

An overview of European research on the Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL] 2000 – 2010

Prof. John Konrad
Principal Consultant
Konrad Associates International

Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the Final Report of the Leonardo da Vinci project RPLO.¹ *"The research picture is somewhat polarised between a wealth of policy-related inventories, projects and comparative studies on the one hand and a small amount of doctoral work on the other. In the main, little attention has been given to scholarly research. Indeed, there is scant 'scientific' evidence, apart from the outcomes of development projects, to support particular approaches to validation. There are not many research-based articles in peer-reviewed journals (although more in the field of assessment than in other fields). Rigorous critical engagement with policy and aspects of practice is conspicuous by its absence. The research field is therefore wide open with ample opportunities to build upon the practical, systems-building work and information gathering that has been privileged to date and to deploy different methodologies and theoretical insights to illuminate particular aspects of policy and practice."*²

The author's experience and expertise supports the view expressed above and indicates the need for a systematic, grounded approach to the issues involved. Other, related,

¹ "European and National Lifelong Learning Policy has emphasised the importance of the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning since European Union [EU] Member States agreed the *Common European Principles for Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* in 2004. The Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes [RPLO] is a common issue in the national systems of the UK as well as in EU partner countries, with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority *Recognition of Prior Learning Guidance for the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework*. The RPLO Project will pilot these Guidelines in the Vocational Education and Training [VET] Teacher and Trainer Sector using the Lifelong Learning UK Standards through the development of user-friendly tools, methods and support materials. Partners in other EU Member States will collaborate in this process, ensuring that common Standards are applied to RPLO in this Sector using the European Guidelines (2009) within the context of the European Qualification Framework Decision (2007) and the Recommendations for a European Credit System for VET (2008)." The project website is at <http://www.rplo.eu>

² Harris J (2010), "Research into the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in the European Union: A wide-open field," Thompson Rivers University-Open Learning, British Columbia, Canada, Draft -14-9-10, page 1.



publications in this virtual symposium will identify specific aspects arising from the RPLO project. Taken together, these papers are designed to provide an analytical perspective that will inform national implementation³ and specifically to provide an initial methodological input to an Italian follow-on Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project (2010-2012)

“Recognition and Development of Vocational Education and Training Competencies” [PEIRA] coordinated by Fondazione Politecnico di Milano.

Inventories on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning

The Learning Continuity (2005)

This European Union research study forms the first of a series of papers that have recorded, reflected and influenced national policies.⁴

Political Context

“During the last few years, valuing learning has become a priority in European policies on education, training and learning. While formal education and training form the backbone of what are frequently termed knowledge-based societies, an increasing number of actors stress the need to make use of the full range of available knowledge and competences. The outcomes of the learning that occurs in non-formal and informal settings at work, in voluntary organisations or at home must be properly acknowledged and valued. This is the only way, it is argued, that a strategy of lifelong learning can be developed and realised, allowing individuals to combine and build on formal, non-formal, and informal learning outcomes. ... A comprehensive new European approach to valuing learning is seen as a pre-requisite for the area of lifelong learning, building on the existing right of free movement within the EU. Proposals focus on the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning as well as on the transfer and mutual recognition of formal

³ The focus of this symposium derives from critical reflection on the outcomes of the RPLO project, which was designed to Transfer Innovation in the application of the European Guidelines on Validation (2009) to the UK National Standards for VET Teachers and Trainers. These Standards were one of the pilots for the Qualification and Credit Framework [QCF], the National Qualification Framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

⁴ Colardyn D and Bjørnåvold J (2005), The Learning Continuity: European inventory on validating non-formal and informal learning - National policies and practices in validating non-formal and informal learning, Cedefop Panorama series; 117, Luxembourg. Available from http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5164_en.pdf



certificates and diplomas.”⁵ “Valuing and rewarding learning, especially non-formal and informal learning in all sectors, thereby recognising its intrinsic worth. Rewarding learning can also encourage those who are most alienated to return to learning;”⁶

