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Recognition and validation of prior learning

Introduction

This book focuses on the issue of recognition and validation of prior learning and learning outcomes. This issue is part of national lifelong learning strategies worldwide, in which value is given to the formal and non-formal learning of individuals throughout their professional, social and personal lives. However, recognition and validation practices are a site for tension and contradiction, as well as they are – from a scientific point of view – under-researched. Given this context, this book provides an analytical overview of the main concepts, assumptions, underlying principles and practices of what is recognized and validated, how recognition and validation are carried out, what logics it is based on and which strategies and instruments it is linked with. The contributions reflect on both national and international perspectives and developments.

The contributions are written by 25 authors from 8 countries working in research institutions or policy administrations and the texts are covering a large number of countries worldwide. We hope this book to be a useful, challenging and inspiring source for a broad readership. We would like to acknowledge our gratitude for the production of this book to all authors involved for sharing their ideas, time and creativity.

1. The emergence of a lifelong learning society

Conceptually, recognizing prior learning and learning outcomes is not new. Allusions to the philosophies of Aristotle and Pestalozzi in their valuing of adults' experience preceded the work of John Dewey, who is regarded as the father of experiential learning (Conrad 2008, p. 91 f.). No matter what recognition and validation system[1] or approach is used and how it is labelled, the process of identifying and then valuing in some way the past learning of individuals and its results is widely practiced around the world.

In industrialized countries, John Dewey's voice is most often heard when tracking the history of prior learning recognition and validation. In his own words, Dewey stated: "The beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have. […] This experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning" (Dewey 1938, p. 74).

1 We use the term "recognition and validation system" in a broad sense including national systems for accrediting prior learning, regional/sectoral approaches as well as project-based and local initiatives.

Clearly, the recognition of prior learning and learning outcomes enjoys a long history and a wide practice; it is embedded in many education and training systems worldwide. Furthermore, it is closely linked with the emergence of the knowledge society and the lifelong learning society.

With regard to the fact that the implementation and diffusion of recognition and validation systems and strategies has become a relevant trend in many education and training systems worldwide, this book presents a selection of cross-comparative and interdisciplinary approaches. Indeed, such systems and strategies have been part of the political agenda for several decades and therewith linked practices have been introduced in national empirical fields through competent bodies of recognition as well as national or sectoral validation procedures and legal frameworks.

It is a paradigmatic framework of lifelong learning that the value of prior learning, acquired outside the formal education and training systems, becomes an emerging field of educational, sociological, political and economic research, especially in the so-called "Western World". This issue is particularly relevant to higher education and vocational education and training, mainly due to the following reasons:

- First, we can observe that the recognition and validation of prior learning has become an inherent part of education practices, placing particular emphasis on the need for conceiving and developing recognition and validation systems and approaches on different levels of qualification. As a consequence, it reinvents the discussion on the training of those who are involved in the recognition and validation process (teachers, trainers, assessors etc.) as well as it demands research on the assessment and value of different types of learning and its results.
- Second, we can anticipate that the recognition and validation practices will not stop at any national or international obstacles. Demographic changes, the shift to learning outcomes (in terms of any type of learning results) and the strive for countries' competitiveness all push forward regional, national and supra-national agendas for recognizing and validating prior learning.
- Third, linking recognition and validation systems with political instruments such as qualifications frameworks, quality assurance systems or credit systems has become a crucial part of national lifelong learning strategies. Thus, we can identify an emerging challenge to design and implement coherent reforms, strategies and instruments.

Indeed, there are conceptual, political and procedural issues which are equally worthy of attention. Whereas research has easily identified and responded to procedural problems and policy changes this is not the case with the conceptual, scientific and even "philosophical" changes linked with the question how to adequately value prior

learning in different (institutional and organisational) contexts and how to theorise the debate fundamentally.

2. Lifelong learning in context with recognition and validation

During the past decades we have observed the emergence of a lifelong learning society and a knowledge society which massively impact on national socioeconomic structures. Moreover, we have witnessed the appearance of new understandings of learning and education which go beyond traditional borders and which made way for reconceptualising theoretical frameworks of education and training.

