed apprenticeship or study competence", and thus in its comprehension of prior learning can be described as limited and convergent in its approach. Still practice shows extensive considerations for the informal and non-formal competence of the applicant in the dialogue with the applicant and in the process of assessment by the specialist/ counselor.

In that light one might as well describe practice in connection with the e-tool Vigo Voksen/ RealDok as divergent, not because of the system itself or because of certain in-built features, but as a result of interpretation of documentation and practices of assessment and recognition of prior learning. "Prior learning is all formal and non-formal competence which the individual has

developed through education, work and leisure time activities”³⁰. It seems that Norway has obtained what is being highlighted in the section on international experiences in the final report of “The Validation Project 1999- 2008”, that is: “The prior learning of the individual has a value in itself for the individual, for society and for the educational system. It creates motivation and self-confidence in the individual, and competence is made visible in a different way in relation to employers and educational authorities”³¹.

What is left is that Vigo Voksen for all practical purposes is a system for administration. An e-tool which neither is neither a tool for self-assessment nor a tool for assessment. To the extent the applicant wishes to map his/ her own competences or do a self-assessment it will have to be in other contexts. E.g. www.vox.no³² provides tools for mapping and clarification free of charge in which a personal CV and other documents can be generated to be used in the process of validation of prior learning.

But these tools are outside Vigo Voksen.

Vigo Voksen / RealDok represent a compromise between different players in the field. The e-tool’s nature of being an administrative system, that all the time must be able of generating data and securing dataflow between different authorities and players, makes it very suitable for documentation, statistics and control for agencies, authorities and the politicians. If – or rather when – the tool will cover all the 19 counties and will become the first entry and seriously will be used for registration, for monitoring the development of all applicants and students at the further educational level – when all this is in place, it really will contribute to the development of competences at the county and national level. As such it can contribute to ease and assure that the educational sector and the labour market support each other and the actual competences of the individual will be utilized.

But the e-tool is also a “heavy” system according to the informants of this study. The system is viewed as “heavy”, because it primarily is not seen as easing things for the end users that is, the specialists and the counselors. It is viewed as if the utility value of the e-tool primarily is an advantage for management, decision-makers and authorities, because the system is designed as an administrative system and a system for generating data. It is not primarily a system for making the work of counselors and specialists – the end users – easier. To them typing data into Vigo Voksen/ RealDok is often seen as double work, which given resources for, but which they themselves do not benefit from in their work with validation of the prior learning of the

³¹ Realkompetanseprosjektet 1999 – 2002...”, s. 85

³² Futher on Vox: <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=1677&epslanguage=NO>

applicants. They (the end users) would much rather use the time for interviews, working on complex applications, or with citizens without much education having trouble expressing themselves in relation to the difficult language of the educational requirements and educational plans.

7. E-tools from third sector

Context regarding educational policy

The e-tools www.realkompetence-forening.dk, www.realkompetence-frivillig.dk and www.realkompetence-folkeoplysning.dk are tools for clarification and documentation of competences acquired in the third sector. They were launched by the Danish Ministry of Education in 2007 in connection with the new act according to which it became a legal right of the individual to have his/ her prior learning validated in relation to the educational system. The three tools are almost identical; still a few differences exist related to their different areas of usage. In this section they will be examined together.

Validation of prior learning should be, in a wider perspective, among other things seen in connection with the Memorandum of the EU commission on Lifelong Learning from 2000, in which it is pointed out that under the conversion to the knowledge society "education in the broadest sense" must be aimed at. In continuation of this the Danish Government in 2004 came forward with the report "Recognition of prior learning in education" as an input to a broader validation of the total of an individual's competences, irrespective of where they have been acquired.³³

