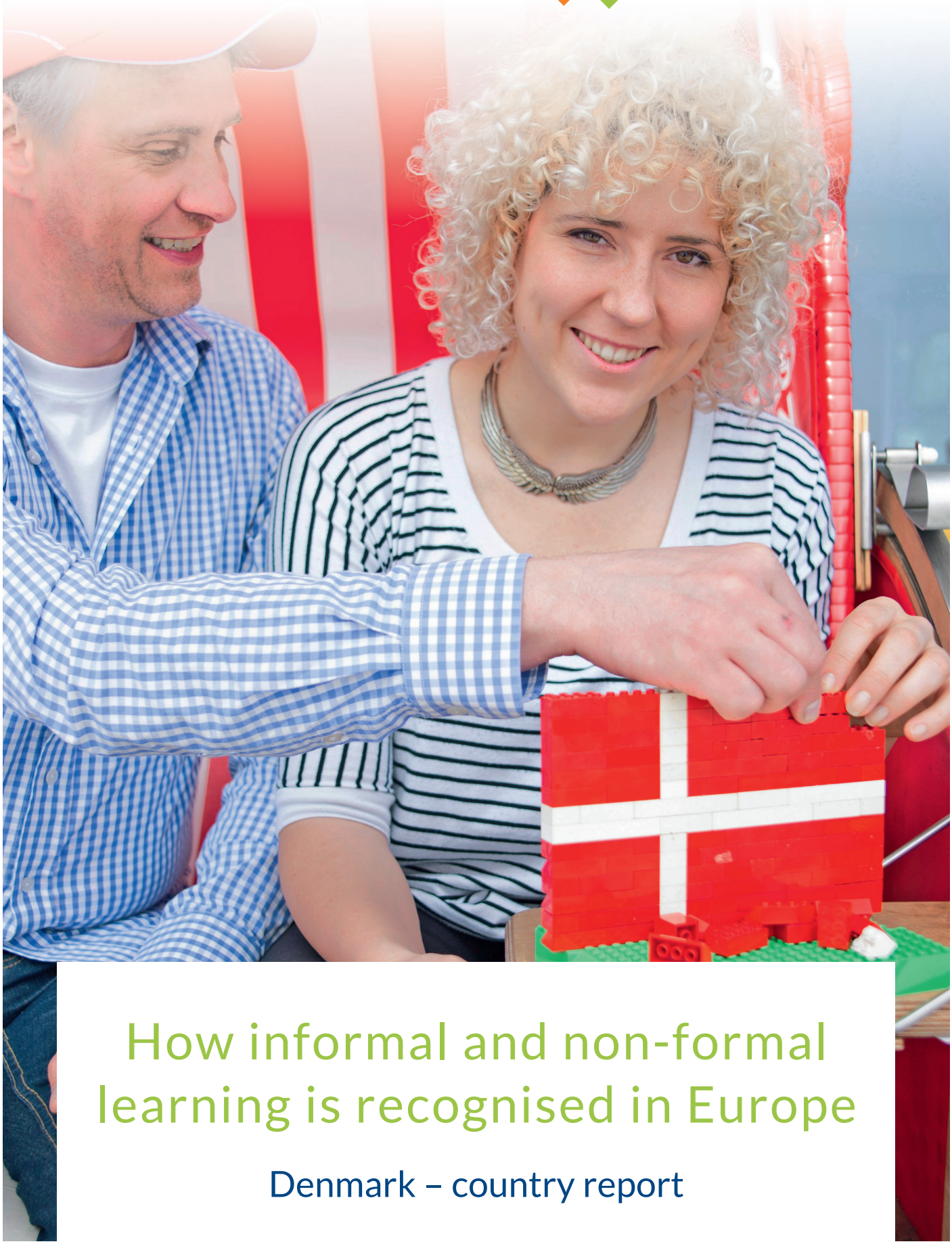
Competences for Europe



How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Denmark – country report

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How informal and non-formal learning is recognised in Europe

Denmark – country report

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This country report was composed as part of a larger study on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. The country reports of Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as well as the summary of the study both in English and German, and finally the complete publication (in German only) can be found at

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/vnfil-in-europe.

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1 Initial situation

Danish society is facing major challenges to compete globally and to maintain high employment levels. Continuous readjustment to the knowledge society and new trends in the world around us, such as increased outsourcing of jobs, make new demands on our competences. Therefore, it has never been so important for individuals to keep acquiring new skills and competences throughout their lives. This is a challenge not just for individuals and companies, but for society as a whole. In order to tackle this, we need increased adult education and vocational training in the labour market, not least to support workers with low levels of formal qualification and those who are struggling to get a foothold in the labour market. The Danish strategy for lifelong learning (Ministry of Education 2007a) answers those challenges. The validation of non-formal and informal learning is part of the strategy for lifelong learning and has been a priority on the policy agenda in Denmark for more than a decade.

Denmark has a long tradition of individual competence evaluation as part of the strategy for adult learning, the result of this is a focus on identification and validation of individual competences. In 2004, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry for Science, Technology and Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs presented the policy paper “Recognition of Prior Learning Within the Education System” (Ministry of Education 2004) to parliament. The paper presented new ideas for how Danes could achieve personal growth and learn new competences in the educational system, on the job, through liberal adult education, and by volunteering. The main idea of the report was to present ways to develop hidden competences, and how to bring them out into the light. The message was: “Whatever you can do counts”. The policy paper is still the basis for the Danish approach to validation of prior learning in 2014.

2 Vocational training and informal learning in Denmark: characteristics and concepts

In Denmark, the concept “anerkendelse af realkompetencer” are used for validation of prior learning. The concept takes into account an individual’s knowledge, skills and competences, no matter where or how they have been acquired. Therefore, prior learning includes competences that have been acquired in formal education or in the individual’s work life, for example, what we learn through our job or when we participate in workplace skills development. It also includes competences acquired in the third sector, for example, at folk high schools (non-formal adult education), from participation in different activities in the business world, or actively volunteering in relief organizations, networks, etc. In conclusion, the concept encompasses formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning.

In Denmark, validation has been developed with a top-down approach focusing on legislation. At the same time, a bottom-up approach has been developed for implementing validation activities in educational institutions. The legislation and formal framework have been set nationally, but the implementation is decentralized at the provider level. Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been an important focal point for many years in the non-formal sector, especially among organizations and institutions engaged in liberal education (third sector).

Validation of non-formal and informal learning within the adult education and training programs receives broad support from relevant stakeholders (including social partners) and is seen as a very important instrument to promote participation in adult and continuing training. However, there is still considerable potential for development and improvement concerning information and awareness raising, standardization, quality assurance and cooperation between stakeholders (educational institutions, job centres, unemployment funds, trade unions, third sector, etc.).

