Validation of non-formal and informal learning
Statements and Comments

Diana Pauna
Stockholm School of Economics in Riga

Introduction

Since October 30th, 2000 when the European Commission paper on “A Memorandum of Lifelong Learning” was signed, it has taken nearly seven years for Latvia to produce “The Policy Guidelines On Lifelong Learning 2007 – 2013” that were approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on February 23, 2007. Quality assessment and the validation of prior learning experience are part of the action plan that will be implemented only by 2013, therefore it makes the task of a peer reviewer from Latvia more difficult to evaluate and provide a comparative analysis of the report and the discussion paper provided by the French hosts, because to date there is very little experience on accreditation of prior learning in Latvia. With this background, the statements and comments are presented as follows:

1. The Case of Non-formal Education Provisions in Latvia
   1.1 Resources and administration
   1.2 Target groups
   1.3 Issues and challenges

2. Drawing on French experience
   2.1 The role of the qualifications system
   2.2 Linking formal and non-formal/informal education

3. Bringing it all together

1. The case of non-formal education provisions in Latvia

Non-formal and informal education has been interpreted differently by different practitioners since these terms were not defined in previous education laws and regulations. The terms appear to be officially defined in the newly adopted “The Policy Guidelines On Lifelong Learning 2007 – 2013”, and there are several related terms (non formal education, informal education, special interests) that all apply to lifelong learning. Since non-formal and informal education are defined as part of lifelong learning, in describing the case of Latvia the term ‘lifelong learning’ will be used.

1.1 Resources and administration

To stimulate continuous education through appropriate policies, regulations and measures, the Ministry of Education and Science has the leading role governed by the Law on Education (1998). Lifelong learning is not defined in this document, and it provides general statements concerning adult education, and in paragraph 46.3 there is a reference to the Law on Adult Education that
does not exist. ‘The Education Development Concept 200 – 2010’ provides several essential priorities to address policy deficiencies, but it does not provide formal basis for the development and financing of lifelong learning measures.

The other stakeholders in lifelong learning are the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Economics, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Regional Development and Local Government, the Ministry of Welfare, non-governmental organisations and social partners. There is lack of coordination and cooperation between these institutions and it impedes long-term planning and targeted use of financial resources. According to the regulations issued by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2003, the Advisory Board ‘Education for All’ was established, aiming at cooperation and joint activities between ministries, other public institutions, local governments, the private sector, non-governmental and international organisations to enhance lifelong learning in Latvia and to provide equal opportunities for education irrespective of age, place of living, gender, ethnicity and income. However, there is a lack of systematic approach and routines at making good cooperation efforts.

With support from the EU Structural Funds (ESF), Latvia has started to develop and implement a lifelong learning strategy. During the period of 2004 – 2006 the financial allocation for lifelong learning was 2.1 mill. Which were used to establish six adult education centres (one in Riga and five in the other planning regions), provide professional development for 479 coordinators, develop a public website on lifelong learning, develop new educational programmes and teaching material, conduct research on education needs and opportunities in different socio-economic groups. This research served as the basis for developing policy guidelines.

1.2 Target groups

The most obvious target groups are the employed, the unemployed, people with a low education level and rural population with low income.

In the employed group four subgroups can be identified: workers close to retirement, low skilled workers with low income, employees who do not work in their profession and highly qualified employees who are well provided with professional development opportunities; in this group the first two subgroups need special care and attention in providing learning opportunities.

The level of registered unemployment was 5.4 percent in August, 2007 (SEA), however, it is uneven if analysed at regional level, for example, in Latgale, a backward region, the unemployment level was 18 per cent while in Riga it was 4.99 per cent. The State Employment Agency (SEA) provides a range of vocational training programmes and adult further education programmes. However, to qualify for these programmes, applicants are required to submit a number of documents to prove that they are unemployed. It partly contributes to the problem that generally characterises this group, i.e. the unemployed lack motivation to study. According to the survey (Developing a lifelong learning strategy, BSZI 2006), only 19 per cent of the unemployed have attended courses within the period of the last three years, and 5 per cent of them have found a new job.

People with a low education level are of major concern since they typically have not finished primary school, secondary school or vocational education school and hence, they do not hold an education certificate. On the one hand, there is not sufficient supply of education opportunities for this group, and on the other hand, they do not have financial resources to apply for further educa-
Assessing the youth situation in Latvia, the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs has submitted a national report on youth policy in Latvia, and the current situation calls for immediate action – 11 per cent of primary school leavers exit without an education certificate; 22.5 per cent secondary school leavers enter the labour market with low skills and without any qualifications, and 5.6 per cent of youth do not attend school. In response, the National Youth Council of Latvia has developed the draft project on “Youth Policy Guidelines 2008 – 2018” that has been submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers for approval, and equal opportunities and accessible education are the central topics addressed by the guidelines.

The group of rural population with low income faces difficulties to access further education either due to lack of financial resources or distant location of the education centre. They often lack motivation, because the education programmes that are offered in the nearby education centres do not correspond to their needs and interests.

Overall, adults and young adults who have accredited formal education feel secure and motivated to enter further education programmes. According to the latest data presented by the Ministry of Education and Science (October 2007), Latvia is leading among new Member States of the EU in using lifelong learning – 7.5 percent of the target group have used this opportunity, compared to the EU average of approximately 11 per cent. Moreover, the growing numbers is one cause for optimism.

