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The application of knowledge acquired outside the school system in the
framework of higher education

Az iskolarendszeren kívül szerzett tudás hasznosítása felsőoktatási keretekben

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Abstract

A high number of students are enrolled in university correspondence courses have - formally or informally - acquired precise, practical knowledge while on the job, who cannot validate their expertise in credits due to the lack of a formal leaving certificate. They must currently therefore take subjects in areas they already master in practice. The objective of this study is to raise awareness of the possibility of utilizing such knowledge obtained in various non-educational ways in higher education. The College of Dunaújváros joined this project as an experimental institute. The Faculty of Child and Adult Education of the University of Debrecen was among the first to work out a validation procedure targeting the specific needs of a correspondence MA educational programme. The analysis introduces the results of validation by case study and survey and attempts to deduce the consequences of what has been achieved and make suggestions for future procedures. Based on our research, we declare that the character of student practical expertise examined in the validation procedure is of high level in some fields. More importantly, its formal acceptance and recognition may contribute to social integration, employability and further education.

Az egyetemek levelező tagozatos képzéseire nagy számban iratkoznak be olyan hallgatók, akik munka mellett nonformális vagy informális úton komoly szakmai tudásra tettek szert, de formalizált végbizonyítvány hiányában tudásukat nem képesek kreditekben érvényesíteni, s ezzel az ismétléseket kiküszöbölni. Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy felhívja a figyelmet a különböző tanulási utakon megszerzett tudás felsőoktatásban történő hasznosításának lehetőségére. A kutatás előzménye a validáció magyarországi bevezetését előkészítő oktatásfejlesztést szolgáló projekt és az ahhoz kapcsolódó szakmai konferenciákon szerzett ismeret. A projekthez a Dunaújvárosi Főiskola csatlakozott kísérleti intézményként, majd a Debreceni Egyetem Gyermeknevelési és Felnőttképzési Kara az elsők között dolgozott ki kifejezetten egy levelező tagozatos mesterképzésre validációs eljárást. Az elemzés az

esettanulmány és egy kérdőív segítségével mutatja be a kar validációs eredményeit, s tesz kísérletet következtetések levonására, javaslatok megfogalmazására. Vizsgálatunk alapján azt állítjuk, az eljárásban részt vevő hallgatók gyakorlati szakmai tudása egyes részterületeken magas színvonalú, ennek elfogadása hozzájárulhat a társadalmi integrációhoz, a foglalkoztathatósághoz, a további tanuláshoz.

Knowledge acquired outside the school system individually

In the 21st century, considering the theory of life-long learning, the benefits and returns of acquired knowledge have become an important issue, both for the individual and society. Education is only effective for the individual if it provides extra knowledge which can be validated on the labor market, when it can reproduce the invested mental and/or financial capital and the acquired knowledge may be sold at a good price. At Lisbon, The European Council drafted the 2000 document titled "[Memorandum on Lifelong Learning](#)" (Memorandum 2000), in which it raised awareness of the importance of validating knowledge achieved by various means. One emphasized objective therein is the increase of need to learn in those individuals who have thus far only rarely experienced the results and benefits of learning.

The document defined those learning methods which differ from formal learning possibilities:

- Non-formal learning: occurs outside the institutional system, the result is not formalized, it is something related to one's workplace or a civil organization
- informal learning: that which is learned naturally in the course of everyday life

The document defined the utilization of acquired knowledge as the true acknowledgement of the knowledge in question. The advantage of that knowledge achieved through formal learning results in concrete, practical individual outcome, as has been introduced by *Polónyi (2004)*, in the framework of a national research project.

Research results determined by level of qualification justified the benefit of obtaining extra knowledge.

