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## **The Validation and Recognition of Prior Learning (VRPL) in France, Spain and Italy**

### **Introduction**

The objective of this paper is to analyze similarities and diverging and converging trends in validation policies, practices and methodologies. This is why this reflection aims at characterizing European validation of non-formal and informal learning, to evaluate differences and commonalities between countries, precisely France, Spain and Italy to consider the potential for building a European approach. We present a cross-country analysis whose aim is to look at validation not only from a national perspective but also from an organizational and individual perspective. Key issues such as the number of people who have benefited from validation and / or the number of qualifications awarded for example are also covered. The domination of formal education is challenged when VRPL provides new possibilities for valuing learning and knowledge from informal and non-formal learning contexts. In some countries there may be structural barriers when a project needs to be expanded to a national level or be embedded in the apparatus of the educational system.

Mainly based on the information provided in the 2010 country updates, it is possible to group the countries according to their level of development or the approach they have taken to the development or implementation of a validation system – either centrally designed and managed validation initiatives or those which fundamentally rely on local project based initiatives. If all descriptive and analytical elements on categorisations however have clear limitations and do not take account of the often complex and multi-faceted situations at national level, however the VRPL can be regarded as a vector making it possible to build bridges between various forms of cultures - of an educational, economic or social nature - resulting from behaviors and representations of the historically rooted actors, finally like the source of convergences or divergences.

### **European context of the Validation of Recognition of Prior Learning**

The process of Recognition of Prior Learning is recognised as an important tool in the pursuit of economic and social goals at European level. Moreover, the long-term commitment to validation has been recently reinforced by the revised Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020 (adopted in 2009) identified ‘making lifelong learning a reality’ as one of its four

strategic objectives to be addressed in the upcoming decade. Within this objective, the Strategy states that “work is needed to ensure the development of national qualifications frameworks based on relevant learning outcomes and their link to the European Qualifications Framework, the establishment of more flexible learning pathways”. Thus, the Strategy makes it clear that there is more work to be done to increase the implementation of validation in the Member States.

### Level of development of the Validation and Recognition of Prior Learning

The countries can be categorised according to their level of development, as being either at a high, medium-high, medium-low or low level. This categorisation by ‘level of development’ is useful to obtain a view of the state of the art in VRPL. However, it is important to note that the categorisation provides only an overall assessment in a dynamic consideration. In fact, the situation is often complex and multi-faceted at the national level, as different degrees of progress and development are in operation in different sectors (e.g. vocational education/ training, higher education, the private sector, etc.) within the same country. In contrast, some countries may not have a clear national legal or policy framework but have bottom-up initiatives with very high levels of take-up. The focus of this classification is on relative, rather than absolute, levels of performance.

High	Medium-high	Medium-low	Low
Finland, France, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal	Denmark, Germany, Romania, Spain, Sweden, UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland), UK (Scotland)	Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Belgium (Wallonia), Czech Republic, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia,	Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Turkey

Source: 2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Executive summary of Final Report

Indeed, the comparative reasoning on which the operations of classification are based is a pragmatic way of thinking. It so happens that, if human thought is undeniably founded<sup>17</sup> – most often and implicitly – between elements of a same category or a different category, it must nevertheless be submitted to a rational construction, so as to avoid the risk of an unlikely classification or erroneous typology, the inexorably incomplete reflection of an impossible inventory.

In functionalist research, « the country or the nations are but local contexts in which the studied phenomena are inserted. The national context is, therefore, in

<sup>17</sup> One of C. LEVI-STRAUSS’s theses shows how primitive thought (« *la pensée sauvage* ») is based on a coherent vision of the world, contrary to the reductive presentations that were formulated during the first halting steps of anthropology.

this case, totally heterogeneous in relationship with these phenomena »; consequently, “the relationship between micro and macro levels is not really constructed and problematized »<sup>18</sup>. As it is, the analysis of the implementation of the device would require to be solicited as much by individuals on a local level as by institutions on a global level. Hence, how would these solicitations manifest themselves in different periods and areas in Europe?

