

THE CANDIDATES' COUNSELLING IN THE VALIDATION OF INFORMAL AND NONFORMAL LEARNING

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Abstract: *The validation of the competences acquired other than by formal means is a current preoccupation at national and European policies level, an opportunity for the young and the adult people alike, a desire, but at the same time a reality of everyday life. The optimal conducting of the validation of nonformal and informal learning entails, according to the European documents, the supporting of candidates. The article presents, in its first part three case studies from different national contexts, Romania, France and Italy, focused on the counselling activity, In its second part, the article analyses the perception of a counselling framework possibly to be implemented in the human resources departments of Romanian companies as a complementary manner to the counselling offered by accredited evaluation centres.*

Key words: *validation, counselling, case study.*

1. Introduction

The idea of a knowledge-based society has simultaneously accelerated knowledge acquisition and the need to rapidly integrate it in social activity, by using both traditional sources and the available knowledge supplies [6]. In a fast-changing world, formal learning has proven to be insufficient and at times inadequate, raising the issue of encouraging and capitalising on other types of learning. The three types of learning, formal, nonformal and informal can be characterised from various perspectives: according to the degree of control that the learner has on the learning process [33], according to the tacit/explicit criterion [29], [37], based on the degree of intentionality [16], [23] or

depending on the places where and the time when they are to happen [23]. The capitalisation of some complementary learning methods enables a wider frame of workplace mobility and helps the professional and personal development of all individuals [17].

While formal learning is mandatorily ended with a type of certification, the other two categories which have long been perceived as sources of personal knowledge have lacked social recognition. Recent labour market requirements and the expressed development need of both individuals and organisations have brought up the issue of certification for competences acquired by other than formal means alike. Thus came into being the term and

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the practise of validation of learning through experience, as an essential means of insuring access to the labour market and to lifelong learning programs [1], for which norms have been created which tempt to be applied throughout the whole Europe [28].

Validation is a process of identifying, assessing and socially recognising competences which people develop in different contexts [16]. It makes the difference between the current age and the previous ones, when knowledge were far less capitalised on [19], [36]. Starting 2001, validation has become an important point on the European agenda, where the latest event concerns the recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes [4].

The validation of nonformal and informal learning is still subject to controversy. There are voices that question it and perceive it as an association between antagonic realms. Strong disjunctions could exist between the public, theoretical or codified knowledge and the tacit, personal experience knowledge of the two implied organisations, the school and the company [9], [23]. The recognition of two types of knowledge through certifications that confer the same rights may lead to the risk of devaluation of the certifications per se. This major risk could be added to an excessively generous attribution of certifications, whose control would be made by new, overlapped validations [9], [15], [36].

The successful finalising of the validation results in multiple economic, educational, social and personal benefits, the share of which slightly differs from one country to another [38].

2. Counselling as a Means of Validation

European Union documents focused on NFIL validation, dating from 2012,

suggest the introduction, in all national systems of validation, of some recommendations regarding the appropriate guidance activities which precede the assessment and certification activities.

Counselling entirely covers the interval between the candidate's subscription and his certification, but it mostly takes part in the preliminary stage of the certification evaluation. The quality of the counsellor's activity directly influences the efficiency of the validation and the candidates' satisfaction and the lifelong learning process on the whole.

2.1. Counselling Objectives

The training of the professionals involved in all aspects of validation is a critical aspect of the practice [4]. While for the assessment activities it is recommended to use the same instruments and methods that are used in assessing formal learning, including the European credit transfer and accumulation system, the guidance activities, which are more personalised and more difficult to standardise, require solutions that are not entirely elaborated.

The main, most perceivable objective of counselling is to ensure the candidates' access to the certification of their competences. The counsellor shall anticipate the issues that a certain candidate might encounter and will help him solve the problem so that the candidate may make the right decisions [32]. The primal responsibilities of the counsellor are to ensure access to information, to identify the candidate's competences, to offer support in revealing the defining experiences and probing them, to prepare the candidate for the evaluation process or for a new certification, or to help the candidate cope with a possible failure.

