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VALIDATION – A MEETING POINT BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET?

Review
Article

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Abstract

The function of the higher education institutions is changing nowadays. The higher education used to be a special system reserved for the dedicated ones earlier: for those, who were the most talented and/or the wealthiest members of the society. They had the chance to learn, and the knowledge they have collected at the universities guaranteed a good job with a good salary for them. New types of students appeared at the universities lately: for us the most important is the age group over 25 years. These students are typically part-time students: they are working and studying in parallel. This trend results in another need: the recognition of non-formal and informal learning collected by the employees during their career. In many cases the lifelong learners' tuition fees and the different donations can cover a significant part of the higher education budget. For supporting the education companies always want some kind of compensation: this can be the validation.

INTRODUCTION

Some new students appeared at the universities in the last decades. One of these groups is the students over the age of 25. Most of these students can study only in a part-time studentship: they are working and studying at the same period of their lives (Hrubos, 2012). This trend results in another need: the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (together the different forms of the non-school learning which is not necessarily any way of education) collected by the employees during their career (Derényi & Tót, 2011).

The role of lifelong learners increased, whether they have completed any kind of degree before (Ward, 2007). They are very important members of the universities' community. In many national higher educational systems the lifelong learners' tuition fees and the different donations can cover a significant part of the higher education budget (HALÁSZ, 2012). But in return for their support the companies always want some kind of compensation: this can be the validation. On the other hand, in several cases students unfortunately are not able to complete the degree they wanted before and finish their studies without any degree. In these cases they have some formal prior knowledge and they can combine it with some practical knowledge collected at the labour market. Being dropout from higher education is a big problem which has effect on the whole higher educational system (Fenyves et al., 2017).

When we are talking about the learning environment on a global level we can declare that the right to education is in a natural partnership with the duty of learning (Carneiro, 2015). Roberto Carneiro's thought is a very simple and – at the same time – very radical summary of the higher education's legal aspect. To find the right's partner duty is not that difficult but to translate this statement for the labour market is a great challenge. The higher education is always in the focus of different social debates. What is the real function of higher education? To support the recruitment of the white-collar people? To serve the graduate employee-needs of the labour market? To serve the science itself? It's really hard to declare that one of these aims is the one and only right answer for this question.

We can't separate these debates from other important questions of the higher education. One of these main questions is the number of people who can enter the higher education system. In the middle of the 1990-es the changing function of the higher education, the changing professional roles of graduates and the expansion of the higher education were very popular topics of the higher education management (Teichler & Kehm, 1995). "Higher education has been transformed from being considered a social expenditure to being an

essential component of the productive economy; accordingly, the way in which higher education is governed and managed has become a major policy issue." (Hazelkorn, 2011) The new expectations faced to the higher education system needed not only a new governing model but a new general point of view too. The decision-makers started to approximate the higher education system to the labour market to strengthen the positions of the users' spheres.

The debate of the changing functions of education resulted an increase in the number of publications. However the total number of scientific outcomes increased dramatically in the last decades in all fields of science (Popp et al., 2018) we can state that the number of publications on the field of education, higher education and recognition of prior learning increased as well.

PREFERRED LEARNING METHODS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Unfortunately many people believe in the fast changing world which is actual nowadays that the specific knowledge can be collected at different institutions or levels of education and is not that important anymore. The base of this thought is the radically fast development of the different technological equipment and services which can make the specific knowledge outdated very fast: the actual knowledge can lose its importance and validity in few years. These people think the knowledge can be easily collected via internet (on different e-learning surfaces). These people agree that one of the most important aims of the education system is to teach the students those skills which are making them able to grab information on different websites or internet databases. They also agree that focusing on different specialised fields of knowledge in higher education is not really useful anymore but the development of such broad academic skills as reflectiveness, critical thinking or analytical thinking is really wanted (Humburg et al., 2013). We can say that these thoughts are really typical nowadays. This approach means the main (public or widely accepted) aim of the higher education radically changed in the last few years. We still believe that one of the main aims of the higher education is to present a high added cultural value during the different programmes, and we believe that this aim can interweave with the new structural point of view.

But how does it work in the practice? How can a higher educational institution form a graduate, who will be successful in the labour market? "Stakeholders seem to agree that the preferred learning method for acquiring both field-specific knowledge and general academic skills in HE

[higher education] at the same time, is to provide students with theoretical knowledge, which should then be applied in practice. The proposed ideas on how this can be done all involve providing actual or simulated case studies, either through internships or through project based teamwork. The underlying idea is that these teaching methods will simultaneously develop professional expertise as well as general academic skills or other skills like interpersonal skills, innovative/ creative skills and flexibility.” (Humburg et al., 2013:77) As it’s seen new elements appeared in the higher educational learning process. These new elements are inspired directly by the users’ sphere. We can declare that the best employee for an employer is talented, flexible and open-minded, and – of course – the ideal employee can use her or his knowledge creative. And it’s really important to see that for a typical employer the employee’s knowledge is important and not the employee’s official document.