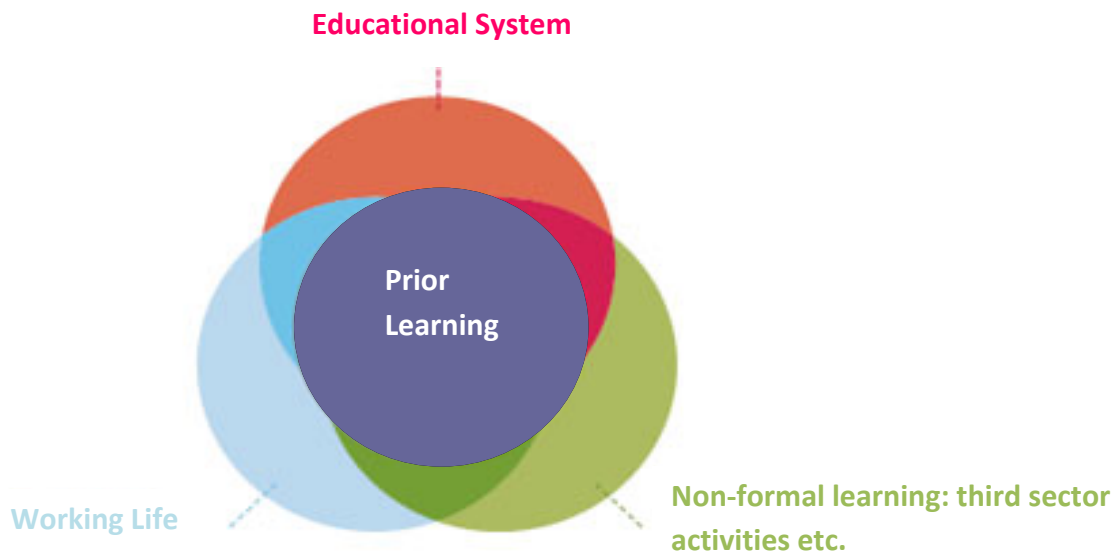
In 2007 the Parliament passed an act for changing a number of different laws in the area of the Ministry of Education (Extended possibilities for recognition of prior learning within the areas of adult- and further education et al.) Act no. 556 of June 6 2007 (Bill L 94, November 30 2006) which gives the individual citizen access to recognition of prior learning. The right to recognition of prior learning came into force August 1 2007 for vocational and professional education, and August 1 2008 for general adult education.

At the homepage of the Ministry of Education the following definition of prior learning is given:

*"Prior learning is the total of an individual's knowledge, skills and competences, irrespective of where and how they are acquired. When your prior learning is to be made visible and recognized, it is all about how you add knowledge to what you already have learned in working life, in non-formal adult education, in associations and in the system of education, and how one can bridge between the different sources of knowledge. You can add to your prior learning if you apply for adult- and further education. You can also benefit from it when seeking a new job"*³⁴

³³ Undervisningsministeriet mfl .: "Tværministeriel redegørelse til Folketinget vedr. anerkendelse af realkompetencer i uddannelserne", 2004.

³⁴ http://www.uq.dk/FlereOmraader/Realkompetence/hvaderrealkomp/mere_om_realkompetencer.aspx



Along with the competences from education and working life a range of competences from leisure time activities are mentioned, which can be included in the description of the total of the competences of the individual, among these practical and academic competences – from non-formal study associations or folk high schools, management – via courses or voluntary work in associations or clubs and language and communication – via work, living or studies abroad.

The Ministry lists three purposes for documenting prior learning

- if one wants to apply for adult- and further education and wishes an individual validation of prior learning at an educational institution,
- if one wants to apply for a new job, or if one in collaboration with one's immediate superior is planning individual training and competence development.
- If an enterprise wants an overview of the competences of the employees.

The applicant must himself/ herself contribute to the documentation of the prior learning he/ she wants validated. For that purpose The Ministry of Education initiated – in connection with the efforts regarding educational policy – two parallel development projects in order to develop models for clarification and assessment of prior learning acquired in respectively working life and in non-formal adult education and associations.

(www.dfs.dk/realkompetence/historiskoverblik.aspx)

Prior learning acquired in third sector

The third sector tool is a tool for documentation of prior learning developed in associations, voluntary work and via non-formal adult education. It is developed for the Danish Ministry of Education by Knowledge Lab, The University of Southern Denmark, and it is a part of the tool "My Competencefolder". The development work is done in collaboration with the users and organizations from non-formal adult education, the voluntary work and the associations.

The work with prior learning and the launching of the tools have been extensively supported from the umbrella organizations in third sector, e.g. the Danish Association for Adult Education (DFS) and the Danish Gymnastics and Sports Association (DGI), who also have been involved in the development of the tools (among other things in the steering committee).

These organizations have provided (and provide) courses for their members about prior learning, on the use of the tools and on how one should be a sparring partner (see below) for persons using the tools (see the web pages).

Within non-formal adult education it is especially the day folk high schools that use the tools, as do some folk high schools. As for the production schools some schools use it as a supplement to their own tool (Interview, Dk 1).

DGI (Gymnastics and Sports) has promoted the idea of validation of prior learning in different ways, e.g. by visiting the local branches and providing courses, and via the homepage under the headline "Get paper on what you can":

"As a trainer, a member of the board or a volunteer you get competences like developing ideas, cooperating, planning, management and teaching. All together this knowledge and these skills represent your prior learning. You can get a piece of paper on this – a certificate, which probably will get you closer to the job or the education of your dreams."³⁵

According to an association officer with DGI, an equally important aim for validation of prior learning can be to make a snapshot of the competences of the association to be used in relation to internal development.