Ensuring the access to information is made by providing relevant and personalised data [26], and the hints of reading, analysing and using the selected data [11]. The counsellor facilitates a stable and adequate relationship between the information provided and the candidate's system of representations concerning the validation of NFIL [25].

The identification of the candidates' competences is made by ecphory of his professional and personal experience, via reflection reported to the defined criteria of the desired occupational field. It is continued by offering support in demonstrating relevant experiences through objective evidence and preparing the candidate for the evaluation process. In the counselling stage, evaluation is perceived in a formative manner, thus developing competences which should prove useful to the candidate in lifelong learning [24].

In order to accomplish the various functions previously described, the counsellors use a hybrid methodology, which encompasses the history of one's life, the areal of one's competences, the portfolio, the analysis of one's work and of the referentials of some jobs, all of these adapted to the needs of every candidate in particular [15]. The methods and instruments used in the counselling process need to facilitate the understanding of the logics involved in the validation process and to pave the way to certification even to the individuals with lower levels of instruction [11], [15].

2.2. Learning of the self

In all counselling stages the candidate mainly learns things about himself, the results being transferred to other contexts, different from the ones of NFIL (nonformal and informal learning) validation, thus helping him to navigate in

the labour market and in the personal development field [3], [8], [13], [38].

Counselling stimulates and maintains the motivation to learn but also develops the capacity of 'learning to learn through self-paced [rhythm] [5], [6], [12]. The capacity to participate in work, social and everyday life is thus being counselled [12].

The consequences of counselling for the validation of NFIL and for everything that results from it, are still perceivable, irrespective of the 'competent' or 'not yet competent' result.

Counselling influences the attitude of the people who demand it towards the validation of competences and their own experience, as well as their attitudes towards themselves and towards work. The candidates to certification who benefit from counselling services may be favoured in additional orientation towards personal training, career shifting or enrichment of one's personal position [13].

2.3. Involved Actors

In order to efficiently cover these tasks, independent counselling services have been organised. Human resources departments from certain companies have at times been involved, thus reducing the costs of the service and at the same time improving its quality [36].

The involvement of various actors in the NFIL training and validation process is either met in some European countries or has been the object of action-research in others. Trade unions may play an important part in the process, negotiating with the employers so as to facilitate the access to a variety of learning opportunities at the workplace [2], [18].

The synthesis-document of ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation) makes the following recommendations which highlight the major importance given to the counselling process:

- Stimulating the integration of the NFIL validation in the human resources departments;
- Developing the information and counselling process of the employees within companies;
- Strengthening the role of offering support in all validation stages (before, during and after);
- Building a stronger adaptation of the support services to the target public
- Warranting the professional development of the actors which deliver the support for the candidates [18].

3. A Comparative Study of the Validation Systems in the three Countries

The objective of this article is to compare some NFIL validation systems in the European countries, by focusing on the counselling activity and presenting the perception of some methods of improving the counselling process in the Romanian system, which have been suggested in the ADDAF (Au dela de l'apprentissage formel) project [39].

3.1. Research Methodology

The investigation was projected around the following questions: 1. Which are the strong points and the weak points of the counselling connected to the NFIL validation process? 2. How is the candidates' counselling process which has been implemented in the human resources management departments of some companies perceived in Romania?

In order to answer the first question, the NFIL validation systems in three countries (partners in the mentioned project) have been compared, the research method used being the study of documentation. The sources of collected data are: law extracts,

procedures, methodologies, EU, OCDE, CEFEDOP documents, articles, research reports and feasibility studies of the ADDAF project partners.

The aim of the comparison is not that of establishing a hierarchy but rather of identifying specific elements, differences and ways of optimization. In order to come up with an answer to the second question of the article the semi-standardised interview was used.

