

PRACTICES OF RECOGNITION OF ACQUIRED COMPETENCES (EVC)/RECOGNITION OF ACQUIRED QUALIFICATIONS (EVK); DIPLOMA EQUALITY & ACQUISITION OF DIPLOMAS FOR (FEMALE) NEW MIGRANTS: EMPHASIS ON EACH AND EVERY TALENT?

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1. Abstract

Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders is slowly but gradually growing up. Structured thoughts about lifelong learning and about competences learnt elsewhere and at an earlier stage, or the recognition of acquired skills in general started roughly in 2000. An exploratory phase which focused mainly on a general description of the pros and cons of the recognition of acquired skills was followed by a period of policy intentions and action plans. After a subsequent phase of pilot projects and initiatives in several policy areas, the results of all these efforts are now beginning to emerge (VUB, 2007). In the labour area, the word used is 'certificate of experience'; in education they are called 'certificates of competence', whereas the sociocultural sector refers to them as 'study certificates'.

The ultimate challenge for the further implementation of the EVC policy is to enhance the efficiency of procedures and effects. On the one hand, the use of EVC is encouraged by making the procedure short and simple; on the other hand, the procedures and instruments must be able to pass reliability and validity tests. In addition, well-targeted publicity is necessary for implementation of the system, particularly with respect to certain target groups. For some time now, there has been talk about quality management and the introduction of a quality assurance and quality improvement system, drawing on the example of the Dutch EVC Knowledge Centre, and which should be applied to the distribution of information on structures and regulations, coordination and exchange of EVC experience. The plan even included phasing and a final date (Training and Alignment Information Service DIVA, 2005), all of which have not been fully realised until this day.

This study, which is largely built up of desk research, concentrates on the organisational aspect of all that is involved in EVC/EVK for new migrants ('newcomers'), with additional attention for the gender element. It sets out to describe the existing Flemish EVC/EVK policy, while highlighting finished EVC/EVK pilot projects in the labour and educational sectors and the recognition of foreign diplomas. As a next step, it shows what a holistic EVC/EVK policy (in accordance with the recommendation of SERV, the Flanders Social and Economic Council, of 14 May 2008) for newcomers could look like, and how that could come about with a minimum of categorist initiatives. The Certificate of Experience, which shows the (level of) employability for a specific profession, could prove to be a key instrument for newcomers in accelerating their employment route. Besides the system of recognition of foreign diplomas, a further developed EVC policy within the higher education sector and one that would go beyond the generally accepted exemption policy based on formal qualifications, could also enhance the influx into higher education or again, prove the employability of the newcomer. However, the authors claim that certain preconditions that would enable efficient competence management for newcomers, are missing. Besides the actors on the labour market, the higher education organisations also have an important task and they should be given a structural role within the integration policy. After all, certain selection mechanisms in the countries of origin and destination bring about that, more than before, highly educated immigrants are settling down in our area.

Key words:

Migration, employment, earlier acquired competences ...

2. Objectives

The central research question concerns the organisational aspect of all that is involved in EVC/EVK in the labour market and higher education. That question can be divided into three sub-questions:

- "What is role of the organisations involved?"
- "What are the bottlenecks?"
- "Which '(good) practices' can be identified (possibly from abroad)?"

Furthermore, the study addresses a transversal question regarding the gender aspect, which can be divided into two subquestions:

- "What are the specific problems for female newcomers, e.g. as regards access to higher education?"
- "Which initiatives exist for development of culture- and gender-neutral standards, both educational and professional ones?"

Clarification of key concepts

EVC: Earlier acquired competence or EVC comprises all knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes gathered through learning processes but not accredited with a diploma.

EVK: Earlier acquired qualifications or EVKs include any domestic or foreign diploma issued after successful completion of a formal learning track - within or outside the educational sector -, provided that it does not involve proof of credit obtained within the institution and the training programme for which one intends to use those qualifications.

VDAB: the Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training, i.e. the Public Employment Service.

SERV: Flanders' Social and Economic Council, comprising both employer and employee representatives.