At present, we can identify a convergence of ideas and challenges which are common to numerous countries around the world and which are present in political, social and educational debates. They focus on the development of strategies and systems to recognize and validate learning acquired throughout the whole lifespan in various contexts. Thus, recognition and validation are part of a lifelong learning paradigm, a new mode of valuing and appreciating learning accomplished by individuals throughout their professional, social and personal lives and far beyond traditional institutional boundaries. As a consequence

> "where the boundaries among education, training work and leisure are attenuated, the recognition of experimental learning, particularly those of adults, is an unavoidable challenge for the educational/training systems of the present day and age" (Pires 2007, p. 7).

The current restructuring of education and training systems is neither restricted to a terminological nor to an organizational change although both aspects are key to the debate. Indeed, there are knowledge and learning types which function as reference models. Within Europe, one of the most often quoted ones is the terminology proposed by the European Commission (2000, p. 7 f.) which distinguishes between formal, non-formal and informal learning:

- "*Formal learning* consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.
- *Non-formal learning* consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.
- *Informal learning* is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can

to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random)."

In non-political contexts (particularly outside the EU) we often find a more simple differentiation between formal and informal learning pointing at the fact that the Commission's tripartition is more an artificial and politically intended one than a research-based one. Moreover, differentiating between formal and informal learning provides the opportunity to place emphasis on respective learning settings (time, place, contents, target groups, etc.) and types of learning (incidental, explicit, procedural, etc.). Moreover, there is no one-size-fits-all term for the recognition and validation of prior learning. Each country has its own preference ranging from APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experimental Learning), APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning), VPL (Validation of Prior learning) and validation of non-formal and informal learning to recognition of prior and experimental learning and learning outcomes.

In general, the term validation refers to the process of identifying, assessing and recognizing knowledge, skills and competences one has acquired in different learning settings and contexts outside the formal education and training system. However, in some countries we find notions such as accreditation, certification, assessment or award that are used in terms of validation. Thus, the heterogeneity and complexity of notions is immense as are the multiple motives that underlie recognition and validation systems. At the core of the discussion we find several criteria for implementing validation systems which are

- to promote lifelong learning,
- to foster individual employability,
- to strengthen countries' competitiveness and,
- to better link labour market demands and education and training.

3. Setting the context: Lessons and issues in a comparative perspective

There are numerous studies on recognising and validation learning outcomes and prior learning. While the majority of research studies and policy documents on this issue focuses on its role as a means of facilitating participation in, or returning to, formal education and training and/or the labour market at national/regional levels, there are hardly any studies providing reliable and comparative data on the actual impact of recognition and validation systems on the above mentioned criteria

for implementing them. However, there are some lessons that can be learnt from countries experience which provide a framework for this book.

The first issue refers to recognition and validation in workplace contexts**.** The extent to which recognition and validation systems are implemented in the workplace depends on a number of factors one of which is the role of stakeholders that design and carry out the validation and recognition processes. This topic is closely linked with the implementation of occupational standards and their linkage to educational standards. While occupational and educational standards and outcomes-based curricula are becoming more common in many countries worldwide, recognition and validation processes are still typically carried out in relation to standards or benchmarks that are not fully or not yet defined but rest on a sense of what someone *should* achieve if he or she completes a qualification, gains access to a learning programme or an occupation by a validation procedure. The lines between occupational standards on the one hand and educational standards on the other hand are not clearly defined which makes it even more difficult to meet the needs of both types of standards by recognition and validation processes.

The second issue is the structural integration of labour markets with education and training systems through the implementation of national qualifications frameworks. In many countries such as Sweden, the US or Canada, education and training systems are highly decentralized and idiosyncratic. In these countries, partnerships between labour market stakeholders and education and training institutions are in place and based on regional respectively provincial initiatives. Although these countries have managed to implement organisations whose work is strongly focused on validation, the awarding bodies still depend on the educational institutions that determine what knowledge, skills and competences are valuable.

