Personal Learning Plan and portfolio as tools for identification, assessment and recognition of competences

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Abstract

Recent appreciation of learning has become a priority issue in national and European policies of education meaning that all learning outcomes, irrespective of the origin should be viewed in a fair and transparent way. There are many ways to learn: formally in official educational systems, informally in working life and non-formally in leisure activities. EU policies stress the importance of recognizing non-formal and informal learning by calling for the exploration of ways to recognize prior learning in these areas and developing tools to implement it. Therefore it is important that the acquired competences, regardless of the place of learning should be identified, assessed and recognized. The emphasis lies on life-long learning, creation of flexible learning paths and strengthening the links between formal education, working life and society.

Our aim is to clarify good practices and methods (personal learning plan and portfolio) as tools for the identification, assessment and recognition of competences in Teacher Education College and in the other departments of the University of Applied Sciences and in the Institute of Kankaanpää. We will concentrate on personal learning plan and portfolio as methods of validation of competences. We use the term validation to define the process of identifying, assessing and recognizing skills and competences throughout student’s life in different contexts.

We will describe the process in which skills mapping, personal learning plan and portfolio are important in the validation of competences. One of the basic principles of a personal learning plan is that the individual expertise of a student is taken into consideration and is given possibility to develop further. The student’s study path describes his competences and development from the past, through the present and into the future. Personal learning plan is a part of a portfolio which is a tool to make the student’s competences visible. It is both a tool for learning connected with student’s professional development and a good method for authentic assessment. The aim of the portfolio is to improve student’s professional and personal development, learning and assessment skills. The dynamic process includes reflection and consideration by the learner of the development in knowledge, competence, capability and advancement.

Our empirical data is based on the TAITURI-project (ESF) during 2004-2006 which focuses on the development of good practices in five departments within the University of Applied Sciences of Jyväskylä (one of these is the Teacher Education College) and Kankaanpää Institute. We will describe practices and development work of methods used in the identification, assessment and recognition of competences. These questions can only be solved by collaborative experimentation with teachers of different fields. We will clarify and
assess the results of such experiments. The process is still ongoing at the University of Applied Sciences and the same questions are being discussed widely in adult education in many countries. In this process peer collaboration between different departments and the partnerships within working life are paramount and necessary.

**Keywords:** Personal Learning Plan, portfolio, competence, assessment, recognition of competences

**Background**

The identification, assessment and recognition of competences is important on the higher education level. The aim of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 and to promote the European system of higher education worldwide. In addition the Bologna process facilitates student and staff mobility and increases both the competitiveness of Europeans in the world labour market and the attractiveness of the European higher education in the world. (Opetusministeriö 2005.). OECD, EU and national policies stress the importance of recognizing non-formal and informal learning by calling for the exploration of ways to recognize prior learning in these areas and developing tools to implement it.

The framework for this issue consists of factors on different levels: individual, working life, work communities, regional development and factors on national and international level.

Working life is in a rapid change in many respects. People need competences and certificates to be able to move flexible in the labour market. It is more and more important to develop your competences throughout the life. There are many places to learn and working means more learning. The valuation of competences has an impact on the individual, at the organisational or sectoral level and at the national level. Training should be flexible, economical and student-centred.

**Towards the recognition of competences**

To understand the phenomenon it is necessary to define some concepts: learning as a lifelong and lifewide process, formal, informal and non-formal learning, competency, personal learning plan, portfolio and the identification, assessment and recognition of competences. Lifelong learning draws the attention to the time-aspect of learning. This means learning throughout the life. Learning starts at birth and can never be completed. Learning will take place always and everywhere forming flexible learning paths. Lifewide learning refers to the variety of life-domains where something can be learnt. It also implies that people can learn everywhere. It means that people can learn in formal institutions (e.g. schools), nonformally (e.g. working life) and informally (e.g. leisure time activities). Competency reveals the fact that somebody knows how to perform adequately. It means that somebody succeeds in handling knowledge, skills and attitudes in different and changing situations. Recognition of acquired competences means to acknowledge those competences that have been acquired outside the school context. Competences can be mapped out (identified), assessed and acknowledged (certified). The acknowledgement can take place in a more formal (e.g. through certification) or in a less formal way (e.g. to check what has been learnt by the individual).