3. Methods and data

The study was largely built on desk research of existing literature and an analysis of existing qualitative and quantitative databases, combined with interviews with key figures within the separate areas. It includes a field SWOT analysis of the policy developments, primarily based on running or completed pilot projects for (female) newcomers.

Methodological explanation

The following survey data were used:

- a 2006 survey among 650 newcomers in welcome offices (Geets, Van den Eede, Wets, Timmerman, 2007);
- a survey among 1322 asylum seekers (Rea, A., et al., 2007);
- a manpower survey (2001-2005).

The following administrative data were used:

- applications for academic recognition of foreign diplomas (NARIC-Flanders, 2001-2006);
- certificates of experience (ESF agency, 2006-2007);
- EVC files in higher education (Flemish Education Council VLOR, 2005-2006).

4. Findings

4.1 Coherence between the individual areas

The first question addresses the coherence between the individual areas: (1) the labour market and its 'certificates of experience'; (2) the education & training sector and its 'certificates of competence'; and (3) culture, youth and sports, where one speaks of 'study certificates'.

Policy actions taken in the scope of lifelong learning all aim at *exchangeability* and equality of these certificates. Standardisation or synchronisation is a precondition for enhancing credibility and legitimacy of EVC procedures. In 2000, an 'EVC working group' was installed that drew up a minimum framework for a Flemish EVC policy model. Still, many stakeholders also developed their own vision. The differences of opinion mainly concern the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Labour-oriented stakeholders prefer to focus on the achievement of the competences, whereas the Education and Training sector raises concerns as regards quality assurance in the context of informal and non-formal learning. And finally, the stakeholders in the Culture, Youth and Sports policy areas clearly opt for lifewide learning, thus positioning themselves alongside the labour market and formal education providers that mainly concentrate on lifelong learning (VUB, 2007).

There are also clear differences in the field of technical implementation of the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. All policy areas seem to aim at keeping the process of recognition within their own ranks. Labour market actors appear to be the only ones in favour of independent recognition centres, provided, however, that those centres follow the standards determined by the sectors (SERV) and that the sectors are able to provide quality assurance. The educational sector prefers to keep the responsibility for competency assessment within the institution involved, and the socio-cultural sector, which includes the adult work and youth sectors, primarily points at the risk of far-reaching formalisation (VUB, 2007).

4.1.1 Labour market-oriented actors

Different players approach the 'acquired competences' issue at a different speed. The labour market-oriented actors clearly lead the debate as far as the recognition of professional competences is concerned, and they have also produced the first initiatives in the form of certificates of experience. However, their efforts meet with a number of complicating factors:

- (1) a lack of competence-oriented nomenclature of *professional profiles* in certain sectors;
- (2) a lack of ambition to obtain recognition as an assessment centre, which results from doubts concerning the actual success that may be expected from the Certificate of Experience, from the fact that it requires a high investment, and from the high administrative threshold imposed by the ESF Agency (the European Social Fund);
- (3) the minimum standard is often too high for target groups such as the disadvantaged, immigrants and newcomers;
- (4) the learning route following on the EVC test within the Certificate of Experience should allow for adaptation to the test results, which implies that the modules of the training path should correspond to one or more competences and that they should allow for flexible organisation;

(5) the government does not yet fully exercise its exemplary role because the existing certificate requirements are not yet in line with 'competition thinking'.

4.1.2 Education

Within the educational sector, EVC practices are most advanced in higher and adult education thanks to the Certificate of Competence, which shows a student's achievements at a Bachelor's or Master's level, or equivalent to a certain course or training section. The challenges faced here are:

- (1) synchronisation and comparability of competence profiles. At this point in time they are dependent on the associations and show differences;
- (2) in the opinion of the educational institutions, awarding exemptions is currently not interesting from the 'funding' point of view;
- (3) the limited influx of disadvantaged groups;
- (4) quality management;
- (5) higher education institutions are familiar with the validation of formal diplomas (qualifications), but much less with validating competences acquired in a non-formal or informal context.

4.2 Newcomers

The study also observed the EVC/EVK policy from a newcomers' viewpoint, i.e. immigrants who according to the Manpower Survey have resided in Belgian territory for less than ten years.