Persons with low levels of formal qualification are often mentioned in connection with efforts to raise competence levels and educational efforts, and they are a particular target group for competence development, including validation of non-formal and informal learning.
The Danish educational system contains two separate parts: the first addresses the ordinary educational system for children and young people covering primary, lower and upper secondary teaching, as well as higher education; and the second addresses the parallel educational system specifically for adults. To some extent, the parallel system covers the same types of teaching and learning as in the ordinary system, but is focused on adults. In addition, there is a range of specific adult programs; for example, Further Adult Education (VVU), Diploma degrees and master studies only exist as adult education. According to the legislation, adult education has an obligation to take into consideration the needs and experience of the adult participants; therefore, having a job and the ability to study must be possible at the same time.
The Danish Vocational system is part of the ordinary educational system and the parallel system. The vocational education and training programs are for young people to complete a program of training that can qualify them for employment and at the same time, accommodate the needs of the labour market. The program is part of the ordinary educational system. The following programs are part of the parallel system. Basic adult education (GVU) gives adults older than 25 years the possibility to complete the vocational education and training programs based on earlier education and work experiences. The Basic adult education begins with assessment of prior learning. The adult vocational training programs (AMU) are part of the parallel system as well. The AMU programs are target persons with low levels of formal qualification. All vocational learning takes place at the vocational education schools and at the adult vocational training centres.
The adult vocational training programs give adults the possibility for upgrading competences for the labour market as well as personal competences through obtaining formal vocational education and training. The programs primarily provide skills and competences directed towards specific sectors and job functions. It is a flexible system which aims at meeting current changes and needs for new skills and competences on the labour market. Adult vocational training programs have been developed for workers with low and high levels of formal qualification independent of age. Everybody may participate in adult vocational training programs as long as they are residents or hold a job in Denmark.

The programs have been organized in approximately 150 joint competence descriptions equivalent to 150 job areas. A joint competence description groups the programs relevant for up-skilling and qualifying in one specific job area. There are approximately 2.900 different adult vocational training programs and 200 single subject courses from the mainstream vocational training and education program, all of which may be combined. They are mainly short vocational training programs, the duration of which normally varies from half a day to six weeks, in average three days. The training is organized in classes or as open workshops where participants may follow different programs at different levels in the same room with the same teacher. AMU is not similar to vocational education but can be recognized if the person will continue in the Basic adult education (GVU). All programs in AMU are developed by social partners and approved by the Ministry of Education.

3 Persons with low levels of formal qualification: Concept, employment situation, further education behaviour

Persons with low levels of formal qualification are often defined as people with lack of skills and competences reflected in formal education at primary school level. In a broader perspective they have competences not connected to formal education. They have a great diversity of experiences and "real"-competences, it is an inhomogeneous group. Some are satisfied with their job and are not motivated for further learning; others are more interested in new job and career development. Validation of non-formal and informal learning can make competences visible and open up for possibilities of education and work in a carrier perspective for the individual.
Persons with low levels of formal qualification represent approximately 16 percent of adults between 20 and 65 years. They are working in all branches and sectors, they have a risk to be marginalized in the society. 33 percent are unemployed (Ministry of Education 2013a).
The most of the persons with low levels of formal qualification have practical and craftsman like competences. The majority is male.

4 Core elements of the validation of formal and non-formal learning

4.1 Legal Basis

The key legislation on validation of prior learning in Denmark is Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007, entitled "Development of the recognition of prior learning in adult education and continuing training". This legislation has been effective since August 2007.
The legislation gives each individual the right to have his or her prior learning experiences validated in relation to specific goals of adult education and continuing training. It focuses on the needs of the individual and aims to make the process as accessible and flexible as possible (Ministry of Education 2007b). The legislation says also that the educational institutions have to inform about the possibility of validation of prior learning at the institutions website, the institutions have to build up methods and procedures and they have to ensure quality and evaluation of validation practice.
Act no. 556 includes the following six educational fields:

- Single course subjects in general adult education (basic level(AVU))
- Single course subjects in general upper secondary education
- Adult Vocational Training Programs (AMU)
- Basic Adult Education (GVU) (GVU will be replaced by vocational education for adults (EUV) with the new legislation from August 2015)
- Short-cycle post-secondary adult education (Further Adult Education (VVU))
- Medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programs).

The legislation does not include Master Programs. The Danish Parliament decided in 2007 that Masters are not included in the legislation. According to Danish law in all areas of education where validation is possible, the assessment must be conducted by the educational institution offering the corresponding programs.

The Danish concept of recognition of prior learning is based on common principles. The principles are fundamental to the further political process and agreements amongst stakeholders:

Table 1: Principles for assessment and quality assurance (source: Ministry of Education 2004)

Principles for assessment and quality assurance
▪ The individual citizen is able to request an assessment of his or her prior learning; based on the framework and regulations applicable within the individual areas of education. ▪ The individual has a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of his or her prior learning. ▪ A user fee may be charged for a competence assessment, except for the persons with low levels of formal qualification. ▪ Competence assessments should always be based on the objectives and admission requirements of the education program. ▪ The individual's competences should be recognized, irrespective of where and how they were acquired, but without compromising the quality and standards of the education and training programs. ▪ The methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome. ▪ The result of the assessment should be documented by issuing a certificate.

In the area of adult vocational training, as well as vocational education and training, the social partners are usually involved in decisions about assessment of prior learning. They have contributed significantly and have had influence in a number of areas within the legislation. Thus, the Government works closely with social partners, for example with the Council for Vocational Education and Training (REU), the Council for Adult Education and Training (VEU-Rådet), the Council for Academy Profession Education and Professional Bachelor Education. These Councils advise the Government on their specific areas of education and training. The National Trade Committees define the contents of VET qualifications and competence frameworks. There are also trade committees that act at a local level.

Assessment of prior learning gives the individual the following opportunities:

- Access to educational programs
- Tailor-made education
- Obtain "competence certificate", if the knowledge, skills and competences are equivalent with those obtained by completing a module or a course in the program
- Obtain a "program certificate" if the knowledge, skills and competences are equivalent with the learning outcomes described in the entire educational program

The opportunities differ in the different educational fields. Within AMU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full AMU (education targets) or for individual subjects that are included in a common description of competences, and they can issue certificates of competence for parts of these. In AMU the opportunity is a tailor-made education obtaining “competence certificate” and a “program certificate”
In GVU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programs and certificates of competences for parts of these. In GVU, there is always an assessment of competences in the beginning of the course to develop a tailor-made education.