In this article we have defined formal and non-formal education and informal learning by adopting the definition of European Commission. (2002, 57-58.) Formal learning is typically
provided by the education or training institution, it is structured and leads to certification. According to Eraut (1998) formal education produces only a little part of the necessary knowledge and skills in the working life. Non-formal learning is systematic and directed and it can provide the student with a certificate. However non-formal learning does not belong to the formal education system, for instance non-certificate-oriented adult education. Informal learning is acquired in daily activities; at work, in social relations, hobbies, through media and information tools. According to Tikkanen (1998) about half of the professional competence is based on informal learning and it is non-intentional or incidental. Informal learning often is random and does not lead to certification. Marsick and Watkins (1990, 7, 23, 31, 31, 152, 246) distinguished between informal and incidental learning. Informal learning is non-institutional but it can be planned, for instance self-directed learning. Incidental learning is a side product of action, of mutual interaction or of trial-error experience. According to Marsick and Watkins people act creatively in informal and incidental learning because they have no roles as in formal learning. Marsick and Watkins emphasized that it is important to make the knowledge of informal and incidental learning visible.

In the process of identifying and recognizing previously acquired competences different steps can be distinguished:

- **Identification of competences**
  First the acquired competences have to be mapped. We used a competence mapping in the development work. Some competences can be documented rather easily, some are harder to demonstrate. In some cases only practical findings can give an indication that one has indeed acquired the wanted competences.

- **Assessment of competences**
  Encompasses the assessment of the identified competences where they need to be clearly define in curriculum for the assessment to occur. This assessment is related to competences in the curriculum. Because of that it is important in educational processes to define clearly competences in curriculum. The assessment can be carried out by yourself and others.

- **Recognition of competences**
  The next step is to give a public status or social value to existing individual competences providing a starting point for an individual learning path. As competences made visible personal development aspects are also boosted.

European Commission (2002, 58) has defined the recognition of competences:

1. the overall process of granting official status to competences (formal recognition), gained either formally by awarding certificates or in a non-formal or informal setting, by granting equivalence, credit units, validation of gained competences.
2. the acknowledgement of the value of competences by economic and social stakeholders (social recognition)

**Personal Learning Plan (PLP) and portfolio as tools for identification and assessment**

The curriculum of the teacher education is competence-based. Each competence area consists of study modules. The structure and the content of the study modules in teacher education have been designed keeping in mind the ideas of teacher’s main competences. The core competences of the teacher’s work are: facilitating learning, development of the educational environment, cooperation and interaction and continuous learning. Each study module includes knowledge and skills, which are assessed and supported by the studies. The ways we recognize students’ prior learning will be informed with each learning assignment.
Ansela, Haapaniemi and Pirttimäki (2005, 16) defined Personal Learning Plan as a personal study, learning, teaching and the organizing plan of teaching. Teacher students identify their prior learning and development needs by writing their own PLP. Through the identification of skills and competences completed formal and non-formal education they can start to assess their own learning in relation to the general aims of teacher education. To transfer credits of prior studies is possible as long as the aims set in a curriculum are met. The PLP is personal and it will be updated during the studies. Students can also set up new aims for vocational development and build up a personal portfolio. In a portfolio students assess their own learning and the competences achieved. Teacher’s role is important to ensure that students have information of this process. Teacher’s facilitation in these issues and in the beginning of the PLP is necessary.

The PLP is connected with personal or professional development. The definition of the development emphasizes individual routes, holistic growth and the development as a lifelong process. In addition the PLP has been described with the metaphor of a learning path. The path can not be formed without the plan. (Ansela, M., Haapaniemi, T. & Pirttimäki, S. 2005, 14.) The base of Personal Learning Plan is the curriculum which describes the goals, contents, realisation and assessment of studies explicitly. The PLP supports the implementation of the curriculum; it is both the tool of to plan and the method to set goals for the personal development. It is connected with the future views of the learner and the lifespan of the profession. (Jalava, Lehtinen, Palonen 1997, 8.)

