
APPROBATION OF A VALIDATION QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

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Abstract: Qualified and well-informed citizens are of paramount importance for United Europe's development and prosperity. The issue of their education extends beyond formal education and covers knowledge and skills acquired informally or independently. Public opinion is that well-realized lifelong learning can make a lot of contribution both to the economic development of the countries and to the development of civil society and culture.

In the modern world, there is a tendency for change from mass production to the individual one - more and more people want products and services that are specially created according to their personal preferences, they want to be distinguished from others in their possessions, they want to stand out. This trend finds its place in the field of education too: learners want to be able to make choices about what to learn and what not to, to acquire knowledge and skills that will distinguish them from others and make them more competitive in the labor market. But in times of financial crisis, and in some countries like Bulgaria - even when there is none, the education expenditures in the state budget are insufficient, especially for those that are not part of the formal structure of educational institutions. This is also a challenge of the lifelong learning: to provide personalization of learning on the one hand, and on the other to achieve economies of scale so that the unit cost of this education is tolerable for the country concerned.

Bulgarian citizens, like everyone else, need to be able to show what they have learned in order to be able to get a promotion at work and/or to have the right to continue their education at higher levels of the formal one. To do this, the individuals need to have access to a system that validates knowledge and skills, that is, one that identifies, documents, evaluates and certifies all forms of training.

The demanding market and growing competition require that in the regulatory framework of any validation system, a validation quality assurance system is to be set up and implemented. The scope of this system includes all validation actions in the particular school. Its tasks are related to: 1) identification of the factors influencing the quality of validation in the particular vocational school, 2) determination of the guidelines for correcting the impact of those factors in the desired direction, 3) definition of the system-specific criteria and indicators allowing effective analysis and improvement of the validation process to be carried out.

This paper presents the results of the approbation of such a system created for the needs of the Bulgarian vocational schools for the realization of the project "New opportunity for my future".

Keywords: validation, quality assurance system, approbation.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Kicheva-Kirova and Kirov (2015), human development depends on the level of education. Kicheva and Mihaylov (2017) consider that the set of competencies and knowledge contributes to man's ability to work and increase his productivity. In this regard, learning, incl. lifelong learning is at the heart of the productive human life and the sustainable development of every person and his transformation into a competent one with a satisfying standard of living. Validation as an assessment and recognition of the results of previous learning is a key factor in making lifelong learning a reality. People who have undergone a validation process have more opportunities to change their lives for better by taking a better job position, in the same or another organization, industry, country. An important condition for all this to happen is the high quality of validation. It requires the so-called validation quality assurance system to be available and implemented in each validating organization.

2. VALIDATION QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The validation quality assurance system aims to improve the validation process to achieve validation quality that meets the needs of the beneficiaries - the individuals who validate their previously acquired knowledge and their future employers.

In the recent past, in Bulgaria, in the vocational education and training sector, there have been several initiatives to develop a validation system, incl. under the project "New Opportunity for My Future" (2013-2015) implemented by the Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training, the respective state institutions: the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Employment Agency and the Social Partners - the Bulgarian Industrial Association, the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Association of Industrial Capital in Bulgaria, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria, the Confederation of Labor "Podkrepa" and others. This is a project within "the scope of Priority Axis 4 "Improving

Access to Education and Training", Area of Intervention 4.3 "Development of the Lifelong Learning System" of the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" of the European Union"⁶¹.

The Handbook developed under the project takes into account the importance of the quality issue - in the fourth part, titled "Validation Quality Assurance System", is stated that "The high quality of validation is an important characteristic of the quality of the school's activity"⁶². The text further calls for the establishment of a validation quality assurance system as part of the school's quality management system.

The tasks of the validation quality assurance system are mainly related to the identification of the factors influencing the quality of validation in the particular vocational high school and the definition of guidelines for correcting their impact in the desired direction.

The main factors for achieving high-quality validation are set out in the handbook and are as follows:

- Organizing and managing the achievement of quality of the validation;
- Quality of evidence documentation;
- Quality of the methods for verifying knowledge, skills and competencies and their realization;
- Quality of complementary learning / training;
- Provision of resources;
- Control of the validation process;
- Feedback.

Each professional high school, and in particular its chair of validation committee, must ensure the establishment and implementation of such a validation quality assurance system. There is not one provided in a ready-made form in the Handbook. The latter lists only the mandatory indicators on which the system is to be based.

In this regard, the author of this article developed such a system for the needs of "Ivan Iliev" Vocational High school of Economics per the legal requirements. At its core, there are 3 questionnaire surveys and 21 data collection sheets following the criteria set out in the validation Handbook.

3. APPROVAL OF THE VALIDATION QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The validated quality assurance system was tested in two stages:

1. First stage - self-evaluation via the system in "Ivan Iliev" Vocational High School of Economics – Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria in June - July 2015;

2. Second stage - self-evaluation via the system in other 49 professional high schools in Bulgaria in June - September 2015.