4.2 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

In Denmark, the key players in working with validation are focused on strengthening the use of validation especially for persons with low levels of formal qualification. They are doing this by creating a cohesive process for validation of prior learning, where several players are included. There is a series of development projects aiming to strengthen the validation effort. For several years the Ministry of Education has set up development projects within AMU. The aim is to improve the use of validation of prior learning and develop a more sustainable and qualified practice. There are projects aiming to improve the development of methods, to develop and strengthen cooperation between counsellors from job-centres and educational institutions. And projects aiming to strengthen the “pre-phase” work, i.e. when the identification and parts of the documentation are carried out.
Practical experience that the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR) has gathered (National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning 2012) shows that validation makes sense to the individual under following conditions:

- The applicant must be met with openness and respect.
- Information and counselling about the process must be given.
- The applicant must be given the best opportunity to go over a clarification and an assessment with an outcome that they deem to be meaningful and fair, according to the expectations and motives of the applicant.
- Support and counselling should be provided throughout the process, and the people carrying out the assessment should make as much effort as the applicant to understand what the applicant is seeking.
- The applicant should have access to help to ensure they understand the information on the process and they should be given the opportunity to create an overview of time, methods and requirements.
- Educational institutions should plan clarification and assessment processes by introducing clear and transparent procedures.
- You must have an individual approach in order to meet the individual applicant.
- The applicant should receive continuous counselling based on their needs.

The experience (ibid) also shows that validation makes sense to the workplace under following conditions:

- Manage a critical situation with restructuring, closures and layoffs.
- Adjust to a development in society, within the industry or the profession.
- Generally ensure a higher competence level among employees. At the same time, the workplace has to be able to justify using the formal education system in that situation and find it relevant to have the employees' prior learning assessed. It could be to have:
- Shortened relevant education for employees and thereby save time and money.
- The employees' broad prior learning clarified and documented.
- The employees' formal competences documented in education plans. The plan belongs to the employee, but as a leader you can also have insight into what is in the plan if the employee approves.
- Motivated employees who want to have in-service training and further education through the clarification and assessment process.

Examples (ibid) show that:

- Consideration of the individual and cooperation between employees and the organization is absolutely essential in the use of prior learning assessments, if the employees are not to feel as though they are being forced into an assessment process.
- A clarification phase and employee involvement is greatly important for the employees, so that they feel ownership over the process.
- Close cooperation and a good dialogue between the workplace, the employees and the educational institution is crucial for a positive process.
- The educational institution has to understand the context, the background, the goal and the framework for the use of validation and formal education in the workplace.
- The workplace must also understand the educational framework and terms of validation and formal education.

There are very good possibilities for validation of prior learning in the Danish system, but the possibilities are still too unknown in the public as already mentioned. It remains difficult to measure the relevance and outcomes for the target group and more statistics and research are needed about individual outcomes.
The number of validations has increased within basic adult education (GVU). Validations within adult vocational training programs (AMU) have dramatically decreased. The dramatically decreased activity in adult vocational training programs follows a decreasing activity in adult vocational training programs in general.
The table below shows the development of activity for validation of prior learning from 2010-2012, based on data from the Ministry of Education (Aagaard 2014: 14).

Table 2: Development of activity for validation of prior learning from 2010-2012 (source: Ministry of Education 2013b)

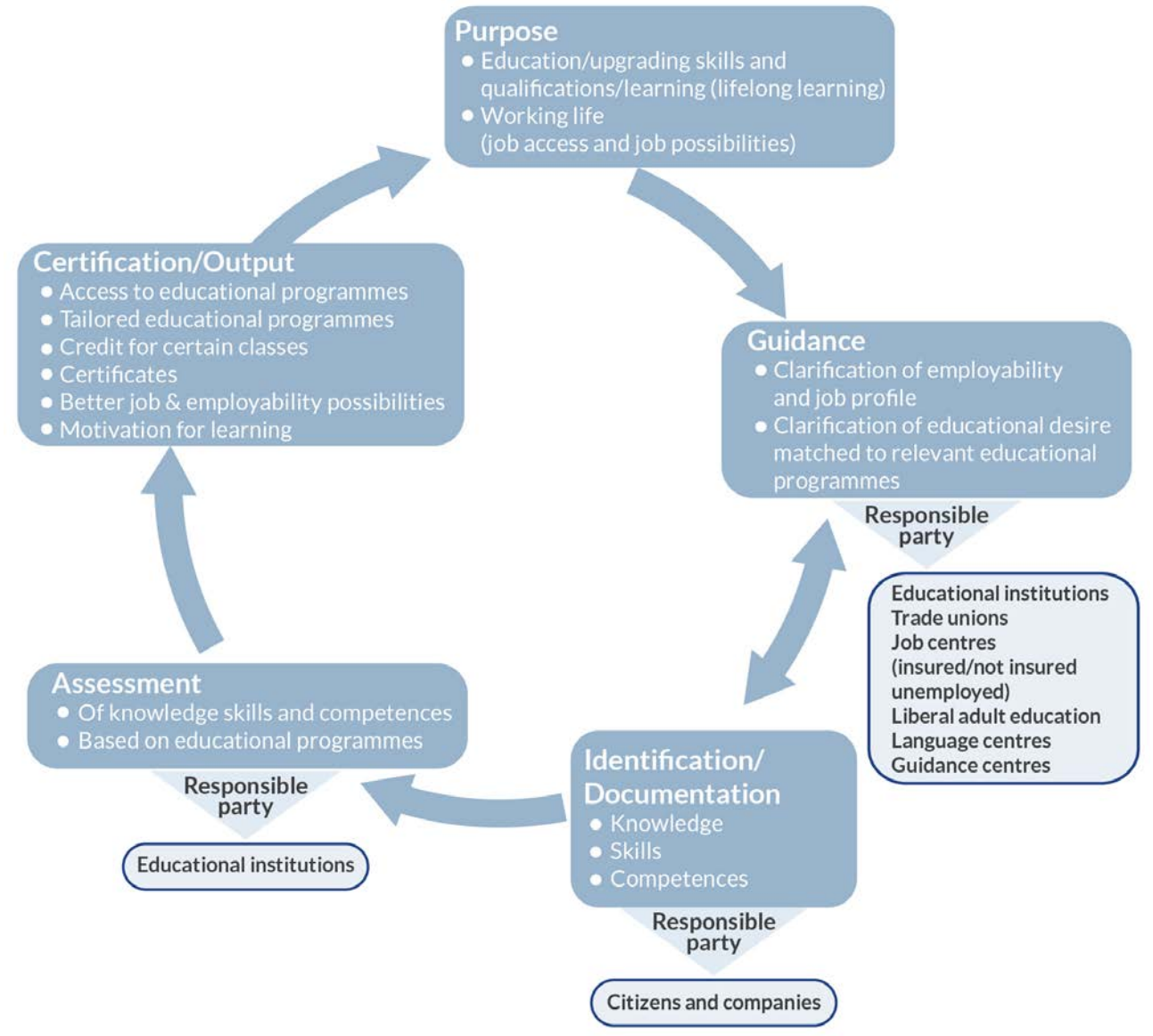
Annual students	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
Vocational training (AMU)	279,3	197,4	53
Basic adult education (GVU)	32,97	34,84	78,86

An ‘annual full-time student’ is a measure used to calculate the annual activity of a certain course or certificate. One annual full-time pupil equates to one student in full-time training for one year. The training-period of individual competence evaluation (IKV) within vocational training for adults (AMU) varies between 0.5 - 5 days, i.e. between 0.0025 and 0.025 annual full-time students. In 2012 there were 8.683 participants registered in IKV in AMU.

