

# THE ASSESSMENT AND VALIDATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES ACQUIRED IN NON-FORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN HUNGARY<sup>1</sup>

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*Recognition of knowledge acquired outside school education has become a primary issue in education development. In its recommendation on the recognition of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning, the Council of the European Union (20th December 2012) requests that Member States establish national systems for the recognition of the outcomes of formal and non-formal learning by not later than 2018. This will make it possible for the citizens to acquire full or partial qualifications based on the knowledge and competences they acquired outside formal education. Regarding the fact that Hungary has also undertaken to elaborate a national validation system by 2018, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive national recognition system based on which a structured knowledge recognition system may be established, which will function within the framework of the domestic educational, training, institutional and legal system, and which will be in harmony with European standards. It is necessary to elaborate a model and system, which will be able to foster the re-integration of the most relevant potential target groups (such as groups of young people and adults with low levels of education) into the labour market and society.*

**Keywords:** learning outcomes, non-formal learning, validation

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## International trends

The issue of the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal learning environment became a primary topic in the discourse on educational policy in Europe about a decade ago. Several studies and documents were developed in this topic during this period, and the European Union permanently monitors the steps the Member States take in order to develop a system and procedures for the validation of learning outcomes. The CEDEFOP and the OECD issue various publications, recommendations and guidelines to help this endeavour (see: CEDEFOP, 2009; Werquin, 2010). The validation systems and procedures developed in various EU Member States show differences, and the related practices also indicate significant levels of development.

At the same time however if the international trends are taken into account an area is outlined in which basic principles and conditions are contained, which are clearly necessary for the development of a validation system, and which could serve as a guideline also for Hungary.

Regarding the practice applied in European Member States it can be seen that there is no general system for the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal learning environment. Very different approaches, procedures and practices have been developed in various Member States. A common feature of these is two parallel development methodologies. One is system level development, the other one is project-and institution-driven development. The common features in the practices conducted in countries where validation procedures function at national level are as follows:

- Specific government objective for which the validation procedure is used
- Relevant educational and training standards accepted by social partners
- Curricula based on learning outcomes
- The validation procedure is linked to the national qualifications framework
- Permanent communication, identification of the advantages of the validation system, involvement of the concerned parties

## Legal regulation for prior learning assessment in Hungary

In adult education terminology in Hungary prior learning assessment was used as a concept, and the issue of prior learning assessment was first raised when adult education was regulated by law (Act CI of 2001 on adult education). There have been several developments and efforts for the introduction and application of prior learning assessment at systems level however this has not been applied in practice. Prior learning assessment has been incorporated in the practice of adult education in Hungary as an administrative step only. It has not been institutionalised and has not had an impact on the quality of the development of the adult education system or on the development of measurement methodology and education methodology culture of adult educators.

The rules concerning the commencement and continuation of adult education were modified in 2013. While prior learning assessment was defined as an individual right in the first act on adult education, it was set forth as a mandatory provision in the new act in the area of professional qualifications and foreign language education recognised by the state (Act LXXVII of 2013, §11(1), item g)). The name of this service (prior learning

assessment) also indicates that this is closely linked to the training programmes and training institutions, so in this sense preliminary knowledge is knowledge acquired and possessed prior to the commencement of training.

The act on adult education also contains the definition of prior learning assessment: it is a process during which an assessment is made whether individuals, who apply for training is capable of fulfilling the requirements for the completion of a certain curriculum during a training course based on their undocumented studies or practical experience as a result of which these individuals shall be exempted from their obligation to participate in certain parts of training courses providing that they adequately meet the requirements of these parts of the curriculum. (Act LXXVII of 2013, § 2, item 8).

Prior learning assessment is made compulsory as set out in the act on adult education however the act does not contain provisions on specific details, so the training institutions can establish rules and practical considerations for taking into account preliminary knowledge at their own discretion. These institutions however do not receive any methodological or other assistance for the development of their institutional practice or for the elaboration of measurement tools.