In an article on the homepage of DGI it is evident that – under the headline "The first sparring partners in the field of prior learning have completed courses"³⁶ – that the leaders of the

³⁵ www.dgi.dk/Traener/uddannelse/realkompetencer.aspx

³⁶

http://www.dgi.dk/Traener/uddannelse/nyheder/De_f%C3%B8rste_sparringspartnere_p%C3%A5_realkompetencemr%C3%A5det_er_uddannet_%5Ba10309%5D.aspx

associations see great possibilities in the descriptions of prior learning, among other things for the young participants applying for education. In the article it is pointed out that it is a challenge to get the concept of prior learning known in the local associations, among other things because the leaders are afraid that too much work is involved in doing validation of prior learning (ibid).

In the DGI-context it seems that the use of the tool currently is limited. (interview Dk 2; Dk 1). One of the association officers, who were interviewed, tells that DGI had imagined it would have been used to a much larger extent than it actually is now. The lack of interest in the area can be seen from the limited demand of course activities. The association officer points to two possible explanations. People working on a voluntary basis are aware of the fact that they have and develop competences, but they do not think of utilizing them as a "selling point", that is the motivation for doing voluntary work does not go beyond the activities in the association as such. Furthermore the educational institutions have not really come forward with making it clear that they recognize competences acquired in the third sector. And as long as the educational institutions do not recognize the competences, there is no point in documenting them (interview, Dk 2).

Within non-formal adult education it is especially the day folk high schools that have been involved in and use the tools. 2/3 of these schools have had their staff trained in courses for sparring partners/ prior learning guide. It varies to what extent the day folk high schools use it.

The informant from the day high schools, who has been interviewed, expressed that the schools find it deeply relevant to clarify and describe prior learning, and that the tool works well.

But it is a pedagogical challenge to make it fit in and it is difficult to use. In many cases the counselors of the schools are the ones that use it, but on an experimental basis it is also used in groups with the students helping one another and with the teacher working as a consultant. Positive experiences have come from this (Interview, Dk3).

The target group of the day folk high school is quite mixed; it comprises citizens on unemployment benefits or cash benefits, courses for participants diagnosed with ADHD, reading/writing difficulties, on sick leave, refugees/ immigrants etc, but some schools have a specialized professional profile that attract young people with a lot of resources and special interests (e.g. The Copenhagen School of Photo and Filmmaking)

The participants do not primarily use the clarification of prior learning to get access to the educational system, but "to verbalize what they can. If you are on cash benefits and belong to match group 4 or 5, one will typically say that you know nothing and can do nothing at all". (Interview).

The process of clarification of prior learning makes the individual aware that they actually are able to do something – they get to reflect over and express what they are capable of. "It really gives them a boost" (Interview, Dk 3).

The informant from the day folk high schools points to the clarification process as being valuable in relation to seeking jobs. The employers are not interested in a possible piece of paper or documentation of the prior learning of the applicant. But they are interested in people knowing how to describe what they are able of. And when the applicants have been through a process of clarification they are far better at telling about it during a job interview. Thus it is more the process than the piece of paper/ the documentation that means something.

For the participants of the day folk high school the paper/ the documentation still is important in the sense that they "first experience their competences as real when they can see them in print" (Interview, Dk 3).

In general the agenda of validation of prior learning is considered important in relation to third sector, and the third sector tool is considered good and useful in the process of clarification. But in relation to the formal educational system there is, among other things, the barrier that the tool produces descriptions of generic- or key competences, such as social competences, intercultural competences, creative-innovative competences, while the educational system is concerned with competences corresponding to specific educational objectives.

Description of the tool

The tool is web-based and designed as an on-line questionnaire. A thorough guide to the user on how to make a description of prior learning is in-built in the tool. The questionnaire has two parts; in the first part the association/ the course/ the voluntary work he or she has been or is involved in or is a member of or has participated in, is described, as well as activities and special tasks/ projects of the individual.