In May 2004, the Education Council of the European Union adopted Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning which started the process of developing and implementing mutual learning across the EU.⁷ The progress of development based on voluntary participation of Member States, candidate countries and countries of the European Economic Area culminated in the *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (2009)*.⁸

The current situation across Europe is that whilst there is a clear agreement on what changes need to be made in national qualification systems and frameworks, how this is to be achieved and over what timescale is not yet clear. The current policy context and especially the link to the European Qualification Framework [EQF] are summarised in current European Commission policy.⁹ Progress towards these goals is described in the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2005, with an update in 2007.¹⁰ Specific studies are also available in the European Observatory of Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning.¹¹

A recently published comparative analysis of Initial VET in nine European countries observed: “Curriculum reform demands the alignment of learner assessment systems and mechanisms. Assessment practices can exert powerful influence on teaching, on the taught curriculum and on education and training institutions ethos and organisation. *There is an inevitable tendency to devalue any learning aims (or learning outcomes), which are difficult to assess by the means currently available.* ... The shift to learning outcomes in VET has several implications for learner assessment methods. *Validation of non-formal and*

⁵ Commission of The European Communities (2001), Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a reality, Brussels, November, COM (2001) 678 final, page 4. Available from <http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/MitteilungEng.pdf>

⁶ Op.Cit. Page 14.

⁷ Available from <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/principles.html>

⁸ Available from <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx>

⁹ See http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc52_en.htm

¹⁰ Available from: <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>

¹¹ The web site of this Leonardo da Vinci Network is available at <http://observal.org/observal/>



informal learning has raised the question of the validity of assessment methods, which is also high on the agenda in formal education, given the new focus on integrating skills and knowledge and the transferability of competence from the educational to a professional context. However, active learning methods and learner-centred approaches highlight the importance of formative assessment. These two aspects – validity and the formative character of assessment methods – were found to attract increasing attention in the wake of the curriculum reforms in the study countries. Although there is sometimes a long way from theory to practice, a range of developments can be seen in the VET segments of the case studies. An important goal of the introduction of learning outcomes in curricula and of new methods of teaching and learning is to develop the ability of the learner to transfer knowledge and skills acquired in an educational context to an occupational context. This requires changes in assessment forms, for instance by increasing the weight of practical examinations and assessment at the workplace.”¹²

This lengthy quotation identifies clearly the range of policy goals and, inevitably, resulting claims about the desirability of these goals. As indicated in the introduction to this paper, this policy driven (often top-down) approach does not necessarily guarantee the validity of such claims.

In a recent presentation, Jens Bjornavold identified common elements of validation and guidance: the need to promote self-reflection and self-assessment; to strengthen the individual capacity to make decisions; and to develop the distinction between formative and summative assessment.¹³ In practice, these two processes are significant elements in the process of Recognising Prior Learning [RPL] as indicated in the diagram below.

