Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway: An advanced framework on the verge of implementation

Statements and Comments

Odd Bjørn Ure
Fafo

Introduction

Historical and systemic roots of Norwegian experiences in validating non-formal and informal learning constitute the path dependency of these experiences. They primarily relate to:

- Education for everybody (in a unitary education system), which has been a widely shared policy goal since the process of national building in the 18th and 19th century. Later, systematic validation of competencies acquired in a variety of learning situations fitted into a policy based on egalitarian and democratic values.
- The slow evolution of an infrastructure of ‘local civic life’ resulted in local control of education, community control and power for parents. The very high appreciation of informal learning in the home, at the workplace and in the community goes back to the epoch of nation building (cf. J. Lauglo 2002). An ambitious state reform for lifelong learning, The Competence Reform launched in 1999, could therefore build on practices for validating learning outside the formal education system.
- A Vocational Training Act dating back to 1952 allows individuals to take a crafts examination provided they have sufficient practical work experiences. This implies that the candidates can have their theoretical training and/or apprenticeship period shortened. Each year between 1/3 and 1/2 of all crafts examinations are passed via this route, which has been resistant to a flow of policy reforms in Norwegian education.

Where appropriate for the discussion, I will return to this path dependency throughout the text1. It should be noted that Norwegian work on validation departs from the notion of ‘real competencies’, which covers both non-formal and informal learning. Compared e.g. with the British notions of and institutional practices on prior learning and prior experiential learning, Norwegian practices do not depend on a similar distinction.

1. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway: state-of-play

The abovementioned lifelong learning reform resided on an ambition to set up an integrated validation system between the labour market, the education system and the civil society. This project was later modified towards a more compartmentalised (and probably more realistic) approach centred on each of them.

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1 I am grateful to Torild Nilsen Mohn, senior adviser at the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning (Vox), for her useful comments to an earlier draft of this paper.
As in France, statutory rights - guaranteed by the State or inscribed in collective agreements between the social partners - are pivotal in Norwegian validation practices. Such rights will be accounted for below, with regard to the education system and, secondly, the labour market.

1.1 Policy context

1.1.1 Output from the education system

Norway spends 7.6% of the Gross Domestic Product on education and training, compared with the OECD average of 5.5%. Norway scores however modestly in international tests on acquired skills, cf. OECD’s PISA study and the Adults’ Literacy and Life Skills Survey. This apparent paradox has sparked off discussions on input vs. output: what happens inside the education system? Increasing disciplinary problems in school and shifting pedagogical regimes are two of many explanatory factors proposed (O.B. Ure 2007). A panacea heralded by most discussants is to link education to practices that students will meet in the labour market.

1.1.2 Demography and immigration

Norway counts 4.7 million inhabitants of which close to 2.2 million are active in the labour market. Differently from subsequent waves of immigrants throughout the French history, the 1st significant wave in Norway occurred as late as the 1970s when the Pakistani community started to develop. Balancing birth and death rates, the Norwegian population increased in 2003 by 0.24% and there are concerns about a greying workforce. If immigration is accounted for, the real increase in population amounted in 2004 to 0.62%. Immigrants who have resided in Norway for more than five years are covered by the general welfare and labour market services, including education and ‘vocational testing’ to assess their prior learning (J. Horgen Friberg, A.B. Djuve 2004).

1.2 Economic circumstances

The present economic upturn in most European countries has also hit the Norwegian economy, which was highly dependent on exports long before oil and gas were discovered on the Norwegian continental shelf. The unemployment rate of 1.8% is historically low. There is however substantial unemployment in some districts far away from the major cities. The number of vacant posts registered by the official (but not monopolistic) employment service presently stands at 32,000, whereas there are 43,400 registered unemployed. Estimations of all published vacancy announcements compared with the number of registered unemployed, suggest that there is a surplus of job offers in Norway.