### Good practices

There have been several significant developments concerning prior learning assessment and taking it into account during the course of the past two decades. There were attempts made even prior to the first act on adult education to make adult education more cost-effective based on prior learning assessment. Today there is more common understanding in the area of the function of prior learning assessment, and more people understand the point of learning outcomes approach, and the issue of prior learning assessment is regulated by law. At the same time however there is no uniform system or standard, nationally used procedures for the assessment of preliminary knowledge in Hungary. The practice in this area is rather one that is regulated by law, and the details are not standardised, so they are elaborated at institutional level only, so this process is performed through different methodologies, at varying levels and intensity at institutional level.

Isolated good practices are performed mostly in areas where the character of the training or the interests of the training participants ``enforce`` that preliminary knowledge is taken into account. Such an area is the ECDL examination system that certifies computer operating and user competences, which, regardless of the mode of the learning process, is aimed to certify knowledge acquired in any way at all. Individuals can sit for an exam without preliminary training regardless of how they acquired computer operating competences. Exam outcomes after each module can be collected on an examination card, and if all the module requirements are satisfied, the outcomes on this card can be converted into a certificate. The recognition system is similar in the case of language examinations. Examiners do not make enquiries about how, when, in what circumstances and during what period the applicants acquired their foreign language skills. Individual language skills are compared to the requirements of the language examinations and provided that there is an adequate match, the applicants are granted a certificate based on the outcome of their performance. In this case therefore it is completely indifferent where the knowledge of individuals comes from, so the learning outcomes of these individuals are assessed. It is important to note that in both cases the measurement,

assessment and certification of the learning outcomes are performed in specially accredited, independent examination centres. The system of self-assessment also functions since the Europass portfolio has been widely used in Hungary as of 1 July 2005. Individuals fill in a CV form, in which they do not only indicate their school qualifications, but also their social and personal competences. When it comes their foreign language competences, they can also indicate ones other than those that can be proved by certificates. Based on the six levels of foreign language proficiency as recommended by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages adults, based on self-assessment, are capable of identify their writing, reading and oral language skills. A detailed table for self-assessment helps with this process, in which various levels of language proficiency are expressed by learning outcomes.

### Factors hindering the systematic functioning of prior learning assessment

In Hungary the development and functioning of a national level validation system is hindered by factors as follows:

- Lack of commitment by the Government: at governmental level preliminary knowledge measurement is regarded as an absolutely peripheral issue. Although the legislators established an act on it, the details are not regulated, the functions are not determined and methodological assistance has not been provided.
- Lack of reference requirements: the curricula for vocational qualifications recognised by the state were not developed on the basis of learning outcomes, so there is no definite, valid standard that could serve as a basis for comparison or a reference.
- Lack of view based on learning outcomes: In Hungary at present there are hardly any forms of learning outcomes-based training planning and training development processes. Learning outcome is a new concept, which has not been used before in vocational and adult training terminology in Hungary. In this context what is stressed is what real knowledge, skills and competences such individuals possess regardless of where and how they acquired them. This means that the assessment of competences is not performed on the basis of the length of the period, location and especially not on the pedagogical methodologies, in other words on the input factors, but on the measurement of defined and expected learning outcomes.
- Lack of trust: there is no so-called social trust between the involved parties: adults and employees are still of the opinion even today that a shortened training course is ``cheating``, and is of inadequate quality.
- It is not accepted by society: learning outcomes acquired in non-formal environment have no value.
- Counter-incentives for role players: due mainly to the features of adult education financing the labour authorities, the training institutions and the unemployed adults have counter-incentives in the area of taking account of preliminary knowledge and so in shortening the duration of the training periods.
- Uncertainties in assessment: the fact that there are no valid training standards and requirements enforced and approved by the social partners that could be used as points of reference for the assessment

of preliminary knowledge decreases the trust in the recognition system.