4.3 Procedures and instruments

In Denmark, there is a significant focus on creating a cohesive process through identification, documentation, assessment and validation of competences. The model below illustrates how different players can be included in the process in connection with counselling and assessment. It provides a good foundation for understanding the approach to procedures and instruments that are used in validation and the validation process.

The process for recognition of prior learning in an educational perspective and a Danish context



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The genesis of the model was discussions in the committee on how to improve and strengthen the use of validation of prior learning. The Ministry of Education developed the model to illustrate the core four elements in a coherent validation process with involvement of the central stakeholders. It illustrates how the education perspective of the candidate can be combined with a job and employment perspective and how different stakeholders can have divergent tasks through the stages of the overall process. And the need to be aware that the involvement of different stakeholders is a precondition for a successful validation process for the individual.
The educational institutions are responsible for conducting prior learning assessment on the basis of the educational standards. Other bodies can manage information, guidance and counselling in a broader perspective.
Guidance and counselling is important through the whole process to help the individual understand what validation is about and individual decisions made in the phases, e.g. after the assessment process, guidance is needed to determine how the individual candidate can use his or her prior learning assessment, including a plan for a subsequent educational program.

The intention with the model is to ensure a more coherent process and develop a common approach to validation methods and practices in general.
In Denmark there are a number of procedures and instruments available for identification, documentation and assessment of informal and non-formal learning. The educational institutions are using a variety of methods which supplement each other. Some institutions are developing their own methods and are tailoring methods to the context and the experiences of the individuals. The methods are not standardized, but there is an ongoing exchange of experiences between institutions. With a much decentralized process for developing practice, it is very needed to collaborate to ensure quality in the activities. Collaboration through development projects contribute to a common approach.
Other bodies, such as job centres, have developed their own procedures and instruments, like CV or portfolio tools.
A distinction is often made between general and specific types of competence assessment:

- A general or divergent assessment aims to identify all competences mastered by the individual. The focus of the process is for the person to clarify and describe all of his or her prior learning, in order to identify future choices of job and education. Often, the process will follow a formative learning approach. Examples of approaches include “My competence folder”: www.minkompetencemappe.dk and the tool for documentation of and dialogue about personal competences: www.realkompetence-folkeoplysning.dk
- A specific or convergent assessment aims to identify which of the individuals’ competences are relevant in relation to the standards of a specific qualification. This can be carried out after a broad assessment.

Most tools include self-assessment, during which the individual is to grade his/her experience, knowledge or competences on a scale typically ranging from one to six. Often, the individuals themselves describe their competences. In other instances, the competences have been described in advance, and the individuals are merely required to assess their competences on a certain scale. Documentation through self-assessment enables individuals to reflect on their own competences and makes it possible to describe them in a systematic way. In order for the documentation to be reliable, self-assessments cannot stand alone. Other methods used for assessment are tests, i.e. multiple choice or written assignments.

The Portfolio method is used as a declarative method. “My competence folder” was launched in 2007 by the Ministry of Education. It is an electronic folder in which an individual may gather documentation for all competences, irrespective of where they have been achieved. It is the individual who updates the folder and it is up to the individual to decide who can have access to the folder. The intention of the “My competence folder” initiative is to have a common tool used by many and it is being revised to ensure wider use. One of the aims is to make it easier to use. According to the evaluation prepared by the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA 2010), the dialogue-based method is the most common assessment method all over the Danish training and education system. But still it differs a lot who is using it and how the educational institutions are using it as part of the assessment process. An ongoing development process is needed to match the demands from the institutions for usability and relevance.

The methods can be a combination of the declarative method, written test, examination, and self-testing. It can be supported by the use of electronic or manual tools.
Oral assessment or a dialogue-based method involves a one-to-one dialogue or interview between the individual and the assessor. Sometimes it will take place in the beginning and will be the primary method. Sometimes it will take place after a test, written assignment or the self-assessment and will be a supplement to different methods. It can support the reflection and verification of the individual competences.
Interviews are often combined with tests and practical assignments at AMU and GVU. Practical assignments are mostly used at AMU and GVU in Denmark.

To some extent, practice-oriented methods have already been applied for validation of prior learning in Denmark; however they can be difficult to apply. Such methods are therefore often combined with other methods, such as tests, interviews or written assignments that reflect on problem-solving.
Task and problem-solving in work or work-like situations provide an opportunity to uncover competences through the tasks that are carried out in practice. These may be competences that are evident here and now, or, if the task/issue is part of an unknown situation, it might be a question of uncovering potential that the person has within a specific area. While solving the task or problem, there is also the opportunity to reflect and outline the reasons for any actions taken. Through this process, any preceding knowledge, understanding and attitudes will also become more evident.

Below is a series of examples of such assessment methods that are controlled by practical functions and tasks often used in AMU and GVU (Nistrup 2013):

- Observation in workplaces. Through observation of task and problem-solving in practice you uncover competences that the person has here and now. If the observation is combined with dialogue during and/or after performing the work task/the problem-solving, it is possible to uncover the preceding considerations for the choice of actions. Like the use of knowledge, competences and attitudes used when solving the task/issue that are uncovered during conversation.
- Solving practical tasks and issues in a simulated workplace with work-like tasks (e.g. school work experiences). Solving a task/issue is combined with conversation and/or written reflection on solving the task. In this way, you uncover the knowledge, competences and attitudes that are behind those actions.
- Solving real problems or cases based on functions that are included in the profession/job in practice. You work on the practical execution of tasks and solving tasks/issues in a shop and you work with written/oral accounts that document reasons and define implicit knowledge. This could be documentation of 'here and now' competences and documentation of predisposition for actions, if working in an unknown situation. Through conversation or written reflections on actions, you clarify posterior knowledge and capabilities.
- Self-assessment of work assignment experiences. The self-assessment can be formulated as a schedule (electronic), a web, a wheel or a target. There will be a description of typical work assignments within a profession or business. There will be a series of questions or statements that the person is asked to assess, based on their experiences with solving the work assignment. The assessment is typically done on a scale from one to six, where one is no or little experience. Self-assessments are often combined with other types of documentation, where the purpose is to confirm or question the self-assessment.

The following describes how a development project worked on connecting a job/skills profile from the workplace with the AMU educational goals:

"One of the challenges of the pre-phase is connecting the job or skills profile with the educational goals of AMU. The job and skills profile is always completed in cooperation with the relevant company and the employee. For the unemployed, this also takes place in a close dialogue with the individual. It is important that the description is realistically based on future job assignments and that it uses language and concepts that are recognizable and understandable for the individual, so that they can identify with the descriptions. The language used in profile descriptions differs from the language used in the AMU goals, as they are formulated in a more general and context-free way. It can be difficult for the individual to understand the language used, and to connect it to their own skills and competences. You can create question guides and exchange experiences on planning the process. Due to the language used, job and skills profiles may benefit from further work to turn them into self-assessment tools. This can be done by reformulating the job and competence requirements as questions, and by adding a scale, for example, ranging from "no knowledge/experience of"; "some knowledge/experience of"; "a lot of knowledge of/experience of". (National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning 2012)

The job and skills description is the tool that subject teachers use to find the AMU educational goals that match the described skills and competences requirements, thus forming the basis for the validation of prior learning in AMU. The educational goals can be added to the job and competence profiles, the self-assessment tool or be described in an independent profile. The profile is in this way the background for the documentation of skills and competences that can be assessed in the adult training programs. The competence certificate or the program certificate can be used as an entry to the labour market for a new job and maybe better job. The certificate obtained in vocational adult training is recognized by social partners and employers.

