

OBSERVAL-Net on-line debate 17Sep-04Oct FR

Conclusions

In closing this debate on **how we assess validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL)**, I offer my warmest thanks to all the practitioners, researchers and experts who took part in this debate for their enthusiasm and dedication to the development of recognition and validation processes. I extend particular thanks to Emmanuelle Auras, Jean-Marie Dujardin, Mauro Palumbo and Carmen Cavaco, who have contributed to the success of this discussion through their texts and through the arguments made today. No doubt, it is a discussion that will continue throughout Europe for some time to come.

The debate opened with a question, namely: is an assessment portfolio enough in itself for the VPL assessment, or are direct observations preferable? Each of the participants in turn presented numerous arguments in favour of one option or the other. Emmanuelle Auras highlighted the benefits of the written portfolio in enabling candidates to reflect on their prior learning. For his part, Jean-Marie Dujardin highlighted the undeniable advantages of experience in a professional setting. Mauro Palumbo, the first of our experts, emphasised the importance of coherence between the candidate's portfolio and the requirements for certification, which is particularly helpful for interviews. He also discussed the importance of guidance in this process.

An implicit consensus quickly emerged in the course of the debate on the importance of the portfolio as an essential assessment tool. The participants were unanimous in emphasising the need to put learning outcomes into words. The discussion therefore mainly focused on the relevance of one or more assessment methods in addition to the portfolio, such as interviews with candidates, a simulated work situation or direct observation in the field. Several participants commented that these additional methods can help panel members to draw their own conclusions and make it easier for candidates to demonstrate their competences, especially when they are not so comfortable with expressing themselves in writing.

Carmen Cavaco, our second expert, raised the question of the variety and relevance of different assessment methods: "Is it possible to recognise and assess learning outcomes, in all its complexity, using a single methodology and a single type of tool that works for all situations and contexts? (...)"

My hypothesis is that the indispensable nature of the portfolio was the main reason why most participants answered yes to the following question asked during the discussion:

Do you think that the assessment portfolio is the best way to provide proof of learning outcomes during the assessment process for the validation of non-formal and informal learning?

Through the various nuanced aspects of the contributions and comments made in the debate, the participants have described the complexity of assessment in education, especially in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This complexity, as explored by Carmen Cavaco and taken up again in the final contribution from Emmanuelle Auras, is also due to the unclear nature of what is being assessed: are we assessing knowledge, or competences specific to the professional activity concerned, or transdisciplinary competences, in particular the ability to form an argument, which is essential for the VPL approach, as was set out a number of times in the discussion? As was also mentioned, one might fear a slippage in the use of VPL assessment methodologies, from a proof-based approach (demonstrating the existence of prior learning to satisfy requirements for qualifications) to a test-based approach, as used when recognising formal training through exams.

Finally, and as was mentioned in several contributions and comments, the validation process contains a formative and projective dimension when it comes to building up a professional career. This brings an essential "lateral benefit" to the process, to use Jean-Marie Dujardin's words.

In conclusion, this lively and highly interesting debate went far beyond merely examining the role of assessment in the validation of prior learning. To take things a little further, I suggest that it would be useful to extend the discussion to examine the relevance and the respective contributions of different assessment methods according to the context and the public concerned.