A questionnaire survey about the results from the implementation of the validation quality evaluation system in the 50 high schools mentioned above was carried out between June and September 2015. The following positive points were made:

- In all the high schools that completed the survey, a validation quality assurance subsystem was implemented thanks to the suggested version by the author of this article.
- Implementation of the system can take place over a relatively short time - in some schools, this only happened for 20 man-hours.
- The implementation of the system can be done by a small team of auditors - in some schools, it was implemented by one or two members of the staff.
- In all of the high schools surveyed, there were beneficiaries who completed the validation process and received corresponding certificates.
- Indeed, there was a benefit from the validation process for the applicants – in 78% of the high schools over 50% of those who had completed the validation process found employment in under 1 year.
- 68% of high schools received a predominantly "High to Very High" feedback by employers regarding the competence of those who validated their knowledge and skills.

Along with the positive points, critical deficiencies that question the quality of validation and the management of the school as a whole were also brought forward:

- Partial or total non-compliance with the requirements for evidence documents in some schools.
- Significant errors and/or omissions in the use of the specimens of the supporting documents in some schools.

⁶¹ MSE. (2014). *Handbook on the Validation of Professional Qualifications Acquired through Non-formal and Informal Learning*. Sofia, p. 1.

⁶² MSE. (2014). *Handbook on the Validation of Professional Qualifications Acquired through Non-formal and Informal Learning*. Sofia, p. 63.

- Significant errors in evidence document evaluation, which led to the failure of the validation process in some schools.

- 12% of the schools surveyed had serious problems with the administration culture leading to incomplete validation.

- In 33% of the schools surveyed, the social partners were not invited to take part in the final state examinations for acquiring qualifications through validation.

- In 26% of the schools surveyed, the feedback mechanism did not exist or was not applied.

- In 26% of the schools surveyed, there was a problem with the provision of necessary material resources for the quality self-assessment process, signaling a problem with the management of their budgets.

- In 38% of the schools surveyed, there was no previous self-assessment of VET quality or it was incomplete.

Recommendations could be made from the analysis of the school's responses as follows:

- State Educational Requirements for all professions, offered in the Bulgarian schools, to be created and applied.

- The representatives of the Regional Inspectorate of Education to organize a more effective communication system for sharing experiences about quality self-assessment issues between validating schools.

- Infrastructure to facilitate the access of people with disabilities to be built at all Bulgarian schools, possibly along the lines of a project.

- In each school, to the greatest extent possible, the target funds for updating and upgrading teachers' qualifications to be used up for them to be aware of the novelties in the professions they teach.

- School leaders to step up their contacts with managers and business owners to invest more money in the material and technical facilities of the high schools.

- School leaders should be encouraged and trained to maintain effective cooperation with and open information flow to and from outside institutions.

- Some schools should take more action to better motivate and develop better access to validation to vulnerable groups.

- Each school should have a website to inform the public about the educational opportunities it offers.

- In each school, a critical analysis of the most significant gaps identified in the self-assessment process should be made. The causes that have led to the problems should be identified, and measures to address them should be developed and implemented, incl. via regular control and training.

In June - September 2015, a questionnaire survey to assess the validation quality assurance system was conducted among representatives of 112 Bulgarian vocational high schools, in which validation took place. They gave predominantly high to very high ratings of the system (9% - very high and 71% - high) and its elements and made suggestions for corrections, the bulk of which were taken into account in its improvement. The respondents estimated that the use of the ready-made system instead of creating their own saved them at least 28,087 man-hours of work, which in monetary terms at actual prices of the lecture hours of Bulgarian teachers was over 280,000 leva.

The main recommendation that could be made from the approbation process is that at the level of the Ministry of Education and Science a consideration should be given to the cost/benefit ratio of introducing a requirement for creation and implementation of quality self-assessment systems in future projects similar to "A New Opportunity for My Future". When such system is not provided in a ready-made form and should be developed by each school on its own, it may take teachers more than 100 man-hours of work to do so (for which they have received no direct payment in previous cases), instead of putting their minds into the teaching process. The survey results showed that in some schools (22% of respondents) such a development would take more than 400 man-hours of work, and in others (24% of respondents) it would not even be possible for one reason or another.

4. CONCLUSION

The application of a validation quality assurance system leads to a number of benefits for vocational schools: high quality of the validation process is achieved, in correspondence to the educational requirements that are set normatively in the country; the public image of the high school is raised and so is the satisfaction of the candidates for validation who completed the process of validating a degree or a part of the profession. The validation quality assurance system leads to improved governance in schools, compliance with regulatory requirements, and reflects modern management achievements in education. The system enhances the adaptability, efficiency, and innovativeness of the high schools that apply it. The proposed system makes it possible to implement the principle of continuous improvement in the course of school management, in particular in the course of quality management.

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