4.4 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

One of the main arguments for inauguration of validation of prior learning has been increased motivation for education and competence development by especially persons with low levels of formal qualification. An evaluation of validation of prior learning in AMU (Industriens uddannelser 2009) shows that more than 50 percent of individuals that have accomplished validation of prior learning continue in the educational system in AMU. This percentage tells us that the procedures and methods in use in the validation activities are relevant for the target group. Still a lot of the professionals working with validation are very focused on development of the methods to ensure to meet all competences the individual. It is a complex matter to develop more standardized methods and at the same time to meet the complexity of the competences that the individual has and make them visible in a valid way.

4.4.1 Financial Structure

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is financially supported by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. Public funding covers assessment at educational institutions, but does not cover the information, or clarification in the process with documentation of the individual's application. Guidance institutions, enterprises and the third sector often deliver clarification and documentation for a formative and perhaps also career development perspective. The costs are carried by the institutions, and are free to the individual.
There is no cost to the participant for: the assessment of reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic and mathematics skills in Preparatory Adult Education or in courses included in the vocational training system for a skills assessment within adult vocational training (GVU and AMU); for skills assessment for entry to general adult education programs; or for general adult education skills assessment in order to issue a competence certificate.

Within the AMU-programs, Validation participants are entitled to a fixed adult education called VEU-allowance financed by the State ("VEU-godtgørelse"), corresponding to 80 percent of the maximum unemployment insurance benefit rate. As most participants are employed and receive full salary during the validation period, this allowance is primarily paid to employers as partial wage reimbursement. As with education and training within AMU, expenditure for the allowances is covered by the employers' reimbursement scheme ("Arbejdsgivernes Uddannelsesbidrag" - AUB) to which all enterprises contribute a fixed amount, regardless of levels of participation in adult education and continuing training activities, as well as State financing.

The "taximeter" financing scheme for the funding of education and training programs is the basic funding mechanism in Denmark to strengthen incentives to make the provision of, and participation in, various forms of lifelong learning more effective. Under this scheme, education and training providers (including private providers) are paid per capita grant by the state for each full time equivalent enrolment. The amount paid to an institution varies according to the stream of study programs in which a person is enrolled. An activity such as individual skills assessment in relation to a particular education or training program or the preparation of a personal study plan on the basis of assessment and recognition of prior learning in which a person is involved, is also financed under the taximeter scheme.

Within higher education, user fees for skills assessment are only applicable for persons with higher education level qualifications up to and including upper secondary level.
Every year the taximeter rates are set in the spending bill adopted by Parliament based on estimated costs per student completion in each of several streams. Schemes/allowance schemes for forgone earnings for adults during participation in education and training based on a co-financed system through public and private sources.
Institutions often criticize the financial foundation for working with validation of prior learning. This is often cited as a reason for activity being low. Furthermore, it is specifically pointed out that there are no funds for a cohesive counselling effort.

4.5 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

Validation of prior learning is free for persons with low levels of formal qualification. It is needed to be aware of other financial circumstances before the validation or after the assessment for the individual. Economical obstacles can prevent further education after the assessment. If validation of prior learning shall be attractive for the persons with low levels of formal qualification, society needs to establish a more sustainable situation for the individual in the lifelong learning and carrier development perspective.

4.5.1 Institutionalization

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education are responsible for the legislative framework for assessment of prior learning and for taking national initiatives for implementing the legislation. The Ministries have developed policy guidelines and funded projects looking at developing tools, methods and procedures. The educational institutions are responsible for counselling and guidance, and for assessing and approving validation within their educational and training programs. The educational institutions also have responsibility for quality assurance, review and evaluation. The implementation of the legislation is decentralized to a high degree. Other stakeholders act as guidance institutions, e.g. the job centres, the trade unions, the unemployment funds and the third sector.

Education and training providers: According to Act no. 556 (2007) each adult education institution is responsible for validation of prior learning. The institutions can assess and recognize prior learning in adult education and continuing training for the purposes of:

- accessing formal education, i.e. using non-formal and informal experiences to meet the admission requirements,
- tailoring an educational program or to give credit for certain classes,
- awarding a Competence certificate if the participant meets the requirements of part of an educational program or
- awarding a Program certificate if the participant's competences are the same as those obtained by completing an entire educational program. The certificates have the same value as the certificates in formal education.

The vocational education institutions providing AMU and the adult education centres (VUC) all participate in 13 local adult and continuing training centres, VEU-centres. The 13 VEU-centres were established in 2010 to provide a unified gateway to both general adult education and vocational adult education and continuing training, with greater focus on quality and effectiveness. The VEU-centres also have a responsibility for promoting the Validationprograms and for improving the quality of the programs in the participating education institutions. Interaction and collaboration between stakeholders, from the policy level to the practitioner level, allows for the integration of a top-down strategy with a bottom-up strategy.

All active stakeholders wish to see more progress in relation to validation of prior learning. They also agree that cooperation between the main stakeholders is important in order to make progress. The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning contributes together with researchers to collect, produce and disseminates information and documentation of existing knowledge on validation of prior learning.

4.5.2 Quality assurance

In the national action plan (see below), quality was one of the initiatives crossing all relevant adult educational areas with a specific focus on developing a code of conduct for validation of competences. In 2012, the Committee in the Ministry of Education with members from all central stakeholders decided not to recommend the development of a code of conduct but recommended production of a booklet with examples of good practice in all educational areas. The committee assessed, that there was a higher need for developing concrete tools to support best practice. The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning published the booklet "Validation of prior learning – how we do it" (National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning 2012). This includes examples on good practice in using validation of prior learning in educational institutions, at the workplace and stories by individuals.