In the culturalist approaches, « the national reference (...) is conceptualized in terms of national culture. The phenomena under study are then supposed to be strongly influenced by this culture, to the point of provoking strong discontinuities when those phenomena are compared from one country to another, because of their cultural specificity or identity »<sup>19</sup>. The universalist and culturalist approaches, which pay little attention to the differences that have been noticed, respectively present the following defect: « applying a pre-established pattern, in the first case; postulating the existence of national specificities of an institutional, cultural or historical nature, in the second case »<sup>20</sup>.

Therefore, the societal approach aims at going beyond those two pitfalls by considering universalist traits as much as particularisms, at the same time highlighting the reference to « questions of representations, meaning and values rooted in the personal history »<sup>21</sup> of the individuals registering in a process of recognition and validation of acquired experience, and the reference to the institutions directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of the devices. In that sense, this echoes B. PROT’s<sup>22</sup> approach, i.e. showing how the interaction between the collective and the individual element is not only present in the work described by the VRPL candidate, but also how central this interaction is to the VRPL process.

### Countries with a high degree of development

This category was defined as countries which have given developments to validation policies to the implementation of validation practices. They have established practices for validation, encompassing all or most sectors of learning, and which already show a significant level of take-up. They also have a

<sup>18</sup> MAURICE M., *Méthode comparative et analyse sociétale. Les implications théoriques des comparaisons internationales* ; Sociologie du travail, vol.2, 1989, p178.

<sup>19</sup> MAURICE M., *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> MAURICE M., SELLIER F. et SILVESTRE J.-J., *Politique d’éducation et organisation industrielle en France et en Allemagne. Essai d’analyse sociétale*, Paris, PUF, 1982, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> IRIBARNE PH. D’, *La logique de l’honneur. Gestion des entreprises et traditions locales*, Paris, Seuil, 1989, p. 600.

<sup>22</sup> PROT B., La double vie du collectif dans les acquis individuels, in BELISLE R. et BOUTINET J.-P., *Demandes de reconnaissance et validation d’acquis de l’expérience*, Québec, PUL, 2009, pp. 11-41.

national legislative framework or national policy in place, which might be one national policy relating to validation in all sectors, or a set of policies / laws relating to different sectors which together form an overall framework.

In **France**, the Validation of prior learning has been established as a right for every citizen. The current system (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience, VAE), which was established in January 2002 (Social Modernisation Act), is used to deliver whole or partial qualifications. Each body awarding qualifications has developed its own rules for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation. The VAE system stems from legislation introduced in 1992 for qualifications awarded by the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, extended to qualifications delivered by the Ministry of Youth and Sport in 1999, and to all main types of qualification in 2002. The most recent change in 2009 aimed to increase the number of individuals accessing the VAE process, in particular private sector workers, and to develop guidance for VAE.

Since 2002 a significant investment has been made in the higher education sector in particular to produce standards (référentiels) described in terms of learning outcomes in order to facilitate VAE (all vocational training diplomas included in the national qualifications directory (RNCP) must be described in terms of learning outcomes).

In addition, in higher education, recognition of professional experience has also been used for a long time (in fact it dates back to 1934) to allow access to individuals who do not meet formal requirement criteria and, in some cases, acquisition of a diploma. A new practice emerged in the 1970s, when a new pedagogical approach moved towards the modularisation of training, to recognise the learning outcomes of workers (obtained through work experience or short in-company training courses) as an entry route to Higher Education (HE). Through an evaluation of professional skills and competences (positionnement or evaluation des compétences et aptitudes professionnelles), it is possible to grant exemption from a pre-requisite to enter a formal training curriculum for a formal qualification from an HE institution, or a part of this training. In 1985 a decree was adopted to allow professional experience to be taken into consideration in determining access to HE (concerning only universities and other types of HE institutions, such as schools for engineers). The process, termed 'Validation des Acquis Professionnels 85'<sup>23</sup> enables all people aged 20 or over who ended their initial studies at least two years before to apply for a place on a HE course through exemption of the qualification normally required.

