

Comparative perspectives on validation of prior learning – experience from four European countries

Abstract

The validation and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is a priority of EU educational policies and central to lifelong learning. It is targeted to enhance employability, labor market opportunities and educational pathways and should, above all, enhance the chances of individuals disadvantaged on the labor market such as the low skilled, unemployed and migrant workers. In the past two decades, various European countries have created policy frameworks to implement and promote VPL. In addition, common European principles for VPL have been formulated, including specific guidelines for incorporating VPL into the European Qualification Framework. These principles enforce that all European member states should adapt their National Qualification Frameworks as to include informal learning by 2018. Based on a European project, this paper compares VPL approaches and practice in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. It focuses on if and how VPL initiatives support individuals' labor market inclusion and further learning and what role institutions play to support, facilitate and implement validation. Providing proper guidance to individuals plays a key role in the validation process. Hence, the paper looks into the role of institutions in the validation process, reverting to four different national examples.

1 Introduction

The validation and recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (VPL) is a priority of EU educational policies and central to lifelong and life-wide learning. The aim is to strengthen the flexibility of learning pathways to increase labor market inclusion and mobility across Europe. One key objective thereby is to enhance employability, labor market opportunities and educational chances for disadvantaged individuals such as the low skilled, unemployed, migrant workers, refugees and individuals with restricted labor market and learning opportunities. Hence, VPL is seen and conceptualized as a tool to enhance social inclusion and labor market mobility of individuals of all age groups. The approach furthermore emphasizes the centrality of the individual, placing, in theory at least, the individual and individual needs, interests and benefits at the center of validation (Cedefop 2015).

In this paper, we comparatively outline national perspectives on informal learning and VPL within the European Union and present examples of how VPL can be implemented. First, we sketch the development of the European conception of lifelong learning, focusing on how informal learning is being defined and linked to VPL. We then present different possibilities of implementing VPL, reverting to approaches in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey. Section four links the national educational policies to implementation practice. Here, we will

present country examples to outline the importance of institutions for and during the validation process. In the last part, we conclude with some recommendations for the Asian context.

2 The European concept of informal learning

In the context of promoting lifelong learning, which significantly has influenced international as well as national education policies over the past decades, we can observe a change of how learning and its key processes and elements are being understood. The concept of lifelong learning thereby strengthens the idea that a person is learning throughout their entire life and in every context of life. To take account of this multi-dimensionality, education policies started to incorporate strategies, programs and qualification frameworks to support the validation and recognition of competences obtained throughout the lifespan (Bohlinger/Münchhausen 2011).

In 2008, the European Council and the Parliament of the European Union defined recommendations for establishing a European Qualification Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning. This can be regarded as the first step towards more prominently promoting non-formal and informal learning within European policies as well as at the national level. By focusing on knowledge, skills and competence rather than on qualifications, the EQF shifts the focus to learning outcomes. This perspective underpins the idea that qualifications should reflect learning outcomes instead of learning pathways and educational programs (Mikulec 2017).

In 2009, the Council passed a conclusion that defined a strategic framework for the cooperation of the European member states in the field of education and vocational education and training. In this document, lifelong learning is to serve as a fundamental principle also for learning that takes place in non-formal and informal contexts (European Commission 2009). As a follow-up, the Council passed a recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2012, requiring that all European member states should implement procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in accordance with their national education systems by 2018. This means that in all EU member states individuals should have the possibility to get their competences, skills and abilities gained through non-formal and informal learning validated. Furthermore, this validation has to be the basis for a full or partial recognition of a qualification (European Commission 2012).