4.2.1 Training/work experience?

Survey data (Manpower Survey, 2001-2005) - conclusive population data are not available - show a relatively high rate of education (32%) among newcomers, and many of them (with a higher education) have acquired work experience in their country of origin. It also follows from the data from this Survey that (1) the educational rate of Flemish newcomers is probably on the rise; (2) the educational rate has a positive impact on the employment rate; and (3) the relation between 'highly educated employed people' and 'main employment' is least favourable among newcomers. The latter conclusion implies that highly educated newcomers perform less 'main employment' than highly educated oldcomers. This again leads to the following assumptions: the specific nature of the training or work experience is less compatible with the labour market requirements, and, there are problems as regards the recognition of foreign diplomas and/or foreign work experience. In short, competence-oriented thinking within the education and labour markets could provide an important stimulus to the position of newcomers in the employment market.

4.2.2. Certificate of Experience and Certificate of Competence ... also for newcomers?

Certificates of Experience and Certificates of Competence could be a key instrument in accelerating the employment route of newcomers. Previous research (Geets, Pauwels, Wets, Lamberts & Timmerman, 2006) showed the paradoxical situation that in their search for work, newcomers are hindered by a lack of professional experience in Flanders or Belgium ('high-level' work in line with level of education and work experience). A Certificate of Experience, but also a Certificate of Competence, would be an excellent means to demonstrate the employability of newcomers. Two completed *EVC/EVK pilot projects* specifically focusing on newcomers led to a number of key points of attention for the current EVC/EVK policy. A first labour-oriented pilot project (Certificate of Experience) was the EVC project for newcomers carried out by the VDAB and which measured competence for the professions 'maintenance mechanic', 'residential fitter' and 'industrial fitter' (2004). Apart from the somewhat ill-chosen professions (it proved hard to find sufficient candidates that met the target group requirements), the relatively high number of newcomers who did not manage to obtain a certificate after the assessment (six out of fourteen participants) indicates the need for a short, transitional *preparatory training* in line with what is offered by EVC practices in countries such as the UK, Finland, the Netherlands and France. The authors believe that an EVC test within the system of Certificates of Experience can only be successful if the *learning route* following the test can be aligned with the test results (the so-called formative function of EVC/EVK). This implies the provision of a customized and flexible module for professional competences that have not yet been acquired. The standard applied for this Certificate of Experience was probably too high. However, this applies to all certificates of experience: they contain the categories 'average professional' and 'experienced professional', but '*starting professional*' is not on the list.

A second, education-oriented pilot project (Certificate of Competence) was the 'United Colours for Nursing' project (2007). Given their family situation and work experience acquired abroad, the dual route of work and study set out by this project offers an excellent opportunity for newcomers to go back to school. Nevertheless, it proved very hard for the course participants. The use of the portfolio demanded intensive support from a mentor for reasons of limited knowledge of the Dutch language and issues involving the evidence of education and work experience (Wahlen, 2007). The biggest bottleneck for large-scale implementation of this pilot project is probably its poor cost efficiency.

For both pilot projects, *knowledge of Dutch* proved to play an important role at the time of the assessment (portfolio, interview, theoretical and practical tests), despite the specific attention given to this aspect (e.g. language support, NT2 courses). General EVC/EVK procedures do not take this into consideration.

4.2.3. Equality of foreign higher education diplomas

The *academic recognition procedure* includes a comparison between a foreign training programme and a Flemish higher education programme. The organisation responsible (NARIC Flanders) asks at least two higher education institutions for advice about the academic value of the foreign diploma. The criteria include: the characteristics and

