The Validation of Experience Skills in Bulgaria
Statements and Comments

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The report presents the underdeveloped validation of experience skills, the main reasons for such characteristics and the initial steps for its further promotion. It does not include new practices to be shared with other countries. The materials after holding this Peer Review will be of help in the further activities towards constructing and implementing validation system that is appropriate for the country.

1. Assessment of the policy context, economic circumstances and institutional/legal background in Bulgaria

The recognitions (validations) of the practical skills acquired in the period of apprenticeship are commonly accepted and with well developed tradition in Bulgaria. According to the Crafts’ Law (CL)ⁱ there are 3 validation stages in compliance with the levels of competences. The apprenticeship has to last 3 to 4 years before receiving the lowest (first level of craft competence².

The knowledge validation (but not of experience skills) of persons after being educated out of the formal secondary education is also well known in Bulgaria. It was applied mainly for untypical cases of training for reasons of long lasting health problems, staying abroad, for adult older than 16 years, etc.

After the enforcement of the Law on Vocational Education and Training (LVET)³, the validation of experience skills was introduced by another act. Article 40 of the LVET stipulates that persons may claim the issuance of a certificate validating their skills if they have been engaged with the professional activities in question for at least 6 months prior to validation, or after practical training for a period defined by the training institution. However, the articles of the LVET and the CL on experience validation are not well harmonized. There are not comprehensively developed procedures for their implementation.

² The law was developed with technical assistance of the representatives of the Koblenz Chamber (Handwerkammer Koblenz) in Sofia and follows the German experience in the field.
For the moment – validation has to follow the common route of certification of vocational skills as specified in the LVET and includes the following:

1. Signing a contract with the training institution by the persons demanding validation for passing exams to receive, acquired level of vocational qualification, or a part of certain profession/specialty and for additional knowledge for professions/specialties already acquired for the purposes of their updating.

2. Conducting state exams in profession theory and practice according to national exam programmes in compliance with the common state educational standards for acquiring vocational qualification by professions.

3. Obtaining a certificate for vocational qualification (in case the person has finished education level or a grade needed for the respective qualification degree). A vocational qualification certificate may be issued for professions requiring capacity and for the regulated professions.

4. In case the person do not answer the general education background requirements he/she will obtaining another type of certificate for vocational training for a part of certain profession, for updating or expanding vocational qualification.

5. After consequently studying of the required number of training modules on different parts of profession – the student is allowed to receive certificate for vocational qualification, but again if he/she answers the mentioned above corresponding requirements for general education.

6. The vocational training of the students and of the adults is regulated by common standards. The state exams on theory and practical skills in the field of certain profession are organized according the common state requirement for that profession acquisition. The exams and learning materials for the adults have to take into account the specific requirements of adults training and experiential learning.

This validation procedure of experience skills complies with the requirements for free movement of persons in the common European area and with the specific requirements for acknowledgement of training in regulated professions.

At present, no administrative or statistical information for the number of obtained validations is collected. In the opinion of a National Agency for Vocational Education and Training (NAVET) official there is small interest in it, stimulated mainly by employers at this time. After the accession of Bulgaria to the EU the requirements for the quality characteristics of the employed labour force have been increased in relation to competitiveness. Employees in construction and tourism gave the greatest attention to validation in 2006.

The validation procedure in Bulgaria differs from the procedure applied in France, as far as it is not regarded as ‘innovation that includes increased opportunities for all qualifications, improved definition of the role that experience plays and a mandatory practice for all awarding bodies’. It has incidental character and can’t be assumed as an element in the recently existing framework.

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4 According to the cited above Law on Vocational Education and Training there are requirements for level of general education that persons have to obtain, before qualifying in certain profession field. The adults included in vocational training have to prove with the respective documents or diplomas that they have completed basic level (VIII grade) in order to receive first (the lowest) qualification degree; Xth or X1th grade or access to mature exams – for the second qualification level; secondary education or access to mature exams for the third; and secondary (or higher) education for the fourth level of professional competences.