In some countries (e. g. Norway, South Africa, Australia, Denmark), the presence of national validation systems (which partly include national qualifications frameworks) allow for a greater participation in awarding formal qualifications. One could reason that this allows labour market stakeholders to have a stronger co-determination right regarding the design and shape of validation procedures and the extent to which it is implemented in the workplace. In this context, Dyson and Keating (2005, p. 58) have pointed out several aspects of how to establish a well-functioning validation system in the workplace:

Figure 1: **Preconditions to implement a validation system (Dyson/Keating 2005, p. 58)**

Clear rationale	Long-term and sustainable implementation process
Information to all key players	Implementation should be cost and time effective
Post-assessment is fair and equitable	Review process should be representative

Closely linked with the preconditions to implement a validation system is the issue of qualifications frameworks. In countries in which they exist National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) have a central role in validation contexts due to the standards and qualifications (even for assessors), recognition and quality assurance procedures they usually provide. In some countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa or Norway, validation systems and qualifications frameworks are closely linked since the recognition procedures for vocational education and training do not differentiate between learning outcomes achieved inside or outside formal learning programmes. However, the actual impact of NQFs on improving validation systems and education and training systems in general is limited and little is known about their long-term effects (Allais et al. 2009; Raffe et al. 2008). Moreover, there is hardly any evidence whether they are an enabling or an inhibiting factor in promoting recognition and validation systems and practice: While in some countries, implementing validation procedures follows a bottom-up approach driven by companies, unions and learning providers, other countries develop top-down approaches including NQFs and validation systems driven by supra-national or international developments. Thus, NQFs can be a pushing factor in the practice of recognition and validation systems if they establish common benchmarks and standards which allow for the formal equivalence of qualifications recognized through recognition and validation.

What they cannot be expected to do is act as generators and promoters of the acceptance of recognition and validation systems. This needs a long-term strategy close to the workplace and provider levels as well as close to learners, teachers and trainers. Indeed, recognition and validation is gaining momentum in many countries inside and outside the EU. In some countries it is based on national recognition and validation systems (e. g. Australia, South Africa, Norway, Denmark). In other countries, recognition and validation very much depend on national or regional initiatives: For example, the United States has developed its very first state-based initiatives some 70 years ago without ever developing national approaches. In Canada, the first initiatives date back to the 1980s and still today, its success depends on agreements at provincial and territorial levels. Although validation and recognition have not been fully implemented in countries like France, England, Scotland, Australia, Finland or Spain, it has become an accepted feature of the vocational education and training systems.

In all countries, it is mainly the providers of technical and vocational education and training that are involved with recognition and validation, perhaps because it is these institutions that have the most highly developed outcomes-based curricula and standards and because their courses are most closely linked with competence development in the workplace.

Another issue is obstacles to the implementation of recognition and validation systems. We can identify obstacles at systems level, at institutional level, at individual level as well as political and scientific barriers. However, there are almost no data about recognition and validation and its impact which would paint a clear picture of how successful and unsuccessful it is, nor are there any clearly defined standards and benchmarks for defining a "successful" recognition and validation approaches. Given the amount of local and undocumented recognition and validation procedures and projects, this indicates a strong need for research-based evidence on recognition and validation systems. However, it seems that recognition and validation in its various contexts and forms accounts for a small proportion of formal recognition through education and training systems only. To a large extend this might be due to the missing linkage between workplace learning on the one hand and formal education and training systems on the other hand. Nevertheless, recognition and validation offer some key advantages as regards a more efficient use of educational resources and the value of learning: It is key to lifelong learning strategies, it supports companies in the development of workplace learning and training and it supports individuals in saving investments in learning and valuing their learning outcomes as well as it strengthens personal and financial benefits. Therefore, it seems that its weakness is revealed in its apparent strength. According to Dyson and Keating (2005), we can identify four types of obstacles, i. e. institutional, organisational, cultural and individual obstacles:

- Institutional obstacles include qualifications structures and rules, awarding and assessment criteria and financing mechanisms. Institutional obstacles very much depend on the degree of outcomes-orientation of a curriculum respectively an education and training system and its formal qualifications. Moreover, awarding and assessment rules tend to be institutionally specific. They are mostly built around course participation and completion. Thus, recognition and validation systems are often not readily accessible to non-traditional learners and/or the financing of the recognition and validation procedures is not separated from the course financing.
- Organisational obstacles can be found with regard to the practices of competent bodies, education and training institutions and providers that prevent individuals from assessing formal education and training and from fully benefiting from recognition and validation schemes that are in place. In terms of NQFs, this type of obstacles has been referred to as the "intrinsic logic" of qualifications frameworks pointing to the tendency of qualifications systems to subvert the intrinsic logic of innovation designed to reform vocational education and training systems, including permeability and validation of prior learning (see Raffe in this book). Moreover, organisational obstacles are very much linked with financing

