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THE UNIVERSITY AS A REGIONAL ACTOR
PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE

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2.4 PROMOTING EXPERIENTIAL AND WORK BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

REINHARD SCHMIDT

The concepts of experiential learning and work based learning raise fundamental questions for lifelong learning which have far reaching implications. Both concepts refer to learning that takes place outside formal learning environments, such as higher education institutions or schools. In the general context of learning from and through experience, the concept of work based learning refers more specifically on one hand, to the learning accomplished in the workplace, linked to individual professional development, and on the other hand, considers such learning in the perspective of integration into formal learning pathways. Before going into details, we must begin by asking some fundamental questions.

A first question which one might ask is what kind of activity or process is learning? Learning does not only mean to retrieve information from some source of information (e.g. a book, internet website, or lecture) in order to increase knowledge about a topic. It also implies the acquisition of complex data and its assimilation which in turn affects our behaviour and actions. According to this view, the focus shifts from an input dimension (the 'syllabus') to the outcome dimension. So, when we talk about 'learning outcomes' we refer to 'competences' rather than 'knowledge'. In other words, a learning process is about preparing to use knowledge at some time in the future and in some place, for some purpose – for example, giving appropriate answers to questions or even acquiring a deeper knowledge of something. As a result of this process, a general 'change in paradigm' has occurred in post-industrial society, even as far as the definition of 'culture' is concerned: Increasingly the idea that culture is something like a 'personal heritage' at the exclusive disposal of its individual owner is being replaced by the notion of culture as a set of individual competences to be invested in the knowledge society.

The two key elements which emerge are focussed upon the notion of learning outcomes linked to competences and on the notion that learning can take place at any time and in any place; on the other hand, not all results of this permanent learning process are relevant to all situations. We must keep this in mind when we think of recognition of prior learning.

Another important implication of this approach is that learning can occur – and actually does occur – in many different modes, and we need to determine what specific kind of learning is produced through these specific modes of learning. In particular, in higher education, we must examine the question whether learning at university is specific in the sense that it occurs only inside the structures and through the educational procedures in which it is traditionally carried out.

VALIDATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

When considering the role of validation of prior learning in universities one of the key questions is what kind of learning outcomes it is possible to acknowledge in higher education and training and, in particular, to what extent can the results of informal learning be said to have the quality requirements for academic recognition?

The validation of prior learning is normally governed by national, regional, and local university regulations and refers to learning in formal education institutions. No doubt, differences may subsist between single institutions and their respective regulations, especially as far as the approach to the control of quality and appropriateness of the certified learning is concerned. This is because the notion of quality is itself a complex one including aspects such as level, reputation of the certifying institution and the grade obtained by the learner. The notion of 'appropriateness' also refers to issues such as relevance to the subject discipline, content, updating, etc., but also in view of the learning objectives a study programme wants to reach.

In most EU countries, the validation of prior experiential learning is still an area of debate which engenders resistance among academics and higher education decision makers, representing a struggle between 'reformers' (including the EU policy makers) and 'defenders' of a traditional approach. The experience arising from European pilot projects and from national experiences such as in the UK (*Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning - APEL*) and in France (*Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience - VAE*), show that workplace learning and learning through experience can be successfully validated by higher education institutions. Moreover, they show that academic recognition is not limited to the sphere of 'practical skills', in so far as such skills are part of the university study programme. Indeed, APEL can be much more than compulsory work placements included in the curriculum.

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Experiences from the field of accreditation also suggest at least three problematic issues:

- APEL is a complex subject which must be handled using a sophisticated approach which includes care, rigour, and transparency by specifically trained staff.
- APEL requires a set of procedures (e.g. a 'learning review') aimed not only at the registration and verification of evidence about learning produced by the applicant, but also the creation of a process of personal involvement leading to the transformation of 'tacit' into 'explicit' knowledge through a process of self-reflection and self-awareness by the learner, supported by a HE expert.
- differences in educational culture and history in Europe suggests that the best way forward is to define a sufficiently flexible transnational framework of regulations that allows for different national approaches in the implementation of the system.

There are two main reasons why the recognition of learning through experience, and especially through professional experience, is of great importance. Firstly, it gives a crucial contribution to the implementation of LLL practices and opportunities in the field of higher education where not much has been so far done. Secondly, it helps promote greater integration between experiential/professional and academic knowledge and competences and so doing brings higher education much closer to the conditions for 'real' learning that surrounds us in contemporary society.

