

2. speaking points

"Recognition of Prior learning – time for action"

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this Bologna seminar. I would like to congratulate the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the other organisers of this timely event where we will focus on recognition issues concerning prior learning. Let me just briefly tell you that I feel in the epicentre of a lifelong learning experience, as I have just started as Director in charge of this field in the DG Education and Culture after many years in DG Employment.

In my presentation I will explain why the European Commission considers Lifelong learning and Recognition of Prior Learning as crucial for the development of Europe's human resources, I will briefly introduce some initiatives that have been taken at European level, with a focus on learning outcomes, and lastly try to challenge universities on their role and responsibility on recognition issues.

The importance of lifelong learning and recognition

If we are to maintain and enhance our quality of life in Europe, we need to constantly upgrade our workforce in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. We all seem to agree that this requires a stronger commitment and engagement of higher education institutions in lifelong learning. Most higher education institutions do not consider lifelong learning as a core activity. And yet lifelong learning does not just offer opportunities for citizens. Lifelong learning brings opportunities for universities too.

The Lisbon Agenda for growth and jobs has a strong focus on Lifelong learning. One of the benchmarks is actually the participation in Lifelong learning. According to the benchmark, 12.5 % of the adult population should participate in lifelong learning by 2010. Unfortunately the curve is levelling out, and there is still hard work to be done if we are to reach our goal. The Nordic countries and the Netherlands are performing fine, but we need all the countries on board to succeed in our ambitious Education and training goals. And this means that higher education institutions also should play a more active role.

We must prepare our citizens for a challenging future in a changing world. Gone are the days when it was possible to leave school with few qualifications, find an interesting job and stay there until retirement with a decent pension. In today's and tomorrow's reality, individuals might experience

periods of unemployment, and will be forced to change jobs, either voluntarily to progress their career, or involuntary, in response to events outside their control.

In response to a request from the European Council in March this year, the Commission has prepared a Communication on "New skills for new jobs", to be adopted next week. Clearly, long-term forecasting of the economics' skills needs and potential mismatches is fraught with difficulties. Precisely for this reason, learning at any stage in life has to become a normal mode of education and training.

Learning is taking place in schools and universities but this is only the "tip of the iceberg" considering all the learning that take place in our society. People learn all the time and in all kinds of settings . at work, in voluntary work, during leisure time and in sporting. We can thus truly speak of both lifelong and lifewide learning.

A huge problem is that much of this learning remains invisible and unrecognised, even to the learners themselves. Recognition of prior learning, or validation of non-formal and informal learning, is about making this vast amount of important learning visible as well as making better and more systematic use of it in our overall strategies for lifelong learning.

Learning outcomes as a central element

A central element in the new approaches to recognition of prior learning is the reference to learning outcomes. In line with the European Commission's initiative to establish a European Qualification Framework, most European Countries are shifting towards a learning outcomes based approach in their education and training policies. This means that the focus is on what the learner knows, understands and is able to do at the end of a learning process, not the duration or the particular input to a learning process.

This shift is taking place in all sectors of education and training, higher education as well as vocational training. At European level the shift is being supported through the references provided in the Bologna Qualifications Framework (three levels: bachelor, master and doctorate) and the, partly overlapping, European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF: eight levels from basic skills up to the doctorate). All countries use both sets of references to set up their own National Qualifications Framework. We are even seeing the emergence of Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks in certain fields (like engineering or business studies), inspired by the project "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe".

The shift to learning outcomes is important for taking forward validation. The moment standards and curricula are formulated in terms of learning outcomes, they will in principle also be open to learning acquired outside the formal education institutions; This is exactly what was introduced in France and in

Holland and is now taken forward by many other countries, in particular as part of the introduction of National Qualification Frameworks.