In teacher education we see that the PLP as a holistic approach for learning. It includes study, work experiences and other activities which improve learning and different skills. In teacher education portfolio working includes writing PLP, making individual plans for completing each study module, writing a personal learning log and completing your summative self-assessment. According to Ansela, Haapaniemi and Pirttimäki (2005, 14-15) the Personal Learning Plan can be closed or open. The closed plan is technical, concrete and the focus is on performance. It concentrates on the planning of the study units of the student. It is assessed through the implementation of the credits. The open plan is a way of thinking for learning and development. The critical self-reflection is one part of this process. The advancement of the studies deepens thinking.

In Teacher Education College the PLP is both a process and a product. It consists of the study orientation of a student, issues in the teacher education and a concrete time schedule. It is an essential part of a portfolio. We have group seminars in which students’ learning is supported by discussions of other students and their teacher. In group meetings students consider and identify their past and current learning and their own development by doing assignments and discussing collaboratively. Students write their own action plan in which they identify their competences and describe their development challenges in relation to the general aims of the teacher education. The PLP as process ensures that the student regularly reviewes and assesses his/her development and reflects knowledge and skills based on practical experiences. This is one way to make students pedagogical thinking visible.

Portfolio has been seen by various groups as tools and strategies for evaluation, and it can be used as a tool to support teaching, learning and professional development and growth of a student to teacher. It can be a window to look at one’s own experiences, thoughts, actions and learning processes. Portfolio can be defined as meaningful process of new creating and developing. When portfolio is seen as a process, the reflection is as important as the result. In
the portfolio working a learner’s own process of reflection and assessment and the setting of future growth and learning challenges is seen. (Niikko 1996, 27-33; Niikko 2000, 13-18.) According to Wolf (1996, 35) while the specific form and content of a portfolio can vary depending upon its purpose, most portfolios contain some combination of teaching artifacts and written reflections. These are the heart of the portfolio. A portfolio provides authentic and meaningful documentation on abilities of the student. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment intersect via portfolios. The portfolio must contain the artifacts of students’ progress, as well as their learning and the chosen artifacts. (Cole, Ryan, Kick, Mathies 2000, 9.)

The portfolio working of teacher education continues during the study process. It begins by making a PLP and ends for summative self-assessment. Portfolio work in teacher education includes writing a personal learning plan, making individual plans for completing each study module, writing a personal learning log and completing summative self-assessment. To a portfolio a student chooses meaningful documents, which tell what he/she has learned, how he/she has developed and what he/she knows at the end of the education. The general aims of teacher education and the personal aims are essential criteria for those justified choices. Identifying own prior learning and development needs are an essential part of planning personalised learning plan. A student formulates a portfolio that provides evidence of his/her own learning process and defines meaningful developmental areas for continuing professional development.

Theoretical background of recognition of prior learning can be seen through the theories of Kolb (1984) and Mezirow (1990). The recognition of earlier learning means that learning may take place in a non-institutional context. The emphasis of recognition of prior leaning is on non-credentialled learning. It is a consequence of the theory of experiential learning. The Personal Learning Plan makes it possible to identify earlier learning. Portfolios show promise as a pedagogy of transformative learning within institutions of teacher education (Freidus 1998, 65). Portfolio assessment is used to support learning and to evaluate it – as a transformational tool and as a technical tool. On the other hand, portfolios are used as developmental reflective tools to engage teachers into their own professional growth. On the other hand portfolios are used increasingly to evaluate student’s ability to meet standards. (Snyder, Lippincott, Bower 1998, 123.) The term APEL means accreditation of prior experiential learning. It includes informal and non-formal learning. In some contexts the term is used to mean the recognition of prior experiential learning. It can be acquired in work, in voluntary work or in leisure activities. APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning) refers to the formal education, which accredits on the basis of student’s certificates.

