

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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In the previous school-year 120 thousand correspondence, part-time and night-school students registered on higher education trainings in Hungary. Most of these students have a job and they decided to continue their education. Some of these students have a strong practical knowledge from their field, but they do not have a qualification of that. Generally they aimed to get a higher salary at their workplace or they have to get a certification because it was their employer's request. In some cases during the consultations these students realize that their practical knowledge is more up-to-date than their teachers'. Moreover sometimes they have previous knowledge from workplace trainings or self-trainings. The problem is that the accreditation of this knowledge in higher education trainings in Hungary does not use common. In this study we aimed to call the attention to the opportunity for accreditation of prior experiential learning in higher education trainings. This is an already existing process for correspondence students at the University of Debrecen in the field of human recourse counselling. With this validation method these students' practical knowledge from the field of Human Resource Management can be recognized by a formal training system, so they pay less charge for the training.

Keywords: higher education, Hungary, lifelong learning, learning methods

Learning methods and the benefits of prior knowledge

Although there is no universal definition, multiple approaches exist to define the concept of learning and knowledge. Mihaly Polanyi, the Hungarian polymath, proposed a philosophical approach, while others attended to define these concepts from a cognitive or pedagogical perspective. From the context of this study, the lifelong learning approach is of significant importance with special focus on the overarching strategy of the European Union also recognized in Hungary. In 2000, the European Commission presented "A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning" (II) in Lisbon in order to cope with the challenges of knowledge economy. The Memorandum emphasizes the importance of the recognition of skills and prior knowledge gained through different learning methods, while it also highlights to enhance the status of education by improving the ways in which learning

participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated. The document identifies the different categories of learning activities as the followings:

- formal learning which takes place in education and training institutions, leading to recognized diplomas and qualifications;
- non-formal learning which takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalized certificates. Non-formal learning may be provided in the workplace and through the activities of civil organizations;
- informal learning which is a natural accompaniment to everyday life.

This approach can be completed by the notion that formal learning activities take place in an environment that is constructed for this special purpose (Coladryn & Bjornavold, 2004). As also emphasized in the Memorandum, from the perspective of lifelong learning in the 21st century, the return on learning is of significant importance not only for the individuals, but for society as a whole as well. Individuals can harness learning if in possession of the additional knowledge gained, further advantages can be exploited in the labour market, the intellectual and/or financial capital invested can be refunded or it allows the transformation of knowledge into money. As proven by a Hungarian research (Polónyi, 2004), the benefits associated with higher education qualification acquired in the framework of formal learning are undeniable. The calculated private rate of return on learning is the lowest for vocational training (4.69%), while secondary school certificate and university degree accounts for a similar rate of return (above 13%). When considering the social rate of return, the lowest return is associated with vocational training (0.58%), while the highest with secondary school qualification (9.06%). Higher education, however, accounts for a significantly lower rate of return (5.28%) for the society as a whole. As no similar research has been conducted in the previous years, more recent data on the rate of return on learning are not available. However, according to a research on wage premiums to education (Varga, 2010), the wage premium to education of those with higher education qualification has decreased after 2006, which has been followed naturally by the decline of private rate of return as well. The study highlighted that the wage premium to secondary education has not been decreased. There are only a limited number of researches on the rate of return in non-formal and informal learning activities. A research conducted among students of the Hungarian Szent István University enrolled in correspondence courses (Varró, 2002) addressed the question how members of the sample group appreciate the accreditation of knowledge obtained in non-formal learning activities. More than 80% of the respondents agreed that formal accreditation of students' prior learning by the way of granting credits should be recognized. The research also highlighted that most of the students do not recognize the difference between non-formal and informal learning. The claim is supported by a representative survey of Hungarian full-time employees (Török, 2006). More than 48% of the survey's respondents reported that they have not been learning anything in the last 12 months during their work activity. *Ron Faris* (2005) by his research conducted in Canada underlined the notion that the majority (upwards of 70%) of learning in the workplace is informal. However, he has also drawn attention to the fact that informal knowledge gained in the workplace is rather difficult to externalize, identify and recognize in formal education. The recognition of skills and knowledge gained through various learning methods in Hungary has been analysed by the assistance of Tempus Public Foundation (Vámosi, 2010). The study emphasized that 22% of higher education teaching professionals are