The countries whose counselling systems have been compared represent three groups established according to the criterion of progress in setting the public policies of NFIL validation and to the ways of involvement of their social actors. The three groups are divided into two polar groups and an intermediary one. France (where complex public NFIL validation programs are being put in practice) and Italy (where there is no national frame, but nonetheless local and regional initiatives are present in certain sectors) are the polar groups, whereas Romania, where the institutional validation system is incomplete, immature and unstable [18] is the intermediary one.

The following criteria have been included in the case analysis frame:

- The legal background concerning the validation of experiential learning and the validation procedures.
- The counselling/ orienting/ supporting practices.
- Professionals and roles in the counselling process.
- The scarce quantitative data concerning the validation of competences acquired in other than formal ways.

3.2. Counselling in France

In France, the validation of non-formal and informal competences has been institutionalised in a well-established legal framework via the Law of Social

Modernisation adopted in 2002. This law stipulates the individual right to certify the competences acquired other than by formal means [6]. Following the adopted measures, the French NFIL validation system has become an integrated system, currently applied to all qualifications [27].

In this framework there is already an information and guidance apparatus, which has been provided at regional level since 2006. This has resulted in a new occupation, namely Point Relais counsellor (PRC). The job description of these counsellors is to inform the public on the validation of competences acquired outside of school, to welcome and support candidates who want their competences recognised.

Any employed or unemployed person, irrespective of age or level of education may request the validation of their competences, on condition that they bring proof of at least 3 years professional experience in the field related to the desired certification. The subscription in the process is unrestricted and financially sustained, to various degrees, by the state.

The validation of the competences acquired through experience is divided in distinct stages, each being subject to exact norms and procedures. The informing and counselling stages are optional whereas the checking of compelling to the legitimacy conditions based on one's individual register and the evaluation made by the jury are compulsory [34].

The counselling methods used are various and demand specific expertise: the biographic method, the balance of competences, the explaining interview, confronting and self-confronting on the basis of video recordings.

In 2002, the number of certified people had reached almost 200.000 and it has afterwards progressed to a number of 30.000 candidates who had obtained the certification of their NFIL competences

every year since 2010. However, this number is lower than the expected one [31]. The French system is a complex, relatively sophisticated on both in the counselling stage and in the validation stage, and it is optimised as a result of numerous debates of specialists or of the involvement of the state.

3.3. Counselling in Romania

Considerably newer as compared to the French system, the Romanian one is based on a set of laws undertaking continuous change. There are no restrictions as far as subscribing to the process of certification of competences acquired through experience is concerned.

The evaluation is made in authorised evaluation centres for one or more occupational fields, based on a national procedure. The evaluation is made by professionals whose occupation is regulated by an occupational standard 'Professional Competences Assessor'. The training of the assessors is assured via continuous training courses authorised at national level. The professional competences assessor is a specialist having recent demonstrated work experience and/or coordination experience in the occupations for which he is named to assess by the evaluation centre. The assessor is at the same time the counsellor of the candidates, the guiding practices being regulated at national level [7].

We believe that in these documents, the counselling activity is scarcely represented, the six attributions of the assessor regarding mostly the evaluation process, the terms *counselling* being seldom used. In the phase preceding the assessment process per-se, there are some activities which can be linked to the counselling process:

- explaining and unfolding the content and the provisions of the standard, at the

- candidate's demand; recommending some competence units to be assessed and some evaluation methods which seem fit to the candidate's job;
- supporting the candidate in analysing his own professional performance as compared to the content of the occupational standard/the professional training standard; the analysis ends with a self-evaluation of competences;
 - presenting the evaluation methods and establishing the schedule of evaluation programme together with the candidate;
 - supporting the candidate in his training for the assessment.

According to analyses made at European level, the authorised CNFPA/ ANC centres have released a total of 30.000 certificates for 150 occupational fields between 2006 and 2010 [18].

