
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the past there has been little need for recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany. The formal education system was able to provide the necessary highly qualified workforce (s. BMBF 2004, p. 134). Today, economic, technological and societal changes pose new challenges to the German education and training system. The increasing competition in a globalized world, quick technological changes and an anticipated shortage of skilled employees in the near future require cross-professional mobility and continuous learning. Individuals are challenged to take responsibility for their education in order to master the new challenges. Non-formal and informal learning as part of the lifelong learning initiative are gaining momentum in this context (s. BMBF 2004, p. 11).

Two recent research projects, the “Weiterbildungspass” (continuing education pass) and the “Lernkultur Kompetenzentwicklung” (competence development as a culture of learning) financed by the federal and the regional Ministries of Education show the rising awareness of this issue in the regional and national policy arena.

The first study focuses on the question whether a national “Weiterbildungspass” is a useful instrument to help individuals to review, document and assess their educational history.

The second study focuses on developing and testing efficient continuing learning structures in companies and strengthening individual professional competences. Assessing competences is one part of this project.

The future relevance of the topic on the policy agenda can be derived from the Bund-Länder-Kommission’s¹ explicit goal to strengthen the individual’s responsibility and self-organization capabilities in continuing education which includes non-formal and informal learning (s. BMBF 2004, p. 23).

Since the mid-nineties initiatives have been undertaken to credit part-qualifications and additional qualifications that do not amount to a full qualification. Experiments in this field have focussed on step-wise qualification modes that link different education settings in a flexible way. Experiences with this approach have been rather limited so far (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 35).

¹ The „Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsförderung“ (Federal and Länder committee on planning education and promoting research) is a committee of German federal and Länder Ministries of Education.

2.0 EXISTING INITIATIVES

2.1 Public authorities

There have been two major initiatives by public authorities recently. The Federal Ministry of Education and the Länder Ministries of Education are the main actors in the public sector who are promoting the topic of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Germany.

2.1.1 “Weiterbildungspass” initiative

The first initiative is a study on the feasibility of a „Weiterbildungspass“ on a national scale. It is a project of the „Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsförderung“ that ran from April 1, 2002 until October 31, 2003. It analyzes the existing 51 regional pass initiatives in schools, vocational training, occupation, honorary offices and in the private area. It draws conclusions for developing a model of a national pass that reviews, documents and assesses informally acquired competences no matter the means and the field of learning. In addition, the model passes' function is to identify the individuals' educational, professional and life goals and to motivate the pass owner to realize these goals. The study analyzes the passes' benefits, acceptance and value on a corporate level and for the society.

Goals of the passes

The study concludes that the goals of the pass initiatives are heterogeneous but often motivated by labour market policy and economic impulses (s. BMBF 2004, p. 65). The goals fall into three categories: individual, societal and corporate.

The major individual goals are to “sensitize for lifelong learning”, “see the need for continuing education” and “take responsibility for learning”

A prominent societal goal particularly in the field of vocational and language training is promoting “geographic mobility and flexibility”. Societal goals in the honorary sector are promoting “Dialogue between cultures”, “inter cultural qualifications”, “gender equality” and “acknowledging the value of the practical work”. In the field of training teachers, one societal goal of the pass is to use it as an instrument to analyze further educational needs particularly in new media.

On the corporate level, pass initiatives are aiming at “helping with selection of personnel”, particularly on the apprenticeship level, and “developing human resources”. This is expected to reduce personnel and fluctuation costs and bureaucracy.

Existing methods and instruments

There are two different types of passes: the first one operates with an open recording system. This means that in a concrete context the performed activity is described, the duration registered and both certified by a third person or organization. In a more complex approach

the pass provides an open list of suggested competences that include e.g. ability to work in a team, to work independently, to cooperate at work etc. This list can be completed by the person who fills it out. The basic problem of this method is that “activity” is equated with “competence” without assessing in how far the activity has been a learning experience (s. BMBF 2004, p. 72).

The second type of pass is based on a closed recording system. This means that a complete list of competences is given. The person who fills it out has no room for additional recordings. Certificates of attendance partly with assessing attended formal and non-formal continuing education courses can be included.