The questionnaire comprises - in relation to associations – questions regarding the following:

- Name
- Name of the association
- Your part in the work of the association
- Description of the association (aim, activities, target group, projects etc.)
- Your activity or special tasks in the association (which role did you have, what did you do, for how long have you been active in the association etc..)
- Do you have a sparring partner

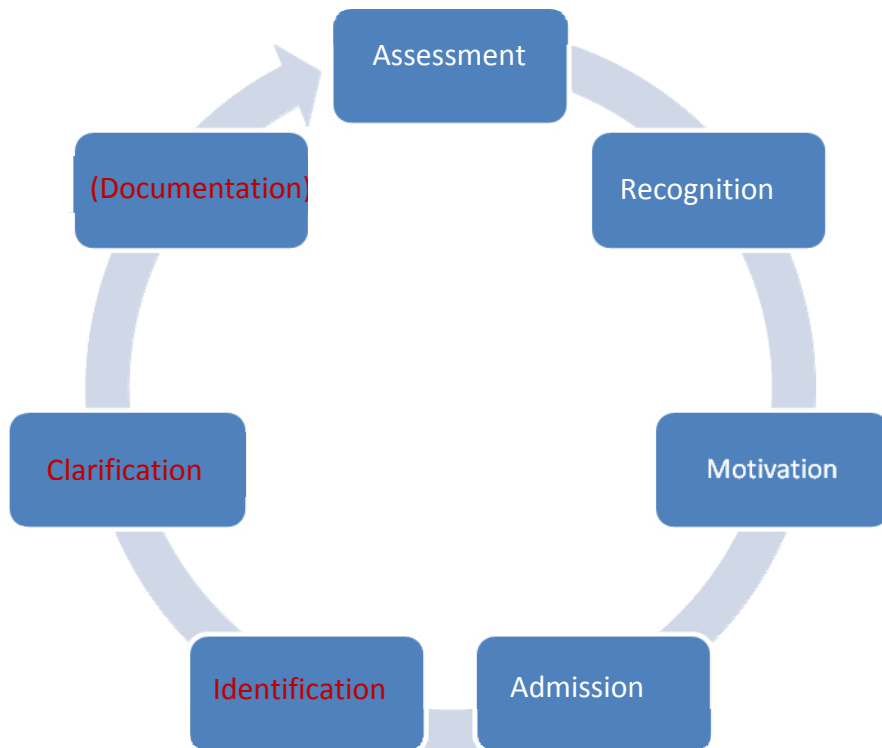
In the second part of the questionnaire the competences of the individual are described. They comprise:

- Social competences
- Organizational competences
- Self management competences
- Communicative competences
- Intercultural competences
- Creative-innovative competences
- Learning competences
- IT-competences

For each competence a description of the specific competence is made with 3 – 5 key words to define the competence. The individual user should only answer questions with relation to the areas of competence which are relevant in relation to the nature of the activity of the association he/ she have participated in. Prior to each area of competence the user is asked if he/ she have had a chance to use or develop his/ her (e.g. social) competences in the association. If you answer no, you skip the question and proceed to the next area of competence; if you answer yes, 10 statements are presented to you related to the specific area of competence. On a Likert-scale with five categories you indicate to which degree a statement applies to you. You may at most skip two statements. You are encouraged to give one or two examples of where and how you have demonstrated the competences in question. If you feel you have developed categories of competences which are not included in the categories of the questionnaire, you have the possibility of adding these. On the basis of the answers of the questionnaire a competence profile is generated, which comprises 1) the descriptions of the individual and 2) graphical presentation of the competences.

The status of the e-tool in relation to validation of prior learning

In relation to the total process of validation of prior learning, as described by Rie Thomsen (2007), the third sector tool is a tool to be used in connection with identification, clarification and documentation of prior learning. The target group is individuals being active in the associations, with voluntary work or participating in non-formal adult education, who wish to document the competences they have acquired through these activities.



Rie Thomsen, DPU (2009)

As mentioned above the umbrella organizations of the associations, non-formal adult education and voluntary work made an effort aimed at focusing attention on what prior learning is and the possibilities of having your prior learning described.

In the field of the associations the members have, via the leaders been informed about the possibility of validation. One procedure is that the members, if they want to have their prior learning described, are asked to fill in the questionnaire on their own, print it out and forward it to the association officer. After that, the association officer meets the individual to carry out an interview for a couple of hours, in which the answers of the questionnaire are discussed in detail. Thus the association officer works as a sparring partner during the process. It could also be the leader of the association working as the sparring partner, if he or she has been trained as a sparring partner. On the basis of the interview the answers might be adjusted or supplemented and a final version of the document/ competence certificate comprising competence description and competence profile is printed and signed by the sparring partner. Then the document in principal can be used as documentation in connection with application for recognition of prior learning in relation to an education or as an appendix to a job application.