At the European level, lifelong learning is defined along a threefold division: Formal learning, non-formal learning and informal learning. Formal learning refers to learning that takes place in an organized and structured educational environment, usually leading to a certificate or a diploma. Non-formal learning takes place in similar contexts, but without resulting in obtaining a formal qualification certificate. Contrasting the former two, informal learning is based on an open, typically non-structured learning process that takes place in relation to practical activities, including work practice. Informal learning thereby is not understood as a single process, but rather as to comprise multiple ways of informal learning. Rogers (2014), for example, defines three kinds of informal learning: self-directed learning,

incidental learning and unintentional learning. While self-directed learning is a learning process organized by the learner, constituting a conscious way of learning, incidental learning takes place alongside completing a specific task. The learner typically is not aware of such task-related learning as s/he focuses, in the first place, on successfully completing the task. The related learning takes place as a side effect. Unintentional learning occurs unplanned and through every day experiences (Rogers 2014). In the context of vocational and adult education, informal learning is considered to be as important as formal learning (Severing 2015).

3 VPL in a national comparative perspective

The VPL initiatives at the European level implemented in the last years have significantly advanced the idea of VPL and have led to the creation of policy frameworks for VPL, not only at the European level, but also at the level of the member states of the European Union. As a result, various validation methods and procedures have been developed and implemented. To date, VPL in Europe presents a fragmented picture, ranging from some countries demonstrating a high commitment to VPL to countries that have not yet engaged in the process. To move from fragmentation to stronger coherence, common European principles for VPL are continuously being reinforced. For example, in 2015 the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) published guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which include a framework for the member states and especially for practitioners who are responsible for the implementation of VPL procedures. VPL is herein defined as a major tool to make ‘visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals’ which ‘frequently takes place outside formal education and training [...] and is frequently overlooked and ignored’ (Cedefop 2015, 14). Accordingly, validation is defined as a process with multiple possible outcomes that should increase the visibility and value of learning that takes place outside the classroom. Based on the Councils’ recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning from 2012, the guidelines furthermore define four phases of validation covering identification, documentation, assessment and certification. In addition, the possibilities for validation should be clarified and communicated and the approaches should meet the individuals’ demands (Cedefop 2015, 15). In practice, validation is implemented within the education and training sector, but also by other stakeholders and labor market actors.

How different member states of the European Union implement validation in the context of lifelong learning and their respective national education systems will be illustrated in the following section. Concretely, we provide insight into VPL approaches in Denmark, Germany, Poland and Turkey to facilitate a comparative perspective. This section is based on initial results from a European project on the effectiveness of VPL policies and programs for labor market inclusion and mobility (e.g. Universität Bremen).

3.1 Denmark

In Denmark, the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been on the policy agenda for about 20 years. Based on common principles, a legal framework for validation of prior learning in the adult education and training sector has been in place since 2007, regulating the validation of prior learning by law. Thereby, the implementation of the legislation is decentralized in Denmark.

According to Danish law, the assessment of the validation application must be conducted by the educational institution that offers the corresponding study programs. Other bodies can be in charge of providing information and guidance in a broader perspective, in particular, during the preparation phase of the assessment process. This ‘pre-phase’ involves providing information and supporting identification and documentation. Other bodies include, among others, trade unions, employer associations, job-centers, unemployment insurance funds, civic education institutions, study committees, ‘eVejledning’ (online guidance service) and third sector institutions.

VPL in Denmark has the aim to (i) enable access to formal education; (ii) tailor a study program or award credits for certain classes up to Masters level; or (iii) award a Competence Certificate if the participant meets the requirements of fulfilling parts of an educational program. Denmark has a comprehensive National Qualification Framework (NQF) covering all types and levels of qualifications that can be awarded by public authorities. This eight level framework was adopted in 2009 and referenced to the European Qualification Framework (EQF) in 2011. Most of the qualifications in the Danish NQF can also be acquired on the basis of validation. Furthermore, the process of VPL in Denmark explicitly includes the four phases of validation: identification, documentation, assessment and certification (Aagaard 2014; Aagaard 2015).