mechanisms: Recognition and validation are time consuming and cost-intensive. Thus, they are usually not part of providers' standard assessment procedures which in general are coupled with formal education and training programmes. Decoupling such programmes and its inherent assessment procedures demands for either more differentiated financing mechanisms or new modes of cost accounting or a different understanding of learning and its outcomes. Next to the issue of financing mechanisms is the one of *who* is assessing, recognising and validating prior learning. Most countries have established (national) competent bodies to offer and/or support recognition and validation procedures and thus are awarding bodies. However, in some countries (regions, sectors) these bodies have no awarding rights, as governments view this as a conflict of interests.

- Cultural obstacles are based on a lack of trust in recognition and validation systems, procedures, assessors or the value of informal and non-formal learning per se. Such a lack of trust may result in overly rigorous or overly lax recognition and validation procedures and/or a lack of supporting infrastructures (lack of time, adequate procedures, staff). Thus, cultural obstacles are very much linked with the public image and acceptance of non-traditional types of learning and its certification and accreditation.
- Individual obstacles are a bundle of complex and contradictory aspects. One of these aspects is how to attract learners who are not familiar with formal procedures in learning contexts: While most countries made high investments in encouraging individuals' participation in continuing (vocational) education and training, little attention has been paid to encouraging learners' participation in recognition and validation. Moreover, individuals with high levels of education are more likely to participate and invest in formal education and training than low qualified people. Thus, there is a high risk of leaving behind traditional non-learner groups. This is even more likely as regards gaining information about recognition and validation systems: Gaining such information is generally a difficult procedure and it is even more difficult for individuals with weak education biographies.

4. Setting the context: The German state of the art

Informal learning is a building block of competence development and thus of learning outcomes in Germany as well as in any other country. However, this type of learning has been both underestimated and under-researched over decades. Despite the Faure Report (1992) and Livingstone's (2002) research findings[2] on the importance and volume of informal learning it was only recently that the topic received attention.

2 Livingstone pointed out that some 70 % of all learning outcomes are acquired by informal learning.

For years, the situation in Germany was characterized by an education system predominantly focusing on qualifications acquired within the formal education system, which is still the case in some areas today. Formal qualifications and certificates have traditionally received an overwhelming attention on the labour market with regard to securing individual employability, collective wage bargaining and remuneration systems (Frank et al. 2005). Since this system has always been widely accepted in Germany, there was little pressure to implement strategies and procedures for identifying and recognising competences acquired outside the formal education and training system.

Due to global changes in society and technology, the development of a European Education Area, and the rise of lifelong learning we can observe massive changes in Germany's recognition and validation structures. There is an increasing number of studies explicitly dealing with informal learning (Overwien 2009). The decisions and resolutions by the Federal *Bund-Länder-Commission for educational planning and research promotion* indicate a reconsidering of informal and non-formal learning structures and its value (BLK 2004).

The OECD country report confirms a need for change in Germany. It indicates that the German education and training system is highly selective, predominantly certification-oriented and thus discriminates against low qualified and special target groups (OECD 2008). Thus, participation rates in education are low and insufficient which is particularly the case with immigrants. Another aspect pointed out by the OECD is the low rate of higher education graduates due to an insufficient permeability between vocational education and higher education and insufficient access options to higher education for those with vocational qualifications.

Germany's education policy aims for overcoming these deficiencies by fostering permeability within the education and training system as well as between education and the labour market. During the past decades, various initiatives and projects were developed, amongst them an initiative called ANKOM (the German acronym for "Accreditation of Vocational Competences for Higher Education") which was financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Freitag 2008). Recognising and validating learning outcomes provides opportunities for many disadvantaged groups such as the four million German low achievers in reading and writing. Within this context, "permeability" rather refers to giving access to formal education than shaping transitions between educational subsystems (vocational training, higher education etc.). Moreover, a national governmental and non-governmental stakeholder group has recently started to develop the German Qualifications Framework (known by its German abbreviation of DQR). The aim is to develop an NQF that is closely linked with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The plan is to align all existing (formal) qualifications within the German educational system to the various reference

and competence levels (descriptors) of the DQR. One of the key challenges will be to integrate informally and non-formally acquired learning outcomes in the framework (BMBF 2008a).