As mathematical research demonstrates, the individual return is the lowest for those graduating only from vocational education programmes: 4.69%, for those with college and university degrees, the value is almost identical: above 13%. Few examinations have been carried out on the utilization of non-formal and informal learning. The monetary returns on the energy invested in obtaining this type of knowledge and the remaining benefits of acquiring it are mainly connected to the locally acceptable concepts of the value of labour for any individual of working age. Based on theories and examinations, we have defined the utilization of knowledge acquired through non-formalized learning processes:

- the benefits of formal learning: both society and the labor market unequivocally accept such knowledge has been obtained; the school leaving certificate entitles one to further education possibilities
- the benefits of non-formal learning: society does not consider this to be actual learning; rather, this type of learning is the enhancement of practical, lexical knowledge; the taking of a course financed by one's workplace does not have any sure value
- the benefits of informal learning: society neither recognizes nor accepts it; nor is the nature of this type of learning always clear to an individual.

This categorization is supported by the results of *Varró (2002)*, who examines the utilization of different learning methods in seeking the answer to the question as to what types of knowledge the sample group (correspondence students at Szent István University) possesses, in validation their knowledge acquired through non-formal education. 80.4% of the respondents considered validation acceptable for such acquired knowledge to be accepted in

the form of credits by higher education. This survey also revealed that most of the respondents were not aware of the differences between non-formal and informal learning. The British researcher *Ron Faris* (2005), in his examinations done in Canada, stated that the identification and legitimization of knowledge acquired through informal learning procedures at workplaces by the hierarchically organised educational structure is difficult. Faris's result is also remarkable in comparison with those of others, since Canada may be considered to be a model in the development and widespread application of tools for gauging knowledge acquired in various ways.

The procedures applied in Canada ensure widespread publicity (I2). Data may be uploaded to [the webpage of CIRL](#) in advance of starting the actual procedure and the organization provides assistance for the individual during the validation procedure. Immigrants form distinct target groups. The same system is applied by employers, who measure and evaluate technical knowledge achieved abroad. France possesses the longest tradition of validating previously acquired knowledge in Europe. The opportunity to validate knowledge brought by immigrants into the country became widespread starting in the 1980s; the possibility of validating knowledge accumulated over years in the workplace became legally recognized in 1985. This act of law was modified in 2002, so that, as a result of going through a procedure to validate one's acquired knowledge, approved validation could be credited, in lieu of requiring actual course attendance for a given subject.

Knowledge obtained outside the school system, as seen by higher education institutions

Perhaps it is not accidental that the name of the procedure applied widely in several European countries comes from the French term 'validation'. Validation in higher education means the recognition of that knowledge brought by an individual, which does not result from education-integrated practice, but which is rather determined by the traditions and the characteristics of the national educational system.

Validation is also applied in lieu of one's taking an entrance examination and being awarded immunity from taking certain courses in:

- Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Holland, The United Kingdom and Norway

The number of credits obtainable through validation is limited:

- In Scotland and in Germany, to 50% of the prescribed total credits for a degree

Validation is only applied for the adult target group (age above 23) in:

- Portugal and Norway

A complete diploma may be achieved by validation in:

- Belgium and France

No national regulation, i.e. validation is a question of university autonomy in:

- Spain, Cyprus, Malta and Italy

Validation is not authorized in:

- The Czech Republic, Iceland, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania and Cyprus

The "[European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and informal learning](#)" website provides a summary of the validation practices in 32 countries (I3). In Hungary, the current legal framework does not enable the widely understood forms of validation. In the context of the pertinent acts, only indirect references to validation may be found. The 2005. CXXXIX. Act on Higher Education 58.§ (7), valid from 2012, includes the following regulation (58.§

(7)): “The committee on credit transfer may acknowledge former studies and work experiences as meeting educational requirements. The number of credits by work experience may be a total of 30.” The understanding of work experience in the legislation cannot be identified, even after carefully studying the act itself and its implementation regulations. A closer definition obviously depends on institutional practice. According to the responsible ministry, it is not the regulation itself which must be established first; rather, it would be invaluable to frame the question in a regulation or an act based on the experiences learned from university initiatives, for which the ministry has provided grant application programmes. In the closing study of the project, *Derényi and Tóth (2011)* defined the bases of generally enforceable procedures concerning validation. Accordingly, the recognition of knowledge occurs after collecting various forms of verification, comparison and compliance, followed by a final decision. To perform the actual procedure, the authors considered an advisory procedure to be essential, in the framework of which applicants themselves provide assistance, so that the validation committee members are capable of identifying the specifically gained knowledge the applicants expect to have validated. Whenever verification is lacking or insufficient, a direct examination of the applicant’s knowledge is suggested.

