Abstract

The Dakar Framework for Action (2000), stated that formal, non-formal and informal education must be fostered to respond to the diverse needs and circumstances of adults. Therefore, education for adults should not be limited in the formal situation (universities), adults can obtain their education through vocational or non-formal education or at their workplace or acquire autodidact (informal education).

In most developing countries, the access to formal higher education institutions is often hampered by financial problem of students. Then, non-formal and informal education becomes the alternative pathways. However, most higher education institutions do not provide procedures for the recognition of prior learning but only formal education programs, which hardly meet the needs of adult learners.

Therefore, a new system of education should be implemented. A flexible system that accommodate the needs of all learners (formal, non-formal, and informal), but still has a quality assurance to promote inclusive, equity and quality education system.

The VALERU project (VAlidityation of non-formal and informal LEarning in RUssia) is dedicated to start a movement towards a country-wide implementation of validation procedures in Higher Education Institutions the Russian Federation and sets an example of how this new educational approach can be introduced and implemented in Higher Education.
The context of VNIL in the Russian Federation

In the Russian Federation and other countries alike, there have been significant changes in higher education in the last decades, as the number of students is increasing and academic education is no longer perceived as education for the elite. The new aim is quality education for everyone.

Universities should provide study programmes which can contribute to supporting the development of knowledge, skills and competences, which are not only relevant to economic activities, but also the democratization of education, its humanization and humanitarization (Grigoryeva et al., 2015, p. 175). The Bologna Process tries to address these issues and to harmonize activities of European countries (Grigoryeva et al., 2015, p. 170). With signing the Bologna Declaration in September 2003, the Russian Federation agreed to fulfil goals in order to become part of the European Higher Education and Research Area.

Using the Bologna Declaration as a Guideline, the “Federal Target Programme for the development of education between 2006 and 2010” was enacted and implemented. The aim was to raise the quality of education to international standards, to introduce comparable degrees and qualifications and to increase academic mobility and expanding export of educational services.

Historically seen, the Russian Federation was heavily dependent on geopolitical power and going into the Bologna Process should help to catch up also with rather soft power like human resources. Highly qualified staff is an important prerequisite for competing in a globalised, fast changing learning society. The Bologna Process became popular in the Russian Federation as a symbol of internationalisation. A series of amendments was introduced to legislation towards the implementation of the Bologna Process (Telegina & Schwengel, 2012, p. 44f.).

Up to now, the Bologna Process has been just partially implemented in the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, for a successful implementation of validation procedures for non-formal and informal learning, it is necessary to achieve the full implementation of the Bologna Process first. The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is one of its main aspects, wasn’t successfully introduced yet. Validation procedures can be easier conducted, if they can rely on the ECTS system, which makes it possible to quantify learning in a way which makes it transferable. Furthermore, the credibility of validation procedures needs to be monitored through an independent system of quality assurance to maintain consistency of its standards (Talbot, 2015, p. 152).

The VALERU project builds on the past developments regarding the implementation of the Bologna Process in Russian Higher Education Institutions. The project is funded within Tempus as a national structural measure and is based on an international and interdisciplinary consortium, coordinated by the Austrian University for Further Education, Danube University Krems (VALERU, 2015a). VALERU is one of the first projects on validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Russian Federation. We now describe how the VALERU project was designed to support the introduction and development of validation practice and which role collaboration plays for the success of this task.
The VALERU project – planting seeds for change-making

The recognition of prior learning can be seen as the next step after the Bologna Process: Once formal education is transparent and comparable, which is a necessary basis for mobility between universities, it can be worked on how to support the mobility between the labour market and higher education institutions. Of course, the partial implementation of the Bologna Process influences the introduction of validation procedures for informal and non-formal learning. The VALERU project aims at making first attempts in changing the mind-set of what higher education could mean for the individual, the labour market and society in general. Validation procedures can support the democratization of education, allowing access to university for people with rather practical than academic learning experiences (VALERU, 2015a).

The VALERU project started with investigations about validation practices in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria and the Russian Federation (VALERU, 2015b). Soon it became clear, that the European partners of the project cannot recommend a specific validation procedure, suitable for the Russian Federation.

A validation procedure needs to emerge from practice. Partners in France rather followed a summative validation approach, which focusses on past learning outcomes and which qualification could be awarded. Our partners in the United Kingdom, University of Chester, follow a strong developmental approach. Which system is fitting for a specific university in the Russian Federation cannot really be predicted. It needs to be understood that validation emerged in countries like France or the United Kingdom over time, strongly connected with the countries’ history.