This way of thinking can help the undereducated people as well who had the possibility to work enough. In Hungary the people with very low level of education (for example: primary education or not completed primary level of education) has very weak chances to get employed so for them every way of the recognition of prior learning and the validation of the knowledge collected not in the framework of formal education can be really useful and can help them to earn more money and become financially individual (Szabados et al., 2012).

LEARNING RATE OF THE WORKERS AGE GROUP

As the OECD report showed the learning rate of the workers age group (25-64 years old employees), we can see that the non-formal versions of learning are very popular – however the formal versions of learning could strengthen their positions too. We can find differences in the ratio of the adults involved in formal education to complete their needs in education and training in the different countries. The results of an international OECD survey showed that an average of 10% of the 25-64 years old population takes part in any kind of formal education. One of the highest rates can be found in Australia (17%) and one of the lowest rates in Japan (2%), while Canada and the Anglo-Saxon countries and all the Nordic countries published results of the proportion ratio over the average in the proportion of the adults attending formal education. The results from these country groups are clear and we can state that only the Netherlands and Spain have similar results. Some other interesting results published by Korea, Japan and France where less than 5% of adults participating in formal education. The OECD

survey showed that those countries where the participation rate in formal education is high also high participation rate could be found in non-formal or informal education (OECD, 2014). The closing sentence is very important. About half of the adults don’t have any direct contact to the official or non-official schooling system, which means that they don’t need new knowledge in their work – or no more knowledge than they can learn in the practice. But their practical knowledge is very precious too. When an employee changes workplace, she or he takes her or his knowledge with her or him. This practical knowledge is very useful and precious, but how can it be measured? The kind of this knowledge can be very different: it can be – for example – any kind of procedural routine collected during decades, the knowledge of system operating or impressions collected during international mobility programs – because we can say that the international mobilization can be very personality-forming (Kömives, 2014).

WHAT DOES THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING MEAN?

To define the recognition of prior learning, we cited the definition used by Irene Sheridan and Dr. Margaret Linehan. This definition made three separated versions of the recognition of prior learning: the formal learning, the non-formal learning and the informal learning. “Recognition of Prior Learning is a process by which learning that has already taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is given a value. This learning process may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. The Commission of the European Communities suggest that for the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:

- Formal learning which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards
- Non-formal learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning include learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, in the voluntary sector, or in communities
- Informal learning that takes place through life and work experience (experiential learning). It is learning that is quite unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

A broad aim of RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known of the course curriculum. The purpose of RPL may be formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification).” (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009)

The Danish legal system gives a very concentrated definition of the recognition of prior learning. By law they define prior learning as a summary of the total qualifications, knowledge and competences for each person with no regards to the place, time or methodology how they collected these attributes. The Danish evaluation of prior knowledge is based on the recognised knowledge’s relation to the formal and/or specific education targets. The Danish educational system can be separated in two different parts. In the first part the educational system offers education for children and young adults in the formal ways of primary, upper and lower secondary education and the tertiary or higher education. A parallel educational system specially for adults also provided. The main focuses of the two systems are almost the same but some methodological differences could be found. Some special programs only exist in the adult educational system, just like – for example – master degree programs. One of the most important prescriptions of the organising the adult education programs is the optimisation of the timetables because the special institutions aimed to offer adult education have to make the students able to work during their studies. The Danish education system has some experience in validating skills or in the recognition of prior learning (for example in the different credit transfer processes) and the new Danish law of education still paying attention to this topic. The educational researchers of Denmark expressed the similarities between the credit transfer process and the recognition of prior learning. These similarities can occur in many ways: for example the documentation of the former or earlier studies widely used in both processes. But on other hand several differences defined between the two processes: the most important circumstance is the fact that the recognition of prior learning not only cover the knowledge collected during the ways of formal education in different educational institutions but the skills and knowledge collected in different non-formal or informal ways, for example the working experience. In many recognition cases the knowledge has not been documented before and that institution is responsible for the assessment which conducts the recognition of prior learning process itself. In some special cases the credit transfer process can face some challenges: for example when the qualification is out of date

because some deadlines elapsed (Andersen & Laugesen, 2012).