Overall, three factors for quality assurance should come into play:
Ensuring organizational quality:

- Through a holistic approach for institutions' work with validation of prior learning
- Through evaluation cadences, feedback, and improvement initiatives at all levels

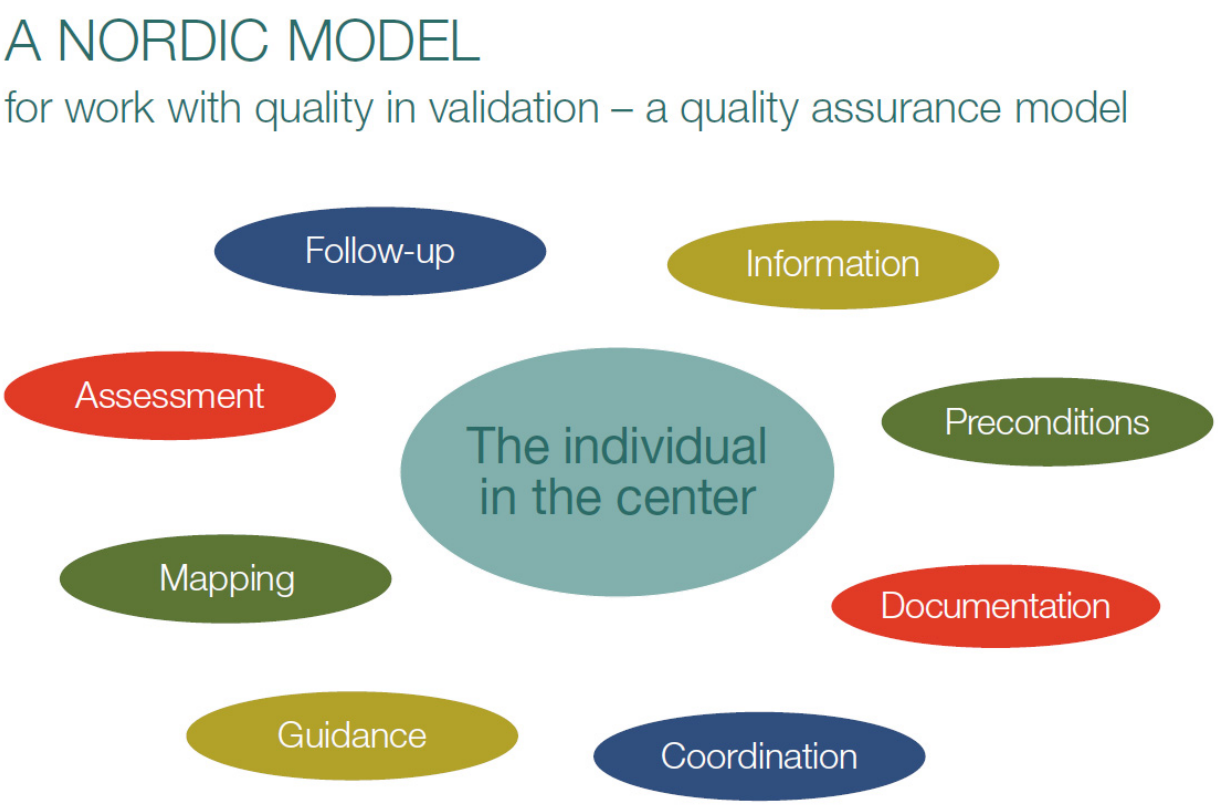
Ensuring assessment quality:

- Through distinct criteria
- Through substantiated choices of methodology
- Through establishing evaluation and documentation practice

Ensuring procedural quality:

- Through distinct responsibility and role distribution (who does what, when, and for whom?)
- Through presentations and information (websites, brochures, emails/letters etc.)
- Through professional filing and document handling

Denmark has also been involved in the development of a quality model for validation of informal and non-formal learning in the Nordic Countries (Grunnet and Dahler 2013). The Nordic Expert network for Validation, Nordic network for adult learning (www.nordvux.net) identified quality as a key issue for challenges in the work with validation of prior learning. Experts from five Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark cooperated as part of a Nordplus project (led by the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning - NVR) with the aim to develop a common model for quality assurance.



The quality model is primarily developed for use in educational institutions. The eight quality factors that make up the quality model relate to conditions that can be handled at an educational institution. Legislation, financing and national executive order requirements are of course key factors for the quality of the validation. The quality model may possibly contribute to pointing out undesirable conditions of this nature, but nevertheless has to accept them as framework preconditions.
As stated above, each individual educational institution has to build its own system for quality assurance. With the development contracts between the local adult and continuing training centres (VEU-centres) and the Ministry of Education, it is intended that the VEU-centres play a role in supporting the development of common procedures and quality standards between the participating institutions in the VEU-centres.

4.6 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

Developing a genuine quality assurance approach for processes of validation of prior learning is needed to secure the individual at the centre of the processes. The quality work must therefore ensure that the individual is taken into account as the main user of validation of prior learning. The educational institutions are according to the legislation obliged to build up quality assurance. Some institutions have a system others have not. A more common approach can be part of ensuring that the validation of prior learning is relevant and accepted by the persons with low levels of formal qualification.

4.7 Support structures

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science provide extensive information about validation of prior learning on their websites (e. g. www.uvm.dk). The educational institutions that offer validation of prior learning also have a duty to provide information on their websites. Guidance bodies, e.g. job centres and study guidance centres, and social partners provide information on validation of prior learning.
While educational institutions are obliged to inform the public about validation of prior learning, there is still an inadequate level of information about the existing procedures in Denmark and too many people are not aware of the opportunities available to them.

In the fall of 2012, the Danish Ministry of Education launched an information campaign to increase the awareness of and promote the use of validation of prior learning. The campaign was carried out by the adult and continuing training centres (VEU-centres) at a local level. The campaign was based on a recommendation from a report by the Committee on validation of prior learning (November 2011). Both online and offline platforms were used to communicate the campaign's messages. The idea behind using different online platforms was to increase the visibility of the campaign and to generate traffic to the websites of the VEU-centres. The campaign had a positive effect and increased the attention on validation of prior learning considerably. Nevertheless the evaluation states that information campaigns are not the best way to raise awareness among citizens and potential users.

A counselling web portal provides general information about prior learning (www.ug.dk).
The guidance institutions provide general information, support clarification and documentation concerning the validation process, and provide guidance to the individual about choice of further learning and career. Guidance, as one-to-one support and group support, in regards to the specific validation-programs, is provided by educational institutions and the adult and continuing training centres (VEU-centres). Job centres and trade unions also provide guidance as well as non-formal adult education providers. However guidance is not currently coordinated between these different bodies. ‘eVejledning’ (online guidance service) also provide information and guidance regarding validation of prior learning.

The adult and continuing training centres (VEU-centres) have also, for a number of years, had focus on qualifying their guidance practitioners in regard to providing guidance and counselling on the validation programs connected to general and vocational adult education and training. Furthermore, 10 projects were initiated in 2012 through the transversal development pool (TUP) with the purpose of strengthening the use of individual competence assessments in the validation-programs in AMU, and a primary or partial focus in some of the projects is on qualifying guidance practitioners in regards to Validation.

4.8 Acceptance and relevance for the target group

Support structures are developed for information and guidance for both unemployed and employed people. The core stakeholders both in the area of education and guidance are very much aware of the importance of collaboration to establish a coherent validation process for the individual. Both development projects and evaluation are needed to build up a more systematic support structure including guidance and counselling for adults.

