

WCLTA 2011

Assessing Non Formal Skills through e-portfolio: the VAB project

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Abstract

In this paper, we shall discuss the importance of assessing non - formal and informal learning on the basis of a national survey that was conducted in the context of the LdV VAB project. In addition, we will present the VAB project context and the e-portfolio we developed in order to record and assess the skills that students acquire via informal/non formal learning.

Keywords: e-portfolio, non-formal learning, Competences, Skills;

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the majority of young people are facing increasing market demands and needs that are continuously changing and growing, equipped only with the skills acquired after their higher level education or training. But is it so? This paper presents the results of a survey carried out among professors coming from several Higher Education Institutions in Greece, on the significance in finding a job of the skills acquired via informal / non-formal learning and the possible ways to certify these skills. In addition, an e-portfolio, a digital pedagogical tool, which allows students to submit experiences and professors to certify the resulting skills, will also be presented. The survey was carried out in the context of Leonardo da Vinci project VAB. The survey included questions on ways for the educational system to consider / support / verify the skills (personal, social and professional experience) acquired by students through informal or non-formal learning beyond the University, on their significance, on the role of tertiary education professors, etc.

2. The VAB project - Background

Universities all around Europe have tried to match the knowledge they offer to the demands of the labour market. In this perspective, they have shaped a new organized system, known as “LMD”, which facilitates portability of European study and enhance mobility among young students. Degrees in Europe are being harmonized through the Bologna process, based on the three-level hierarchy of: Bachelor (Licence in France, Poland and Portugal), Master and Doctorate (LMD). Skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments) and

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Competences are described in terms of responsibility and autonomy. The LLP project VAB is a Transfer of Innovation project, co-financed by the EU Leonardo da Vinci Programme that will contribute to the development of the educational system by making Professors aware of the importance of non-formal learning in assessing the knowledge of their students. VAB intends to contribute so as to improve the employability of young people and prepare the Professors and trainers working at the University to answer the labour market's needs. More specifically, Professors will be able to evaluate the personal, social and professional experience acquired by their students/trainees beyond the University in order to support their students and enhance their professional integration. The VAB project is closely linked to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), a common European framework composed of eight reference levels, which are described in terms of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are specified in three categories: knowledge, skills and competence. The levels span the full scale of qualifications, from basic (Level 1, for example school leaving certificates) to advanced (Level 8, for example Doctorates). Levels 6, 7 and 8 refer to Higher Education (levels LMD). At this point, it is necessary to clarify some definitions before we go any further. *Formal education*: the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded 'education system', running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programmes and institutions for full-time technical and professional training. *Informal education*: the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment - from family and neighbors, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media. *Non-formal education*: any organized educational activity outside the established formal system - whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity - that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives.

3. National Survey

The current report includes views of Professors coming from several Higher Education Institutions regarding non-formal and informal skills / competencies, acquired by students beyond University through non-formal/informal learning. A specially designed questionnaire was used in order to collect these data and a statistical analysis was made based on the quantitative data. We have collected a sample of fifty (50) questionnaires from Professors who teach in various HEIs all over Greece; seventeen (17) questionnaires were provided by women and thirty-three (33) questionnaires by men. We have asked the Professors to answer the following questions:

- Question 1: Do you consider the skills (personal, social and professional experience acquired by the students through informal or non-formal learning beyond the University) to be important?
- Question 2: Identify the skills that are acquired via informal or non-formal learning and the corresponding competences that in your opinion are essential.
- Question 3: Do you believe that the skills acquired/developed through informal or non-formal learning should be incorporated into a more global evaluation of the students?
- Question 4: Do the courses in your institution take into account the non-formal learning?
- Question 5: In your own Department, is the student's practice part of the courses?
- Question 6: Do you believe that the students' practice should be considered as obligatory and be included in the courses offered by your Department?
- Question 7: In your opinion, should the portfolio where all the skills that are acquired via informal or non-formal learning are recorded, be complementary to the degree?
- Question 8: In your opinion, who should be responsible for the supervision, the evaluation or certification of non-formal learning?
- Question 9: Select the reasons why Professors should assess the skills/competences acquired through formal or non-formal education.
- Question 10: In your opinion, what is the role of the Professors in assessing the results of informal or non-formal learning?
- Question 11: Who could certify the e-portfolio that will be built by the project VAB?