The demographic changes outlined above engender a high demand for skilled personnel, particularly in the health and social sector. Validation of non-formal and informal learning, both in working life and for having access to higher education, is important in reducing skills shortages. Consequently, at the level of ISCED 5 close to half of the applicants to health and social studies applied on the basis of prior learning experiences (OECD 2007:80). Other sectors and branches in need of manpower rely heavily on foreign workers with short or long-term work permits, as witnessed for instance in the transport sector and in the building and construction industry.
1.3 Institutional and legal background

Municipalities are responsible for primary and lower secondary education (6-15), counties for upper secondary education (16-19). Higher education is under the auspices of the national education ministry but institutions at this level have a substantial degree of freedom.

1.3.1. Labour market

The labour market is less State regulated than the education system and more subject to regulations between associations for employers and employees in various sectors. A statutory right to validation applies for unemployed people having signed a ‘jobseekers’ agreement with the employment service. Unemployed people can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed for free but relatively few of them make use of validation services. If successfully completed and followed-up, a pilot project presently run by Vox, the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning, might remedy this. It involves the labour market services of the newly established NAV (see below) and aims to use validation tools when setting up qualifying courses for persons in search for a job.

From the mid-1990s, paragraphs on skills development were added to Basic Agreements between the social partners in all economic sectors. These paragraphs i.a. outline annual stocktaking of competencies and set out that employers are obliged to pay for continuing training in response to in-company needs. A new clause was added to the agreements in 2006, requesting employers to have a system for documentation of employees’ experiences, included courses and practice related to work conditions. There is little empirical evidence of how these paragraphs are used, in particular the recent clause on documentation of experiences. In general, there are however few indications that the Basic Agreement covering the industry sector serves as inspiration sources for the training actually carried out in enterprises (cf. Bowman 2005).

During the National Validation Project (1999-2002), 6,000 employees in 150 enterprises belonging to a variety of different industries were involved in nine projects testing various tools and methods for the assessment of prior learning. Some of these tools described and accounted for non-formal and informal competences in a way that was useful for enterprises in their allocation and development of human resources. The tools and methods have also assisted employees when applying for new jobs or for admission to educational institutions. After the experimental period ending in 2002, there was however only a limited dissemination of validation tools throughout the labour market (S. Skule, O. B. Ure 2004).

At present, various validation tools and methods co-exist but no standards for the entire labour market have emerged (cf. OECD 2007). Recently, however, Vox (The Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning) has compiled a ‘competence card’ mapping an individual’s professional skills such as branch knowledge, work methods and responsibilities in addition to personal skills. This attestation should form part of a national system for documenting prior learning. It is supported by free software that can be downloaded by companies in order to build a database of staff competencies; be they formal, informal or non-formal.

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1.3.2 Formal education system

The lifelong learning reform launched in 1999 developed more pathways between initial and continuing education. A milestone in this direction were statutory rights for individuals to complete their education at primary level or at upper secondary level.

The framework for validating non-formal and informal learning in the formal education system makes a distinction between access to and shortening of education/training.

In upper secondary education, adults with a right to complete their education can have their prior learning assessed for free. In case of successful recognition, their subsequent study period can be shortened. Each year around 10,000 students at upper secondary level participate in a process of recognising non-formal and informal learning. Eight out of ten who are enrolled in such a process follow a vocational ‘track’ (OECD 2007: 79).

In higher education, adults without formal competencies allowing them to be enrolled can have their prior learning assessed in order to gain admission to specific courses (opposed to ‘general study competence’), provided they are aged 25+. Around 10 % of the total number of students are now being enrolled according to this new procedure (St. meld. 16 (2006-07), p. 20).

Compared with upper secondary education, fewer ‘non-traditional’ students in higher education succeed in having their study period shortened. Between 2001 and 2004 higher education institutions received 123 applications for shortened studies, of which 30 % were rejected. Higher education institutions have very gradually started to develop procedures for exchanging prior learning with shortened studies (cf. Brandt 2005). The administrative staff involved requests more support, i.a. a national framework allowing them to discuss principles, regulations and common problems in validation at a university level (OECD 2007: 26).