Before looking more closely at the challenges and benefits that derive from the validation of prior learning, it is useful to clarify the perspectives within which this occurs or should occur. The adoption of APL/APEL practices during the intake procedure for students applying for individual assessment of prior learning at the time of enrolment in a regular study programme certainly represents a significant step forward towards making higher education compatible with lifelong learning. But it should not be conceived and pursued as an objective 'per se'. Two further ambitious objectives can also be envisaged:

- a. The re-organisation of regular mainstream HE pathways allowing for the possibility of individual study programmes, based upon an initial APEL procedure leading to partial exemption (or in particular cases, as e.g. in the French VAE experience, to total exemption) from the regular learning activities/results to be achieved. Such individual study programmes, while being

compatible with the set of learning outcomes defined for the current degree courses, are based on a negotiated learning agreement identifying the learning outcomes to be reached and the learning activities to be undertaken by the individual student.

- b. The implementation of work based learning study programmes according to the European Platform developed by the DEW-BLAM project, including an intake phase characterised by the accreditation of competencies possessed by the learner as a result of prior (experiential) learning.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Developing and promoting APEL as part of mainstream practice in higher education presents a number of benefits and challenges for each of the stakeholders involved in the process:

- a. The individual learner benefits through the application of the principles of lifelong learning and the enhancement of her/his individual professional development; on the other hand, she/he is challenged to become responsible for her/his personal learning process and for the conduction of the entire study pathway.
- b. The higher education institution can better fulfil its wider role as an institution seeking to develop links between research and education, and between the work environment and education, including acting as a stimulant for social, cultural and economic growth. On the other hand, APEL implies significant changes for HE institutions that are cultural (e.g. the need for academic acceptance of learning occurring outside its walls), organisational, pedagogical, technical, and financial.
- c. The work organisation will receive enormous benefit from the introduction of APEL in the field of human resources management and staff development; and ultimately increase competitiveness; so, they should meet the challenge of becoming an integral part of educational partnerships with universities. This will require investing in the professional development of their staff, beyond particular business interests and financial calculations.

But there are benefits and challenges that the validation of prior learning brings about for the organisation of post-industrial society in general terms, far beyond the specific interests of individual stakeholders. APEL provides a new way for meeting the demand for recognition of

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professional experience at all levels in education. Policy makers must understand that they are challenged to take action to create appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks, foster social awareness about the need for validation, and to give specific financial and logistic support to innovation in the field of university continuing education.

PROMOTING A EUROPEAN APPROACH TO WORK BASED LEARNING (WBL) – FINDINGS FROM THE SOCRATES/GRUNDTVIG COOPERATION PROJECT 'DEWBLAM'

Findings from a European cooperation project, 'Developing European Work Based Learning Approaches and Methods' (DEWBLAM), may well illustrate how work experiences of individual learners can be integrated in higher education study pathways through the validation of competences acquired in the workplace and through professional activity. The partnership engaged in the project between 2003 and 2006, with support from the Socrates/Grundtvig programme, consisted of twelve university and non-university institutions from eight European member states and was coordinated by the Italian Inter-university consortium *E-Form*.

THE MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE PROJECT WERE:

- The presentation of scientific research around the theory of work based and experiential learning with respect to traditional academic learning
- The development of a 'framework for the Common European WBL Platform', identifying minimum key requirements for WBL study programmes
- Preparation of detailed guidelines in 9 European languages for the curriculum design and development of a WBL study programme
- Result from pilot projects experiencing the 'DEWBLAM approach' in each of the participating countries (and in addition in Switzerland)
- Recommendations on the organisation of a European conference on WBL approaches in higher education.

The European Platform for WBL study programmes at higher education level, developed by DEWBLAM, is based on some fundamental principles:

- Professional activity is a learning activity
- Work organisations are learning organisations
- Learning in the workplace generates not only generic competences, such as communication skills, leadership, responsibility, etc., but also knowledge about complex facts and contexts, together with methodological and theoretical awareness.

The implementation of WBL study programmes in the HE environment gives added value to all participating stakeholders, since it links the work environment to the learning organisation, strengthens the social role of HE institutions and their capacity for educational innovation, and enhances individual professional development, challenging the individual learner's responsibility for her/his own educational pathway. The work based learning approach to higher education is relevant to the LL perspective because it brings together and integrates different sectors of education that are traditionally separated: professional development, higher education and lifelong learning.