acquainted with the notion of “application of learning outcomes”, although it does not indicate its actual application. One fifth of the teachers recognize knowledge gained in formal learning, while the higher education sector is rather dismissive towards the formal acknowledgement of other forms of prior knowledge. Only 8% of the instructors of 57 higher education institutes participating in the survey reported that prior knowledge obtained in periodic training should be recognized in higher education, while a negligible part of the participants (less than 5%) believe that the accreditation of informal learning should be emphasized.

For adults, the outcome of energy invested, the benefits of knowledge obtained are rather associated to the work and workplace. Based on the adaptation of the Education Participation Scale (Boshier, 1982) for adults, the employee group addressed in this study reflects rather the factor of “social stimulation”. An employee with multiple competencies can be associated with an employee with strong continuous learning skills who can successfully adapt to changing work and life conditions. According to empirical and theoretical analyses, the benefits gained through different forms of knowledge management can be determined as the followings:

- *benefits of formal learning*: undoubted recognition of the certification by society and the labour market
- *benefits of non-formal learning*: broadening of factual, lexical knowledge; not recognized as real learning by society; workplace trainings might be considered without added value by the labour market
- *benefits of informal learning*: ambiguous benefits for the individual as well, neither recognised nor approved by society

Notwithstanding the fact that the notion of “life-long learning” has been accepted by every education researcher, the professor of the University of Lille has highlighted a remarkable outcome in his research on the measurement of knowledge (Feutrie, 2007). Feutrie evaluated the European countries according to how quickly they implement the methods of measuring learning outcomes in their education systems. The Hungarian education system is characterized by examinations, scores and measurable results. Knowledge gained through formal learning activities is most valued by such systems as only formal learning is recognized by the labour market and contributes to postgraduate studies. Non-formal learning may be provided alongside the mainstream system of education: in language courses, and workplace trainings. Although they can lead to formalized certificates, with the exception of language certificates, these qualifications are neither recognized nor approved by other workplaces or educational institutions. The institutions specializing in adult education may require prior knowledge; however, candidates must meet language and IT requirements only. The benefits of learning can be assessed from the perspective of the individual, the labour market or the education system (Table 1)

Table 1. *Benefits of knowledge gained through various learning methods in Hungary*

	Formal learning	Non-formal learning	Informal learning
For the individual	Formalized certificates	Broadening of factual and lexical knowledge, competency development	Neither recognized nor approved in most cases
For the labour market	Certificates provide proof of knowledge	Not recognized as real knowledge	Not recognized except in special cases
For the education system	Pre-requirement of continuous studies	Moderate recognition as real knowledge	Limited recognition as real knowledge

(Source: Individual research of the authors)

As the table demonstrates, informal learning lacks both recognition and validation in Hungary. However, international practice deviates from the Hungarian one.

In France, the recognition of prior learning exists since the 1980s, while since 1985 informal learning as an access route to higher education has been recognized legally as well. Since 2002, individuals have a legal right to recognition of prior learning allowing candidates to gain exemptions or full qualification purely on the basis of validation of their prior knowledge. The French legislation was incentivized by social factors; policy makers realised that most work-related educational activities do not provide formal qualification. According to surveys, 30% of employees do possess the vocational knowledge, but lack formalized qualification. The French system introduced formal processes that allow individuals to be awarded a certificate of education purely on recognition of learning outside the formal education system. Up to 25-30 thousand people are participating in the recognition process each year. Each citizen with a minimum of 5 year of relevant work experience can apply for its recognition. In the United Kingdom, the idea to recognize prior learning was first advocated in the 1980s; today UK is a leading country in promoting the system. A unique aspect of the British system is the recognition of skills and competencies gained from housework and telework. The “European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and informal learning” website provides information on the validation procedures of European countries. (I2)