1.3.3 Achievements in bridging education and work for the purpose of validation

As recognised by OECD, the Norwegian framework for validating experiences from the labour market (broadly: non-formal competencies) and the civil society (broadly: informal competencies) is fairly advanced. However, the average learner is not yet offered substantial tools for the translation of learning experiences gained in these two settings. In spite of systematic attempts to bridge the educational sector and the labour market, better co-operation is requested (cf. OECD 2007:65). The recent merger of the employment service and local welfare offices into the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation (NAV) is expected to create a more favourable climate for intersections between the education sector and the labour market to the benefit of validation practices. According to OECD, the co-operation between employment and welfare offices and county offices in charge of validation of non-formal and informal learning is presently “underdeveloped” (OECD 2007:68).
1.3.4 Statutory rights for validation of prior learning

To sum up, the following rights, guaranteed by the State, apply in the labour market and the formal education system:

- individuals with sufficient practical work experiences can take a crafts examination without passing the normal apprenticeship route. The candidates can have their theoretical training and/or apprenticeship period shortened;
- unemployed people can have their non-formal and informal learning assessed for free (paid by the employment service);
- immigrants who cannot provide enough documentation for their skill level can go through a vocational testing in order to assess their prior learning;
- adults with a right to complete their education up till the level of upper secondary school can have their prior learning assessed for free. Also, the assessment can entail shorter studies;
- adults without formal competencies allowing them to be enrolled in higher education can have their prior learning assessed in order to gain admission to specific courses if they are aged 25+. The assessment can entail shortening of the studies.

In addition, collective agreements, concluded and regulated by the social partners, contain recommendations for validation of prior learning.

2. Transferability and comparability of Norwegian experiences

This section briefly addresses two aspects of validation of non-formal and informal learning that can be transferred, i.e. the actual tools available and information about these validation tools. Before plunging into the possible transfer of such validation experiences, a couple of comparative precautions are needed.

The first precaution is that knowledge is probably less important as a social distinction in Norway than in France (cf. French discussion paper, p. 2; R. Sakslind 2006). A recent survey of higher educated Norwegian employees revealed that very few considered theoretical knowledge to be of societal importance. The respondents were afraid of ‘flagging’ their own knowledge because this could give them a flavour of being ‘besserwisser’³ (R. Sakslind et al. 2006). This attitude might be linked to an emphasis on egalitarian and democratic values in the Norwegian unitary school system (cf. our introduction on path dependency)⁴.

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³ ‘know-it-all’
⁴ Whether this also partly explains the low score of Norwegian learners in international skills tests, is an issue surpassing the core discussion in the present paper.
The second precaution is that any transfer of experiences across borders (and policy learning in general) should reside on a distinction between:

- practices strongly rooted in systemic elements;
- practices and tools that more easily can be translated into other contexts.

Given that there are substantial differences in national arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning even between the Nordic countries (P. Andersson, Å. Hult 2007), it would be futile to transfer the entire Norwegian policy of validation of non-formal and informal learning into another national framework. Both Norwegian and French practices and tools for validating non-formal and informal learning stem from statutory rights guaranteed by the State and from collective agreements between the social partners. Although a copy/paste approach would be futile, there could be mutual interest in comparing the nature of national frameworks, e.g. collective agreements in both countries.

2.1 Transfer of validation practices and tools

As to concrete practices and tools in validation of non-formal and informal learning, the transferability is probably even higher. A range of validation methods have been tried out in Norway, for instance CVs and written portfolios based on an agreed template, personal interviews as well as self-assessment with or without electronic tools. A combination of methods has turned out to be quite successful, such as a practical demonstration combined with interviews with the learner. Recently, e-portfolios have gained strength. An issue emanating from the French country report and discussion paper is the weight of written material in a portfolio. More specifically, how can a candidate in a vocational subject collect material in a portfolio (e.g. pictures/drawings put into an e-portfolio) without having to explain his or her skills in writing?