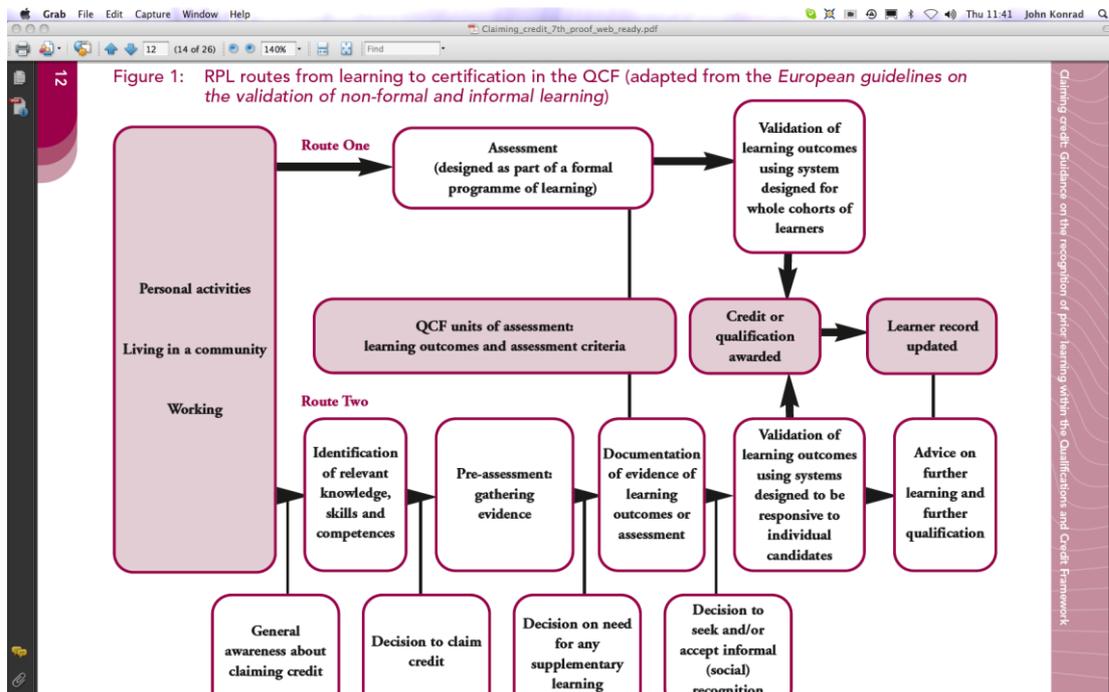
The key aspect of this approach is that RPL is an alternative route to assessment *of equal value* to assessment in formal learning leading to Certification. The issues of validity and reliability of methods of assessment have significant

¹² Cedefop (2010), Learning outcomes approaches in VET curricula: A comparative analysis of nine European countries, pages 119-120, http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5506_en.pdf
(My emphasis italicised)

¹³ “How guidance and validation can stimulate access and progression in VET” 12 November 2009, Stockholm, slide 4.
http://www.se2009.eu/polopoly_fs/1.23783!menu/standard/file/ws%20%20Jens%20Bjornavold%20Cedefop.pdf



implications for Continuing VET in the light of the approach of the European Guidelines on Validation.



Enhanced cooperation in Education and Training (the Copenhagen Process) [2002 – 2010]

This Declaration launched the approach of common developments based on enhanced voluntary cooperation between Member States and Candidate Countries using the bottom-up 'Open Method of Coordination'. "On the basis of these priorities (European dimension; Transparency, information and guidance; Recognition of competencies and qualifications; Quality assurance) we aim to increase voluntary cooperation in vocational education and training, in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, and thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning."¹⁴

The period 2007-2009 saw specific partnership activities under the heading of Peer Learning Cluster meetings. For example, within the general framework provided by the Recognition of Learning Outcomes cluster¹⁵ and its consideration of the issue of

¹⁴ The Copenhagen Declaration on Enhanced Cooperation in VET of 29 and 30 November 2002 is available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/policy/copenhagen_en.pdf

¹⁵ The cluster on recognition of learning outcomes was responsible for taking forward a broad range of issues related to the shift to a learning outcomes perspective in education and training policies and practices. A key question pursued by the cluster is whether this shift can be used to promote access, transfer and progression in education and training, facilitating lifelong learning. See <http://www.kslll.net/PeerLearningClusters/clusterDetails.cfm?id=13>

Quality Assurance procedures in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.¹⁶

This process created the basis for the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning.¹⁷

“This publication presents the conclusions of more than two years of intensive exchange of experiences - involving representatives from more than 20 European countries - in validating non-formal and informal learning. The main objective is to make the outcomes of this common learning process available to a wider audience to support further development of validation of non-formal and informal learning at European, national and local levels.