In the work of the day folk high schools the tool, as mentioned, is used primarily to structure a process of clarification. Through the clarification the individual becomes aware of his/ her own competences and becomes able to verbalize them. Thus the tool is not primarily used to produce material of documentation for the educational system or an employer.

Counseling and sparring

The extent of counseling that is offered in connection with competence description depends on for which learning context one wants to document competences. For example, professional counselors are working with the day folk high schools, while that not is the case for the associations.

When the third sector tools for documentation of prior learning were developed it was stressed by, among others, DGI that the members should not fill out or document the competences by themselves. (Interview, Dk 2) To assure validity and reliability of the documentation it was recommended that the questionnaire is filled out together with a sparring partner, who as mentioned above, signs the completed document.

On the website containing the tools, the users find instruction/ guidelines on a working procedure that is used when the competence description is made together with a sparring partner; in the same way instruction/ guidelines are available for the sparring partner. On the webpage of DFS/ DAEA materials for the sparring partner, for the individual needing sparring and course materials for the sparring partners are available as well.

Both DGI and DFS provide courses for sparring partners/ prior learning guides for their member organizations.

An association officer with DGI (Dk2) points out that the function of the sparring partner is not only to assure valid descriptions of prior learning. In the processes where he himself has worked as a sparring partner, he has experienced that the person receiving sparring, has had "Aha experiences" during the interview on the current competence description. During the interview people come to think of something and maybe realize that they are good at something they had not considered.

Thus the process of sparring works – besides from assuring validity – also as a process of identification and clarification. The officer views this as an expression of DGI having an important point when they insisted on the sparring partner function in connection with the tool.

Moreover his experience is that the individuals going through a process of competence description more often underestimate themselves than overrate themselves. People are not aware of the fact that they learn something through their activities in the organization, which can be used in other contexts.

How the process is experienced

In this connection it is the experience of the DGI-officer that it is positive to go through a process of competence description, which to a very high degree is also the view within the day folk high schools. The informant from the day folk high school points out that many of the participants

through the clarification become aware of a lot of competences, even though they are used to seeing themselves as someone who "cannot do anything" (Interview, Dk 3).

The concept of competence

The concept of competence in-built in the tool has no explicit theoretical frame of reference, but the categories of competences are inspired of and are close to the categories of competences in the National Competence Account (NKR). IT-competences and organizational competences are not included as major categories in NKR, while NKR also comprises literacy, democratic competence, nature- and environmental competence and health and physical competence.

The comprehension of competence is clearly specified in the sense that key words and indicators in relation to each competence give a detailed picture of how each competence should be understood.

The dimension of action in relation to each competence is included in the documentation in two ways. Firstly by the possibility of giving examples in relation to each competence, how he or she has demonstrated his/ her competences. Secondly via the number of statements, connected to each competence, all being expressed in an "active" language. For example the following statement is an indicator of the person being socially competent: "I help solving conflicts" and "I take responsibility for group jobs getting done".

The dimension of knowledge is primarily constructed as transformation of knowledge. Only in relation to intercultural competences, is knowledge presented as a domaine of knowledge, as a key word contributing to the description of the competence. As an indicator the following statement is used: "I make myself familiar with knowledge of other cultures". In relation to organizational competence a key word is "comprehension of organizations" and in relation to IT-competences "knowledge on programs and internet" is a part of the key words.

Transformation of knowledge especially forms a part of learning competence, IT-competences and intercultural competence. In relation to learning competence for example the following indicators (statements) are listed: "

"I feel like learning new things" and "I use what I learn, e.g. in courses and activities of the association".

The point of having a sparring partner during the process of documentation, is that it might contribute to tacit knowledge or not realized knowledge being made visible and documented.

The context of the competent action can – just as the dimension of action – be included by the individual in describing how he/ she has demonstrated his/ her competences, but they can also be described separately from concrete situations and contexts.

Concluding remarks

The e-tool, www.realkompetence-forening.dk, is an on-line tool for clarification and description of prior learning. It is a self-assessment tool, but when launching and training in the use of the tool it is indicated that it is best to use the tool together with a sparring partner who is trained to give sparring to the individuals using it. The sparring or counseling function is thus viewed as a key factor in relation to clarification and documentation of prior learning.

In the interviews the user friendliness in relation IT functionality has not been seen as a problem. The third sector tool is developed to clarify and document competences developed through the associations, the non-formal adult education and the voluntary, social work. It is launched by the Ministry of Education in close collaboration with the players in the field, and it based on a relatively complex comprehension of competence. The tool has extensive support from the umbrella organizations in the third sector that have encouraged and supported the member organizations/ local associations to work with clarification and documentation of prior learning.