Tools and practices can form part of a mutual learning process during which each element is contextualised by those having been through these experiences. Those supposed to learn from the experiences should be invited to re-contextualise them. Such a discussion of contextualisation and re-contextualisation will contribute to identifying successes and failures, the relevant and the irrelevant etc.

2.2 Information about validation services

Moving then to the other type of validation experiences, i.e. information to learners about the possibility of having prior learning assessed and how to proceed in doing that. 85% of Norwegian adults enrolled in upper secondary education did not know where they could have their non-formal and informal learning assessed (Haugerud, Røstad 2004). This has sparked off trials on having one-stop-shops. Nowadays, seven of 19 counties have designated one single centre to receive applications for assessment of prior learning (OECD 2007:31).

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5 A similar approach inspired from Basil Bernstein is proposed in the field of regional policy learning, cf. P. Federighi (ed).
Vox, the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning, offers sharing of experiences and further training of staff involved in validation of prior learning. There is apparently a need for networks, i.a. between practitioners in the county administrations and among practitioners in university administrations. In addition, there might be a role for stakeholders, such as the social partners, in disseminating information and providing guidance to the learners (cf. French discussion paper p. 6 on problems in choosing vocational paths or qualifications). At least this could be discussed in the context of policy learning across borders, alongside a reflection on what branch organisations can contribute with in this context. At the moment, the role of Norwegian social partners in validation of non-formal and informal learning appears to be somewhat entrenched into a corner of formal paragraphs in need of successful implementation. Mutual policy learning might spur this process of implementation.

3. Relevant issues and developments affecting validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway

A third issue emerging from Norwegian experiences relates to how the devolution of responsibilities in education and training affects the implementation of measures and practices for validating prior learning. Differences between Norway and France in terms of centre-periphery governance may reduce the potential for immediate policy learning in this field but the question is important in both countries (cf. page 7-8 in the host country discussion paper).

The statutory rights explained above all depend on a successful implementation at local level. In order to implement these rights, Vox has carried out exploratory projects at a county and municipal level i.a. looking at local implementation processes. These studies reveal that there is too much variation in how counties practice validation of non-formal and informal learning at the level of primary and secondary education. It occurs that informal learning experiences recognised in one county can be turned down in another. This has to do with the widespread devolution of responsibilities in the field of education and training to municipalities (primary and lower secondary education), counties (upper secondary education) and to the institutions themselves (higher education).

The devolution might slow down the implementation of the national framework for validation of prior learning. On the other hand, the devolution allows counties to develop procedures for how decentralised validation practices can be based on a local reality, e.g. when it comes to utilisation of existing structures. The role of Vox in this picture is i.a. to disseminate outcomes of exploratory projects at a county level to more counties, thus counteracting dispersed validation practices by gathering experiences in an open learning process. In this regard, Vox has launched a project together with the 19 counties aiming to have a common understanding between practitioners of laws and regulations in adult education, including those relating to validation.

The local and regional control in the field of education and training coincides with path dependent “infrastructures of local civic life” (cf. the introduction to this paper). Future achievements in harmonising validation practices therefore depend on more than political determination and voluntarism at a central level. The advanced national framework could remain on the verge of

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6 A further issue is whether vocational validation and guidance services should be seen together and possibly be more professionalized, either jointly or separately, but this goes beyond the scope of this paper.
implementation if this dualism (or dialectic?) between national validation standards and local contexts is not sufficiently addressed.

These challenges faced during the national implementation of validation practices should not overshadow the wider European context. An underlying idea has been that ‘competence cards’ developed for the Norwegian labour market should be compatible with Europass and the annexes that gradually are being enclosed to it. The discussion about a European Qualification Framework, points towards a new framework for Norwegian ‘competence cards’. Perhaps this will constitute a new playing ground for comparisons and policy learning in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

References


7 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html