As compared to the French system, the Romanian one is much simpler, the counselling activity being scarcely represented and conducted by people who are trained in the occupation for which support is needed. The counselling abilities are trained in a lecture conducted by continuous training specialists. The lecture consists of 80 hours on average, including the training of the assessment competences. The Romanian documents do not mention the role of companies in validating NFIL competences of their employees, and only recent analysis such as *Rapport pour la Confédération Européenne des Syndicats avec le soutien de la Commission Européenne* (2012) mention the role of trade unions in this process.

3.4. Counselling in Italy

Italy currently lacks a national framework of validation of acquisitions, consequently lacking the unique occupational standards. Nevertheless, in recent years regional or university experiences which have defined minimal

certification norms at national level are being mentioned. As in Romania, the Italian assessor is an expert in the occupational field where the candidate applies for certification. Some regions use various counselling techniques, there is a guide given to the candidate and a guide given to the counsellor. In some companies, part of the counselling activity is undertaken by the human resources departments that use methods inspired from the French system [35].

3.5. Similarities and Differences

In Romania, the evaluation process proper is conducted by only one person, certified as an assessor, whereas in France the evaluation is made by a jury, but there is also a procedure describing the steps that the candidate has to make towards certification. Before validation, both systems list the informing, counselling and orienting of the candidates.

In France, the term 'counsellor' is properly defined, while in Romania this term is included in the 'assessor' one. In Romania, the assessor plays multiple parts at a time: counsellor/supporter of the candidate, assessor of the candidate's competences and at the same time assessor (internal or external) of the quality of the evaluation process. In France, the counselling role is played by a professional, other than the assessors-members of the jury who certify the candidates' competences. The existence of a counsellor, having a different function than that of the assessor is argued by the French specialists by the need of conducting a global and neutral analysis of the candidate's activity, type of analysis which would not be accessible to the evaluator [32].

The difference made in France between the work of counsellors and that of assessors avoids tension, conflicts and the

overlapping of roles. While the assessor is monopreoccupied and the evaluation is unifocused, counselling is varied and multifocused [32].

The methods used by the French counsellors are numerous and request a large time span in order to be applied, but are, according to specialists adequate and necessary to accomplish the final aim.

Some stages and activities of the French system are to be found in the Romanian system as well, but they are only conducted in certified evaluation centres, not by a specialised counsellor but by the assessor, an expert in the occupational field targeted by the candidate. In France, the counselling activities are conducted in VAE information and counselling centres.

As compared to the French system, the Romanian system benefits the evaluation-certification stage, but does not treat counselling in a formal way. The Romanian assessor's guide only scarcely refers to the counselling activity. The conducting of the assessment process by an expert in the field targeted by the candidate allows proper information of the candidate on the evaluation-certification process, but the counselling process of the candidate would request specific competences which are not mentioned in official documents. Considering the variety of professional backgrounds and the life experiences of every candidate, the intervention of a counselling specialist seems necessary.

The need of a professional counsellor is also argued by the effects of the counselling activity on the candidate's personality: self-recognition of one's NFIL competences [10], stimulation of the learning process on the self, increasing the learning motivation and the belief that the candidate can control the events in his life [22].

These brief comparisons highlight the absence of homogeneity in the practise of counselling candidates at European level, as well as the existence of different quality

levels, having varied effects on the validation and upon the candidates to NFIL certification.

4. Towards Complementing the Counselling Methods

Although in some countries the system of certification of competences acquired outside formal education is stable, we could state that the social innovation process continues, aiming to obtain a large area of convergence at European level. To test some new counselling frames is part of this process of enlarging the convergence of national systems and of their transparency.

4.1. The scheme of a Counselling Frame

In order to make up for some inconveniences resulting from the absence of counselling competences of the assessors who are specialists in a certain occupational field (as is the case for Romania) or in order to involve the employers and the trade unions to a greater extent (a need present in all analysed systems), the ADDAF project has implemented a counselling frame in the companies in Romania, Italy and Spain (the latter not included in our analyses).