Therefore, we followed an approach, which allows and open adaptation for Russian Higher Education institutions. A training programme was developed, which covers three aspects:

1. The Context of VNIL: Changing Requirements for Knowledge in Higher Education
2. The Framework for VNIL: Lifelong Learning and Validation Procedure.
3. VNIL Methods: Learning Outcomes and Assessment.

The training programme is strongly connected with the Bologna Process and underlines that certain instruments like the ECTS-system and qualifications frameworks support the transparency and the quality of procedures. The target group of the training programme includes academic staff, administrative staff in higher education and interested stakeholders in NGOs and companies, but its focus is clearly on the implementation of validation procedures in Higher Education Institutions. Specialists from Germany, France and the UK were holding workshops in four different regions of the Russian Federation to support a country-wide dissemination of the idea of validation. The aim of VALERU is to create a Russian expert pool, which is able to advise and/or assess in a validation procedure. Also, they are able to conduct the VALERU training in their own institutions for further dissemination of the concept of validation and how it could be realised (note: training materials can be seen and downloaded at valeru.eu).

Eight Russian partners participated and cooperated in the VALERU project, among them the Russian Ministry of Education, universities, professional bodies and associations (VALERU, 2014). This strong consortium was an important prerequisite to not only develop a sound strategy how to introduce VNIL, but also to build trust into the procedure.
Implementing validation procedures in Higher Education structures is a challenging task. Universities tend to perceive themselves as main drivers to shape their students’ minds, not so much acknowledging that they have probably learned and constructed their realities outside university. Actually, around 70% of an adult’s learning is informal and not taking place in education programmes provided by the government (Schmidt-Hertha, 2011, p. 234). It is similar with the percentage of Indonesian students who continue their education in HEIs (formal education). By 2015, the percentage is 33.5% (DGHE/Dikti, 2016). Recognizing and valuing this informal learning in higher education means a shift in mind set, from a teacher-centred to a student-centred education.

VALERU is the very first project on validation of non-formal and informal learning in the Russian Federation and therefore it is necessary to establish a common understanding, on individual and above all, also on institutional level. It is about knowledge building on the basis of the cultural capital in the Russian Federation in order to increase it (Suthers, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, to achieve this goal, shared cultures and mutual understanding need to emerge from project activities (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009, p. 229). The underlying social process is a necessary prerequisite to accomplish this (Stahl, 2000, p. 71).

Meaning-making and Collaboration

After we outlined the VALERU project design and difficulties as well as necessary aspects of introducing VNIL, we now outline the importance of collaborative learning and meaning-making in a community through an example from the VALERU project work.

Personal cognition and social activity are connected through deep interlock. Individuals develop personal beliefs from their own view on things, on the basis of socio-culture knowledge, shared language and external representations. These beliefs again become knowledge through social interaction, communication, discussion, clarification and negotiation, or as Stahl (2000, p. 72) puts it: “Knowledge is a socially mediated product.”

The VALERU project tried to foster individual sense-making of project partners during field visits at EU universities, who already successfully practiced validation procedures. The VALERU project members can be identified as key persons for the validation movement in the Russian Federation. At their universities, the VALERU training programme was conducted in order to spread experiences from practice on validation procedures and their prerequisites.

The workshops of the training programme were problem-based and focussed on team-work. The idea was to support a process of meaning-making, a shared understanding of what validation is, what it could mean for Russian Higher Education and what it needs to be implemented. VALERU, as the first project of its kind, did pioneer work in this regard and this also became clear during project work as shown in the following example for meaning-making and collaborative learning in the VALERU project:

The working language was English during the project, but considering the sustainability of the project, we ensured that all relevant material is translated in Russian language and available online on the VALERU platform. Our project partners from the Russian Federation soon were confronted with linguistic problems: Relevant words to talk about validation didn’t exist in Russian language yet. Building vocabulary to describe validation and its procedures is a necessary prerequisite to further promote the recognition of prior learning in the Russian Federation’s higher education system and also among relevant stakeholders on the labour
market. Our Russian partners already had a good understanding of what validation means for an individual, for higher education and for the employers and essential aspects of validation procedures.