<sup>23</sup> The 1984 January 26 Law and the 1985 August 23 Decree mentioned exactly: "*validation des études, expériences professionnelles ou acquis personnels*": validation of studies, work experiences or personal outcomes.

### Countries with a medium-high degree of development

This category would include either countries where there is a national system, or a framework of systems, for validation but take-up remains relatively low, or countries where there is a particularly well-established system of validation in a certain sector with a high level of take-up, but not a national framework in place.

In **Spain**, there are some opportunities for validation in relation to Higher Education (HE) and also professional competences (up to a certain level). Some Autonomous Communities (Comunidades Autónomas – CCAAs) have also established procedures for validation. In Higher Education, since the 1970s individuals aged over 25 without upper secondary education have been entitled to access Higher Education upon satisfactory performance in 'over-25s' Higher Education access exams – although without receiving a secondary school qualification through this process. Later, from the early 2000s new measures were put in place at national level in order to recognise competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. A new decree to regulate validation procedures in Higher Education has been drafted and will be finalised by the end of 2010.

In 2009, the Royal Decree on the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience established the procedures and requirements for the validation of professional competences acquired through work experience and non-formal learning processes. The Decree opened up a structure for validation of professional competences, for modules of formal Vocational Education Training (VET) or full qualifications at levels 1 to 5, according to the criteria specified in the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications. The decree is restricted to only some levels of competence and the calls for examination will only apply to certain economic sectors each year. The first joint call for validation of professional competences will be carried out in 2011 and will only cover some competences. It is planned that other competences will be included in the calls launched in the following years. The first round of validation of professional competences under the new regulatory framework at national level will be carried out in 2011, covering modules included within the Catalogue on children's education and medical care sectors. It is expected that 8 000 people will take part in the process in 2011<sup>24</sup>.

### Countries with a medium-low degree of development

Countries with a medium-low degree of development are likely to have established validation systems in one or more sectors, but not amounting to an overall framework for all types of learning.

<sup>24</sup> The legal framework states the CCAAs must introduce the process on validation on their territory by 25th August 2010.

Recently in **Italy**, some of the most recent Government initiatives towards the introduction of a validation system appear: The White Paper of the Ministry of Labour, published in 2009. The White Paper assigned specific importance to the needs of individuals.

In relation to validation, the Paper aimed at giving value to “workplace learning” and informal learning and is an important statement about the need to build and implement a national system of validation of competences<sup>25</sup>. The document “Italia 2020”, an action plan for the employability of young people through the integration of jobs and learning, signed by the Minister of Labour and Social Policies and the Minister of Education, Universities and Research. The document “Italia 2020 - Piano di azione per l’occupabilità dei giovani attraverso l’integrazione tra apprendimento e lavoro” (Italy 2020 - Action plan for the employability of young people through the integration of jobs and learning) was signed on 2009. The Action Plan identifies strategic policies for the coming years in the field of VET and identifies an urgent need to develop suitable approaches and instruments to: Ensure a match between workers knowledge and labour market needs, with priority focusing on “assessment and validation” of learning and the updating of the training processes; streamlining the governance of training systems, with specific regard to the involvement of social partners; improving the quality of educational activities, by introducing new systems and approaches to assure quality of accreditation and certification procedures.

#### Countries with a low degree of development

This category was previously defined as encompassing countries in which “as yet there is little in terms of policy or practice which actually facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning”. This category now includes countries which may be in the process of developing, or approving legislation or policy relating to validation, or tools which might support the introduction of a process of validation such as occupational profiles, as well as those countries where very little activity, if any at all, is taking place.

#### Types of approach or system of the Validation and Recognition of Prior Learning

On the 2010, countries can be divided into two main categories those with a centrally designed and managed system of validation on the one hand and those with local project based initiatives on the other. These two main categories encompass several different approaches. In countries with a centrally regulated

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Policies – WHITE “La vita buona nella società attiva” – “A good Life in Active Society”, 06.05.09; <http://www.lavoro.gov.it/NR/rdonlyres/B8453482-9DD3-474E-BA13-D248430849/0/libroverdeDEF25luglio.pdf>

approach, validation is driven by a national law, policy or strategy, a national framework with devolved responsibilities, or is based on centrally-designed qualifications which include a validation ‘component’ or validation procedures to facilitate access to formal education / training or employment. In countries where local or project-based initiatives are prominent, these may emerge in response to an identified need to support specific target groups, or from demand from employers in a certain sector. Pilot projects focusing on testing a methodology for a specific target group, or among a small number of providers are another source of less centralised approaches.