The counselling conducted within the company ensures the employees easier access to the validation of the acquired competences in an informal and nonformal manner and facilitates the learning of the self [18]. In the counselling which is conducted in the human resources departments of companies methods such as one's life history, the competence balance, the Vermesch interview could be used, for they are methods easily accessible to the people who work in such departments.

The history of one's life, which favours biographic learning, plays an identification part of one's NFIL competences [20], but

also increases tolerance towards frustration and the candidates' chances to succeed [8], [22], [27].

'Bilan de competences', more used in France, is a tool for guidance, helping the candidate to conduct self-assessment and build a new professional or training perspective [21],[30]. The method requires the mastering of a variety of techniques (psychometric tests, personality and docimologic tests, interview, document analysis etc) and has certain formative effects on applicants. At the same time the competence balance constitutes a way of coding tacit knowledge favouring the construction of one's personal register [35].

Introduced by Vermersch, the explaining interview is based on the existence of implicit, tacit knowledge that can be explained. The technique requires the verbalisation of a certain experience, aiming to identify knowledge, procedures, errors, to show one person her working style, to help her get organised and conceptualise her experience [37].

The counselling made inside a company would enable access to a wide variety of instruments: referential, interview guides, bioscopy, self-evaluation sheet, evaluation methods sheet, the counselling evaluation activity calendar, the individual register, the simple and cross-reference self-confrontation based on video recordings, and synthesis reports. We suppose that the use of these instruments would favour the functions of counselling, synthetised in ensuring easier and safer access to the certification of competences.

4.2.The Perception of some Complementary Counselling Ways in Romania

In order to answer the second question of our study, we have conducted 5 interviews using a semi-structured guide. All people took part at the local conference (Brasov,

2012) of dissemination of the previously sketched counselling frame. The interview guide consists of 10 questions grouped under three topics: advantages and inconveniences of validating experience in Romania, the subjective perception of the guiding device proposed and the estimation of the counselling frame's chances to succeed in Romanian companies.

The participants were three women and two men, of an average age around 40, who work in human resources (2) mid-level education (1), probation service (1), adult training (1). The analysis technique was the cathegorial content analysis and the results shall be grouped according to the topics followed.

As far as the advantages and inconveniences of validating the competences acquired through experience, the interview participants state that the system should be encouraged. According to the interviewed people, validation can be useful to various categories of individuals, young and adults, disadvantaged categories (named as such in the EU documentation), but other people as well *'here (in Romania) the validation of competences acquired as a result of experience could prove to be useful to the people who have lost their jobs as a result of the bankruptcy of various companies in the last decade...I'm thinking of 45-50 year old people who have a university degree which proves to be useless, but I'm also referring to people who never had a university degree or type of certification for various reasons'(AB).*

NFIL validation is efficient for other disadvantaged categories, for example people who are imprisoned or under strict surveillance. Obtaining a certification would ne a good way of favouring their social reintegration *'I work with people who have a poor educational background and for whom it is very difficult to find a job*

after liberation (from prison). Such a system would work to their advantage (CT). The system would also be useful for pupils or students 'it would benefit the certification of some competences that pupils or...why not...students have acquired as a result of volunteering I guess (AS).

As far as validation disadvantages are concerned, the participants have highlighted the financial costs and the time resources, and the need of specialists in this type of counselling. The fear of the unknown is seen as a negative aspect in some companies, particularly in small ones. Here is the statement of one participant: *'we are currently undergoing a time of crisis and changes...I think companies are not that interested in validating experience. Some would lose their employees, whom they have supported in obtaining the certification...but they could condition the resignation.... the employee should be able to resign if he wanted, but after a certain period of time agreed upon by both parties (AMR).*

All participants have highlighted the fact that the certification of competences is useful not only for the employee but for the employer as well, but positive feedback cannot be generalised.