Outside of Europe, Canada is also a great example on the development and adaptation of measurement techniques. The procedure of recognition provides adequate opportunity for wide publicity. (I3) Data can be uploaded on the website of CIRL prior to the procedure. The association carries out client-requested counselling and the recognition of the skills of immigrants is also part of the process. The same procedure is applied by employers in order to assess vocational knowledge acquired abroad. In South Korea such procedures for the recognition of prior learning exist where credits are granted for different forms of learning activities. If certain number of credits is accumulated, the candidate may receive a degree (Halász et al., 2007).

The utilization of knowledge in educational frameworks: Validation

It is probably not a coincidence that the procedure applied in several European countries was labelled by the French expression *validation*. *Validation in vocational training* serves the purpose of broadening the possibility of acquiring certain qualifications, and gives a chance to elders eager to learn. It is a serious advantage for anyone with several years of professional experience to be exempted from the completion of various modules or to receive credits when presenting the already gained professional knowledge, thus being able to reduce the timeframe otherwise necessary for acquiring the given qualification. *Validation in higher education* means the recognition of prior knowledge along with the notion that several other activities (e.g. work) could result in knowledge gaining beyond formal learning activities. The basic principle of validation comprises the acceptance of various learning methods as equal, and thus evaluates the result of learning irrespectively of the learning environment. The concluding study of the project “*Systemic development of services in higher education*” (Derényi & Tót, 2011) describes the basis of a generally applicable validation procedure in Hungary. The procedure also assumes appropriate quality assurance, institutional protection and the protection of students. According to the proposal the identification of knowledge is assessed through evidence collection, comparison, correspondence and in the final stage through decision. For the implementation of the procedure the authors consider a consulting process inevitable, through which the applicants will be guided to be able to identify their knowledge attaining to the expectations. In case there is no satisfactory evidence or lack of evidence, they recommend direct knowledge testing.

The accreditation of knowledge gained through various learning methods at the University of Debrecen

As conclusions for the above mentioned project in higher education, some recommendations for the accreditation of knowledge gained through various learning methods - otherwise known as prior knowledge - by the Hungarian higher education were articulated, however, parallel legal regulation was not set in place. As the statement of the ministerial portfolio expresses, the question is worth regulating in a decree or a ministerial act based on the experiences of the academic initiatives. This lack of central regulation might be the exact reason why institutions restrict themselves from the application of validation. In spite of university autonomy, actors in the higher education scene also require extensive legal back-up for their applied procedures and full compliance with various quality assurance conditions. The project on institutional level was tested in a Hungarian higher education institution, although systemic application has not been implemented yet. In the case study, an experiment of validation is presented, which was developed by the University of Debrecen and which is applied in its MA in Human Resources Counselling.

Introduction of the organization

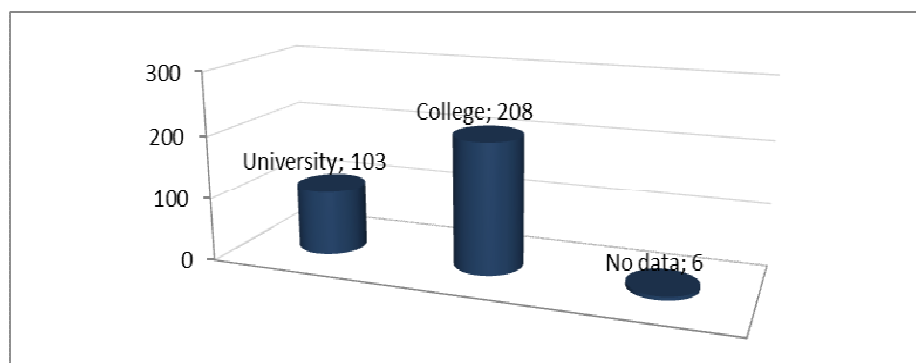
University of Debrecen is a fundamental higher education institution in Hungary. According to the latest statistical data (I4) it is the second most popular university among applicants. The student body consists of more than 33.000 students in 15 faculties. The Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training - responsible for the procedure - received in the recent application period (I4) 998 applications, with 881 applications ranking the Faculty first place. The number of active students on the Faculty ranges to 1498, from which 1060 are participating in correspondence courses. The training program of the Faculty embraces two higher level vocational trainings (both full-time and correspondence), four BA undergraduate programs (both full-time and correspondence) and the MA in Human Resources Counselling (only correspondence).