#### Countries with a centrally regulated approach

In countries with a centrally regulated approach, validation is driven by a national law, policy or strategy. This might be either by establishing a right for individuals to undergo, under certain conditions, a validation process, or an obligation on learning or validation providers to develop and implement validation processes. The degree of implementation and take-up may, however, be varied:

For example, in **France** the 2002 Social Modernisation Act made access to validation of knowledge gained through experience a right for everyone with at least three years of paid or voluntary experience. Since 1985, the validation system in France has been based on a legal framework which is regularly updated after consultation and agreement with the social partners. The main changes are generally made to integrate the outcomes of social partners’ negotiations in the field of lifelong learning (LLL). The last change was made in 2009 and concerns the process to increase the number of individuals accessing the VAE process, in particular private sector workers. Laws from 1984, 1992, 2002 and 2009 are collected in the Labour Code and the Education Code<sup>26</sup>. Each awarding body corresponding to a ministry has published its own rules, outlining practical issues for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation.

#### Countries with local, project-based or sectoral initiatives

Less centralised approaches are evident where local project based or sectoral initiatives emerge in some countries in response to an identified need to support specific target groups, or demand from employers in a certain sector.

In **Italy**, numerous local experiences have been implemented applying to various sectors/ levels of education. In recent years, some Italian regions have

<sup>26</sup> Labour code, art. L. 900-1 and following, L. 900-4-2, L. 935-1, L. 951-1, R. 950-3, R. 950-13-3 and following, R. 950-19 and following, Art. L. 6411-1 and following. Education code, art. L. 214-12, L. 214-13, L. 335-5 and following, R. 335-5 et R. 361-2 and for HE: art. L. 331-1, L. 613-3 and 613-4 and following, L. 641-2 Decree n° 2002 - 590 of 24 April dedicated to HE

introduced tools for the VRPL, making it an individual right (e.g. Emilia Romagna and Toscana), linking it to the recognition of credits for access to formal training or education (Valle D'Aosta, Lombardy, Marche, Umbria) or using it to promote the employability of jobseekers (Veneto and Lombardy). In terms of Higher Education (HE), the Ministerial Decree No. 270/2004 affirmed the possibility for the Universities to recognise "the knowledge and professional skills certified according to the existing legislation as well as the other knowledge and skills gained in training courses at a post-secondary level in which the university contributed in design and delivery". "The University for Lifelong Learning" guidelines developed by a working group, organized by the Ministry of Universities and Research in 2007<sup>27</sup> state that the university system must be an integrated and constantly monitored system in which the recognition of learning should be possible, regardless of how and where the learning took place. In the same document Universities are invited to visit the Centres for Lifelong Learning (CAP) which are academic centres operating at regional and national level also in partnerships with enterprises and public administrations.

One of the main purposes of CAP is to help individuals to validate non-formal learning (as credits toward the university programmes the individual is interested in), and to personalise training pathways according to the previous experience acquired in other contexts and to facilitate the access of adult learners and / or employees to validation. Furthermore, numerous local "micro-experiences" have been implemented throughout Italy in different Regions and in a variety of sectors.

On 2010, an agreement between the Ministry of Labour, the Regions and Social Partners was signed, concerning training and general policies to be jointly implemented through the year. The agreement envisages the national qualifications system as the fundamental basis for efficiency and transferability of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. Validation is mentioned as an important aspect to develop in relation to competitiveness and lifelong learning.

It seems that those countries which have a local approach tend to fall within the lower level of development categories and although there is a mix in terms of the level of development among those countries with a centralised approach, it is interesting to note that all of the countries in the 'high level of development' category have a relatively centralised approach in one or more sectors of learning.