- It may decrease the value of school certificates: the general notion is that a preliminary knowledge recognition system may decrease the value of school certificates and instead of participating in training, youths and adults participate in the recognition procedures.
- Lack of measurement methodology: there is a lack of experts at training institutions and even at professional organisations and at ministerial auxiliary institutions, who possess appropriate measurement-methodical knowledge.
- Lack of independent examination centre: there is no functioning examination centre in Hungary. Professional examinations are conducted at adult educational institutions and at adult educational institutions with authorisation for conducting exams. Training and examining participants are not separated from each other, and there are no quality assurance mechanisms incorporated in these processes, so in many cases trust decreases also towards formal qualifications.
- Lack of terminological framework: the set of terminology linked to prior learning assessment is debated even among professionals. The terminology is not regulated by law, and several different sets of terminology are used parallel in Hungary.
- Lack of framework of understanding: the function of preliminary knowledge management has not been clarified, what specific purposes it could be used for (e. g. Training course attendance, shortening training periods, etc.). It is not clear who the beneficiaries of this service are (is it the right of every adult, or should it be linked to certain statuses such as unemployment).
- Problems related to financing: financing is the most important policy tool. Adult education financing is a multi-channel process, in which typically institutions are financed. As long as institutions are financed, they will not be interested in taking into consideration preliminary knowledge. When it comes for financing by the central, national budget, or by grants, there is no difference made, so heterogeneous groups cannot be financed differently.
- Lack of interest: the parties involved for the time being do not see their own interest in prior learning assessment and consideration.
- High costs: the recognition procedure incurs high costs, and it is not clear who should finance it and from what resource.
- The prestige of formal training: in Hungary the prestige of formal school qualifications/training is still very high.
- Weak prestige of the non-formal institutions: the non-formal learning environment and adult education always represented “the second line”, and never received appropriate recognition and prestige.
- Lack of a Qualification Framework in Hungary: there is no relevant national qualification framework in Hungary, which could provide major impetus to the introduction of learning outcomes-based methodologies and to the recognition of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal environment.

## Possible functions of prior learning assessment

The most important step in the establishment of a recognition system in Hungary should be to create commitment by the government and trust by society towards the validation procedure. After this it will be possible to create technical conditions for a validation system and to elaborate training and activity standards based on learning outcomes as well as to develop steps for the validation procedure and to develop measurement tools. Validation of learning outcomes in Hungary – taking into consideration the educational and the employment situation today – can be implemented with four objectives in mind as follows:

- To foster participation in training: in such cases the validation procedure would serve the purpose to survey and certify if adults are capable of successfully joining and participating in training courses without school qualifications and/or vocational qualifications that are required as an input condition for ordinary vocational training.
- Validation for the purpose of considering preliminary learning: in such cases the validation procedure would serve the purpose to survey and certify if adults, based on their learning outcomes acquired in various learning, living or labour conditions comply with standards contained in requirement modules for certain vocational qualifications, in other words if they possess knowledge elements of the requirements and, if so, to what extent, of the modules that they would have to learn in formal learning circumstances. This procedure would make it possible to take into account the preliminary knowledge of individuals for vocational qualifications.
- Validation for the purpose of recognition: the validation procedure would serve the purpose to survey and certify if adults, based on their learning outcomes acquired in various learning, living or labour conditions comply with standards contained in requirements for certain vocational qualifications, in other words if they possess elements of knowledge and if they are capable of performing certain tasks at a given level of independence and responsibility equivalent of what they would acquire within the framework of formal training. This procedure would make it possible for adults to acquire partial or complete vocational qualifications without participation in training.
- Validation fostering employment: validation will concern the work experience of adults, in other words whether based on their learning outcomes acquired in specific or various work environments they comply with the standards necessary for fulfilling certain jobs and professionally performing related tasks. In such cases adults will be issued Professional Competence Certificates that validate their work experience, which will enable them to fulfill specific jobs and perform related tasks.

## Conclusions

Establishment of the national system for the recognition of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning is a burning issue also for Hungary. First we have to create basic principles and conditions, which are clearly necessary for the development of a validation system. The benefits of validation system are clear. The development and introduction of such a system at national level would encourage participation in life-long learning, would make training more attractive and would create a second chance for individuals. Regarding its social impact, the use of state resources would be more economical and the acquired competences would be transparent, employability would grow, and it would be easier to reach policy objectives.

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