3.2 Germany

In Germany, VPL is increasingly receiving attention in educational research and practice, not least as a response to the developments of educational policies at the European level. However, the German validation landscape remains a patchwork, particularly as compared to the situation in other European countries with less regulated and formalized education and vocational training systems. Hence, VPL in Germany presents a picture of rather uncoordinated regulations, programs, processes and projects headed by different authorities and with varying outreach. A legislative framework, common guidelines or a common strategy to establish flexible and transparent validation processes do not exist (Seidel 2011). Validation procedures have thus far mainly been piloted on a project basis. Among other reasons, this is due to the highly regulated education system that focuses on formal qualifications and the close linkage between school-based and work-based learning in the framework of the formalized and nationally regulated dual system of vocational education and training (Greinert 2007). While informal and practice-based learning at the workplace is considered important, it is not taken into account in the context of validation, mainly because it takes place outside the formal system.

Linkages between validation and the German Qualification Framework (DQR), which was developed by an expert committee on the basis of the EQF and adopted in May 2013, are loose (AK DQR 2011). However, the focus on competence of the eight-level DQR matrix could potentially be used for the classification of professional and personal competences acquired in all educational sectors and contexts and facilitate the integration of VPL (Merrill/Hill 2003). Below, we outline three validation approaches that are legally framed.

First, the recognition of prior learning to obtain permission for taking an external examination that forms part of the formal education system: For vocational training, this procedure was established in the 1960s to give people not formally trained under the dual apprenticeship program the chance to acquire a formal vocational qualification. According to the National Vocational Qualification Law (§45 (2) BBiG) and regulations set up by the chamber of crafts (§37 (2) HwO), people are allowed to apply for taking the final examination without having attended the respective vocational training program ('Externenprüfung') if they comply with certain requirements, for instance, the proof of relevant work experience covering 1.5 times the duration of the regular training program. Alternatively, it is also possible to prove that relevant competences have been acquired in other ways.

Second, the recognition of prior learning to obtain access to different learning pathways: Different procedures and pilot projects (e.g. ANKOM) were developed to recognize prior learning for getting access to or moving between different learning paths (Freitag et al. 2015). The aim is to avoid repetition, shorten educational pathways and increase permeability, also between vocational tracks and higher education. The various approaches, which exclusively include access to higher education without holding a University entry qualification, are largely decentralized to the university level.

Third, the recognition of equivalence of prior learning to national education standards and certificates: The Vocational Qualifications Assessment Law (BQFG, also called "Recognition Law") was introduced in April 2012. It guarantees individuals the right to get foreign qualifications recognized as being equal to a respective national qualification by a competent authority within three months. Although the law focuses on assessing and comparing formal qualifications, informally acquired competences and relevant work experience can be considered when formal certificates are missing or are incomplete (see BQFG § 3 section 1). The recognition process is, in the first place, based on assessing relevant documents such as training certificates, certificates of capability and proofs of relevant domain-specific work experience acquired in a foreign country or in Germany (see § 3 BQFG section 1). Complementary, competence assessment is also possible based on practical tests, work proofs and interviews. When significant skill gaps impede full recognition, a partial recognition can be awarded that can be supplemented, for example, by further training (Böse et al. 2014).

3.3 Poland

VPL in Poland has been known for a long time, in particular in the context of vocational qualifications and crafts. For these domains, VPL was legally regulated in 1989. With the resolutions of the European Commission (2004; 2009), validation became a key element in

the development of the Polish Qualification Framework (Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych 2017), in particular to foster the transparency of qualifications and labor market mobility and flexibility (European Commission 2016). Since 2010, VPL has been introduced more systematically, while the true change in the system took place in 2012 when the possibility of passing an extramural vocational examination (without going through the formal vocational education program) was introduced.