### Data on flows of beneficiaries

In 2009, near 75 000 files they were judged permissible by the set of the Ministries sender of Certifications by means of VAE and a jury examine around

58 000. Around 32,000 candidates they obtained a certification by VAE that is 13% than in 2008 more. After a slight reduction in 2008, the number of certificates by the Validation of the Acquired Experience returns to establish with a tendency to the rise to the work from 2003: the number of candidates certificates had progressed much during the first years of ascent in load of the device (+ 65% between 2003 and 2004, + 28% between 2004 and 2005) soon more moderately (+ 15% between 2005 and 2006, + 16% between 2006 and 2007). In 2009, the number of candidates judged permissible for the obtaining of titles of the Ministry of national Education progresses a 13%.

In 2010, nearly 75 000 files have been considered admissible by the whole of the ministries delivering certifications through the VAE, and about 53 000 candidates have been heard by a jury. These numbers have varied very little since 2007, after a big increase between 2005 and 2007. In 2010, about 30 000 candidates were awarded a certification by the VAE, i.e. 7 % less than in 2009. The yearly number of certified students had largely increased between 2003 and 2005, before they became stable at about 30 000. Since 2002, which is the date the device was implemented, the number of certified candidates has risen to practically 200 000.

Table 1: Flows of beneficiaries, in France, for the period 2004-2010 (Dna=Data not available)

	Total number of candidate applications					Total number of candidates who were assessed				
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
National Ministry of Education	23 148	25 594	28692	32460	31 160	22284	21967	22013	22290	20 030
Ministry of Higher Edu. and Research	Dna	Dna	6909	6764	6 656	3935	4529	4309	4476	4 282
Ministry of Agriculture	839	799	961	1043	927	365	371	446	522	511
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health	16 235	29 720	22065	19675	17 854	10400	16111	13899	19504	17 741
Ministry of Employment	8 855	10 178	10659	10863	8 948	9360	8983	8632	8743	7 847
Ministry of Youth and Sports	2 503	Dna	Dna	Dna		1407	Dna	Dna	Dna	
Ministry of Army	151	155	413	591	496	86	78	210	331	456
Ministry of Culture	1 193	1 201	1221		187	26	1108	1125		106
Ministry of Maritime Affairs	nd	nd		82	122	74	64	68	82	73
Total of ministries awarding qualifications	Between 56 000 and 59 000	Between 75 000 and 80 000	Between 72 000 and 75 000	Between 72 000 and 75 000	Between 70 000 and 75 000	47 937	approx. 55 000	approx. 53 000	approx. 58 000.	approx. 53 000

Source: DARES (NB These statistics only take into account qualifications officially recognised by the State. For the time being, there are no statistics for other certificates (for instance those awarded by chambers of industry or of trade)

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.programmallp.it/lkmw\\_file/LLP///erasmus/MIUR\\_Linee\\_Indirizzo.pdf](http://www.programmallp.it/lkmw_file/LLP///erasmus/MIUR_Linee_Indirizzo.pdf)

As mentioned above, only recently a process for the validation of professional competences has been put in place at national in Spain. The Roadmap anticipates that 8,000 individuals will apply to the first call for validation (which will take place in 2011), 25,000 to the second call and 50,000 to the third one. However, take-up of some of the validation initiatives currently available is relatively high. For example, between 2004 and 2005 the number of people who made use of the registered university entrance examinations for over 25s was 19,853 and the number of students who accessed VET via entrance examinations at intermediate level was 12,267, while at higher level the number was 7,796.

At Higher Education level the Ministry of Education is currently working on a new regulation on validation. The new regulation will establish the procedures to validate non-formal and informal learning up to 15% of an undergraduate degree<sup>28</sup> or master's degree.

Figure 1 shows the take-up of validation for educational purposes in Spain from 2002 to 2005 and that take-up is highest in relation to validation for access to university education and VET at the secondary level. Take-up for access to higher VET or to obtain a full secondary VET diploma is much lower. Take up levels have increased over the period analysed, although it is still moderate to marginal<sup>29</sup>.