The approach to WBL developed by the DEWBLAM project has found a need for the following key features to be built into work-based learning programmes:

- Study programmes integrated in European frameworks for higher education, supporting in particular the Bologna and Lisbon strategies, the European credit accumulation and transfer system (ECTS), the 'Tuning' methodology for curriculum design in higher education, and the European and national qualifications frameworks (EQF and NQFs)
- stable partnership between stakeholders, in particular between the work organisation and the educational institution, in all phases of the implementation of the study programme, established by means of a formal agreement
- validation of competencies possessed by the learner, acquired through any kind of prior learning (APL, APEL, VAE), and identified by means of an individual 'learning review' carried out during the intake phase

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- negotiation of the individual learning pathway between the three parties of the process (learner, work organisation, university), formalised through an individual 'learning agreement' establishing in detail the learning activities, contents, credits, modes of learning and assessment, etc.
- tutoring in the learning process both in the workplace and in the HE institution by specifically trained company and university staff
- integration of different learning methodologies, i.e. blended learning, group and individual learning, classroom and distance learning, reflective and project (workplace) learning, research methods etc.
- multiple assessment of learning achievements with participation of the work organisation, leading to a formal award by the HE institution.

The approach and model developed in the course of the DEWBLAM project clearly shows the central importance of validation of prior learning, the role of experiential learning and workplace learning as a means of competence acquisition at higher education level. It also clarifies that the concept of 'work-based learning' is not limited to the learning in the workplace, but can be conceived as a global approach to an innovative way of organising mainstream higher education pathways from a lifelong learning perspective.

ABOUT THE PROJECTS

Information about the SOCRATES/GRUNDTVIG cooperation project 'Developing European Work Based Learning Approaches and Methods' (DEWBLAM) and, in particular, about the Final Scientific Conference organised in Florence (Italy) in 2006 can be found at: <http://www.eform.it/dewblam/dewblam.php>.

Among the achievements of the Projekt are the 'Framework for the common European Work Based Learning Platform in HET and VET' and the 'Guidelines for the Curriculum design and development of a Work Based Learning study programme'.

The European Pilot Project 'Tuning Educational Structures in Europe' produced a methodology for the design of European HE curricula, which is available on the EU Education and Training website at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/tuning/tuning_en.html as well as the websites of the coordinating Universities: University of Deusto, Bilbao, and University of Groningen: <http://www.relint.deusto.es/Tuning-Project/Index.htm> or <http://www.rug.nl/Corporate/International/Europe/tuningEurope>

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2.5

ACTIVATE 10,000 UNEMPLOYED ENGINEERS INITIATIVE: HOW CAN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION CONTRIBUTE TO REDUCING UNEMPLOYMENT?

GERD KÖHLER

Although continuing education is mentioned in more or less all the mission statements of German universities published in recent years, it still a marginal activity in most German universities. One problem is the underfunding of higher education which makes it difficult to put more emphasis on continuing education. The government policy 'to demand more for less' paralyses universities. They are therefore retreating to the 'core business' - i.e. activities which are research and teaching. To change this, continuing education has therefore constantly to convince other whether it be higher education administration, politicians or the 'world of work' to provide more funding for continuing education.

Despite these problems, it could be said that social and economic circumstances are 'favourable' for the development of new initiatives: The 'knowledge based economy' is creating a huge demand for the development of continuing education in higher education. Current discrepancy in the labour market make it necessary to find short-term solutions to meet demand for jobs in certain sectors. One example is the shortage of engineers in the workforce. At the same time, demographic projection point to the need for sustainable, longer-term strategies which balance demand and supply in the workforce through prolonging the time in work over the lifetime. This can be done better through continuing education instead of early retirement or dismissal for older workers as well as through new ways of accessing higher education for those without traditional entrance qualification.

In all these fields continuing higher education can play a crucial role through:

- short-term adaption courses
- brush-up courses for older experienced employees
- to develop their competencies
- and courses for the recognition of prior learning

Of course it will not be easy to convince people in higher education and in the 'world of work' to tackle these issues. The short-term orientation of shareholder-value-policies lead to similar problems as the market