Overall, several legislative changes gradually led to the restructuring of the system of which the majority took place between 2012 and 2017 (Duda 2016). The legislative Acts also include procedures for quality assurance, allocating responsibilities of institutions and defining requirements for validation processes. The aim is to build a consistent system of VPL in Poland with coherent and nationally defined procedures that recognize the competences individuals have acquired in different learning settings and through different forms of learning. The approach seeks to recognize these forms as equivalent to formal education. Verifying learning outcomes outside the formal education system, however, requires careful examination and systematization. For this purpose, Poland has established two pillars: the Polish Qualification Framework and the Integrated Qualification System (IQS). The Act on the Integrated Qualifications System (Ministry of Education 2015), which came into force in January 2016, combined separate, already existing regulations on VPL into one system and introduced key elements for assuring quality. While initially the IQS mainly covered full and partial qualifications from formal education, also other qualifications (e. g. those obtained from further training) are gradually being included based on requests from associations of entrepreneurs and the industrial sectors. Despite all these efforts, validation practice in Poland is only at the initial stage.

State-regulated VPL includes (i) the vocational extramural examinations conducted by Regional Examination Commissions (OKE); (ii) Chambers of Crafts examinations; and (iii) special professional qualifications (e.g. in the field of civil engineering). The methods used for validation are theoretical and practical examinations. In addition, based on the Integrated Qualification Systems Act of 22 December 2015, some pilot initiatives introduced new ways of validation, placing the individual and learning outcomes in the center of attention rather than the educational system. These competence-based approaches that recognize learning outcomes require a shared understanding of validation, relevant information, staff to be appropriately trained and a system of providing guidance. Furthermore, it is necessary to have a good cooperation between many partners and actors (including employers), secure apt validation conditions by institutions and ensure that the process is applied in line with the legal framework. One such pilot was carried out from 2014–2015 in Małopolska by the Regional Labor Office Kraków in cooperation with other actors. The pilot covered 33 participants in the domains of CNC machine operation, real property management, baking in retail facilities and team management in maintenance services. The validation methods included interviewing, portfolio, evidence analysis, self-assessment, knowledge test, practical test, on-site observation and simulation (work samples). A main outcome was that the preparation of validation scenarios and procedures in line with the quality assurance principles was a challenge for the actors and institutions involved. In particular, the validation

process requires staff training and competence standards for specific roles (e. g. the assessor role) and a guidebook on process implementation.

3.4 Turkey

In Turkey, validation of non-formal and informal learning is a new phenomenon. Validation of prior learning (VPL) is carried out by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Vocational Qualifications Authority (VQA). The VQA, established in 2006, is responsible for validation-related activities in Turkey. In addition, there are many public and private organizations involved in validating non-formal and informal learning. Thereby, validation is applied only to the vocational and technical sector, but does not form part of the education sector. As a consequence, certificates based on VPL are treated differently to those gained through formal education as they do not provide access to the formal education system.

To ensure that certain educational standards are met, vocational and technical education programs are up-dated on the basis of published standards and then new education programs are developed accordingly. The Lifelong Learning Directorate General (LLL DG) within the MoNE carries out some projects to support the development of the validation system in Turkey. To work along the same points of reference, education and training standards of non-formal learning programs are made compatible with the Turkish Qualification Framework (TQF). When modules, programs, and curricula are structured, learning outcomes have to be taken as the basis (Vocational Qualifications Authority 2013). This is an on-going process and legislation is a driving force in this regard.

Since the standards of the formal education and training programs under the MoNE differ from the occupational standards in the private sector, they have to be made compatible with the TQF. As a consequence, the curricula of 19 occupations had to be redesigned and 14 had to be adjusted in 2017. Of the currently 633 national occupations, approximately 25 per cent had to be redesigned to meet the standards of the curriculum in question. Overall, the qualifications based on occupational standards are more accepted on the labor market.

The validation processes within lifelong learning aim to identify the knowledge, skills and competences that are acquired in informal and non-formal learning contexts at all levels of the TQF. Consequently, the TQF is adapted to ensure the certification of qualifications obtained as a result of learning in non-formal and informal learning environments. The examination and certification processes are carried out by the institutions, which are accredited in line with the respective national qualifications and authorized by the VQA. All the necessary procedures for documentation are carried out by the authorized certification body (ACB) under the supervision of the VQA. With the approval of the VQA Board of Directors, the VQA Vocational Qualification documents are given to those who are to be certified as the result of the measurement and evaluation performed by the ACB.