5 These two certificates have different names that are difficult to be translated in English.
of lifelong learning (LLL). This is quite normal given that the LLL concept and its relation to the requirements for ensuring employment flexibility were widely promoted after 2003, i.e. in the years of intensive preparation of the EU membership. However – the LLL is the lagging behind most underdeveloped element in the applying the concept of the flexicurity, as it is presented by the European Commission. According to EUROSTAT data population participation in LLL in Bulgaria is too low – 1.3% for 2005 compared to the general EU-27 level of 9.7% 6. This is the lowest level of that indicator and only Romania (1.6%) and Croatia (2.1%) have similar values. Bulgaria is far away from Sweden registering the highest level of 32.1% for the same year.

Presently the continuous vocational training (CVT) is known in Bulgaria as training of persons over 16 years of age7 to acquire, expand and update their vocational qualification for improving employability, and for encouraging carrier and individual developments. A strategy for CVT development in the period 2005-2010 has been elaborated with detailed annual implementation plans. Unfortunately it does not include the issue of the validation neither in the targets, nor in the expected results. The work on LLL Strategy will be finalised in 2009.

Employers have not officially declared shortage of workers and specialists with certain professions since 2006. Mainly persons having average or low level of qualification are demanded in the labour market. Mostly persons with primary or lower education and with no qualification are demanded via the Labour Offices. Therefore, the validation of acquired vocational skills of this group of employees still has not been a well outlined necessity.

On the other hand, the vulnerability of low-educated persons most frequently losing their job is quite common for the labour market. Thus, the preliminary vocational training proved to be a prerequisite for improving employability. The national labour market programmes contain modules for vocational training or literacy courses before starting work, as well as internship and apprenticeship. Validation here may serve for enhancing efficiency of the efforts for receiving employment, as far as it does not require the trainees to be off-the-job.

It has to be presumed that after increasing the rates of employment and improving its quality, the employees will have extended possibilities and opportunities for gaining knowledge, skills and experience to be recognised and evaluated. In addition to these prerequisites - the need for validation could result from preservation of a basic relative share of the persons with primary or lower education of over 35 years of age in the labour force and the connected with it - persistence of the problem of school dropping-out.

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6 Since 27 October 2006 that indicator is based on the annual average value of the quarterly data, not just on data from the first quarter as it used to be. http://europa.eu.int/estatref/info/notes/en/read_me.htm

7 A constitutional requirement for obligatory presence in the educational system till reaching 16 year exists in Bulgaria.
2. Assessment of the potential transferability

As far as the degree of validation application in Bulgaria is low, the transfer of the elements of French (or any other appropriate) experience may be done comparatively easy, starting from building up the system from almost the very beginning. However, important prerequisites must be created and it may take several years. Particularly, the following groups of problems deserve special attention:

- The Labour Code, the Law on Vocational Education and Training\(^8\) and other legal acts do not contain texts to define the right of every person somehow committed to a professional career (life) to validate the acquired professional experience.
- Public administration staff is not well qualified to organize and/or to take part in validation.
- No information networks are built to assess the needs of the persons and employers and to direct them towards appropriate ways for preparing for validation.
- Mainly secondary professional and general schools are interested in validation. Presently, universities and higher educational institutions are not very involved in it.
- The legal framework does not explicitly specify important elements of the validation procedure, e.g. is only the practical or the theoretical training sufficient to take an exam as it is alternatively set in the Law on Vocational Education and Training; how many times may candidates be allowed to take an exam; what will be the role of employers during the evaluation and whether it will be decisive.

The establishment of pre-conditions for implementation of the validation system should start with the building of an information network for working with persons demanding it and with its advertisement. The guidance centres, which soon will be opened throughout the country, may provide information for the network. Presently the vocational qualification departments of the Labour Offices and the Centres for vocational training may be used.

The monitoring and control system of the validation, the work of the exam committees, the elaboration of exam materials, the preparation and carrying out of the validation applied in France are interesting for Bulgaria. It is important to eliminate the possibilities for corruption within these schemes, as well as for decreasing the requirements for exams.