Still, finding the right words in Russian language is a challenging experience for the Russian speaking consortium members. It stimulates an deep understanding and meaning-making is stimulated (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009, p. 228). This can serve as an example for social knowledge-building. The person responsible for translation brought up the issue of terminology in Russian language and proposed possible words for accurate translation for open discussion during a project meeting. Multiple perspectives were discussed, as the project consortium includes various stakeholders of validation procedures. Through communication, discussion, clarification and negotiation, the original suggestion of the translator was refined. Recognizing prior learning in higher education can bridge the gap between the labour market and academia, but for this relevant stakeholders from both fields need to negotiate, discuss and agree on a common result on how to understand validation in the context of the Russian Federation. The medium of knowledge is language and this underlines how important common vocabulary is (Stahl, 2000, p. 72).

Working Together as a Team: Aspects of Collaboration

It was outlined above that the collaboration between consortium members from various fields in higher education and labour market is necessary to stimulate meaning-making processes. The aim is to build and share knowledge on a topic, which is rather new to the higher education system in the Russian Federation. Growing together and getting organised in a team are main prerequisites for fruitful collaboration. Still, communication and negotiation process within the project is challenging due to the interdisciplinary and international project consortium (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009, p. 228). Bronstein (2003, p. 299) defined five components of inter-professional processes among different disciplines:

1) Interdependence
2) Newly created professional activities
3) Flexibility
4) Collective ownership of goals
5) Reflection on process

Interdependence means that each partner is dependent on the other to master a certain activity. This aspect is given by the cause of the project: To build up a validation strategy and a training programme on a country-wide level in the Russian Federation truly demands several partners to work together to accomplish the task. Also, it is necessary that partners have clear ideas of their own and their partner’s roles. The VALERU project plan defined roles from the beginning, which were further developed in an iterative way during the project. At the start, not all of the partners knew each other very well and it took time until it all consortium members got a holistic idea the specific strengths of all consortium members. Growing together as a team is necessary to develop an atmosphere of respect and trust. A main characteristic of independence therefore includes formal and informal time spent together as a team (Bronstein, 2003, p. 299).

The second component according to Bronstein (2003, p. 300) is “Newly Created Professional Activities”. In the VALERU project it was not only necessary to work together to master the task but also working together in a team promised to achieve way more than working independently. This is especially relevant also for the development of a sustainability plan after the project ends. Without working together and negotiating a common way of how to
proceed where all partners can contribute, it is vital if the project consortium really want to make a change and promote and provide the training programme to an even larger group of stakeholders. The final sustainability strategy is still in negotiation but it became clear in the final VALERU project meeting, that a network for further interdisciplinary discourse is needed. Not a single strategy, but rather a country-wide policy is needed to ensure the quality and transparency of validation procedures in higher education:

“In other words, reform involving collaboration extends beyond the individual collaborators and their direct services to clients. Such reform may be observable in new structures, policies, and service delivery systems” (Bronstein, 2003, p. 300).

Not only the VALERU training programme needs to be promoted in order to foster a common understanding but also piloting activities need to be shared and good practice examples discussed to develop a sound strategy for higher education institutions in the Russian Federation.

“Flexibility”, the third component of interdisciplinary collaboration, refers to “...the deliberate occurrence of role-blurring” (Bronstein, 2003, p. 300). This means on one hand that the alternation of roles can take place if the situation is demanding it but also that a productive compromise can be reached even facing a disagreement first. Flat hierarchies within the team is also an important aspect for alternating roles. As already mentioned, project roles were outlined in the project plan. It defined two main managing roles: The role of the overall coordinator of the project, Danube University Krems, who also has main responsibility for the EU partners of the project and the local coordinator for the Russian Federation, Moscow State University of Geodesy and Cartography, who mainly coordinated activities as discussed in the steering committee meetings and project meetings in the Russian Federation. As closely working together the situations demanded to blur roles every now and then, but it always turned out to create practicable and useful solutions for the project development.

“Collective ownership” is also mentioned as one component of collaboration. It means that there is a shared responsibility of reaching the defined goals. Clearly defined, realistic goals are essential for collaboration. It needs a shared vision and an agreed-on mission. Inclusiveness in making decisions can lead to stronger commitment and sense of ownership for the project processes, which is strongly connected with the socialization of the interdisciplinary team (Bronstein, 2003, p. 301). In international and interdisciplinary projects growing together as a team can be challenging. An important factor is to keep up communication and the information flow between partners. Through internal project newsletters it was ensured, that all project members are informed about recent developments. Web-conferences were held, but especially face-to-face meetings had great value in speeding up project developments and commitment (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009, p. 228).