The 2014-2018 Lifelong Learning Strategy Document makes reference to the development of the validation system (Ministry of National Education 2009). Preparatory work on the establishment of the system of recognition of prior learning is carried out by the MoNE and the VQA. The MoNE has conducted pilot studies in three professions, and the Vocational

Qualifications Authority has started to establish vocational knowledge and skill examination and certification centers.

4 The role of institutions in the VPL process

The four presented countries depict different stages of the implementation of VPL. While Denmark has a fairly comprehensive, well developed and decentralized system, Germany presents a patchwork with uncoordinated approaches and lack of an overarching framework. Poland has redesigned its VPL system during the last five years to link old and new approaches of validation, while Turkey is still at the beginning of developing a concept of VPL and adapting its education system to European standards. For scrutinizing the role of institutions for framing and guiding VPL processes, we now draw on individual experiences with VPL in the four countries.

4.1 Example from Denmark: Kira

Kira (Aagaard 2015) is 33 years old, has two children and left school after nine years with the degree Folkeskolen. Due to her family obligations she did not have the possibility to complete a vocational education and training. Nevertheless, she earned some money with occasional jobs and worked in the cleaning sector and in a nursing home as a temporary, semi-skilled employee. She lives in a rural area in the North of Denmark. The next big city is about one hour travel by public transportation. There are not many educational courses offered in the region.

Legal Background: Kira can have her competences validated to start an education. She can apply for an individual competence assessment of adult vocational training and can have her skills assessed according to specific educational regulations. Depending on the assessment, she will be entitled to obtain an adult vocational training competences certificate and/or an education certificate as well as an individual training plan.

Process: Kira seeks advice at the job center where she outlines her educational ambitions during an advice session. She also speaks to an advisor from the unemployment office (at the labor union) to find out what kind of education she wants and what her rights are. She then seeks advice at an adult vocational training center (AMU), talking to another advisor. Here, she is informed about her options and is offered to take a specific course to clarify her current situation. This course helps her to identify her prior learning from former education, jobs and leisure activities. In addition, she uses her competence folder (“Min kompetence mappe” www.minkompetencemappe.dk) and CV that she previously compiled at the job center. With these tools, she has her professional, social and personal competences outlined. Kira is offered a personalized job and education plan via an adult vocational training module with the objective of clarifying her educational ambitions. Finally, another interview is carried out to identify which subjects need to be assessed. This individual competence assessment is followed-up by a respective subject teacher. Several materials and methods are used in this assessment: In one test she has to answer a series of questions and to complete a practical test for assessing her practical skills. The consultant then goes over the results with Kira. He tells

her that she can obtain a competence certificate for three subjects and also provides her with a training plan.

Financing: For Kira, the individual competence assessment in adult vocational training is free, because she has been unemployed for four months. Accordingly, she has the right to six weeks of education of her choice.

Support: Kira can find information about an individual competence assessment in several places, for example the job center or a center for adult education and continuing training (VEU-center). Additionally, several educational institutions have set up open advice sessions in cooperation with local job centers. Furthermore, the unemployment office will be able to guide her through the process.

4.2 Example from Germany: Bastian

Bastian (Schöpf 2015) is 29 years old and lives in a small city in the South of Germany. He finished secondary school after ten years and started a vocational education and training as a nurse. He left this vocational training after one year without having completed the qualification. He then found a job in the IT sector where he worked for four years for an industrial company. Here he acquired work experience in network management and the coordination of IT services. Due to downsizing and outsourcing of the IT services he started working for an external IT service provider. After 12 months his employment contract was not renewed. He is now unemployed since five months.