Introduction of the graduate program (Human Resources Counselling – HRC MA)

The University of Debrecen launched the MA graduate program in Human Resources Counselling in cooperation with two faculties - the Faculty of Business Administration and Rural Development and the Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training. The program is accredited in the field of humanities, but business administration and human management also play a relevant part in its course structure. The qualification entitles the graduate to perform tasks also in the area of adult training, counselling and human management. The program was launched in February 2009 as a cross-semester, correspondence course, and then in September 2009 both a full-time and a correspondence course joined in. The program consists of 4 semesters, and the number of lessons totals in 1350 hours. The requirements for graduation prescribe practical knowledge gaining in work environment within 3 semesters, in 230 working hours in total. 317 students were enrolled in the correspondence course; the number of active students reaches 191 at present.

The students enrolled in correspondence courses have not yet graduated by the Bologna System of Education. According to the previous education system, university degree signifies 5 years of participation, while college degree indicates 4 years of participation in the Hungarian higher education. Here, the former equals to the MA/MsC, while the latter to the BA/BsC level of the Bologna System. As statistical data confirms, most applicants for the program are college graduates: Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Distribution of applicants for the HRC MA according to basic qualifications (person)*



(Source: Individual research of the authors)

Further specialization of the degree is also a significant characteristic for the students enrolled in the program: Table 2.

Table 2. *Distribution of HRC MA students according to qualification (%)*

Andragogy	Cultural manager	Social educator	Social worker	Human resources	Teacher	Kindergarten teacher	Other
15.4	5.3	20.5	1.8	3.5	13.2	4.4	35.9

(Source: Individual research of the authors)

For the interpretation of the data, it is important to emphasize that the educational profile of the Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training and its predecessor institution has contained the programs of andragogy, social educator and kindergarten teacher. These programs are also overrepresented (46%) in the type of qualification.

Certainly, qualification does not necessarily correlate with the work place of the students. Related data are only available about the number of active students participating in the program: Table 3.

Table 3. *Number of students according to the type of workplace (person)*

Enterprise	Corporation	Multinational corporation	County Employment Centre	Office of the Mayor	Institution	Police/Army	Non-governmental organization
29	16	11	19	19	34	7	29

(Source: Individual research of the authors)

Data confirm that 56 students are employed in human resources units of economic associations without formalized professional knowledge, whereas 41 students are employed in human resources departments of public administration/public service units. The first degree enabled some to work in County Employment Centres, non-governmental organizations or smaller enterprises. 24 students are working in organizations specializing in adult training. The distribution of the group of students not appearing in Table 3 shows a strong spread.

The elaboration of the validation procedure

The Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training decided to make an attempt to introduce the validation procedure for the HRC MA students based on student composition, recommendations of the concluding study of the validation project (Derényi & Tót, 2011) and prevailing legal possibilities. The procedure to be elaborated had to comply with the current Hungarian legislation, and it also had to gain the acceptance of responsible organisational units of the Faculty and that of the University. The following rule was introduced into *Section 58 (7) of the Hungarian Act CXXXIX of 2005 on Higher Education*: “Credit transfer committee can recognise former studies and work experiences as fulfilment of academic requirements. The maximum amount of credits for recognition based on work experience shall be 30.” However, the accurate definition and interpretation of ‘work experience’ by the legislature cannot be assessed even after thorough