Research on the acceptance of knowledge acquired in various ways

In the framework of a project, an institutional trial was run at the College of Dunaújváros, but its application at system level was not realized. As a result of lack of financial and technical support, there are currently few initiatives; only one institute has published results on its experiment to date. In our intrinsic case study we are introducing a validating experiment, which is being run by the Faculty of Child and Adult Education of the University of Debrecen, in the correspondence MA course in Human Resource Counselling. Our case study is supplemented by the results from a private survey, which was devised in the contexts of various learning forms. The sample is constituted by MA students in Human Resource Counselling, at the Faculty of Child and Adult Education of the University of Debrecen, totalling 191 respondents or the total affected data base.

The introduction of the organization

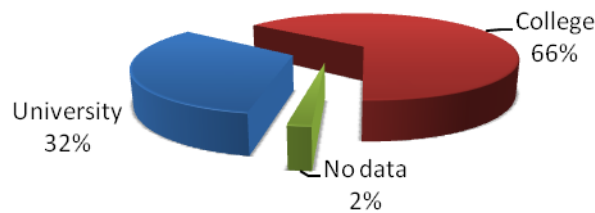
The University of Debrecen is a definitive higher education institution in Hungary. 33,000 students study in 15 faculties of the institution. During this application period, 998 high school students applied for admission to the Faculty of Child and Adult Education (I3), the number of those listing this programme as their first preference is 881. The number of active students is 1,498, of which 1,060 are correspondent students. The educational supply includes two higher level training programmes (full time training and by correspondence), four BA programmes (full time training and by correspondence) and the Human Resource Counselling MA programme (only by correspondence).

The introduction of the selected course (EET MA)

The University of Debrecen launched the Human Resource Counselling MA course with the cooperation of two faculties – the Faculty of Applied Economics and Rural Development (GVK) and the Faculty of Child and Adult Education (GYFK). This degree course was accredited in the Social Sciences, but Management and Human Resource Management also form a major part of the course structure. The qualification entitles students to work in adult education, counselling and human management tasks. The programme launched in February, 2009, always beginning in the spring semester, as a correspondence course. It continued in September of that year as full time and correspondence courses. The education lasts for 4

semesters; the total number of hours is 1,350. The condition for graduation: achieving practical knowledge in a workplace environment in a total of 230 hours. To the correspondence course, 317 students were accepted and 126 graduated. The case study was prepared using 191 active status students. The Master of Administration degree is equivalent to the former 5-year university diploma; this is the reason why a majority of the applicants has only a college degree (Figure 1):

Figure 1: The distribution of EET MA students by basic degree



Source: own creation, 2012.

The MA degree provides students with a higher status, in addition to the knowledge they had already acquired as college degree students. For those working in governmental, public service, the prospect of being classified into a higher pay category is also regulated. One third of the students have university basic degrees; for these students, the acquisition of the technical course content is essential. For our research, the nature of one's technical qualification is an important evaluational factor, in addition to the diploma itself (Table 1):

Table 1. The distribution of EET MA students by basic qualification (%)