Legal background: Bastian has no legal right to claim the assessment of the skills obtained through his former jobs. The letters of reference are the only proofs of his work experience. He can also not apply for an external examination in one of the dual vocational education and training IT professions as he has only four years of work experience in the IT sector.

Process: Bastian is participating in a qualification program that usually supports obtaining partial qualification. However, in his professional field suitable partial qualifications do not exist. He is informed that he would have access to an external examination if he went through a post-qualification ('Nachqualifizierung'). As Bastian does not feel comfortable with examination situations he decides not to follow this route.

Financing: Since Bastian is unemployed and participating in a qualification program, the recognition and validation of his informally acquired competences would be possible in the course of a partial qualification without any costs. However, since no partial qualification is available for his professional profile he would need to pay the preparation courses for the external examination himself. As he does not have the money to pay these fees and is also not sure whether he would pass the external examination, he does not pursue this route any longer.

Support: Bastian learned about the possibilities of obtaining partial qualifications by chance as a participant in a qualification program for unemployed. He was incidentally informed by another participant. Before he did not know anything about the possibility of taking an external examination nor did his employer suggest to him to obtain a formal qualification.

4.3 Example from Poland: Agnieszka

Agnieszka is in her forties; she graduated from vocational school as a salesman and worked as a retailer in a general food store. She enjoyed her job which gave her satisfaction as she lived off her professional career. When she had a child (now 19 years old), she stopped working due to her family obligations. Her husband is an artist. When her son did not require so much attention any more from his mother, she did not return to her job as a salesman, but started to organize and market her husband's professional and artistic activities. As she had always been interested in artwork, she supported the work of her husband for many years. Eventually, she also started to create and sell artistic handicrafts. At the same time, she took care of the home, including food preparation, both for the needs of everyday life and circumstances, but also prepared meals for larger family events and for her friends. When she decided to return to work, she did not want to work again as a salesman, but wanted to build on her developed artistic and cooking skills.

Legal background: As Agnieszka is unemployed she legally has the right to get support from the local Labor Office. The Labor Office offers helping with the recognition of competences and provides advice by career counselors. Furthermore, Agnieszka has the right to participate in professional training courses for free.

Process: Agnieszka is given the chance to participate in a pilot project on VPL carried out by the Regional Labor Office in the Małopolska Region. The validation process that the pilot project applies involves a number of diversified methods tailored to the demands of the participants. During the validation process, Agnieszka has several conversations and interviews to identify her experiences and competences and to assess her skills. Furthermore, she has to do a job simulation to deliver a work sample typical for the work as a baker. In the course of the project, Agnieszka get confirmed one of the professional qualifications of the baker profession, namely baking in retail facilities. After the validation process, she starts her own business – a small catering business at the Center for Practical Learning Headquarters, where she now works on her own.

Financing: Agnieszka could participate in the pilot project and undergo a validation process without any costs.

Support: The pilot project was a comprehensive project guiding the participants through the whole validation process. Therefore, Agnieszka received a wide-ranging consultation and advice by vocational counselors and validation advisors.

4.4 Example from Turkey: Ali

Ali is a 32 years old man, married with one child. After graduating from high school in Ankara, he started to work as an accountant in a construction company in a different city. After he married, he realized that he did not want to be far from his home town and decided to apply for another job. He found a job at a colour separation unit at a printing press in Ankara, where he has now been working for the past 12 years.

Legal background: Ali's job falls into the 40 dangerous and hazardous occupations that require a special qualification. The occupational safety specialist, who is obliged to pay a monthly visit to the company, informed Ali about the obligation to become certified from the Vocational Qualification Authority (VQA). Additionally, his regular high school diploma does not allow him to start his own business, an option Ali would like to have. With the certification of the VQA, he would also be entitled to run a business of his own.

Process: Ali applies to an institution authorized by the VQA as authorized certification body. He fills out the application form and submits his identification card together with the documentation of his educational background. He then pays the total examination fee, which is determined according to the profession, ranging from 100 to 600 EUR. He successfully completes a theoretical and a practical performance examination. While the theoretical examination is based on a series of written tests, the practical examination is a demonstration in a real working environment. The name of the qualification is "responsible for offset printing unit, level 5".