“Reflection on process” is the last component of collaboration defined by Bronstein (2003, p. 302). It refers to the integration of self-evaluation and to collect feedback to reflect on collaborative interactions. In the VALERU project, an internal project evaluation questionnaire was designed to ensure the quality of project developments and to support collaboration. It included items on how project members reflect on a certain period of teamwork within the project. Consortium members could openly address issues in working together. Main points to improve in the project work were collected in an internal report on quality assurance, which was distributed to the project partners and discussed in a webinar. Making processes transparent and talking about it openly supports the dynamics within the project team.
Indonesia, as a developing country and the fourth biggest population in the world, has difficulty in providing equally access to higher education institutions. Financial and geographical problems are the biggest barriers, then, non-formal and informal education becomes the alternative pathways. Therefore, higher education institutions should have a system that can accommodate someone who has no opportunity to learn at higher education institutions, but has learned non-formally or informally. He/ she has the competences, but only does not have the formal certificate (academic degree).

Indonesia has realised the importance of National Qualification Framework and produced the regulation about it (Presidential Decree No. 8/ 2012). The Indonesian Qualification Framework (IQF/ KKNI) is an instrument for levelling framework qualifications and competence of Indonesia’s manpower. It compares, balances and integrates education and training sectors, as well as job experiences, in a scheme of competence acknowledgement for specific occupational requirement.

The IQF can be used as the instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. Even, the IQF stated that learning may be obtained through four different pathways (it is called as multi entry and multi exit system):

1. Education pathway of both formal or non-formal education systems.
2. Job experience pathway in the work place based on a career ladder or occupational levelling system.
3. Accredited training with nationally recognized certification system.
4. Individual experience or self-learning ensured by an authorized assessment system.

The level of qualification and the pathways, based on the IQF, can be seen in the picture below:

(Directorate General of Higher Education (Dikti), 2015)
There are 9 levels on the IQF and each level has the descriptor based on the learning outcomes. Taking for example, the descriptors based on the learning outcomes for Bachelor/S1 (Level 6) are:

1. Capable of applying science, technology and art within his/her expertise and is adaptable to various situation faced during solving a problem.
2. Mastering in-depth general and specific theoretical concepts of specific knowledge and capable of formulating related problem solving procedures.
3. Capable of taking strategic decision based on information and data analysis and provides direction in choosing several alternative solutions.
4. Responsible for her/his own job and can be assigned responsibility of the attainment of organization’s performances.

All Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Indonesia have to meet the descriptors so that all of the students will have the same level of qualifications and all HEIs must provide a flexible learning system (multi entry, multi exit).

The IQF/ KKNI is a new framework for Indonesia HEIs, thus consequently, the understanding of the framework is still lacking, especially for the non-formal and informal pathways. However, as a government regulation, the IQF/ KKNI must be implemented by all higher education institutions in Indonesia. Therefore, it will be very important to know how the learning process should be designed and implemented based on the IQF/ KKNI. Therefore, the collaborative project, e.g. the VALERU Project, needs to be held in order to improve the knowledge and skills in implementing the IQF/ KKNI based system in HEIs.

**Conclusion**

The project set-up, its communication structures and cultures have a strong impact on collaboration within an interdisciplinary, international team. Just if relevant stakeholders collaborate, a meaning-making process is stimulated, which can result into a common policy of how to implement a validation-strategy in a transparent, quality-assured, country-wide way. It was shown on the example of the VALERU project, how important collaboration is for the success of a project, which aims at stimulating change-making in higher education. Also, examples were given how components of collaboration were realised in the project.

A next step to further promote the successful inclusion of validation procedures in higher education could be a network, which supports the collaboration between stakeholders on a long run. Reforms demand interaction of various stakeholders and individual working is not enough. Validation procedures are still quite new for many universities and often, there is a lack of trust into the quality of the procedures, both on the side of academia but also on the side of validation candidates.

A mutual understanding of various stakeholders, a common agreement on implementation strategies and quality assurance needs to emerge to trust. This can be only accomplished in a setting, which promotes interdisciplinary collaboration.

The VALERU project can be adapted by higher education institutions in implementing the process of recognising and validating the prior competences of the learners, then a formal certificate which stated the qualifications level, can be awarded so that the non-formal and informal learners will have the equity with the formal learners.
Hopefully, a similar project of VALERU can be held in Indonesia, ASEAN, Asia – Pacific, and all of the nations in the world, it will be very useful and helpful, especially for those who have obstacles in entering HEIs (formal education) and those who are responsible in providing the multi entry and multi exit system.

**Bibliography**


Biodata

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