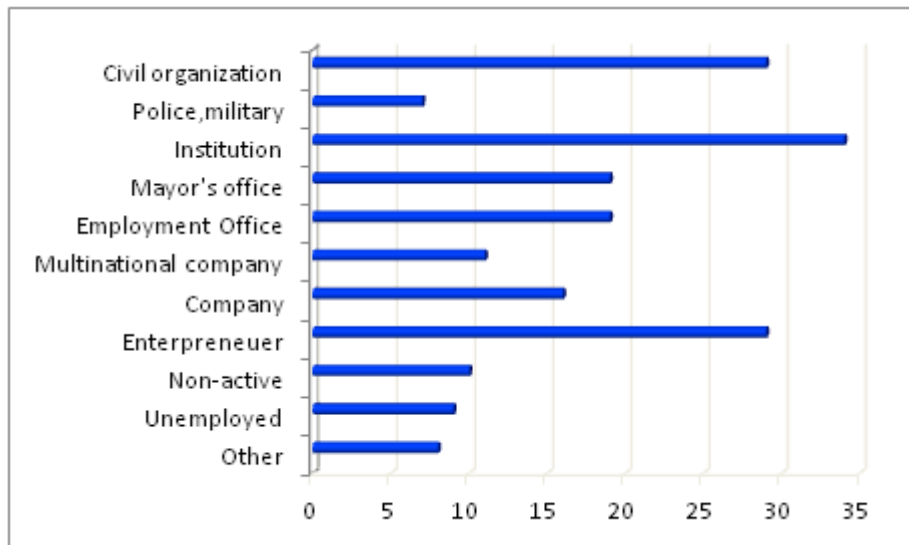
Androgogy	Cultural manager	Social educator	Social worker	Human resources	Teacher	Kindergarten educator	Other
15.4	5.3	20.5	1.8	3.5	13.2	4.4	35.9

Source: own examination, 2012 (n=191).

The Faculty of Child and Adult Education offers, among others, the following education profiles: cultural management, Androgogy, social education and kindergarten teacher training. These degree courses are overrepresented in the types of degrees actually awarded, with 46% of students earning these types of degrees.

In the theoretical part of our examinations, we pointed out that knowledge may be achieved outside the formal frameworks of the labour market. This is why we consider it important to represent the distribution of students examined by workplace (Figure 2):

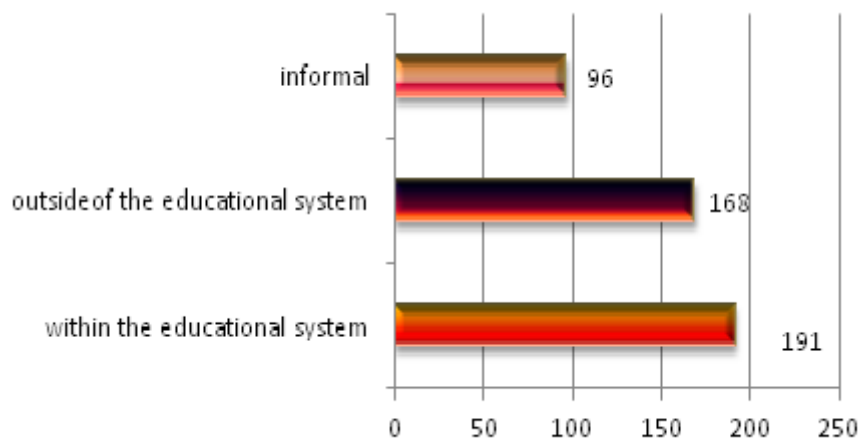
Figure 2: The distribution of students by workplace (persons)



Source: own examination, 2012 (n=191)

The data justify that the predominance of the students do not work in a workplace corresponding to their actual area of education. Without formal technical knowledge, 56 persons work in a human organizational unit of a business organisation and 41 work in human-political department in public administration/public service. 97 of the 191 students work in the field of labor issues or human management; only 6 have the adequate qualifications to do so. 24 students work in such organizations which offer adult educational activities. The other category of the distribution shows a strong diversity considering workplace. In a private survey, we asked students through what forms of learning they have acquired useful knowledge (Figure 3)

Figure 3: The participation of students in different learning forms (persons)

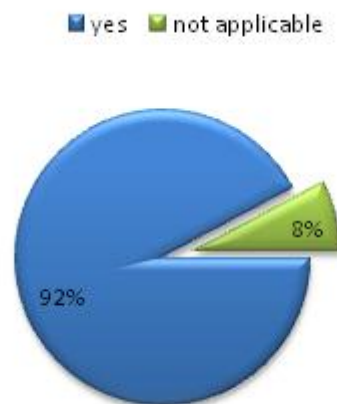


Source: own examination, 2012 (n=191)

Of course, all these students participated in the formal education system. Data justify that students of the MA course are motivated to learn; 88% of them have participated in non-formal learning as employees. Half of the students have declared that they have even learned informally.