The recognition of prior learning (the term used in the last paragraph), as an aspect of the higher education is defined by Irene Sheridan and Dr. Margaret Linehan, too. They separate two different forms of the recognition of prior learning: the certified (or accredited) learning and the experiential (or unaccredited) learning. “Certified (accredited) learning is learning that has previously been accredited, formally recognised or certified. This is the recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider. The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as ‘accreditation’. (...) Experiential (unaccredited learning) is learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised and is typically uncertified. This is learning which has been gained through life experiences in work, community, or other settings. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may happen only retrospectively through the RPL [recognition of prior learning] process. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The recognition of this type of learning will normally result in the awarding of credit attached to the learning outcomes for the learning achieved by the learner. While it is useful to understand the differences between these different types of learning, it is likely that an individual’s learning experience will have a combination of formal, non-formal and informal aspects. Engaging in RPL allows people to systematically look at their own experiences, to reflect on them, and perhaps look at them in a different or new way. Through informal or experiential learning people are regularly acquiring and renewing their skills and knowledge, and RPL enables people to consider and reflect on how these have developed and changed.” (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

Irene Sheridan and Dr. Margaret Linehan clarifies the meaning of the main roles during the recognition of prior learning process. The first role is the learner’s role who is asking for the recognition of her or his prior learning outcome. The process of the recognition of prior learning often asks for some evidence of the adequate studies (and it not depends on its certified or experiential form (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

The second is the mentors’ role. The aim of mentoring people is to measure their potential and

to combine the different parts of their knowledge. The tools of this process can be advice giving, counselling or coaching (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

And the third role in the recognition of prior learning process is the role of the assessor. The assessor holds responsibility for the assessment of the whole individual case in recognition of prior learning. The assessor has to have a wide knowledge in the aimed subject of the recognition process and also has to have a knowledge and experience in using assessment techniques (Sheridan & Linehan, 2009).

INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

In the last few years the recognition of prior learning became one of the most popular topics in the life of the higher education. Governments all over the world started to pay attention on this topic. For example the Vietnamese Government started to define the main frameworks of the connection between the educational system and the labour market. The Vietnamese Government pays a big attention to the development of human resources and realises big investments in the development of education and training. One of the most important aims is to make the educational courses and the whole professional education more relevant to the labour market. To reach this aim, the Vietnamese Government decided to focus on the development of the different curricula, the training of the teachers, the establishment of the qualification frameworks, accreditation, management systems and – maybe the most important aim is to – strengthen the links between the education and the business sector (Tuan et al., 2012). The aspect of partnership strengthening between business and training institution shows that the connection between the formal educational system and the labour market is very important.

But why do countries use the system of recognition of prior learning? Per Anderson and Andreas Fejes made it clear: because it is very useful for the economy. “Recognition of prior learning has become a popular tool over the last few decades to improve the formal qualifications of citizens around the world. This is reflected in the policies of the European Union (...) and many of its member states, such as Sweden (...). These initiatives and RPL research often take for granted that RPL contributes positively to the prosperity of a country.” (Anderson & Fejes, 2012)

The recognition of prior learning is a very important topic in the United States of America, too. The legal and educational system of the United States of America uses several terms for recognition of prior learning. The use of the

different processes depends on the content of the application submitted by the applicant. The following types are mainly used by those people who are trying to validate their knowledge collected not mainly in formal education but outside from the education in the American system: accreditation of prior learning and prior learning assessment (Dyson & Keating, 2005).

As many other important educational development, the system in the United States has been originally designed for veteran soldiers. The American Council on Education uses different methods for recognising knowledge accumulated by soldiers during their military training in the academic system (Dyson & Keating, 2005).

The recognition of prior learning can become a good solution during the integration of migrants arriving into the European Union. The asylum seekers arriving into Europe are typically not able to present any school degrees because they are not able to collect the diplomas when they are trying to escape from – for example – war zones. In these cases the validation or recognition their practical knowledge can be a good solution to help their integration in the labour market (Oláh et al., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

The changes of the labour market increased a big pressure on the higher education system. The employers want talented and open-minded graduates, whose knowledge is fictile. The great actors of the labour market sending the employees to any higher educational institution wants them to collect useable new knowledge, and they want the higher educational institution to recognize all the knowledge the employee collected during her or his lifetime, working time.

When these new students enter the higher education system – as followers of the lifelong learning movement –, they have special knowledge. This knowledge is not every time an academic kind of knowledge but it's very useful and well tested every time. The higher education have to find the value of this knowledge and to transfer it in the academic life.

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