**Development work within TAITURI-project**

In general, there are different methods to assess the competences in vocational education: tests examinations, and declarative methods, methods based on observation, simulations, certificates, evidence of work or other practices. The acknowledgement can happen in a more formal way (e.g. through certification) or in a less formal way (e.g. to check what has been learnt by the individually verified documents). Skill tests and competence-based exams have been developed on the vocational education training level to take account prior learning or to assure the competence. So far there have not been many practical methods taking account prior learning in the higher education level.
TAITURI-project (ESF) during 2004-2006 has focused on the development of practices in the validation of competences. The participants of this project have been five departments in Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and Kankaanpää Institute. One of them has been Teacher Education College (TEC). The activities in this project have been following:

- Training in the identification and recognition of non-formal learning
- Training on assessment of the methodologies
- Net-based working arena
- Support for participating organizations
- Developmental activities
- Collaborative learning and joint seminars
- Additional training (e.g. portfolio, PBL)
- Monitoring and evaluation of the project

We will tell some features about students in TEC. Teacher Education College provides teacher training mainly for the teachers of vocational training institutions and universities of applied sciences. According to the Finnish legislation qualified teachers in these institutions must have 1) a relevant master’s or polytechnic degree, 2) minimum of three years of work experience in a field corresponding to teaching position, and 3) pedagogical training (60 ECTS cr). TEC and four other teacher education colleges in Finland have a task to provide this pedagogical training for people who already work as a teacher or are intending to work as a teacher in vocational training institutions. In Jyväskylä 415 students yearly start their studies in different training programmes. Over 90% of the students already are working in teaching or in other fields of working life. Some of them having many years of experience as a teacher in different sectors of working life. For those students who already have developed competences required in teacher’s work the accreditation of prior learning is an important issue.

Important questions in the process of the identification, assessment and recognition of competences are: How to identify competences? How to define competences (in curriculum and in working life)? How to attest competences? How to recognize competences and who does it? Quality assurance is important in every phase of validation. Also the dialogue between education and working life is important. Methodology is one of the important elements in the identification and validation of prior learning outcomes. It is essential that prior learning outcomes are recognized with required validity and reliability criteria. Validity must reflect a balance between the validation of prior outcomes and existing reference standards (for example curriculum). Reliability serves to confirm the validation procedure. Methodology can take a descriptive or a demonstrative form. In the former method people describe their professional experience with documents and by reflecting upon their career; in the case of latter people show their experience by means of their actions. These forms of evaluation are not mutually exclusive. Activity needs verbal explanations and the opposite also is true. In many cases the combination of both the descriptive and demonstrative approaches may maximize understanding of the complexities involved in prior learning outcomes.

Skills mapping is derived from curriculum and is a self-evaluative test in the beginning of studies. It connects to personal learning plan. Personal learning plan is a part of a portfolio which is a tool to make student’s competences visible. It is also a tool for learning that is connected with the student’s professional development and a good method for authentic assessment. The aim of the portfolio is to improve the student’s professional and personal development, learning and assessment skills. The dynamic process includes reflection and
consideration by the learner of the development in knowledge, competence, capability and advancement.

We noticed, that in this process of identification, assessment and recognition of competences portfolio has an important role. Portfolio is a collection of work, life- and educational experiences with certificates. In other words it is a collection of different kinds of documents that refer to competences, skills, knowledge and attitudes. The individual is the owner and manager of the portfolio. There are no general portfolios. They have always been built in function of a specific objective. Portfolio methodology refers to the monitoring process of competences. By using the portfolio the individual raises their awareness of their competences. We continue to develop the e-portfolio and other e-tools in identification, assessment and recognition of competences.

It is not easy to decide which methods are suitable for the higher education (expert competence). In the development work concerning the identification, assessment and recognition of competences we noticed different questions. Firstly it is important that curriculum is really competence-based so that one can compare curriculum and competences developed in the informal and non-formal processes (and also developed in formal learning processes in other institutions). Secondly, adult student need support and guidance to identify their competences. Then, it is important that the procedures in the validation of competences are clear, high-quality and transparent. On these questions have been considered in our development project. In addition, we made development work in order to educate assessors in working life. We think, that the more people in working life have assessment skills, the better for the workers and also students in the future.

In summary, development work in a new issue can begin from the grass-root level or from the government. We began on the grass-root level, because these questions were current in education in Universities of Applied Sciences. We tried to learn about the system of skill test in vocational schools, where the competences have more practical elements. We knew that in higher education it is important to develop other tools to face this question. In Finland, there is on expert group by the Ministry of Education exploring possibilities and drafting recommendations. Working collaboratively with other colleagues in this development project, has given us a better understanding of the whole process of identification, assessment and recognition in general and the possible problems it brings along.

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