

Peer Learning Cluster – Recognition of learning outcomes

Peer Learning Activity - Paris, 9 - 11 July 2007

This note provides a short summary of the programme, discussions and the outcomes of the peer learning activity (PLA) organised in Paris by the French Ministry of Education.

The purpose of the PLA was to build on the work so far of the peer learning cluster (PLC) and especially on the outcomes of the Brussels PLA (Jan 07). The French and Italian experience of validating non formal and informal learning was used to deepen the understanding of participants of the nature of recognition systems. The main focus was the role of stakeholders in the validation process and particular attention was paid to the role of the company.

The PLC wishes to produce some Guidelines at European level on effective practices in validating non formal and informal learning. The PLA provided a context for understanding better what should be included in the Guidelines.

The programme

The PLA began with a series of presentations on the French national system for validating informal learning (VAE – la validation des acquis de l'expérience). The range of different actors explained their role under the legal arrangements and how they contribute to the quality of the system. This was followed by a series of presentations from the human resources department of the French international company, FNAC. Amongst the presenters there were three successful applicants for validation. The discussions that followed explored how VAE works and the role of the company in the validation process including the benefits for an individual in being in a company involved in a validation process.

The second day began with a specific Italian experience of a pilot regional validation system of non formal and informal learning. National, regional and companies' roles in the recognition process were presented and then discussed. Together with the discussions of VAE, the Italian session created a good context for three parallel workshops on counselling applicants, assessment (evaluation) and certification. In each of these workshops a series of high level experts were available to present information and facilitate discussions.

The discussions

It is clear that VAE is now well supported by the Ministries of Education and Labour but also by the other Ministries involved in education and training such as Ministries of Agriculture, Culture and of Social Affairs and Justice. Social partners are also supportive. VAE is seen across all these agencies as a tool to serve individuals to allow them to access existing diplomas, to have a reduced time for training and to raise self-esteem. VAE also supports companies through enabling better management of their workforce and

benefits society more generally by increasing transparency of the diploma system and allowing participation for drop-outs. The system has gained strength through a series of steps through partial validation of competences through to access to full certification.

Implementation is now being limited due to the resources needed to manage the process. Those currently certificated through VAE are mainly people attending adult learning schemes and attempts to certificate those disengaged from the education and training or work settings has not been as effective as it had been hoped. It was concluded that further development of VAE would need a strong political commitment.

The Italian region Macerata Provincia is hosting an EQUAL funded project that is supporting the insertion of disabled people and employees aged 45 years or more into companies. It is a pilot scheme for a national project that is similar in terms of goals and the participation of stakeholders to the VAE. However, in Italy there is no national qualification framework and this raised some interesting questions about the need for such a framework for validation purposes. In Italy, qualifications can mean the recognition of competences, it can also signal a level of professionalism or the basis of a collective bargaining agreement. This range of meanings is a significant influence on the validation process.

A central element of the Italian project is the development of a personal citizen's training portfolio. The portfolio inspired discussions on the role of the portfolio in the national validation process and in terms of the distinctiveness of Europass CV. The latter is entirely owned by the individual whereas the citizen's portfolio has some joint ownership and attracts guidance from local authorities.

There are clear links between the regulated labour market in France (and national standards in terms of referential and diplomas) and the VAE process. Labour market regulation and the strong diploma culture can be an incentive for individuals and companies. Consequently, in countries where there is a weakly regulated labour market the need for a validation process may not be so strongly incentivised. In response to questions the Italian presenters highlighted how the EQF developments had provided a new impetus to define national standards that would support, amongst other things, the standards needed for validation processes. Interestingly, in the Italian case there is room for defining standards in terms of learning outcomes and in terms of input standards (training standards).

The broad range of support for these two systems of validation from stakeholders was a focus of discussion. The systems have the potential to enable collective working of stakeholders through the tightly structured regulation of the processes. The presentations from FNAC and the discussions that followed showed the depth of joint responsibilities for the VAE process. The shared responsibilities (especially, the sharing of costs) were an issue for much discussion. It emerged that there were substantial hidden costs in such processes for ministries, universities and companies.

The technical processes described by the French and Italian experiences also opened up discussions on such things as functioning of juries and the production of procedural guidelines.

Whilst VAE is well established in many occupational areas (all civil service professions are accessible through VAE), an interesting point was raised in terms of the use of VAE in the regulated professions. Nursing is an area that will raise substantial challenges.

The three workshops (counselling, assessment and certification) identified issues and provided much information which will be useful for amplifying the outline of the European Guidelines for validation. These outcomes of the discussions benefited from the French and Italian presentations and allowed deeper exploration of, for example, (a) the steps in counselling processes, (b) the stakeholder interdependencies involved in the functioning of juries, and (c) the impact of learning outcomes approaches on the needs of the labour market and on the training curriculum.

The outcomes

- Better knowledge of the French VAE and the Italian pilot initiatives
- The need to further explore the tension between the interests of the individual and the role played by the employer
- Deeper understandings of the technical processes of validation (counselling, assessment and certification).
- Examples of the interdependencies between of validation processes, standards, training and qualification.
- Increased appreciation for the need for clear standards and qualifications frameworks as the basis for validation processes learning.
- Ideas for taking forward the EU common principles through the development of European Guidelines for validation. The discussions will inform the drafting by the Commission of the guidelines for effective practices in the recognition and validation of non formal and informal learning.

Mike Coles, July 2007