Financing: Since Ali passed the examinations, the fees were fully refunded to him. If he had failed, he would have had two more attempts. When failing all three attempts, the fees are not refunded.

Support: Ali did not receive any kind of consultation. This means that no VPL advisor or qualification counselor was involved to support and guide him through the certification process.

4.5 Reflections

The four illustrative cases show how VPL processes can be implemented differently. The first example is contextualized within a rather comprehensive institutional system with different opportunities for consultation and obtaining information. The process of validation is individually tailored and Kira received clear advice and a training plan that considered her opportunities. She also got her competences validated and certified, which helped her to improve her position on the Danish labor market. The second example presents a less flexible and less comprehensive institutional system of VPL. Bastian's competences did not fit into the existing qualification programs available. He therefore had to adapt to fixed pathways established within the German education system. The guidance provided was less helpful and financial support less accessible. For Bastian, a validation would have involved considerable personal efforts, own initiative and, above all, it would have cost a lot of money. The third example depicts a validation approach that particularly considered the background and needs of the individual. As this validation took place in the course of a pilot project, it was possible to test new approaches and wide-ranging conditions and circumstances. The participants received close guidance and support and the methods were tailored to their needs. It could be considered a good practice example for the future development of validation of prior learning in Poland. Finally, Ali did not receive any guidance or support, but by coincidence came across a procedure that could facilitate his future progression on the labor market and new possible career pathways. His case illustrates the importance of individuals' own initiative

and disposition of risk taking where institutional support is lacking. Since Ali managed to pass the required examinations, he was financially supported in the process.

To successfully implement validation and realize the multiple VPL procedures in practice, institutions that support, facilitate and implement validation and provide guidance to individuals play a significant and important role. We argue that the provision of adequate information and guidance are central for the success of the validation process. As the first example shows, various actors, who typically operate at an institutional level, are responsible for the implementation and are key actors who monitor the effectiveness of validation. These actors include teachers, trainers, counselors, assessors, coaches and other practitioners. Most of them are affiliated to or work for public and private institutions as well as third sector agencies and other intermediaries, which are assuming a very important role, not least because they are creating the effective linkage between the systemic, institutional and individual level. The fairly complex interaction between the macro (policy), meso (institutional) and micro (individual) level requires capacity building and having well trained and informed practitioners in place, who can guide individuals through the process.

5 Conclusion: What can Asia learn from the European approaches?

While policy frameworks and validation methods have been created in many European countries, coherent approaches, an adequate institutional infrastructure and well-prepared guidance staff still present major challenges. It is not only necessary to develop coherent approaches on the policy level, but also indispensable to account for the different educational systems and contexts of each country as well as the implementation structures on the ground. What can be learnt from the European experience is the relevance of a comprehensive institutional setting that can accommodate and take account of the individual circumstances. The focus on the individual and their learning outcomes – be they formal, non-formal or informal – are very important for a successful implementation of a functioning VPL system.

The idea of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to build a ‘closer cooperation in education and life-long learning’ (ASEAN 2007) is very much linked to a well-functioning VPL system. The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) constitutes a solid basis for the creation of a common market with free movement of employees and labor. As Singh (2017) argues, National Qualification Frameworks can define the skills, knowledge and abilities a person possesses when having completed a qualification. This increases the transparency of formal qualifications and, at the same time, enables the inclusion of non-formal and informal learning. Thus, implementing a Qualification Framework can be the first step towards an ASEAN VPL system.

Furthermore, by referring to learning outcomes instead of qualifications and degrees, the AQRF facilitates the harmonization of the qualification systems of the ASEAN member states (ASEAN 2016). This changed perspective explicitly widens the understanding of learning and could thus foster the implementation of a comprehensive VPL system within the ASEAN member states.

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