In Germany there are several exceptional rules for gaining labour market and education access by recognising and validating prior learning (Geldermann et al. 2009). However, there is no overall national regulation or law a validation system could be based on. Equivalence of formal and non-formal/informal learning would demand for new regulations allowing for access to the formal education and training system and to the labour market.

Another example is the numerous competence portfolios which were developed within various regional and national contexts since the mid-1990s, amongst them the so-called "ProfilPass", a portfolio that covers an individuals' job experience and competences. Its aim is to support individuals' lifelong learning, career guidance and re-entry to working life (Seidel in this book).

At organisational levels, we find an increasing number of research-based and well-evaluated validation structures and procedures (Dehnostel, Elsholz 2007). Here, identifying staff's competences and developing competence profiles plays an increasingly important role for many companies (Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM 2005).

A well-established example combining aspects of workplace learning and giving access to formal education and testing is the so-called "Externenprüfung" (admission to final exams in special cases; externals' exams). The regulation was established in 1969 as part of the Vocational Training Act and aimed at adults with long-term work experience. It offers the opportunity to take the final exams of an initial vocational education (§ 45, Paragraph 2 of the Vocational Training Act, BBiG, and § 37, Paragraph 2 of the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code, HWO). According to the 2008 Report on Vocational Education and Training, externals' examinations made up 7.2 % of all final examinations (not including craft trades) (BMBF 2008b). However, little is known about actual impact of the regulation on improving individuals' employability and re-entering the labour market.

These examples indicate a bundle of (research) aspects of the recognition and validation issue: One aspect is the identification and documentation of competences while another one points to certification and recognition. We can observe an increasing discussion on recognition and validation approaches in diverse fields in practice and theory one of which is the development of Germany's NQF and its linkage to the EQF. In this respect it is a challenging task for both policy and research to develop an appropriate infrastructure for recognising and validating learning outcomes. There is a need for improved support structures, guidance and information on available opportunities for external examination. As regards higher education, abandoning traditional access preconditions would be a first step to

provide access to those with vocational qualifications and work experience. Finally, improved support structures would also allow qualified to gain access to or remain in employment (Heinemann in this book).

5. Methods and instruments

During the past years various methods and instruments have been developed to recognize and validate non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes and the notion of "learning outcomes" has become a well-known term. They are defined as "the set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process" (CEDEFOP 2009).

The recognition of such learning outcomes refers to the process of granting official status to skills and competences which are at the core of learning outcomes. Formal recognition is achieved

- through the award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles);
- through the grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences and/or
- through social recognition which is the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders (CEDEFOP 2009).

Moreover, CEDEFOP has identified five steps for validating learning outcome which have been accepted in most of the EU's Member States (CEDEFOP 2009): 1) information, advice and guidance, 2) identification, 3) assessment, 4) validation and 5) certification.

These steps clearly point to a difference between assessment and validation. *Validation* of learning outcomes is defined in terms of "the confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification" (CEDEFOP 2009). In comparison assessment of learning outcomes refers to "the process of appraising knowledge, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria, specifying learning methods and expectations. Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification" (CEDEFOP 2009).

To classify recognition and methods the European Inventory (2007) has suggested to distinguish several types of methods, i. e. debate, declarative methods, interviews, observation, portfolio method, presentation, simulation and evidence extracted from work as well as tests and examinations. Another categorisation is presented by Druckrey (2007) who differentiates between test-based methods, biographical

methods and action-oriented methods. The classification depends on the concrete proceedings and the inserted methods: For instance the biographical methods are mostly realized through self-reflections; assessments by others in this case are simply used facultatively. Instead the test-based methods consist primarily of self-reports by externals evaluating them with the help of a predetermined grid through others (for instance evaluators). Within action-oriented methods mainly evaluation and assessment by others take place. But in the practices of validation and recognizing there often can be found a combination of different proceedings.

