Theoretical Basis for the Principle of Equal Value applied to the Recognition of Prior Learning and to Formal Learning

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Abstract

This article provides a reflection on the outcomes of the Leonardo da Vinci project RPLO\(^1\) from the point of view of Higher Education. It is particularly important to take account of these reflections when considering the impact of the European Guidelines on the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning to the implementation of the Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning issued by the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom.\(^2\)

Learning outcomes, as the main elements of a qualification, are organised within units of learning outcomes, giving a transparent structure to the qualification from the learner’s point of view.

All the units of learning outcomes, and the whole qualification, have four basic measurable properties: reference level, volume of workload, academic or professional profile and quality. Reference level denotes the complexity and the scope of the

\(^1\) The Aims and results of this project may be found at http://www.rplo.eu

\(^2\) “5 The UK has always had, and celebrated, diversity of provision and variety in its approach to the delivery of learning opportunities and the practice of learning in HE. Formal certification of this learning operates within robust and participatory quality assurance frameworks. These frameworks promote public understanding and confidence in both the quality of HE and the standard of its outcomes. 6 A similarly diverse range of approaches and practices for the accreditation of prior learning has evolved across the HE sector. Public confidence in the accreditation of prior learning, comparable to that for learning achieved during more traditional teaching and learning activities, is important if the practice is to be sustained and developed.” The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004), Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning, page 2. http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl/apl.pdf
acquired learning outcomes, while volume denotes the total amount of workload, and profiles the field of work and study associated with this. Quality denotes the reliability and validity of the official document issued as part of the Certification process, in relation to the specified reference level, volume and profile of the unit of learning outcomes.

Analysing all four basic properties of units of learning outcomes, the article have discusses the theoretical basis for the principle that the Recognition of Prior Learning should be considered as an assessment strategy of equal value to that used in formal learning.

**Key words**

**1. Introduction**

The European Union has identified mobility of citizens and lifelong learning as key strategic factors for sustainable long-term economic growth in Europe. In the Europe 2020 strategic document, mobility and lifelong learning are stressed more strongly than ever.³ To move freely it is necessary that citizens’ qualifications are easily understood and recognised throughout Europe, whether they pursue further learning in another institution in another country or seek employment abroad. To facilitate and to promote that, the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF EHEA) and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) have been developed as meta-frameworks.

The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning⁴ acts as a translation device between qualifications systems. It uses the common language of learning outcomes and qualifications to support a better understanding, easier comparability and transparency of qualifications in Europe.

The EQF approach allows countries to connect with each other, bridging across education and training subsystems, covering all

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levels of qualifications within different profiles. The EQF also promotes the validation of learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning settings (or Recognition of Prior Learning).

All countries in the EU have developed or are developing their National Qualification Frameworks for lifelong learning (NQFs), using learning outcomes as main elements to describe qualifications. These frameworks will facilitate more flexible learning pathways for individuals across general education, Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education. The added value of National Qualification Frameworks in implementing the European Qualifications Framework will address contemporary issues in implementing Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL].

An increasing number of European countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example, in leisure time activities, at home or at work. With the implementation of National Qualification Frameworks, the Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL] will become easier at all levels and subsystems. RPL in European countries takes on increasing importance with the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework and National Qualification Frameworks. RPL provides the opportunity to validate knowledge and skills of experienced staff that have gained substantial professional development since completing their initial formal education and training. At individual, company and national levels, there are now clear opportunities to develop a system for recognising the achievements of the workforce that are vital to continued competitiveness.

It is important to underline that it is not obligatory to formalise non-formal and informal learning in order to validate and recognise the competencies an individual has thus acquired. Should an individual nevertheless require this for any reason, it is necessary to provide him or her with the procedures and instruments for validation of non-formally and informally achieved competencies and to carry out their recognition in a clearly regulated way. Conducting these procedures may be handed over to institutions carrying out the procedures of external or internal validation, depending on the further organisation of the system and the needs of society. However, non-formal and informal learning may have outcomes that consist of specific values, which are completely independent of
those of formal learning, such as high adaptability to the labour market and individual needs, even if they are not formally recognised.

The main issues that arise within the development of national systems for Recognition of Prior Learning are the reliability and the value of the validation process for non-formal and informal learning comparing to formal learning.

This article analyses the basic properties of units of learning outcomes, as elements of qualifications, and discusses the theoretical basis for the principle that the Recognition of Prior Learning should be considered as an assessment strategy of equal value to that used in formal learning.

2. Qualification and Unit of learning outcomes

Qualification means the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process, which is obtained when a competent institution determines and certifies that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards through the issue of a certificate or diploma. It means that qualification refers only to competencies that have been validated and assessed by the competent institution. Although this has been traditionally possible in the case of most knowledge and skills, knowledge and skills that cannot be assessed or measured may pose a challenge. Social skills, autonomy and even more so responsibility, do not lend themselves easily to validation and assessment. This is why autonomy and responsibility in many cases, when describing learning outcomes, are used in the sense of achieved employment of some specific knowledge or skills. Namely, if a person possesses some knowledge and skills, this entitles him/her to the associated autonomy, which further leads to the associated reference level of responsibility, and vice versa. For example, if autonomy at the sixth level is expressed as “managing professional projects in unpredictable conditions”, then the responsibility should be “taking ethical and social responsibility for managing and evaluating personal and group professional development in unpredictable conditions”. When a need occurs for representing competencies for which there was no possibility of a validation of their

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acquisition, then the conditions and the formal activities carried out with the goal of acquiring these competencies are pointed out (for example, some competencies during specific courses within formal learning).