structure of the educational system; the level of the institution; the level of the training programme; essential components of the training programme, including traineeships, theses and lectures; the total study volume; access to the training programme and finally, relevant professional experience. Key factor in the chance of recognition is a combination of the diploma's country of origin on the one hand and the study area on the other. Between 2001 and 2005, an average 56% of the applications led to a positive outcome. Positive decisions are found predominantly for diplomas acquired in the EU-14 (74%). The study areas social and community work, education, social health sciences, trade sciences and business studies show a 90% chance of recognition, regardless of the region of origin. At 43%, non-recognition is relatively high for diplomas in the economic and applied economic sciences, especially given the fact that only 13% of the EU-14 diplomas for this study domain result in a negative decision. As an additional factor, the number of applications in this domain has risen considerably in the past few years (25% per year on average). The increase of the number of academic recognition applications for medical and paramedical diplomas (average 31% per annum) is also in sharp contrast with the chance of recognition. At 48%, nursing diplomas show a much lower chance of recognition. Chance of recognition is lowest for medical science diplomas (9%), dentistry (4%), law, notary studies and criminological sciences (2%). These studies usually result in practicing a regulated profession. In the scope of the development of an Internal European Market, a more favourable procedure has been created for EU citizens/people with an EU certificate, namely the *professional recognition procedure*. For physicians and nurses, the sector directive provides automatic recognition of EU diplomas that meet certain minimum education requirements. A similar institutional rather than individual approach could result in simplification of the academic recognition procedure.

4.2.4. (Back) to school?

The question related to 'finality of the integration route' examines to which extent the Flemish integration policy considers and differentiates between different types of newcomers. 'Newcomers to the procedure' are confronted with a number of dilemmas, the most important ones being: studying (Dutch, vocational training, higher education) vs. working, and 'official employment' vs. 'illegal employment'. In other words, there is a field of tension between the uncertain residential status on the one hand and the efforts required for integration on the other, such as taking a welcome course, learning to speak Dutch and finding work. With this in mind, the relative under-representation of family migrants in language and vocational training institutions that emerged from a survey among integration clients (Geets, Van den Eede, Wets, Lamberts & Timmerman, 2007) may be called surprising. Given the fact that they are older and in first instance, will try to valorise their diploma and professional experience, the threshold is even higher for newcomers with professional experience than for those without. Furthermore, certain newcomers, for instance asylum seekers pending their application - particularly male newcomers - have more financial opportunities to start higher education programmes or to resume their study route than others, such as family migrants. These conclusions lead to the formulation of an 'integration paradox': asylum seekers, who, in view of the time spent in the country, show the best integration results, are also the ones with the least chance of staying (legally).

4.2.5 Gender mainstreaming

For the Certificate of Experience to become an activation tool for women, the competence structure and working ambitions of these female newcomers will have to be examined first. In terms of chances of recognition, medical and nursing diplomas run the highest risk of devaluation for women, as do competences. The biggest problem for female newcomers is to prove their educational and employment career. In addition, the EVC may scare off this group of newcomers (because of price and procedure), which results in continuation of a democratic deficit. Given that their routes are often interrupted by child care, female newcomers with children don't have the same chances as other newcomers to transform or upgrade their educational and professional qualifications to the Belgian context. Existing role patterns, a lack of child care and dependence on the partner income are all elements that nurture the limited educational opportunities for women.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

5.1. Certificate of Experience - also for newcomers

Given that a lack of professional experience in Flanders/Belgium hinders newcomers in finding work, the Certificate of Experience could prove to be a key instrument for newcomers in accelerating the employment route (Geets et al., 2006). The pilot project "EVC for newcomers: measuring competence for the professions 'electrical engineer' and 'maintenance engineer'" has provided the following insights:

- (1) the target group must be large enough;
- (2) the client monitoring system of the welcome offices and VDAB must list the foreign working experience so that it can be linked to a training path or be used for the development of new initiatives;
- (3) there is a need for unambiguous information about the educational and employment history of newcomers;
- (4) a language- and culture-independent EVC test sometimes requires more than working with visualisation or diagrams or involving a language instructor in the selection;
- (5) preparatory courses and solutions must be provided in order to obviate manifest shortcomings in professional experience;
- (6) the learning route must allow for adaptation to results of the EVC test;
- (7) there is a need for a training phase that constitutes an integrated, intermediate step of the EVC process. In this context, it is important to

prepare newcomers for an EVC test, mainly starting from possible knowledge and competence gaps which should show, among other things, from the composition of the portfolio, e.g. which (safety) conventions and working instruments exist in Belgium and how do they differ from the ones in the country of origin;

(8) broadening the tasks of the portfolio mentor in EVC procedures for newcomers is recommended. It should go beyond collecting educational and working experience and also include assistance in preparing for the EVC test.