4.9 Education policy positions on the validation of informally acquired competences

In 2010 - 2011 the Ministry of Education carried out an evaluation of the Act, no. 556. The report Validation of prior learning within adult education in Denmark. The status report regarding Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007 (EVA 2010) is the most comprehensive mapping of validation of prior learning within adult education.
The report concludes that validation of prior learning is still a broadly founded political project supported by relevant stakeholders and the social partners. Validation is seen as a very important instrument contributing to promote adults participation in adult and continuing training and to improve adults' possibilities on the labour market.
There is a potential for development and improvement especially within information about validation, simplifying practice, standardization and quality assurance.
In 2010, The Ministry of Education made a national action plan with four initiatives crossing all relevant educational areas. The general themes are (The Ministry of Education 2011):

- Mapping out the players guidance and counselling before validation (the prephase).
- Examining the possibilities of validation in the educational system to get a broader perspective for example an occupational and a job-related perspective.
- Quality assurance with a special focus on developing a code of conduct for validation (later it got decided to recommend the production of a booklet with examples of good practice in all educational areas instead).
- A local guidance and information campaign, in order to support a broader implementation of validation in all educational areas.

The government launched an ambitious plan for growth in Denmark in February 2013, including strengthening of quality in public adult education and training and a reform of vocational education and training.

In September 2013, the Danish government tabled a proposal for a reform of vocational education and training. The reform aims to increase professional competences, reduce drop-out rates and make vocational education and training more attractive. Furthermore, the proposal contains an overall plan to ensure that vocational education for adults makes the path from unskilled to skilled more transparent and goal-oriented. It must also use the education and experience that the adult already has as a starting point. The new law for vocational education enters into force in August 2015[1].

The reform includes vocational education for adults above 25 years of age (vocational education for adults (EUV)). EUV starts with an assessment of prior learning. Based on this assessment, the specific training plan is established in conjunction with the previously scheduled EUV course. The Basic adult education (GUV) will be replaced by the EUV.

The assessment of prior learning will consist of an objective (standardized) and an individual section. As part of establishing the EUV, labour market parties (the professional councils) will describe the previous education, AMU courses and work experience that can be credited in vocational education for adults. This way the educational institutions' basis for the objective part of the assessment of prior learning becomes clearer, and it is more transparent to the students which specific credits they are entitled to for their previous experience. The individual credits provide an opportunity for further shortening of the education based on a specific assessment of the individual's competences (Ministry of Education 2013a). The offer must be attractive, targeted towards adults and results in certificates equivalent certificates as young people acquire. A vocational education for adults with work experience would consist in a much more compressed educational process than the corresponding process for young people. This is due to the fact that adults have education and experience to build on and that they are often more mature and focused.

4.9.1 National Qualifications Framework

A comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) is in place in Denmark, covering all types and levels of qualification awarded and quality assured by public authorities. The proposal for the eight-level framework was adopted in 2009 and the NQF was referenced to the EQF in May 2011. It is expected that the NQF will be of significant importance to the work on validation of prior learning. This is due to that fact that an overview, transparency and placement of educations in the NQF can support transparency in validation of prior learning. In higher education, the qualifications framework is used as a reference to determine the criteria for assessments of prior learning. However, in the rest of the educational system there is not such a connection yet. It is important to point out that this qualifications framework is based on qualifications defined as knowledge, skills and competences, whereas an assessment of prior learning is about people having their competences assessed, so in this case it is all about the individual.

[1] eng.uvm.dk/~/media/UVM/Filer/English/PDF/140708%20Improving%20Vocational%20 Education%20and%20Training.pdf

4.10 Conclusions and perspectives

Overall it can be stated that better interaction between the different learning arenas will provide excellent prospects for the individual, companies and society in general, in the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning (Ministry of Education 2004):

- It is motivating for the individual when the focus is on what the individual is capable of.
- It will make the individuals' competences more visible and contribute towards giving everybody, and perhaps particularly those with a practical mind-set, the chance to utilize their potential to a much greater extent.
- It can provide better opportunities for the unemployed and refugees/immigrants to get started in the education system and qualify to join the labour market.
- It will support a more targeted demand for and provision of education.
- Financial resources are utilized better when unnecessary education is avoided and when students move more quickly through the educational system.
- It will contribute to increasing the overall level of educational attainment within our society.

The challenges of strengthening the use of validation of prior learning in Denmark can be summarized in the following key points:

- To emphasize objectives and intentions in the work with prior learning, so that the task in all phases of the validation process is seen in accordance with the overall process of validating prior learning.
- To distinguish between using the concept of prior learning in a broader sense, “everything that you can do” (formative approach) and the more narrow meaning “what you can do according to education regulations” (summative approach).
- To increase awareness about how an educational and a job or employment perspective can work together, so prior learning is based on a holistic perspective.
- To work on having a clear division of responsibility between different players, for example, so that it is possible to support the individual through a process that starts in a job centre or a company and then moves on to the VEU centres’ educational institutions.
- Often different methods of documentation are used by the different players, and the individual might have to start over with a new process in prior learning and educational planning. The question is how you can strengthen a coherent process, partly by having methods supplement each other and maybe, in a broader sense, using each other’s methods.

Schools talk about financial and resource problems with implementing validation of prior learning; they also talk about didactic challenges when people are offered shorter courses adjusted to ordinary courses. Finally, the vocational sector, even after 10 years with GVU, think that it is difficult to assess competences that have not been acquired in a school setting. In general validation is a part of a paradigm shift from education to learning and it is a challenge for stakeholders and individuals to change mind-set and develop a new approach to learning and competence development.

The persons with low levels of formal qualification are one of the main target groups for validation of prior learning. They as well as any adult, have the right to ask an educational institution to assess their prior learning in order to obtain validation of their competences in the adult and continuing

education system. It may be a problem that learners are not well informed about the right they have their non-formal and informal learning validated. It is a continuous challenge to inform about the possibility of validation.

In Denmark it is a political point of view that validation of prior learning with a special focus on persons with low levels of formal qualification plays an important role for the job opportunities and for the employability and the mobility on the labour market. There is from a political point of view a potential employment and employability benefits to be gained especially for this group.

The use of validation by institutions and other stakeholders has a diversity in proportion and in degree of how the validation practices are integrated at an organizational level and in developments of procedures and methods. Improvements at an institutional level can be expected in general and may open up for more use by persons with low levels of formal qualification.

Our knowledge about effects of validation of prior learning is based primarily on results of development projects and case studies. We know from these projects and case studies that identification, documentation, assessment and certification of “real” competences make competences visible and raise motivation for further learning and play a role for job and competence development especially for persons with low levels of formal qualification.

5 Case studies: Practical consequences of the core elements

Kira

Legal Background
Kira has the option of having her competences validated so that she can start an education.
She can apply for an individual competences assessment (IKV) of adult vocational training (AMU). Kira can have her skills assessed according to specific education regulations, and she herself has to take part in having her competences assessed. Depending on the assessment, she will be entitled to an adult vocational training competences certificate and/or education certificate, as well as an individual training plan.