A few European initiatives to promote Validation of non-formal and informal learning –

Already in 2004 the Education Council agreed on a set of common European principles on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. These principles, focussing on the rights of the individuals and obligations of providers of validation, cover the basic conditions to be fulfilled if credible and high quality validation arrangements are to be introduced. While applied on a voluntary basis, these principles have been used as a starting point by many countries working on national arrangements. An example is the Dutch quality charter on validation adopted in 2006-2007.

Since 2006 the Commission, in close cooperation with Cedefop and Member States' officials, has been working on a set of European guidelines for validation. These guidelines build on the principles referred to above, but go into much more detail and take into account the experiences made by countries during the last 4-6 years (Carlo Scatoli will present them in detail tomorrow).

Two of the action lines of the Bologna Process are also strongly connected to this Bologna seminar, namely Recognition and Lifelong learning. Almost all countries have adopted the Lisbon Convention on recognition, but the country reports tell us that much more could be done on lifelong learning, especially to open up to new student groups. We would also like to see a more proactive use of the Lisbon Convention when it comes to the validation of prior learning. There are guidelines for recognising transversal education, and joint and double degrees. Maybe universities should develop joint guidelines for the recognition of prior learning? In a seminar for Bologna Experts on Lifelong Learning, a joint seminar organised by the UNICA consortium and the EU Commission, a majority of Bologna experts suggested to set up such a common system for the recognition of prior learning.

I would expect the NARICs to look more into it. The Bologna Ministers specifically asked the NARIC network to develop the issue of recognition of non-formal and informal learning and to come with practical solutions. The European Commission has actually selected a project on this issue funded under the Lifelong Learning programme. It is coordinated by the Dutch NARIC.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has been a part of the European cooperation in education and training since the mid 1990s. Since then a substantial number of projects have been supported through the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig and EQUAL programmes addressing national developments in this field. The experiences gained through these projects have been

important for developing the assessment and validation methods needed to capture and measure the learning taking place outside the classrooms.

These projects have been crucial in terms of awareness raising . during the last ten years validation has moved from being a theme for specially interested experts to becoming a top priority in mainstream education and training politics - exemplified by France, Portugal, Norway and the Netherlands etc.

EUA Charter on LLL

Last but not least the EUA has taken an important step with the adoption of the European Universities Charter on Lifelong learning. The Charter was drafted at the request of the French Presidency and presented in the informal ministerial meeting in Bordeaux earlier this month. One of the 10 Action lines in the Charter is on recognition of prior learning. The Charter urges the universities to establish systems to recognise all forms of prior learning and governments to create the necessary conditions and incentives. This is very important in the context of lifelong learning in a global setting where knowledge is acquired and updated in many different environments.

All the above frameworks, indicators principles, guidelines, processes and the Charter can serve as references or toolkits for national authorities and education and training providers in taking forward validation in the coming years. Most of the hard work lies within the institutions.

Universities and recognition of prior learning

So what does this all means for universities?

I think that it is about time that universities get their acts together as far as lifelong learning is concerned.

Bologna and Brussels may provide references and governments should indeed provide the legal setting for the recognition for prior learning and adopt national qualification frameworks, but the universities have to integrate all this in their institutional recognition practice and learn to assess and accept students with untraditional backgrounds and with professional experience, who may not necessarily have formal academic credentials. Universities need to open up for these new student groups for better use of human resources. They should also do so for their own survival as the demographic time bomb is ticking and regular student numbers will go down

We would expect universities to be pro-active and establish assessment centres to advise and integrate non traditional learners as is practiced in a few countries already today (such as France and the Netherlands).

Conclusions - the challenges

With this brief introduction to various initiatives from both the European Commission and other stakeholders I am coming to the end of my presentation. But I promised to give higher education institutions some challenges. In summary, and very concretely, we would expect universities to

- Implement the European Guidelines for the validation of non,-formal and informal learning
- Implement the EUA Charter for lifelong learning
- Establish assessment centres for recognition of prior learning

Thank you for your attention and I wish us all a fruitful, solution-oriented and open-minded seminar.