The tool is used to a varying degree by the different types of non-formal schools under DFS/DAEA, but the interest in using the tool seems to be decreasing within e.g. DGI/ Gymnastics and Sports. This could relate to the fact that the tool is based on a broad or generic comprehension of competence, in which the competences being described are general societal competences, and not e.g. specific competences referring to specific educational objectives. This relates to the phenomena which Aagaard and Nordentoft³⁷ calls the first step in the validation process, in which "the broad concept of competence" is used. In this phase "starting point is open to all the competences of the individual" – a divergent approach with an explorative and open aim.

The legislation in Denmark regarding recognition of prior learning is worked out in such a way that it is the educational institutions which hold the authority to assess prior learning, with reference to the objectives and competence descriptions of the educational system. This entails that the educational system is not necessarily concerned about descriptions of generic competences, but demand documentation that the applicant knows exactly that which is described in the educational competence objectives.

Even though the e-tool is launched by the Ministry of Education and is backed up by the organizations it is developed for, it seems that its actual use in relation to documentation and ultimately recognition of prior learning in relation to the educational system is limited. On the other hand it seems e.g. in the work of the day folk high schools, to have great value for the individual in relation to clarification, reflection and communication of one's own competences when seeking a job.

³⁷ Aagaard, K. og A. Nordentoft (2008): Anerkendelse af realkompetence – en proces med flere trin, i "Fokus på RKV" nr. 1, 2008, udgivet af det Nationale Videncenter for Realkompetencevurdering, VIA University College, Århus.

8. The E-tool “Accumulated Knowledge and Skills”

AKS – www.aks-international.com – is a Leonardo da Vinci-project which is funded by EU. The project is managed by the Norwegian organization ELBUS and the project is represented by the following European partners:

1. Norway, OREE "The educational committee for electro- and electronic professions "
2. Greece, The Technical Academy of Athens
3. England, JTL (English educational organization on electricity)
4. Sweden, SEF (The Swedish Electricity Union)
5. Denmark, DJH (The Jutlandic Vocational School in Hadsten)

The project was developed and carried out in 2004. It still has its own homepage and might be working in several of the participating countries, but not in Denmark, and it has not been possible to find project partners in Norway. The project was the first Leonardo da Vinci-project in December 2004 to be awarded by the Directorate of the EU Commission for Education and Culture.

The project and its e-tools for validation of prior learning were originally chosen for examination in this study, because it represents a branch-specific approach to the use of e-tools for identification, clarification and recognition of competences, and because it is so clearly not connected to an educational institution or placed within the mainstream educational system. As it has not been possible to interview the original project partners, the following presentation will be more limited and is based on the documents that can be downloaded from the homepage of the project.

The context of the project

The participants of the project present the project in the following way:

“The project's scope of work was validation, assessment and transferability of formal, non formal and informal learning in the electro-technical industry throughout Europe.

Project aim: The project developed a methodology to help document and assess accumulated knowledge and skills for potential employees in the electro-technical sector from any European country - and hopefully others. Individuals who have been assessed and verified get a three-part CV. This system can be used to account existing knowledge resources, on an individual, enterprise and societal level. In general terms, the objective of this project is to increase the visibility of learning taking place outside of formal training and education institutions and systems, thus giving credit to the indispensable role of this knowledge - to individuals as well as to enterprises and society in general.

Benefits: There are many potential benefits of establishing a tool for the documentation of the individual's accumulated knowledge and skills. In almost every country and industry, we find the following elements to be of central importance:

- 1. For individuals, the awarding of credit to non-formal learning may ease their entrance into the formal training system as well as improve their eligibility in the labour market.*
- 2. For enterprises, awarding credit to non-formal learning may be of importance because it increases their potential for effective human resource management. This system will be used to obtain a goal-oriented and precise definition of every employee's knowledge development needs, based on his or her professional needs or wishes, and private interests.*
- 3. For society as a whole, awarding of credit to non-formal learning may be of importance in simplifying the transfer of skills between different spheres (education, work, home) and in order to improve allocation of resources.*
- 4. For more accurate and rapid assessment and validation of foreign workers, both refugees and other immigrants.*

Unemployment is the main source of poverty and social exclusion in almost every European country. This European perspective is very important, as immigration between countries is increasing. We believe that the harmonized documentation procedure that results from this project will make it easier to guide foreign immigrants quickly into productive working life.