1.3 Issues and challenges

In Latvia non-formal education is accredited in a non-systematic way and there are no state regulations on validation of prior learning and work experience. In secondary school education, for those who have studied a year abroad as exchange students, their studies are accredited; young adults who study in evening schools to finish either primary or secondary education receive accredited certificates. In higher education, there are universities that seriously consider prior experience during the admission procedure to select the best candidates; during studies some institutions require internship periods that are accredited and show on the graduation transcript; finally, all exchange programmes at local universities and abroad are accredited if they are properly organised by signing a learning agreement. In adult education, all adult education centres provide their own attendance or participation certificates; it is easier to ask for validation of non-formal education when the adult education centre is accredited, however, only a few major training centres are accredited. In the light of the national development strategy, there should be a systematic approach to validation of prior learning and work experience.

To follow the national growth scenario ‘People first’ presented in the National Development Plan and promote a knowledge based society through lifelong learning, the following issues should be turned into challenges: legislative alignment, cooperation in providing education services, quality management and accreditation, development of education supply and accessibility and monitoring the supply of lifelong learning programmes. With the ESF financial support of EUR 28.2 mill. and national funding that is provided for the development of lifelong learning in Latvia in 2007 – 2013 it is certain that there are financial resources that will be spent on a variety of measures. However, the question remains to be answered – how well this money will be spent.
2. Drawing on the French experience

The analysis of both reports reveals a number of broadly similar features characterising the context of continuing education. Institutions and individuals understand the importance of learning as providing social security and welfare to individuals which, in turn, will translate into economic security and welfare to the state.

2.1 The role of the qualifications system

The role of qualifications is important in France and also in Latvia and the importance of certificates in recruitment procedures and employers’ decisions cannot be ignored. While there is a high level of recognition of formal education, the prestige of non-formal education qualifications is fairly low and the stereotype is maintained by educators themselves, because they strongly believe in academic traditions and the terms ‘professional’, ‘applied’ or ‘vocational’ are perceived as secondary rate. It implies that there is ground for improvement in promoting information about lifelong learning and providing quality output.

There are several aspects essential for promoting information on continuous education. They relate first to the general public to understand what benefits they will gain individually, and second, to employers who should support the development of a better workforce in general and their employees in particular. In both cases the acquisition of qualifications is important. Employers recognise with no difficulty prior learning and work experience for individuals who are students at higher educational institutions or hold a higher education degree/qualification. It suggests that employers are looking for quality human resources, therefore, adult education centres should produce quality output and success stories should be used for continuous education and qualifications promotion campaigns. Creating an effective learning environment and matching learning methods to learning objectives and audience should stimulate a commitment to learning and guarantee quality output.

The process of non-formal and informal learning becomes de-institutionalised (Internet, youth groups, mobility programmes, etc.), therefore the survival of the qualification system depends on how well it responds to change. The information provided by the French hosts shows that the process of changing implementation is complicated, because it involves efficient communication, cooperation and coordination.

2.2 Linking formal and non-formal/informal education

Competence factors are identified as crucial in boosting the quality of workforce, and, indeed, the debate is again about the balance between general and specific knowledge and skills. The employers point out that education institutions should prepare individuals for the labour market, however, to adapt to future changes, employees should be equipped with general knowledge and skills. The analysis of all the steps in the long path that candidates should undergo to complete the validation of qualification suggest that they can deal with specific knowledge, but have difficulties with general knowledge, i.e. assessing information, written language and communication skills. It suggests that the candidates should be offered opportunities to develop general skills, because not all of them can be practiced in a self-study mode. These findings collaborate with the observation that general skills will be useful for linking formal and non-formal education and make...
transitions between formal and non-formal education opportunities more flexible, resulting in linking career paths to study options.

2.3 Potentially transferable to Latvia

There are several interesting experiences that are presented by the French hosts, and some of them might be considered as potentially transferable to Latvia. First, the innovative approach to certification breaks new ground by promoting experience as a source of professional competences and creating healthy competition for continuous education training programmes. Given the old-established perception that the certification of educational activities is associated with education provisions (laws, regulations, etc.) and training programmes, the new framework obviously calls for a change from training to employment certification in legislation. Even though the overall number of applicants for validation of prior experience is smaller than in continuing education, it is interesting to see how the validation of experience differs across sectors. In Latvia it might cause a major debate since there are strong traditions of certifying educational achievements while experience has been neglected so far, therefore French experience will be helpful to build on.

Second, the level of cooperation between ministries has an important practical implication. With eight ministries being involved in certification, it requires collective effort and significant coordination that has been administered by the inter-ministry committee. In Latvia nine ministries are involved as stakeholders, and they could potentially become involved in the process of developing a system for certification of prior experience. Where ministries are concerned, the situation in Latvia is different, because the Ministry of Education and Science has a dominating role, and other ministries do not issue titles, diplomas or qualifications. With the Advisory Board ‘Education for All’ being established in 2003, it might be considered to widen their scope of activity to achieve cooperation also in the field of certification.

3. Bringing it all together

The policy development on lifelong learning has just started in Latvia, and the case of France on introducing the validation of non-formal and informal education is very relevant. It suggests suitable policy measures in respect to the implementation, operation and evaluation of the system. In both reports there is an attempt to critically examine and evaluate issues and challenges for validation of non-formal education, however, there is a common agreement that validation of prior learning has a positive impact not only on labour market policy, but also empowers various other strategies.

In Latvia the benchmark should be set by the Ministry of Education. Based on the analysis of the target groups, there is a need for alternative ways for securing professional careers, helping to get people back on the job market and reduce unemployment. In education, programme developers strive for integrating experiential learning, because experience brings skills. Therefore validation of prior learning can be considered as value added, and, indeed, it is a tool to increase the skills, qualifications and awareness. Moreover, it will provide opportunities for employees and employers to use efficiently on-the-job training and internet-based learning, because in the future people will spend less hours in the classroom. Finally, the European understanding of validation
of prior learning is in a development phase, and it is time for policy makers in Latvia to make a decision on the most efficient fit to the European framework.