In parallel, certain efforts have to be made for breaking the monopolistic position of the Ministry of Education and Science as only its institutions are entitled to issue certificates for vocational qualification. As far as in France the list covers 8 ministries, it is interesting to study the way of organisation and coordination of their activities during certification.

\(^8\) Art. 1, paragraph 1 of the LVET reads that this Law shall regulate the public relations referring to: ensuring the right to vocational education and training of citizens in line with their personal interests and abilities.
3. Issues relevant to the policy areas that are currently being raised and debated in Bulgaria

The currently implemented continuous vocational training policies are mainly an element of the general active labour market policies. Vocational qualification of adults covers training of unemployed for upcoming employment; training without ensured job placement but in compliance with labour market needs; training of employed (courses, interns, practices); literacy courses and acquisition of professional skills or part of professions. The main objective of this type of training is employability improvement, employment or keeping a job. Presently, the report data of the Employment Agency organising the training, show that vocational qualification courses are demanded for starting a job. Women, persons with secondary education and those under 45 years of age are mainly interested in the courses. It may be supposed that these groups will be primarily interested in the validation of acquired knowledge and skills.

Bulgaria now has achieved low unemployment levels, which are comparable to the EU average. At the same time long-term unemployed hardly getting a job remain in the labour market. The main part of them is illiterate, has stopped school attendance before finishing 6th grade and has difficulties in written and oral command of the Bulgarian language. These are the persons involved in literacy courses and courses for learning a part of a profession. Later on, following an optimistic scenario, they should get a job and after 6 months of professional experience may claim its validation (according to the LVET). However, the acquisition of first degree (the lowest) of vocational qualification assumes finishing of at least 6th grade. However, the persons within the group in question cannot obtain such training as far as it is offered only to juveniles up to 16 years of age in day classes. Adults who have not finished primary or secondary education and are willing to acquire a high qualification degree are in a similar position. This is not a flexible practice that has to be changed.

There are serious problems with job placement of ethnic minorities’ representatives who steadily preserve elementary education levels, while some of them are very adept and even have unique craft or other professional skills. Given this group, another way of “validation” may be regarded – only certain skills that may be used at elementary literacy level. Nevertheless, the challenge here is how to develop that skills further, even if it refers to making wood ware or pottery, for example.

Validation cannot be detached from the general problems of education and training. The crisis situation is still not overcome in the country. Vocational training is conducted in parallel to the general education, and this way of organisation does not render the desired results. Bulgaria has been many times criticised for its low developed college education.

The application of the validation system should be linked with its financing thus supposing employers’ participation. However, they are not willing to spend funds for vocational training.

The validated qualification should have positive impact on labour productivity and affect wage amount, at other things held equal. Meanwhile, Bulgaria still preserves the form of “seniority payments” after certain years of work career, which allows comparatively easy recognition of professional experience without prior validation. That practice devalues the efforts for experience validation.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Polices (MLSP) together with the Ministry of Education and Sciences (MES) will have to combine their efforts in introducing the concept of experience validation in practice. This task has to be performed in accordance with: first - the EU activities on education and training system reform: ‘Education and Training 2010’; the adopted three overall and thirteen associated concrete objectives to support the Lisbon goal; and with the results reported of the 12 working groups (2002-2004) on one or more objectives of the work
programme. The officials at the MLSP have already acquired certain knowledge on these issues and on some national schemes through the study visits, peer reviews etc. It is safe to be told that there are grounds for more intensive public administration work on validation.

The steps further will have to include presentation of the well developed EU models of validation to the social partners in Bulgaria and to the society, as a whole. The progressive concept of validation will have to be included in the Strategy for life long learning.

The appropriate for Bulgaria model will have to be suggested soon and put under discussions and approbation. Clear procedures for validation will have to be developed. The access to Structural and other EU funds will have to be utilized and some pilot projects to be implemented on these issues. At the end of 2009 – Bulgaria will have to be prepared to make use of the advantages of the experience validation.

References