Process
Kira seeks advice at a job centre, where she can outline her ambitions for her education in an advice session. She also speaks with an advisor from her unemployment office to find out what education she wants and what her rights are.
She then seeks advice at an adult vocational training centre (AMU), where she has a conversation with a consultant. During the session, she is informed of her options and is offered a course to help clarify her position. The course will start by uncovering her background and all the prior learning she has from any education, work and leisure activities. In connection to this, she uses her competence folder ("Min kompetence mappe" www.minkompetencemappe.dk) and the CV that she previously created at the job centre. In this way she has her professional, social and personal competences outlined. Kira is offered a personalized job and education plan via an adult vocational training module with the objective of clarifying her ambitions for education.
Then another interview is carried out, in which the consultant gains a clear picture of which subjects need to be assessed. The individual competence assessment is continued with a teacher from the relevant subjects. Several materials and methods are used in the assessment. Kira does a test where she has to answer a series of questions, and she completes a practical test for the teacher to see what she can do in practice. The consultant then goes over the results with Kira.
The consultant tells Kira that she can have a competence certificate for three subjects, and, at the same time, Kira has a training plan worked out.

Financing
It is free for Kira to have an individual competence assessment in adult vocational training, because Kira has been unemployed for four months, and she has the right to six weeks education of her choice.

Support
Kira can find information about her options for an individual competence assessment in several places. The job centre can advise Kira, or she can seek advice at a centre for adult education and continuing training (VEU-centre) about the education / institution of education that she is interested in. Open advice sessions have been set up at several educational institutions with fixed opening hours and in close cooperation with local job centres. Furthermore, her unemployment office will be able to guide her through the process.

Bastian[2]

Legal Background

Bastian has two options for having his prior learning recognized so that he can complete his education.

He can apply for an adult basic education (GVU), which is a vocational education for adults over 25 years of age. Adult basic education starts with the individual participant's previous experiences and qualifications, so that these can be put to the best possible use. The participant can also start an education at the level best suited to them, according to their previous qualifications. Moreover, he can apply to study a post-secondary adult education ("academy education") or a diploma program in IT. Through an assessment of prior learning, he can have formal validation of his prior learning. This always takes place according to current education regulations. Here are three options for an assessment of prior learning:

- Admissions certificate. You can have your prior learning assessed in connection with acceptance to a post-secondary adult education or a diploma program if you do not meet the official requirements.
- Competence certificate. You can have your skills assessed according to the goals of specific parts of your education, for example a particular module.
- Program certificate. You can have your competences assessed according to the goals of a full education.

Bastian chooses an adult basic education (GVU).

Process

Bastian has previously heard about adult basic education and is interested in how you can develop a competence in a short period of time. This is why he requested an individual competence assessment, so that the competences he has already are acknowledged, but also so that he can find out how he needs to develop in order to become more skilled.

Bastian turns up, along with five other people, for the individual competence assessment at a technical college. They are all being assessed for the IT Supporter education.

After a short introduction to what the individual competence assessment is and the agenda for the day, the participants are asked to complete a self-assessment of their prior learning within the professional field. It is completed electronically and takes a couple of hours. For every question there are two possible answers: yes or no. The questions are grouped according to the goals of the education.

After the questions have been answered, the electronic program generates an answer profile that shows which education goals Bastian thinks he is qualified for. This profile provides the basis for the subsequent interview.

[2] The case is inspired by a case that is described in www.nvr.nu

The interview takes place in a small theory room that has been arranged with a small table in one of the corners. The subject teacher starts by asking how the self-assessment went and if it was difficult to do a proper self-assessment. They then ask Bastian if he can recognize himself in the person profiled in the test, if this fits with his experiences and the knowledge he has gained from work and courses. Bastian does not quite know if he can recognize himself in the person profiled in the test. So the subject teacher checks some of Bastian's 'no' answers. They want to find out if Bastian misunderstood the question, or if he just thinks he can do less than he actually can. The interview impacts on Bastian's image of himself. He was more modest than he should have been, and he finds out that he can answer several of the subject teacher's additional questions. So the interview shows him that he actually knows more than he first thought.
After the interview, Bastian has to work on the real-life, practical assignment of building an IT system for a workplace. The assignment will reveal Bastian's abilities within those areas that he considered himself to have knowledge, during the self-assessment.

He is placed in an open shop where there is teaching in small groups as well as private tuition. He gets his own workstation with IT equipment. The other participants in the individual competence assessment get a similar workstation. The five participants can talk to each other and they help each other feel at ease in the room and with the assignment.
The subject teacher regularly passes by Bastian to observe how he is progressing with the assignment, but also to ask questions concerning Bastian's methods. Sometimes this prompts Bastian to rethink what he is doing or to remember knowledge, skills and competences that he had not realized could be useful in this assignment.

Every morning the participants of the individual competence assessment meet with the subject teacher. They each speak about their experiences of the previous day and their plan for the day ahead. Every participant sets their own goals and, in this way, they make a plan for their own prior learning assessment. Group conversation can lead to participants inspiring each other in their ongoing work. The subject teacher is happy with this because it is also what happens during your education and work life. Additionally, he sees evidence of Bastian teaching himself something or remembering some previously-forgotten knowledge during the work process. This results in the outcome of the final assessment being better than after the self-assessment and the first interview.

On the last day Bastian finishes his case assignment and then he has a final one-to-one interview. The subject teacher talks with Bastian about how he found the assignment, asks what was difficult and what was easy. The conversation also links back to the self-assessment and they discuss how Bastian's self-assessment profile would look if he were to do it again.
The subject teacher then gives Bastian the final assessment of his education goals. Bastian can have a fair amount of goals validated. The rest are incorporated into a training plan for his adult basic education.

The entire individual competence assessment process lasted a week. The first day was self-assessment and the first interview. The following three and a half days focused on the case assignment, including the morning meeting, the ongoing interviews and the subject teacher's observations of the practical execution of the assignment. The last day primarily focused on the exit interview where the final assessment was delivered.
The specific plan for the adult basic education process is agreed upon after the individual competence assessment itself, with the student counsellor and the course secretary.

Financing
There is no participant fee associated with having an adult basic education. There are different rules regarding if and how you, as an unemployed person, can complete your education. It depends on how long you have been unemployed, and if you are insured as an unemployed person or a receiver of cash benefits. Bastian can receive an adult education and continuing training allowance while studying, which is equivalent to 80 percent of the unemployment benefits.

Support
Bastian can find information about his options for an individual competence assessment in several places. He can seek advice at a centre for adult education and continuing training at the education / institution of education that he is interested in. Open advice sessions have been set up in most educational institutions with fixed opening hours and in close cooperation with local job centres.
Alternatively, if he is interested in a post-secondary adult education or a diploma program, he can contact the educational institutions that offer that specific education. These institutions are obliged to provide information about the options for an assessment of prior learning on their website. There will also be student counsellors who are able to offer advice on current opportunities.

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