In regard to the assessment stage in the open and the closed recording system, there are little systematic and checkable procedures that go beyond describing learning efficiencies and competences. Mostly the assessment stage consists of self-evaluation of the pass owner along a given list of competences without involving external institutions that scientifically measure the competences.

Role of the social partners

The social partners consider the following aspects of the pass initiative positively: Firstly, the pass helps to make the individual’s qualification history clear. Secondly, it increases the motivation. Thirdly, it proves basic competences. Fourthly, it lists and describes the company’s tasks and projects. Fifthly, it facilitates mobility, and, finally, the pass helps to classify the employee on the wage scale at a new company.

The social partners fear some critical developments that have to be avoided. These are the following: Firstly, discrediting those who have little written proof of lifelong learning activities. Secondly, using an external competence recording and assessing system as well as acquiring certificates in a more flexible way could fundamentally challenge the traditional vocational and employment system as a whole (s. BMBF 2004, pp. 111, 112).

Conclusion for a national model pass

The study finds out that the regional pass initiatives are locally limited, not systematic in identifying and recording informally acquired competences and focused on specific topics and concrete problems with some innovative approaches. This heterogeneity results in a lack of transparency for the individual (s. BMBF 2004, pp. 150, 152).

Based on the analysis of the existing passes in continuing education, the study suggests the following characteristics of a model pass (s. BMBF 2004, p. 151):

- integrating reviewing and counselling
- supporting individual reflexion, review and goal setting of the education, life and work biography
- being suitable for all target groups and across educational fields
- being open for third party assessment and self-assessment

- covering formal, non-formal and informal learning
- offering help and motivation for further education, life and career planning
- having a high „brand recognition“ and a high market value

The study recommends to follow the example of existing passes and to integrate German and European approaches. The competence fields of the European curriculum vitae are suggested to be used as a minimum standard.

2.1.2 “Lernkultur Kompetenzentwicklung” initiative

The second initiative by public authorities is part of the initiative “Lernkultur Kompetenzentwicklung”, financed by the BMBF and the ESF which runs from 2001 until 2007. The study focuses on developing and testing efficient continuing learning structures in companies and strengthening individual professional competences. In regard to validation of informal learning, the initiative attempts to find means how to implement informal learning in a more effective way in continuing education. The initiative consists of about 200 projects. “Certifying Internet and multimedia learning” is the title of one project within the “Lernkultur Kompetenzentwicklung” initiative that deals with validation of informal learning. It focuses on competence development and the change of the culture of learning. The project’s goals are twofold: Firstly, it aims at improving existing certificates in the IT- continuing studies area so that the certificates can mirror the real competences of the participants. Secondly, it analyzes alternative certification methods. This includes validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The results of this one-year project are not yet available since it has ended very recently on June 30. 2004.

2.1.3 Part-qualifications and additional qualifications

Additional qualifications are defined as “... learning in formal, non-formal or informal settings that may be linked to recognised vocational qualifications, and may in this way extend, actualise and increase the relevance of existing national qualifications” (Hanf and Reuling 2003, quoted in: Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 35). The Federal Ministry of Education has supported experiments in regard to additional qualifications. It has introduced additional qualification as a priority in a project aiming at reforming vocational education and training (“Reformprojekt Berufliche Bildung”) in 1997.

Goals

Part-qualifications and additional qualifications may contribute to opening up the formal qualification structures. Its main features are using modules and mixing learning outcomes from different settings and contexts. These characteristics would enable individuals who have not competed a formal qualification to enter education and training and to access the labour market. It would give young people an opportunity for career development through apprenticeship (Karriere durch Lehre). Additional qualifications would also give enterprises a

new and flexible instrument for human resource and competence development (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, pp. 35-36).

Existing methods and instruments

In the late 1990s experiments with part-qualifications and additional qualifications were started. These tests had two main features: Firstly, a modularization of qualification: The tests experimented with a step-wise qualification mode. Secondly, a mix of learning outcomes from different settings and contexts: The tests linked education, training and work together in a flexible way. Additional qualifications are normally acquired by systematic training. The amount of hours vary from 20 to 200 hours (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 36).