These guidelines, while inspired by the common European principles on identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning adopted by the European Council in 2004, are not a policy framework approved by a law-making body: they are a practical tool, providing expert advice to be applied on a purely voluntary basis. Their impact relies exclusively on their relevance and ability to add value at national or local levels.”¹⁸

Commentary on the European Guidelines

The issues identified by these Guidelines are discussed in detail. “Learning achieved through non-formal or informal means is only distinguishable from learning achieved through formal programmes by the context of learning. The tools for assessing learning are essentially the same, though some adaptation of the tools – as well as possible combination of different tools – is necessary to take account of contextual differences, such as the timescale over which the learning took place. ... Before the assessment tool can be selected, it is important to look at the learning to be assessed. It is generally accepted that the following criteria need to be considered:

- Breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;
- Depth of learning required;

¹⁶ The French Community of Belgium hosted the PLA in February 2007 and organised a series of case studies and workshops to enable deeper understanding of quality assurance procedures in the context of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. <http://www.ksll.net/PeerLearningActivities/PlaDetails.cfm?id=74>

¹⁷ Validation of Learning Outcomes is defined as “The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.” From CEDEFOP (2009),

¹⁸ European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) (2009), Luxembourg. Available in English, French and German from <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx>



- How current or recent are the knowledge, skills and competence;
- Sufficiency of information for an assessor to make a judgement;
- Authenticity of the evidence being the candidate's own (response to the specified) learning outcomes.

... The following criteria need to be considered for each potentially useful assessment tool:

- Validity: the tool must measure what it is intended to measure;
- Reliability: the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions;
- Fairness: the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and assessor bias);
- Cognitive range: does the tool enable assessors to judge the breadth and depth of the candidate's learning;
- Fitness for purpose of the assessment: ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which it is intended."¹⁹

These criteria are summarised in a set of checklists.²⁰ However there is little scientific evidence, apart from the outcomes of development projects, to support these approaches. This issue is considered in the next section of this paper.

A recent OECD study on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning observed:

"The lack of quantitative data (on Recognition) is confirmed in all countries. While there are certainly examples of local databases – in assessment centres, reception facilities and enterprises – cases in which representative data are gathered on an extensive scale are almost non-existent. A satisfactory detailed investigation might be conducted by developing a database, which describes people involved in a procedure for recognising non-formal and informal learning, observing those who have failed, those who have succeeded and those who have not wished to take part or not thought about it, if measurements are also recorded over time. ... With this kind of data available, the eligibility criteria for embarking on a

¹⁹ Ibid. pages 58-59. A range of methods are described and analysed in pages 59-65.

²⁰ See "tools for evaluating the validation processes as they are applied to non-formal and informal learning in any setting. The tools have been developed by the peer learning cluster on the recognition of learning outcomes and are based mainly on discussions in the peer learning activity held in Brussels (January 2007)." Ibid. Annex 2 pages 78-85.



procedure for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes might be greatly refined and improved. The current criteria leave much to be desired because they are nearly always based on a number of years spent in a given sector of activity, whereas the concept of learning outcomes seeks to surpass the learning process to focus on what individuals know and can do. ... Furthermore, by placing emphasis on research, it will be possible to bring the recognition of nonformal and informal learning outcomes out of its relatively isolated position vis-à-vis practices in formal education and training, and employment and the use of human resources. However, research programmes will require standardisation of the vocabulary and the underlying concepts – quantitative information can be only collected if the subject matter is clearly defined.”²¹

Although this author has considerable sympathy with this view, given the cultural and legal differences between national systems with the EU, in practice such research, may only illuminate common issues, rather than provide systematic conclusions.²²

Research on Validity and Reliability of Assessment

Much of the research in this field has been directed to the working of the National Curriculum in schools in England. There is also a growing body of such research in competence-based vocational education and training in other English-speaking countries, notably Australia.²³ The majority of the published literature in the English language either refers to policy statements, or is more than 10 years old.