Another categorisation was developed by Kaufhold (2006; 2007) who presents four distinctive features which are:

- The *intension* depends on the overall aim of a validation process. Kaufhold distinguishes job-related validation instruments (aim: selection and recruitment) and career-related validation instruments (aim: career development and personality development).
- The *definition and theoretical concept of competence* depends on the intension and contexts of a validation instrument. Since there is no generally accepted competence definition most validation instruments are focusing on similar, but slightly different aspects of competence such as knowledge, abilities, skills, motives, emotions, attitudes etc.
- Respective *learning settings and contexts* demand for specific validation instruments and procedures. Since there are no instruments which cover all types of competences in any validation situation there is a need for carefully evaluating the setting and context and defining the overall aim of the validation.
- The *methodology* refers to the instruments and tools employed in validation contexts, e. g. interviews, questionnaires, work samples or tests. Here, we can distinguish between self-assessment and external/third-party evaluation. Further criteria refer to basic quality standards (objectivity, reliability, validity, fairness, benefits, economy, acceptance) (Kaufhold 2006; 2007).

Methods and instruments should be chosen according to the overall objectives of the validating process. In general, several objectives are impacting on the development of validation methods ranging from an individual's perspective and an organisational point of view to the macro perspective of the education system. In this context, Schneeberger et al. (2009) highlight three individual reasons for participating in recognition and validation activities:

- to receive a formal certificate;
- to receive a certificate without correspondence to the formal education system;
- to recognize and value informal learning outcomes and increase its social acceptance.

In this regard, competence measurement and assessment have gained much attention during the past years (Seeber and Dietzen in this book). The so-called competence diagnostics has become a crucial part of current discussion of testing and large-scale assessments in vocational education and training. Finally, we can identify an increasing need for developing theories, (empirical) models and approaches which build the fundament for competence measurement and assessment – e. g. by developing psychometric test instruments. The challenge is to develop research-founded, domain-specific and work process-oriented validation instruments and link them with current competence development theories.

6. Lessons and issues: Structure of the book

We can derive several research questions from what we described so far. These questions are at the core of the book's contributions and all of them deal with implementing recognition and validation systems and therewith linked (political) instruments successfully:

- How can a country or a sector reach a high level of commitment by policy makers, which is taken up by practitioners and their institutions, and the availability of clear standards?
- How can we design recognition and validation procedures and systems, financing schemes and learning pathways that encourage learners to have their prior learning assessed and certified and to seek access to the qualification system and the labour market?
- How can we provide a better linkage between formal qualification pathways and the labour market in a way that learning outcomes and prior learning are understood and viewed as a valuable inherent part of it?
- How can we ensure high-quality, research-based and outcomes-oriented recognition and validation systems that are applied by competent bodies and professional assessors who themselves are highly qualified and competent in what they are doing?

It is against this background that this book is divided in three sections:

I) Validierung und Politik (validation and education policy)
II) Validierung und Konzepte/Begrifflichkeiten (on the notion of recognition and validation)
III) Validierung und Anwendungskonzepte (sharing practices on recognition and validation)

The first section **"Validierung und Politik" (validation and education policy)** contains articles which mainly focus on national, European and international developments and trends in the recognition and validation of learning outcomes at political levels.

This section starts with a contribution by Annie Bouder and Jean-Louis Kirsch (Céreq – Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications, Marseille) who describe trends and developments in France. In their article they show why the term learning outcomes is both – familiar and strange. They start with a historical review by highlighting the past 40 years of progressive French developments within the vocational education and training and the "discovery of the vocational experiences". This process finally has led to the VAE law (Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience).

Barbara Petrini focuses on the Swiss experiences with validating learning outcomes. In Switzerland a new vocational education law has been enacted in 2002 which provides the opportunity to validate learning outcomes. Today, persons without formal qualification can receive a certificate based on the validation of experimental and workplace experience. Such a certificate grants numerous advantages like the acceptance by companies, access to education and training or proof of a formal degree. It is the Swiss cantons and the companies who are responsible for realising and implementing the validation system in vocational education and training. So far, validation instruments have been developed for few occupations only.