In the framework of the survey, we wanted to know whether knowledge gained informally has an advantage at work for the members of the sample (Figure 4)

Figure 4: Do you apply knowledge gained informally at work? (%)



Source: own examination, 2012 (n=191)

176 of the students examined have declared that they rely on their knowledge gained informally, and none of them considered informal learning useless.

Analyzing the data, we have defined the following: in the programme in Human Resource Counselling MA of the Faculty of Child and Adult Education of the University of Debrecen, mostly students with college degrees continue with their studies; most of them have basic Bachelors of Arts degrees. Considering labor performance, half of the sample works in the fields of labor issues or human resource management and an additional 13% work in the field of adult education. Thus, these students carry on such activities for which they now want to acquire a university degree. Students have been motivated to learn in the past, too: 168 have participated in forms of training outside the school system, 96 have declared that they have also learned informally and they apply the knowledge they have gained at work.

In the degree programme itself, such students are participating, who are motivated to learn and have acquired professional knowledge in various types of adult education courses and through informal learning. The majority did not formally graduate in the field of human resource management.

The introduction of a validation procedure

The Faculty of Child and Adult Education, as it knows the composition of its students, has decided to attempt to introduce validation for applicants to the EET MA courses, on the basis of the suggestions of the validation closing study (Derényi &Tóth, 2011) and on what is legally permissible. With the leadership of the degree programme director, a validating committee was set up, the function of which is to work as an advisory and procedural board. The committee first defined 4 basic principles:

- The Principle of volunteerism
- The Principle of quality assurance
- The Principle of trust
- The Principle of credibility and legitimacy

Such procedures had to be worked out which correspond to law; moreover, approval had to be sought from the responsible faculty and the competent university structures. Based on the international literature and the national experiment, the faculty has decided to accept 3 years' work in an applicable technical activity as work experience, the duration of which must have been spent as an employee, running an own entrepreneurship, in social work or while on relevant scholarship. The principle behind the decision is the acceptance of the diverse, atypical forms of employment of the 21st century. The next task is the development of methodology for measurement/acceptance of the knowledge brought for validation by the applicant. The emphasis of transfer and control of knowledge may be interpreted from the spirit of the Act on Higher Education; this is the reason why the faculty has practically linked the validation of preliminary knowledge to currently offered subjects. Preliminary knowledge is measurable in relationship with the competences described in the subject description of the subjects to be accepted. In the sample curriculum, there are a variety of courses which are practice-oriented; the achievement of competence is connected to one's work and practical knowledge is qualified at examinations. Based on the sample curriculum network, exemption may be asked for practical requirements and/or one of two subject groups. These two subject groups are: human politics, adult education. To evaluate preliminary knowledge, two methods were combined by the institute: the declarative method (acceptance on the basis of documents) and competence portfolios (proving the competence achieved at work). The acceptance of work practice occurs by individual judgement as to whether the knowledge under scrutiny meets practical requirements, the analysis of a document proving one's work relationship issued by the employer, as well as by a professional CV listing specific work experience. Students asking for exemption from meeting requirements of technical subjects have to prepare an evaluation portfolio, the content of which is: a technical CV, a list of preliminary education (photocopy of those which can be documented), and a description of the relevant work experience. This portfolio is an approximately 20 page document, for which the formal requirements are the same as those for the diploma and the applicant should also present his knowledge in the form of a presentation. The exemption from practical requirements equals 9 credits; the exemption from subject requirement equals 20 credits. This means 29 possible total credits, which corresponds to the limit defined by the Act on Higher Education. In addition to the development of the procedure, the registrar's office was of particularly valuable assistance. Details of the procedure were registered in the organizational and operational regulations of the faculty; it is represented also on its webpage, under the menu point "Validation". The understanding of the procedure of validation means less difficulty. Meeting its formal and content requirements is also easier for those students who pursue adult education training. These students less frequently asked for assistance and their practical knowledge in this field was also more perceptible. Students who have asked for assistance with the validation procedure, the assembly of a portfolio and the oral presentation posed a problem. We could have written a sample case study on how sceptic the leader (with 15 years of work experience) of one of the regional employment centres was, and how to get from "I do not dare to hand such an application in" to the point of being an applicant capable of assembling an outstanding portfolio. Assembling this portfolio meant a great challenge for students; similar to the challenge of preparing for the complex state examination or the preparation of a thesis and its defence in the traditional system. All of the portfolios are high standard and verified serious professional knowledge and wide-scale practical knowledge. A portion of the assistance provided is a preliminary formal evaluation, as a result of which several students withdrew their applications. Students may participate in the validation procedure for a fee.