- Question 12: Which are the main obstacles in implementing the evaluation process of the skills/competences acquired through informal or non-formal learning?
- Question 13: Express briefly a summary of proposals that in your opinion can contribute to the development of successful activities and initiatives in order to assess the skills/competences that students have developed through non-formal learning.
- Question 14: Are you willing to participate in the evaluation process of students' informal or non-formal learning?
- Question 15: Do you wish to take part in the pilot phase of the digital portfolio (e-portfolio) and online learning (e-training) application?

According to the view of the participants, the formal education system has to incorporate procedures in order to nourish these skills, to identify weaknesses in their development and to design strategies for further improvements. These skills can easier link theory and practice and facilitate the application of theoretical knowledge (via exercises, students' practice and events organized by students). A global evaluation, in addition to theoretical knowledge, should include skills and competences developed in practice. These skills complete students' profile and help them to become professionally and personally orientated despite the difficulties that arise because of their different personalities. Skills, such as cooperation, communication, "learning to learn", creativity, critical thinking, negotiation, initiative, etc, constitute the main qualifications that interest many organizations and employers. Developing techniques and skills, such as self-promoting and self-awareness, can be helpful in finding a better job and improving people's life as far as their working, personal and social environment is concerned.

Table 1. List of Non-Formal Skills / Competences and Level of Importance

NON FORMAL SKILLS / COMPETENCES	IMPORTANCE				
	Not at all	Little	Enough	Very much	Too much
Communication Skills	0	0	4	13	33
Competence in management	0	2	8	28	12
Competence in organizing events	2	17	20	9	2
Competence in collecting and managing information	0	2	5	20	23
Competence in managing human resources	0	5	10	18	17
Competence in the field of leadership	2	6	17	9	16
Competence in making things	2	11	21	11	4
Competence in the field of knowledge and innovation	0	4	5	25	16
Competence in being creative	0	4	3	14	29
Competence in using information and communication technologies	0	0	10	15	24
Analysis and synthesis Competences	0	1	6	17	26
Cooperation Skills	0	0	1	15	34
Decision making	1	1	13	20	15
Negotiating Skills	1	0	16	16	17
Accountability Skills	0	0	6	15	28
Flexibility Skills	0	0	8	27	15
Initiatives Skills	1	1	7	21	18

The horizontal axis of the graphic (Fig. 1) depicts all the non-formal skills and competences referred in Table 1. The vertical axis shows the degree of importance of each competence combined with the number of the answers. The label that appears at the right of the diagram includes the scale the professors were requested to use: Not at all, Little, Enough, Very much, Too much. The acquisition of informal and non-formal skills helps the students integrate in the working environment smoothly, work in teams, have a sense of professional responsibility, communicate and share ideas without difficulties. From professional perspective, it has been mentioned that these skills are vital in the

selection process of personnel, but are not taught directly and systematically in tertiary institutions. It is worth mentioning that the aforementioned skills are considered to be really essential for building a successful career because they help students create a social network that can be used directly or indirectly in their professional career. These skills often determine the career path of students and sometimes are required for the efficient study or work.

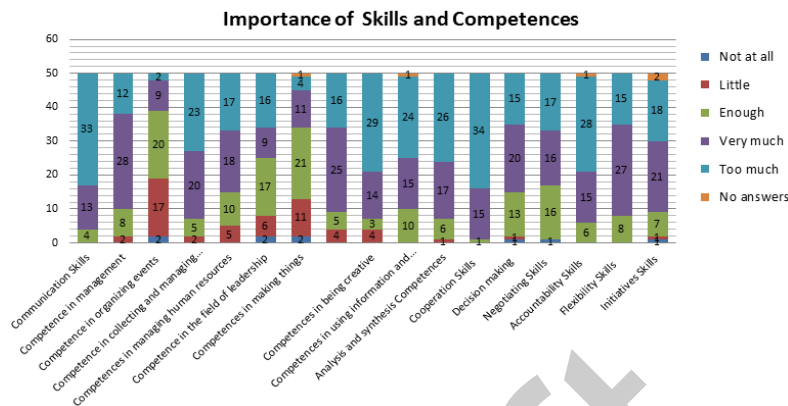


Figure1. Graphic diagram of the importance of non-formal skills and competences

The main obstacles in the evaluation of non-formal skill were identified by the Professors to the following:

1. Lack of impartiality, objectivity, reliability and validity in quality assessment (framework and tools). Lack of flexibility and adaptability of traditional educational institutions and courses
2. Time and costs of the individualized process (which can be reduced by using technology in a smart way).
3. Not enough familiarization of the trainees and trainers regarding informal learning. Reluctant cooperation of students, due to ignorance or lack of time.
4. Omissions, errors, interventions that may have occurred
5. Difficulty in consolidating proper evaluation from Professors, in achieving collectiveness (cooperation of the Professor with a student), in encouraging individualized approaches
6. Students' attitude towards learning and evaluation of their studies (being active and alternative and taking initiatives)
7. General belief that informal learning is insignificant and not related to the labor market
8. Multiculturalism
9. The indefinite nature of the informal skills/ competences and the difficulty of applying them. Some skills are increased with more experience (eg analysis /synthesis competence), others are decreased (eg usage of technology) and others follow a circular curve (eg creativity, innovation)
10. Lack of institutional framework, not clear guidelines and evaluation criteria, and lack of systematic monitoring of students. Bureaucracy, lack of organization and staff (need for additional overtime work) Lack of infrastructure, skilled personnel, well-established perceptions and attitudes.

Besides the problems, the Professors made suggestions about successful activities and initiatives in order to assess the skills/ competences that students have developed through non-formal learning. The Professors' proposals are listed below:

1. Relate the activities that are recorded in students CV's to the diploma so as to gain credits from professional experience, volunteer work, practice exercise, or even from extracurricular activities (eg basketball team leader)
2. Possible use of psychological personality tests or Self-evaluation tests (interviews or tests)
3. Enrichment of the Professors' role (Professor as a counselor, Professor as a mentor)
4. Use technology capabilities (self-assessment, e-learning, distant learning, etc.)
5. Develop e-portfolios

6. Strengthen the practice exercise and support it wherever it needs, Implementation of non-formal or informal skills under real working conditions, Close cooperation between the Universities and a network of stakeholders that support students' practices.
7. Enhancement of voluntary work
8. Establish a system similar to ECTS
9. Create an organization which will plan the non-formal or informal skills related to specific workplaces
10. Inform Professors and integrate actions and ideas in developing initiatives
11. Self-organizing and Collaborative learning
12. Introduction of Problem Based Learning methods
13. Utilization and activation of Lifelong Learning Institutes in order to define systematic procedures according to scientific criteria
14. Interactive semester course at the University which will be followed by filling out questionnaires and realizing personal interviews with students.
15. Creating Standards and Certification Methods, as well as an individual file trainee (student profile)
16. Selection of several people as evaluators
17. Proper planning and systematic organization of the evaluation (Use multiple methods and techniques of evaluation). Publication of evaluation results.
18. Establishment of clear and measurable skills - Create a systematic framework for evaluation skills

4. Conclusion

The survey that was conducted for the VAB project resulted to the fact that knowledge acquired by the University is irreplaceable but needs to be continuously enriched, reinforced and supported by the non-formal learning. The results show that the majority of Hellenic Universities professors recognize the importance of informal and non-formal learning. However, it is very difficult to standardize and certify all possible skills. The e-portfolio could possibly assist both students to enrich their CV and highlight their skills and professors to understand, take into account and evaluate their Qualifications. A more global evaluation of the students will incorporate skills and competences which are fundamental in promoting mobility and enabling them to respond to labour market developments as well as to the emergence of new economic and social needs. Certified skills are even more important, because they are related to more opportunities for success, financial and social benefits and greater assistance to the students regarding their professional integration to the national and European labour market. The knowledge acquired by educational institutions is not enough by itself and cannot guarantee to the students an effective and productive performance to their career. Any skill acquired beyond Higher Education that leads to the acquisition of profound learning through experience is important.

Acknowledgements

The research described is supported by the EU Leonardo da Vinci VAB project (2009-1-FR1-LEO05-07330). We would like to thank our fellow researchers who participate in the project. We would like to thank Educational Content, Methodology and Technology Laboratory (e-CoMeT Lab) for its premises.

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