In a 2003 study of assessment of National Vocational Qualifications [NVQs] it was argued, “For NVQ assessment to be reliable, each assessors’ judgements must be consistent for various candidates and tasks and consistent with the

²¹ Werquin P (2010), *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning OUTCOMES, POLICIES AND PRACTICES*, OECD, Paris, page 85.

²² Although the need for such research is restricted within the EU, the policy considerations imposed by the Treaty of Union do not apply on a wider canvas and mutual learning and improvement may well result from a wider analysis.

²³ See for example, “Assessment is a burning issue in the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Debates and discussion about competency based assessment, evidence based assessment, assessment validation, graded assessment, recognition of prior learning, recognition of current competence, mutual recognition, online assessment, holistic assessment, workplace assessment and key competencies have taken place over the last 10 years against a background of a changing and dynamic National VET system.”
http://www.icvet.tafensw.edu.au/resources/assessment_vet.htm



judgements of other assessors. In this situation, the question that arises is 'How can NVQ assessors' judgements be standardised (made consistent and reliable)?'²⁴ The study concluded, "The belief that standardising procedures, paperwork and/or practice will standardise assessment decisions needs to be challenged. It is likely that standardising processes, procedures, and practice will make the NVQ system fairer if assessors judge in a similar way, but it will not necessarily ensure that consistent assessment decisions are made. This is why the standardisation of assessment decisions is crucial."²⁵ The nature of a possible solution is "One approach is to tackle the problem that the reliability of NVQs might be lower than is desirable. Konrad (1998 & 1999)²⁶ argued that the literature about communities of practice could be used to improve the training of NVQ internal verifiers (and consistency in assessment judgements). Eraut and Steadman (1998) support this view, concluding that the training of assessors and verifiers was not focused sufficiently on building assessment communities that would result in consistent and comparable decisions."²⁷

This raises a number of practical issues of how Communities of Practice²⁸ can be optimised and the ways in which the professionalisation of RPLO roles and responsibilities might be effectively implemented.²⁹ This issue is examined in detail by Bednarz and Salini's paper on the Swiss experience. However, the issue of the quality of formative and summative assessment of RPLO is still a major issue to be tackled. It will be considered, inter alia, by the continuation project "Recognition and Development of Vocational Education and Training Competencies."³⁰

²⁴ Greatorex J and Shannon M (2003), "How can NVQ assessors' judgements be standardised?" A paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, 11-13 September 2003 at Heriot-Watt University Edinburgh., page 1. http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/digitalAssets/113886_How_can_NVQ_Assessors_Judgements_be_Standardised.pdf

²⁵ Greatorex and Shannon (2003), Op. Cit., page 5.

²⁶ These papers are available at <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000889.htm> and <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000001074.htm>

²⁷ Greatorex and Shannon (2003), Op. Cit., pages 8 and 9.

²⁸ A starting point for this discussion may be found at Smith, M. K. (2003, 2009) 'Communities of practice', *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm.

²⁹ This comment refers to the Units and Modules developed at QCF/EQF Levels 5, 6 and 7 by the RPLO Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project – for more information see the project web site at <http://www.rplo.eu>

³⁰ This Italian Transfer of Innovation Project [PEIRA] is coordinated by the Fondazione Politecnico di Milano, which was one of the partners in the RPLO project and runs from 1 October 2010 for two years.



Wall's paper "Enabling and disabling discourses in promoting RPLO policy and practice in higher education" indicates a starting point for this debate and points to the potential of a higher education approach to the issue of professionalisation.

Dželalija's paper on the Theoretical Basis for the Principle of Equal Value to Recognition of Prior Learning and Formal Learning takes as its starting point the measurable properties of Learning Outcomes as components of Certification in a system of Qualifications within the European Higher Education Area, which now covers 47 countries.³¹ This paper focuses on the relationships between Units of learning and a Qualification in the context of Quality Assurance.

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 22 October 2010

³¹ See the text of the *Budapest-Vienna Declaration* at the Bologna process web site <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