Validation data of the examined organization

In September 2011, the first opportunity was opened for validation in the Faculty of Child and Adult Education. Inexperience with the procedure posed a new challenge for both the educational group and the students. Routine student assistance was enhanced by advisory activity, with many common group consultations and much individual care supporting these orientation activities. The interested students were surprised to note that their technical knowledge might be accepted by the formal education system, as this approach was previously unimaginable in their years of education. Despite the generally poor awareness of the validation programme, interest in the procedure has increased owing to the advisory assistance offered. Considering the second year students, interest was considerable, with 51 of 80 students handing in validation applications; only two of the applicants were rejected. Among all students, a total of 112 applications have arrived, with 92 of these students requesting exemption from practical requirements and 20 of these students asking for exemption from subject requirements. The considerable interest in this procedure proves that the students recognized their interests considering the recognition of their earlier obtained knowledge through validation is important.

Summary

After studying the professional literature and international practice, based on a case study and a survey, we assert that validation will become an important and inevitable part of the individual learning procedure and the higher education sector in Hungary.

The authority governing the related area of the educational profession supports the national introduction of the procedure through the project which aims at improving higher education. The first part of the project, which ended in 2011, enabled participants to form the bases of the validation procedure and to run an institutional trial. The second part, starting in May 2012, will provide possibilities to involve further institutions. After the final completion of the project, the professional authority intends to develop regulations which reflect the experiences gained through the project. After making the case study and analyzing the survey data, we assert that one part of the students taking the EET MA course in the Faculty of Child and Adult Education of the University of Debrecen have already gained their professional knowledge informally. As these students come actively using this knowledge in their professions, they expect the education they receive to enhance their approach to their fields, as well as its theoretical background. Naturally, they also seek documentation attesting to their having completed a degree programme. The acceptance of their preliminary knowledge in credits occurs in a professionally grounded manner, made with adequate quality assurance, taking both the needs of the individuals applying for validation and those of the validating institute itself into proper consideration. There is a natural risk when some obtain a document proving qualification with less formal educational effort by validating knowledge acquired through different forms of learning. These documents are highly symbolic assets and they can provide their bearers with tangible economic benefits. The related quality assurance, transparency and trust make all these cases easily manageable. An important pillar of institutional introduction is the appearance of the idea of life-long learning in the mission statement of the higher education institution. Additional elements are student-oriented administration and service, assistance, the promotion of private learning activity and the commitment of lecturers towards the content renewal of the education they are providing. The acceptance and validation of the results of formal, non-formal and informal learning are typically an interest of the student. Acknowledgement may contribute to social integration, employment and further desire for learning. The procedure plays an important labor market

role in employee integration. In the best case scenario, validation of such knowledge may become an integral part of one's professional development and how one earns acknowledgement in the workplace. The utilization of the knowledge of an additional training, course or a higher level study programme rarely prevails, in the institutional sphere, educators do not build on preliminary knowledge; outside the institutional framework, educators are not financially interested in the procedure. The acknowledgement of this knowledge may be important for an individual possessing knowledge. The acknowledgement of knowledge learned in different forms may also be in the interest of the higher education sector. The acceptance of the principle of acknowledgement means a considerable step in changing the understanding of learning and its organization. A shift in approach like this may put the individual into the focus, instead of the educational organization.

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