The project results:

Methodology

The project group have developed a pan-European methodology or procedure that will enable electro-technical or other enterprises to document and assess accumulated knowledge and skills for an employee or potential employee. This methodology is explained in a handbook, and is supported by a web/electronic-based tool to aid the process.

Documentation procedure and associated tool

The project group have developed and tried out a tool in several different European electro-technical pilot companies to aid the process of identifying and objectively assessing an individual's accumulated knowledge and skills. All five partner country languages are present in both the methodology and the tool.

The tool will help the individual to record his/her own experience and skills. By 'record' we mean that the individual will, in a systematic manner, register his/her personalia, qualifications social skills (family life, social activities, interests), milieu and local community (commissions, voluntary duties, affiliations to any societies, sports club, choir), professional skills (work, hobby, interests,

etc.) and any wishes or future intentions related to their interests or work. A three part CV will be used for this (1. personal, 2 professional skills, and 3. general skills).

Soft skills: The 'assessment' involves a conversation with the employer based on what the individual has recorded about him/herself. It will follow clearly defined guidelines and will be strictly confidential between the individual and the employer. To aid this development dialog the project has developed an 'Ability to take action ' questionnaire. The main objective of this assessment is to develop the basis of a personal development plan involving measures that the employer is able to initiate or support.

The mapping tool is web-based whilst the CV and "The ability to take action" forms are available electronically through the AKS web site for those who have passwords for the main mapping tool."³⁸

Description of the tool

The tool itself is an on-line tool which requires User ID and password. It is the individual enterprise that issues User ID and password, and the e-tool is thus closely linked to individuals working and employed in a specific enterprise. It is both a tool for mapping – for the employee and for the enterprise – and a tool for documentation used in connection with assessment, e.g. in relation to Staff Development Interview (SDI/MUS). In this way the e-tool also works in relation to a process of recognition and assessment, within the enterprise.

On the homepage a number of documents and examples are available to explain the use of the tool's different elements³⁹. It is partly about examples of questions from the electronic questionnaires which are the key feature of the tool, and partly manuals and suggestions on how the individual user, counselors and enterprises with advantage can use the e-tool

The e-tool as it is presented on the website comprises several parts⁴⁰:

1. CV, accumulated knowledge and skills. Forms for documentation: personal data, education up to now, work experience, experience, command of languages, organizational experience, IT-knowledge
2. A branch specific part, with registration of specific competences within the electricity branch. This tool is made as a "competence test" in which one on a scale, indicates to which degree a competence is mastered

³⁸ Se: http://www.aks-international.com/more_about.html

³⁹ Se dokumenter på: http://www.aks-international.com/download_documents.html

⁴⁰ Se dokumenter på: http://www.aks-international.com/download_documents.html

3. A part 3: "The ability to take action" which consist of "awareness and assessment of one's own ability to take action" via a questionnaire regarding "social, learning, method and professional competence". There is a total of 40 statements/ competences which one marks on-line on a scale from 1 to 10 (Does apply for me – Does not apply for me)
4. Development plan for the individual employee (see below)

After part 3 a Staff Development Interview is carried out which subsequently can result in a development plan for the employee. Thus this is a total documentation of professional, learning, personal and social competences, which are summed up in an action plan for the individual employee and for the enterprise.

The e-tool is meant to be a development tool for the employees and for the enterprises that wish to use the tool. The tool is intended as a development tool for the employees to monitor and document their own professional and educational profile, and as a tool for the management in relation to HRM (human resource management), for competence development and to establish an overview of the competences of the enterprise::

"The model will become a license- and web-based product including among other things an individual profile so an enterprise by means of User ID and passwords can get access to an overview of its employees and the employees can get access and update their own profiles"⁴¹.

The e-tool such as it is described on the homepage with examples, documents and manuals is intended as a dynamic tool that can be used by both the employee and by the enterprise. The tool includes both branch-specific ("hard") and more general ("soft") competences, and thus its use is aimed at identification and clarification of both technical and purely professional, that is electricity and electro-professional competences, and at competences of a personal, social and learning nature, as for example cooperation competences and management competences.