5.2. Equality of foreign higher education diplomas

There are three problems regarding application for diploma equality. First of all, part of the academic recognition applications, e.g. study certificates and unfinished study programmes, are labelled as having an insufficient 'level' almost beforehand. This part of the aggregate academic recognitions applications seems to be rising. Expansion of the advisory body in charge of the a priori estimate of the chance of approval, might stop this increase. The second problem is caused by incomplete files. A special procedure developed to this end allowed advisors to have an 'introductory' conversation with the applicant. Unfortunately, organisational problems have led these to diminish considerably. Thirdly, the quality of the advice must be evaluated. The absence of essential training components in the foreign programme will generally lead to negative advice, and hence to a negative decision. Practice shows a very broad interpretation of these 'essential training components' and too little consideration with additionally obtained diplomas and relevant professional experience that might compensate for the shorter duration of many foreign university programmes as compared to the Flemish programmes. This is confirmed by data analyses: regardless of the study area, older diplomas stand a smaller chance of being awarded academic equality.

5.3. Certificate of Competence also for newcomers

The portfolio has an important place in the entire influx procedure. This being a personal file, it contains an inventory of personal competences, substantiated by evidence. For newcomers and particularly for asylum seekers, submitting such evidence can be problematic. The route counsellor plays a key supporting role in composing the portfolio.

Assessments within the EVC procedure require good language proficiency. Nevertheless, the focus is on measuring other competences than language proficiency. Save for some pilot projects, there are no examples of assessments taking account of limited language proficiency or cultural-specific aspects of the target group. Highly targeted actions are required to improve influx management, a task that surpasses the assignment of individual institutions. Actions at a Flemish Community level and coordinated by a specialist support centre can most certainly provide support here (Higher Education Council, 2003). Furthermore, higher education institutes and universities must intensify their cooperation with other educational institutions and third parties such as welcome offices, integration centres and self-organisations. Differentiated routes including catch-up and remediating modules are required to increase the chances of newcomers to find permanent employment.

5.4. (Back) to school ... via a 'transition year'?

In view of the 'battle of the brains' and the increasing trend in labour migration, there are a few innovating projects that can bring newcomers closer to higher education, but they are exclusive, expensive and don't cover all needs. The researchers claim that the 'brains' may not necessarily have to be found abroad - they may very well be present already, waiting for recognition, activation and updating.

A general preparatory, interdisciplinary training programme for newcomers who intend to pursue a higher education, in other words - a transition year, could consolidate the influx of newcomers and help them to move to next levels. Based on the problems mentioned earlier, the Dutch transition year model seems to be the missing link in the existing EVC/EVK policy. This programme focuses on a thorough knowledge of the Dutch language. It also provides a course in English, maths and computer skills. In addition, newcomers get to choose from five optional packages: 'educational training'; 'health care'; 'economy and management'; 'social and community training' and 'nature and technology'. Given the relatively limited size of the target group it seems advisable to set up training centres at an association level for each region. Ideally, a certificate should provide access to a study route in any educational institute after the transition year.

5.5. Towards an alternative integration flow via the transition year.

It would be best to integrate the EVC route option into the integration route. At the heart of this argument is the idea to increase the involvement of higher education (at an association level) in the integration route via the screening of both work and educational aspirations of the newcomers. For newcomers without diploma equality but with good employment perspectives, an attestation attached to the recognition procedure of foreign diplomas could provide insight into the acquired competences. Depending on whether or not the newcomer has working experience, this could be accomplished via the competence investigation procedure or the Certificate of Experience procedure. The Certificate of Competence could also be oriented towards the labour market by listing the acquired training competences. Missing competences could be resolved via modular vocational training programmes. Participants could subsequently find work as a 'starting professional'. For newcomers without a higher education diploma but who do have aspirations to study, the transition year again forms an important link to the regular educational circuit.

Full reference of study report(s) and or paper(s) and other key publications of the study summarised here

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