examination of the Act and its former execution decree. It may be hypothesized that institutional regulation and practice is entrusted with its tighter definition. The Faculty made the decision based on international literature and national experiments to accept 3 years of professional activity pursued by the student in labour relations, as entrepreneur, as social worker or as scholarship fellow as 'work experience'. The principle for definition bears the signs of recognition of various, even atypical employment forms in the 21th century. The next relevant question is the elaboration of the methodology for evaluation/measurement/recognition of prior knowledge. The emphasis on the monitoring and transmission of knowledge could be detected as guiding principles in the Act on higher education, thus recognition of prior knowledge was attached to formal courses in practice. Prior knowledge could be measured in accordance with the competences described in the syllabi of the courses to be accredited. The sample curriculum includes such courses, which are practical-oriented, for which competence is acquired through a work situation and by which examinations assess the existence of practical knowledge. Based on the structure of the sample curriculum, exemption from the fulfilment of practical requirements and/or from two course groups could be requested. The two course groups embrace human management and adult training. The institution combined two methods for the evaluation of prior knowledge: the declarative method (recognition based on documents) and the competence portfolio (evaluation of competences gained through work activity). 'Work experience' is recognised as the fulfilment of practical requirements through case-by-case consideration by the examination of the certificate of employment issued by the employer of the applicant and by considering the professional curriculum vitae describing the factual work experience in detail. Students requesting exemption from professional courses shall prepare an evaluation portfolio which includes the professional curriculum vitae, the enumeration of previous studies (with respective copies in documented cases), the description of the factual work experience and a presentation prepared by the applicant. The exemption from practical requirements is worth 9 credits, while the exemption from course requirements equals to 20 credits, therefore 29 credits in total - in accordance with the Act on higher education. The range of services in the registrars department was extended with counselling, reaching beyond the elaboration of the procedure. As part of the counselling, a preliminary formal report is issued which had resulted in the withdrawal of several student requests. Students can participate in the procedure for validation free of charge.

Validation data in the analysed organisation

The first possibility for the application of the validation procedure occurred in September of the 2011/2012 academic year at the Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training. Both students and the education team were challenged by the unfamiliarity of the procedure itself. The routine administration of student affairs was extended with counselling; and information gathering was aided by several group and individual consultation. The majority of interested students acknowledged in surprise that their professional knowledge could be recognised by the formal education system – such attitude is inconceivable based on their previous studies and experiences. In spite of the generally low levels of notice, the interest in the procedure has been raised due to counselling activity. In the case of students in their second academic year, the interest was significant: 51 from 80 students requested the procedure and only 2 requests were rejected. The number of requests

totalled in 112, by which 92 students applied for the exemption from practical requirements and 20 students requested the exemption from course requirements.

Summary

Based on the examination of the literature, international practice and the explicated case study, the claim could be made that validation should be significant and unavoidable part of the learning process of individuals and that of the higher education sector also in Hungary. The procedure applied at the Faculty of Nursing and Adult Training at the University of Debrecen has shown that students requesting the procedure have already gained the knowledge based on which they continue their activities, and they expect the broadening of their vision, theoretical background and certainly the certificate of the qualification upon graduation. There are naturally some risks ingrained when the certificates of the qualification could be gained with less effort and as the result of the recognition of the knowledge gained through various learning methods, which mean symbolic goods bearing economic advantages. However, through the quality assurance, transparency and trust attached to the procedure such cases become manageable. One key pillar of the systemic introduction is the appearance of the idea of life-long learning in the mission statement of the higher education institution. As additional elements, student-centric administration and service, counselling, support for individual learning activities, commitment of the instructors appear to go beyond the renewal of the content of the education programs. Therefore, the spread of the validation procedure in Hungary could be accelerated by competence based education-assessment, and by joining the European Qualifications Framework.

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