The public education and training system as well as the chambers have developed additional qualifications. The former provide them for free, the latter for a fee ranging from 50 to 500 € (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 36).

Conclusions

On the one hand, Colardyn and Bjornavold consider the experiments as beneficial to the German education system: “The experimentation on part-qualifications (*Teilqualifikationen*) and additional qualifications (*Zusatzqualifikationen*) may in the end make it easier to combine learning outcomes from formal and non-formal settings. While not a main focus so far, the orientation towards a more unit-based system may prove important for the opening up of the German vocational education and training system to external learning outcomes.” (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 36). On the other hand, they express doubts about these approaches: “Experiences so far are rather limited and it is yet an open question whether this approach will become a real alternative for the groups targeted.” (s. Colardyn and Bjornavold 2004, p. 35).

2.2 Industry initiatives

The corporate sector is interested in validation methods particularly in three areas: selection of apprentices, selection of personnel and human resource development (Deutscher Industrie- und Handelskammertag, interview April 23, 2004). The awareness for the need of recognition methods for non-formal and informal learning exists in the corporate sector. However, the existing systems are so far tailor made for the specific needs of the companies (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, interview, June 23, 2004). Companies have some experiences with documenting and assessing informal learning. However, they see themselves at the beginning of this development. There are ideas how to identify, assess and use informal learning but there are little steps towards implementing them (s. BMBF 2004, p. 95). Some major companies like DaimlerChrysler in Daggenau are developing procedures for recognizing and certifying informal learning. DaimlerChrysler has undertaken a pilot project on learning in the process of change which includes validation methods for non-formal and informal learning. The reports on this project will be available sometime in fall 2004.

An overview of validation methods in German companies titled "Kompetenzmessung im Unternehmen" will be published by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM in 2005.

2.3 Third sector initiatives

There are several pass initiatives in the honorary sector like the "Hamburger Freiwilligenbuch" (Hamburg voluntary booklet). They describe the tasks that the pass owner has performed and the duration which are both certified by a third person or organization. There are no standards for describing the tasks. Often the attendance of continuing education seminars are described as tasks. The assessment of the competences are limited to confirming the existence of competences (s. BMBF 2004, p. 73).

There are other passes like the "Nachweismappe Ehrenamt" (certificate booklet for honorary posts) that give lists which include competences like "ability to work in a team", "motivation", "working independently". The "Kompetenzbilanz" ("competence record") by the "Deutsches Jugendinstitut" (national research center for studies on youth) shows the highest level of complexity: It derives fields of experiences from family related activities, that are analyzed by questions like "What have I learned from this?" and "Which competences have I acquired by this activity?" These competences are assessed on a five level scale, from level 1: "I am very good at it." to level 5: "I am not good at it." Today, the "Kompetenzbilanz" is the only pass in Germany that uses a real measure instrument for assessing competences (s. BMBF 2004, p. 74).

The "IG Metall" (union for metal workers) publishes a "Kompetenzhandbuch" (handbook on competences) that helps to develop a profile analysis of competences. It gives a list of competences for the following three areas: professional, method and social competence. Each competence area comprises between nine and 16 individual skills.

3.0 CONCLUSION

3.1 National policy trend and on-going research

It is too early to systematically compare the efficiency and effectiveness of the different approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning in Germany. Many initiatives are still at an early developing stage like the national pass or are still being researched like the IT-certificate.

The various public initiatives show the relevance of the topic on the national policy agenda. The study on the feasibility of a “Weiterbildungspass” concludes that there is a real political willingness to implement the pass on a national scale.

In the corporate and third sector the topic is gaining momentum. However, the approaches are mostly at a developing stage, unsystematic and few.

There is continuous research on the area of conflict in which validation of non-formal and informal learning moves between individual, corporate and societal demands as well as on corporate validation approaches.

3.2 Overall framework for validation of non-formal and informal learning

In Germany there is no legal framework for lifelong learning. Due to the federal system the federal government and the Länder governments share the responsibility for education which requires a high level of cooperation between these two political levels. The “Weiterbildungspass” is one example for this kind of cooperation. In addition to the cooperation on the vertical level, the cooperative system in Germany requires also horizontal cooperation between the government and social partners.

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