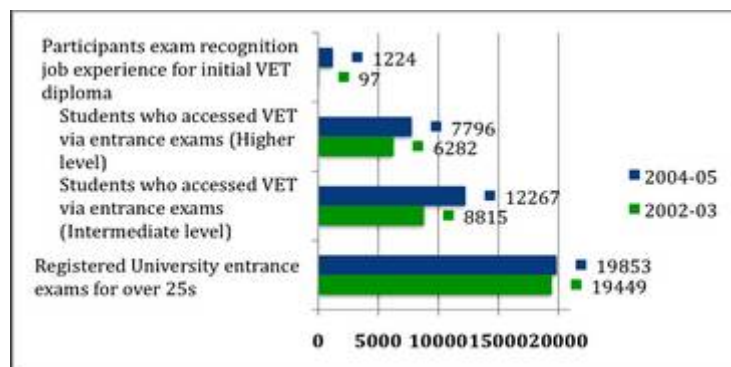


Figure 1: Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Spain  
Source: Souto-Otero, M. (2009) Making-up people's minds: How can VET be made more attractive and relevant to economic needs? Peer Review on "Towards a new vocational

<sup>28</sup> The degrees that will be able to implement the future regulation are those adapted through the Bologna process.

<sup>29</sup> Souto-Otero, M. (2009) Making-up people's minds: How can VET be made more attractive and relevant to economic needs? Peer Review on "Towards a new vocational training system more adjusted to the new competencies and skills requirements of the labour market". SPAIN, 25-26 May 2009.

training system more adjusted to the new competencies and skills requirements of the labour market".

## Conclusion

The potential benefits of RPL are gaining greater visibility within France, Spain and less in Italy. If all descriptive and analytical elements which appear in this contribution make it possible to pose a first reflection, there remains questions which cannot be occulted and which will weigh on the development of the system of VRPL so much on the level of its institutionalization only of its territorial establishment.

Implementing direct paths in order to obtain formal qualifications or providing "facilitating measures" for an access to various trainings, and thus, avoiding the repetitions and failings of the educational system, are an essential reason for the validation of the RPL<sup>30</sup>. Validation can prove useful in meeting the needs for the various economic sectors, such as the shortages of qualifications or the observance of the regulations relating to professional qualifications. More and more actors of the private sector (social partners and private companies) acknowledge the advantages of validation<sup>31</sup>. Validation is acknowledged in certain countries as a supporting tool for such disadvantaged groups as refugees, unemployed people, and elderly workers<sup>32</sup>. Validation implies a reference to a standard, as recognition and validation form a process "aiming at identifying, formalizing and socially recognizing the knowledge and skills acquired in action"; in other words, they concern the clarification of the conditions of knowledge production and the process allowing awareness and formalization with the purpose of social validation<sup>33</sup>. The nature of those standards is crucial and will largely determine whether the results of validation are reliable or not. If a standard is too local, it can have a negative impact on transferability. If it is too general and lacks flexibility, it can prevent validation from precisely defining the essence of individual learning experience. In order to encourage validation, standards must, first and foremost, be (re)defined and described as acquired learning or skills; and even if, to a certain extent, such is already the case, substantial work must still be accomplished, especially on the level of mainstream and higher education. It can sometimes be noticed that validation measures meet with skepticism, which reflects a representation pervaded with the fear of seeing the global level of validation quality decrease in the case of an opening to non formal and informal learning.

<sup>30</sup> FEUTRIE M., Analyse comparée des systèmes de validation des acquis de l'expérience en France, et en Belgique (communautés française et flamande), octobre, 2007, 17 p.

<sup>31</sup> DYSON C. et KEATING J., Recognition of prior learning: policy and practice for skills, learned at work, 2005, 72 p.

<sup>32</sup> KOK W., 2003; Conseil de l'Union européenne, 2004b; Commission européenne, 2007a

<sup>33</sup> DELORY-MONBERGER Ch., Biographie et Éducation. Figures de l'individu-projet, Paris, Anthropos, 2003, p.69.