Norway Country Profile

The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway prioritise adults who have not completed upper secondary education, offering them a possibility to access higher education without a formal certification.

Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) is an important component of lifelong learning reform and the so-called Competence Reform (in Norwegian, Kompetansereformen), which was introduced in 1997 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 1997a). The Competence Reform aims to meet the increasing need for new or changed competences in society, in the workplace and at the individual level (Ministry of Education and Research, 1997b). To accomplish the Competence Reform, the Validation Project (in Norwegian, Realkompetanseprosjektet) was given the mandate to establish the foundation for a national system of validation of non-formal and informal learning during the years from 1999 to 2002.

While the Ministry of Education and Research has the main regulatory responsibility at all levels of education, equally important are social partners, professional associations and trade unions, both nationally and regionally, for realising policy goals and recognition practice. The new basic agreement for the years from 2010 to 2013 between the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (NHO) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (in Norwegian, Landsorganisasjonen i Norge, LO) emphasises the importance of making prior learning visible, stating in § 1–4 for the Documentation of actual competence (i.e., informal learning), “It is important that the enterprise has a system for documenting the individual’s experience, courses and practice.” (Norway. LO and NHO, 2009, p. 42). Professional associations and trade unions offer, for example, apprenticeships and other training schemes in enterprises locally, thus supporting adults in Vocational Education and Training (VET) schemes.

As a result of the 1997–1998 Competence Reform, adults without lower secondary and upper secondary education (including VET) were given the statutory right to have their prior learning validated. In addition, according to the amendment to the act of 2001 relating to universities and university colleges, adults without a general college and university admission certificate can apply for admission to higher education on the basis of their documented prior learning. The applicant must be over 25 years of age. The act also allows for exemption from parts of a study programme on the basis of VPL, i.e., where an applicant’s competences from prior learning are of equal worth to the learning outcomes of the course or parts of a study programme.

With regard to further developments, the Government’s white paper Report No. 16 (2006–2007) (Ministry of Education and Research) on early intervention for lifelong learning focused on the national system for documenting and validating the non-formal and informal learning of adults. The government’s initiative on Lifelong Learning (2009) states that the VPL system must be promoted and strengthened.

The Ministry of Education and Research has appointed a committee to work on referencing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). So far,
the NQF has been closely linked to the formal education system, describing levels of competences acquired through formal schooling. The Committee consults with stakeholders on how the outcomes from non-formal and informal learning should be accommodated in the NQF in their own right, without having to be recognised through the formal education system. Many stakeholders are especially interested in making the vast reservoir of experiential learning from working life more explicit and visible and to recognise it in the NQF, rather than only within sectoral recognition systems. This also pertains to non-formal and informal learning outcomes in study circles and associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

The Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox) is the umbrella body designated by the Ministry of Education and Research in 1999 to work on VPL at the national level. In the last two years, Vox has been responsible for developing VPL guidelines towards enrolment in tertiary vocational education and towards exemption in Higher Education (HE). In regard to the latter, Vox has developed guidelines in co-operation with relevant stakeholders from the sector. In addition, in 2013, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training developed national standards for VPL at the lower and upper secondary education levels. Vox cooperates with NGOs and social partners in order to further adult learning in working life.

There are still challenges in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. A Vox report has shown that only 26 per cent of employees are sufficiently informed about their rights and opportunities, calling for a more targeted information strategy (Guthu and Bekkevold, 2010). Also, the co-operation between the the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration and the county centres responsible for the recognition of learning at the upper secondary level needs further strengthening. The Vox report (2010) has highlighted the importance of improving co-operation between the different sectors at the county level, and draws attention to the need for greater co-operation between the different levels of the education system.

Resources and references


Guthu, L. and Bekkevold, K. 2010. The Vox Mirror 2009 – Key figures on adult participation in education and training in Norway.


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