The main elements of any qualification are learning outcomes, which are often organized within units of learning outcomes, giving a transparent structure to the qualification. It means that instead of an overall set of learning outcomes, units of learning outcomes are often used as the main elements of the qualification.

A Unit of learning outcomes denotes the minimum, but complete, set of related learning outcomes, with typically 5 to 10 learning outcomes. It means that the definition of a unit of learning outcomes is similar to the definition of a Qualification. Both the Unit and the Qualification, have a set of competencies that have been validated and certified by a competent institution. For both, it is possible to assign the same set of properties, which are related to each other. For example, the workload assigned to a Qualification is the sum of the workload of specific Units.

3. Basic properties of Qualification and Unit

Generally speaking, it is possible to assign and to measure different properties of a unit of learning outcomes and qualification, such as: the year of study, their main role and application, the name of the persons who validated and assessed the learning outcomes, individual grades, the period during which the learning outcomes were acquired, etc. However, recently in different literature, indicates a minimal but complete number of measurable basic properties of the unit of learning outcomes and the qualification: reference level, volume of workload, academic or professional profile, and quality.6

Among the four basic properties, one of them – the reference level – appears as the most visible in the EQF and NQFs. The rest of these properties, the academic or professional profile, the volume of workload and the quality, are also equally important within the EQF and NQFs, or even more so (such as the quality). For example, the volume of the workload is even an explicit part in the higher levels of the EQF (or the Bologna

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Process part of the EQF) when speaking about the full class of qualifications. For illustration, all full qualifications at the first cycle of the Bologna Process (or 6th level of the EQF) should have the minimal volume of workload of 180 ECTS.

Reference level denotes the complexity of the acquired competences, independent of other basic properties (volume, profile, and quality). Volume denotes the total amount of the acquired learning outcomes and it is independent from other basic properties (reference level, profile, and quality). Profile encompasses the field of work or study, the main role, profession, and other similar properties of learning outcomes, and it is (like reference level and volume) independent from other properties (reference level, volume, and quality).

The quality of a Unit of learning outcomes is a somewhat different property and it denotes reliability and credibility of the statement made by the official certificate (and/or other documents) documenting the other properties of the unit. Quality is expressed in two dimensions: personal and institutional. The personal dimension of the quality describes reliability of the presence of the learning outcomes (of the given reference level, volume and profile) as something that an individual possesses, and it is often expressed in grades. The institutional quality refers to the reliability of competent awarding institution, including licensed assessors, which provide for the acquisition and formal validation of learning outcomes, including issuing the official certificate. A certain value of the personal and institutional quality is implicitly involved and required for all Units of learning outcomes.

For each of these basic and complete set of properties, we have methods and procedures for their identification and for expressing their values. Reference level of the unit of learning outcomes is determined by means of level descriptors and expressed by numbers (often from 1 to 8 in National Qualification Frameworks). The value of the volume is expressed in ECTS or ECVET credits or some other credits, and the profile should be indicated by the title of the unit.

Using the above analysis, it can be concluded that the minimal but complete set of information needed for any unit of learning outcomes are the following:
- Set of learning outcomes (as the main elements, clearly describing the unit)
- Profile (indicated by a Title)
A defined set of learning outcomes (as the main elements of the unit) can be fully described by all four basic properties: profile, level, volume, and personal and institutional quality. Personal dimension of the quality, unlike all other basic properties, can be assigned only after the process of validation of learning outcomes.

Unless excluded by special requirements, any type of learning, formal, non-formal or informal, can achieve a set of competencies of all type of profiles, at any level of complexity and with any value of workload. It means then, that the quality of the Unit is the only property which could be used to distinguish one set of learning outcomes achieved by formal learning from the same set of competencies achieved by non-formal or informal learning.

4. Assessment

From the previous section it may be concluded that the equality of the value of units of the same set of competencies achieved by different type of learning is only possible if the quality of the unit of competencies achieved by any type of learning is the same. This is requires that the set of assessment criteria, criteria for the competent awarding institution and criteria for competent assessors are standardised, regardless of the type of learning.

Within National Qualifications Frameworks there should be no space for a number of different quality standards for the same set of competencies organised within a unit, i.e. no separate assessment criteria, criteria for competent awarding institutions and competent assessors for competencies achieved by formal learning on one hand, and any other type of learning on other hand. The assessment criteria of the unit should be standardised for competencies achieved by formal as for any other type of learning. Different units of learning outcomes, of
course, have their own set of criteria, awarding institutions and competent assessors, including their own examples of assessment.

If it is supposed that within some specific unit there are competencies, which are possible to assess only within formal learning activities and formal conditions, then those requirements become a part of the assessment criteria of that specific unit. It means that in that case the only way for assessment is to follow full formal learning activities and assessment within it. Such examples we can find elsewhere. There will be always some set of competencies, important for society, which it is only possible to assess as a part of the formal process of learning.

5. Conclusions

This article has analysed the basic qualities of units of learning outcomes and has discussed the theoretical basis for the principle of equal value between the Recognition of Prior Learning and Formal Learning.

Before assessment takes place, regardless of the type of learning, one set of competencies is fully described by the same values of three of four basic properties: profile (indicated by a proper title), level and volume. In order to fulfil the principle of equal value it is theoretically clear that the remaining element of the set of basic properties (i.e. quality) should have also the same value, which is possible only if the assessment criteria (including criteria for competent awarding institution and assessors) are standardised within the unit of that set of competencies? Different Units usually have their own assessment criteria, and also their own profile, level and volume.

From the theoretical point of view, it is clear that the only way to have equal value is if the Recognition of Prior Learning is following the same (unique) assessment route as for formal learning. For some special units of competencies, usually important for the society, it will be necessary to follow full formal learning activities.

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