Competences and the concept of competence

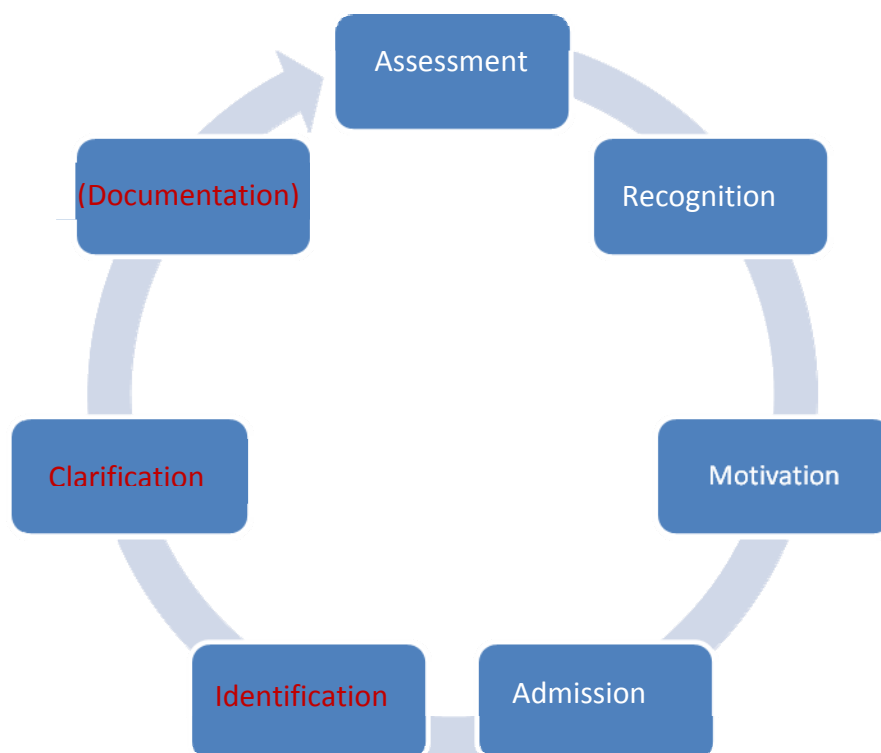
Regarding the comprehension of competence and learning it is said: *"A main goal of this project is therefore to supply the tools to increase awareness of non-formal and informal learning and its mutual benefits to the individual employee and the enterprise. The individual will be valued for their accumulated knowledge and skills; the enterprise will be more competitive by better knowing the resources in its workforce at the same time showing their adaptability. The enterprise will be able to evaluate foreign workers more accurately and swiftly. Similarly, it will be easier for the enterprise to establish itself abroad."*

⁴¹ Aks-international.com

Recognition of prior learning is done on the basis of an interview that is based on the self-assessment via the e-tool. The specifically electricity-professional competences are assessed on the basis of the documented experience, education and practice of the employee. Regarding the competences which are not strictly professional, that is personal, learning oriented, language, IT-skills and social competence, these are assessed during an interview between the employee and the management of the enterprise, e.g. in connection with the Staff Development Interview. This means that it basically is the management of the enterprise that decides which competences can be recognized.

Concluding remarks

The Accumulated Knowledge and Skills-tool is a thoroughly prepared and comprehensive web-based tool aimed at the electricity branch, but besides purely electricity-professional questions of identification and clarification, the tool in principle can be used in all branches and enterprises.



Rie Thomsen, DPU (2009)

It is a tool for identification, clarification and documentation, and used the right way it probably will have a great motivational effect on the employee, who can see himself/ herself in a process of active development, education and career.

At the same time it is a tool of management for enterprises (within the electricity branch) which wish a web-based HRM-tool in connection with SDI/ MUS-interviews and for competence outlines for all or parts of the enterprise:

Enterprises wishing to attract and develop suitable employees, irrespective of where they have acquired their competences, could use the AKS-tool. An enterprise can also use AKS for making a status of the competences of the enterprise, and for more strategic and long-termed planning of the competence development of the organization. Maybe it is a bit naïve to believe that the same tool can be used both by the management of the enterprise and by the individual employee, but the risk of abuse and betraying confidence should be minimized by the use of user-identification and password for access. The tool is designed in such a way that the individual employee himself/herself can change in the competence outline which almost works as a portfolio.

It is a matter of taste if one will regard the AKS-tool as a tool for development for the employee, primarily designed as a portfolio of the electricity branch, or one regards the tool as a tool for management and control for the HRM-director of the enterprise.

Could this basic question be one of the reasons why the e-tool has not been more widely utilized?

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NVR - National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning, Denmark, contributes to the collection, development and dissemination of knowledge about recognition of prior learning with a specific focus on methods for documentation and validation of prior learning. The key activities of the Knowledge Centre are: 1). Development and research projects 2). Conferences, seminars and courses. 3). Consultant work and 4). Dissemination and dialogue about VPL, which is supported by the cooperation with relevant networks

NVR's activities are related to national and international initiatives to ensure that lifelong learning and life wide learning is made visible and recognized to the joy of the individual and for the society.

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