Leesa Wheelahan argues that the separation of processes of learning from learning outcomes leads to impoverished educational outcomes, and that competency based training (CBT) results in second class education for the working class. She analyses the linkage between national qualifications frameworks and CBT in social, political and economic contexts in Anglophone countries which were the "early adopters" of CBT. The contribution explores the extent to which CBT works in its own terms and analyses its insufficient contribution to positive labour market outcomes and equity. A theoretical critique of CBT follows as well as a discussion of the different notions of the human actor that underpins higher education and CBT, and how NQFs can make a positive contribution to lifelong learning.

David Raffe explores the spread of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and examines the role of learning outcomes within them. He describes two contrasting types of NQFs – outcomes-led and outcomes-referenced – and suggests that these are associated with different roles for learning outcomes. He reviews evidence which suggests that outcome-referenced frameworks, in which learning outcomes play a less central role, have been more effective. He argues that we need to move beyond the polarized debates about learning outcomes to define a positive but modest role for outcomes within qualifications systems and NQFs.

Kirsten Barre and Peter Dehnbostel describe the development of Germany's NQF which is designed to strengthen the transparency, the permeability and the

access and equity of the education system. They discuss to what extent the outcomes-based approach, the validation of learning outcomes and the theoretical concept of competence are appropriate from a pedagogical and educational point of view. They raise the question if these developments primarily follow economical intentions and how this could be linked with the overall aim of personality development and inclusion. The article ends with a proposal how to integrate informal and non-formal learning in the German qualifications framework.

Sandra Bohlinger reviews previous experience with implementing national qualifications frameworks and to analyse current trends and challenges within the European countries. Qualifications frameworks are political instruments that enable assessing learning outcomes. They describe the relationships between different types of qualifications and learning as well as they promote permeability, transparency and equity between vocational and higher education. Qualifications frameworks are drivers for change since they provide the impetus for a number of fundamental reforms required in (vocational) education and training systems. Focusing on the European Qualifications Framework, this paper addresses the question of whether the development of qualifications frameworks yields the anticipated socioeconomic and political benefits.

In her paper Stephanie Allais describes problems within the implementation of the qualifications framework in South Africa. Allais draws on insights from several experiences: In all cases, learning outcomes did not facilitate judgments about the nature and quality of an education and training programme. She suggests that outcomes should not disclose meaning within or across disciplinary or practice boundaries and cannot enable the essence of a programme to be understood similarly enough by different stakeholders. But the notion of transparency (or even, a more moderate notion of sufficient transparency) which proved unrealisable in practice is the basis of nearly all the claims made about what learning outcomes can achieve. While the problems may be specific to the South African attempts to using learning outcomes, they raise questions for reformers and researchers in other countries.

Isabelle Le Mouillour outlines how the development of the ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) has been part of modernising vocational education and training systems. ECVET is closely linked with other European education policy instruments such as the European Guidelines for validation. She focuses on the recognition and accreditation of acquired and evaluated learning outcomes with regard to vocational qualifications as well as the engagement of stakeholders in vocational education and training. In this article mobility is used in terms of geographical and horizontal (sectoral) mobility or in the course of individual careers.

According to Georg Spöttl the equivalence between general and vocational education is a current topic in most European countries and particularly in those countries where vocational education and training has a long tradition and vocational qualifications encompass aspects of authority and access. However, vocational qualifications usually give not access to academic careers. In this context, the implementation of the EQF paved the way for new discussions and developments, and it stimulated the EU's Member States to reform their education systems. In this context, the author points out the hidden barriers between vocational and higher education. The contribution ends with suggestions for creating more permeability in terms of career development and horizontal and vertical mobility.

In their article, Michael Young and Stephanie Allais discuss the role of "qualifications" in educational reform in general. Thus, they contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for analysing the reform of qualifications internationally. This paper sets out to offer a way of thinking about the reform of qualifications and in particular to provide a basis for analysing the introduction of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks. The authors suggest that this change is best seen in terms of the shift from "institution-based" to "outcomes-based" models of qualifications and that this change is likely to be of distinctly different significance in developed and developing countries.

The intention of the book's second section **"Validierung und Konzepte/ Begrifflichkeiten" (on the notion of recognition and validation)** is to provide contributions to the clarification of the theoretical attempts and discussions.

Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha points out that learning outcomes are not independent from the way in which they have been acquired. With this starting point the author criticizes theoretical models which relate on the one hand the explicit knowledge to the formal learning process and the development of implicit knowledge to the informal learning. The author starts with a definition of the notion of formal, non-formal and informal learning and then describes the relevance of these three types of learning for individual competence development by referring to quantitative data on participation rates in learning. The contribution ends with linking the different types of learning and its recognition and validation.

Tanja Weigel presents an overview of the concept of competence by referring to four areas: at the beginning, she highlights the most relevant research strands of the notion of competence. Then, the author describes application fields in international contexts followed by national examples of implementing the concept of competence in education policy.

Learning processes occur all over the lifespan and in all types of situations. Marisa Kaufhold argues that they contribute to broaden our knowledge and skills and therefore our basis for acting. Competences and skills are predominantly acquired

throughout adulthood but mostly without any formal certification. It is against this background that the author focuses on the validation of informally acquired competences and emphasises the need for well-founded modes of recognising and validating learning outcomes. She develops an analytical tool (a grid) for classifying validation methods and approaches.

One of the key questions of vocational education and training research is how to empirically analyse occupational competence. This debate is at the core of Agnes Dietzen's contribution. She contrasts experience-based approaches with cognitive-psychological ones. The article ends by debating how to link both types of approaches and by developing a future research agenda.

Susan Seeber outlines the conceptual and empirical approaches which are used for the operationalisation and the recognition of vocational competences. She then discusses basic requirements for and challenges of a research-based competence assessment that is predominantly based on psychometrical models.

The third section **"Validierung und Anwendungskonzepte" (sharing practices on recognition and validation)** highlights practice examples from several countries worldwide.

Sabine Seidel summarises the current research and development status of recognition and validation procedures in Germany. While there had been hardly any regulations in the past, the situation is changing rapidly nowadays. The article highlights recent trends as well as chances and challenges that are linked with recognition and validation of prior learning.

Kristian Beinke and Sonja Splittstösser refer to the issue of competence validation of low-skilled workers. While formally qualified prove their competences by possessing certificates and diplomas, this is not the case with low qualified who usually have hardly any formal certificate. For this target group, recognition and validation offers the opportunity to make their competences visible and to improve their employability. It is against this background that the article focuses on validation instruments for low qualified and particularly emphasises instruments supporting self-reflection.

Alisha Heinemann starts with an overview of current diagnostic techniques for measuring language literacy of adults. She points out current developments in formative assessment in context with research on basic education. Formative assessment is described in terms of its strengths and challenges. In her contribution, Heinemann presents a project called "Lea" (Literalitätsentwicklung von Arbeitskräften – Developing Literacy for employees) that aims at reducing functional illiteracy.

Gesa Münchhausen's contribution deals an emerging field of research which is recognition of competences acquired during work time. She highlights advantages and challenges of competence validation for so-called atypical employees. The author

presents the increasing importance of informal learning, followed by structural changes in the labour market, an increase in atypical employment and its impacts on individuals. She then discusses competence development of fixed-term employees and investigates empirical data of a qualitative research study. The contribution ends with identifying advantages of recognition and validation for fixed-term employees.

The overall aim of Germany's vocational education and training system is to acquire a holistic occupational competence. According to Irmgard Frank, realising this aim regularly leads to structural and content-related changes of training regulations (initial and continuing education and training). As a consequence, examinations are designed more action-oriented and process-oriented. The author points out the demand for competence-based examinations and analyses current examination methods in terms of a holistic occupational competence.

The contribution by Larry Smith and Berwyn Clayton provides students' insights and perspectives on validating learning outcomes. The chapter is based on a secondary data analysis of an Australian study conducted in 2008. The authors investigate students' assessment of and attitude towards validation processes they participated in. The data presented in this chapter suggest that analysing individuals' perspectives is a key factor of recognition and validation that is traditionally underestimated and under-researched as to its importance.

Taking on an organisational point of view Christoph Anderka refers to companies who are confronted with structural changes and its impacts on their employees and vocational education and training. Promoting transnational mobility of employees demands for more transparent and comparable modes of describing learning outcomes. Referring to the example of Volkswagen Coaching (a pan-European project) the author points out numerous challenges that are linked with realising the learning outcomes orientation.

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