Concerning the implementation of a counselling frame in the human resources department, the participants underlined the fact that it would be easier to implement in multinational companies. Irrespective of the company, the implementation would depend on its internal structure, resources, motivation and the managers' degree of accepting new techniques. The absence of a formal frame would be a drawback for the state companies, although there are similar practices everywhere that could be transferred or adapted. *'Any company evaluates the competences of its employees, even from the selection stage.*

There is also periodic evaluation undertaken by the human resources department or by direct superiors....' (SL).

Participants have also expressed certain doubts regarding the reproductibility of the counselling frame, estimating little success: companies are not motivated, they do not know the system benefits, some encounter financial difficulties or lack labour market or counselling specialists. One of the participants pointed out, nevertheless, that many occupational trainers could extend their competences towards counselling *'we do have the trainers....a few thousands in Romania, maybe. I think that some of them would like to try a professional shift, they would have the advantage of knowing the occupation and gaining new competences only in counselling..for the ones who graduated from the faculty of psychology, dual training would be far more accesible'(AB).*

Going deeper into the problems, the interviewed people were asked to suggest methods and instruments which could be used in the human resources departments for supporting the employees in the validation of NFIL. The answers have shown that all described and analysed methods (life history, bioscopy, balance of competences, explanation interview) are applicable and useful on condition that there be competent people, financial resources and the favourable involvement of the company.

5. Conclusions

The described investigation was projected around two questions concerning the strong and weak points of counselling related to the NFIL validation process and the Romanian perception of a counselling framework implemented in the human resource management desks within companies.

The analysis of the NFIL validation systems in the three chosen countries, focused on the counselling process has shown that there are some effective practices although the qualitative levels are different. The counselling services offered to the candidates are situated in a polar manner: from extended services, offered by professionals in specialised centres (France) to situations where the expert assessor is a counsellor at the same time, without being trained for such a complex position (Romania). In Italy, where available, the counselling services seem to be more effective, having objectives, methods and instruments which resemble the ones in the French system. Unfortunately, counselling services in Italy are isolated and the practices are far from being standardised and generalised at a national level.

The comparison has highlighted the absence, at European level of homogenous procedures and norms in the candidates' counselling practice.

The counselling framework suggested for the human resources departments is based on common functions, methods and instruments, adaptable to the candidates. The counselling of candidates through the companies' human resources departments is perceived as positive but not lacking obstacles according to the interviewed subjects. Successful validation has economic, educational, social and personal benefits, helping the candidate to integrate the validation of experience in his professional evolution and self-knowledge in personal development, therefore articulating work, training, validation and self-development in a unique, significant logical system of reasoning.

Carrying out the counselling activity in the human resources departments of the company would benefit both the employees and the company. The role of the company can become complementary to the role of evaluation-certification played by accredited evaluation centres.

The involvement of more social actors, favouring of the employee and of the company alike are appreciated as attainable objectives via the new counselling framework. The action-training conducted within the company and the evaluation-certification, internal or external become complementary ways of maximising learning through experience. Such framework enables collective negotiation of employers and employees in order to integrate NFIL validation in a more secure professional route.

The implementation of such a counselling framework would help the employed people but would not benefit the unemployed. Even amongst the employees, the less motivated ones, the ones with poor writing skills would benefit less from these opportunities. It is possible that, via the use of such modalities the gaps and inequalities of access towards certification enlarge between the employed and the unemployed, favouring the people who already have a certification.

The advantages would be more secure if the organisations encouraged counselling and certification unconditionally. It is possible for the employers not to encourage the system, lest they should lose their employees, or lest there should be any problems if the counselling was to be made during working hours.

In this complex process, the companies need to keep balance between their legitimate interests and the interests of employees as a group or as individuals. Should this be done, the validation process, sustained by proper counselling would subscribe to the direction indicated by the European Union - towards the learning society.

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