

Framework for the Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Switzerland: The situation of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) dual system

Background

In Switzerland, and particularly in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, projects for the validation of non-formal and informal learning have increased over the past decade under the influence of certain cantons and companies, in a context of professional reintegration of unemployed people. The cantons pioneering these initiatives (notably Valais and Geneva) have developed systems for validating experience enabling large numbers of people to obtain a Federal Certificate of Vocational Education and Training (FCVET)¹. For this purpose, they have set up an *ad hoc* cantonal legislation and obtained derogations from the Confederation to enable them to issue certificates through the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Legal framework

It was in this background, and on a broader scale in the context of European reforms in the area of lifelong learning, especially through the Copenhagen Process, that Switzerland drew up a “new law on professional training” in 2002 (nLFPr) (Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation, 2002). This law, which came into force on January the 1st 2004, allowing informal training to be taken into account under certain conditions, stating *inter alia*:

- Art. 9, paragraph 2: **professional and non-professional experience, specific training and general education acquired outside the traditional education channels shall be duly taken into account.**
- Art. 33: *Professional qualifications will be certified through one global examination, a combination of examinations with a narrower scope, or by other qualification procedures recognised by the Office.*

The 2003 Ordinance on Vocational Education and Training (Swiss Federal Council, 2003) which came into force on January the 1st 2004, clarifies the nLFPr, particularly in terms of the definition of “other qualification procedures”:

- Art. 31, paragraph 1 (Article 33 LFPr): Other qualification procedures are deemed to include procedures which in a general rule are not defined in training regulations but which still enable the required qualifications to be verified.

And there is one mandatory requirement:

- Art. 32 (Art. 34, paragraph 2, LFPr) : If qualifications have been acquired by a person other than through a regulated training channel, that person must prove **professional experience of at least five years** in order to be admitted into the qualification procedure.

¹ This certificate to recognised professional qualification and is the basis of lifelong learning. It's obtained after 3 or 4 years of dual training in companies or training colleges.

Implementation

With this new law and its Ordinance laying down the general regulatory framework, the next step was to transfer that regulation, making it applicable in the particular circumstances of professional training in Switzerland. It is for this reason that the Federal Office for Professional Training and Technology (OPET) set up the project “Validation of non-formal and informal learning” and a “platform for the validation of non-formal and informal learning”, and brought all parties involved together in the summer of 2004. These discussion and reflection forums as well as project inventories led to the publication of a *National Guide to the Validation of non-formal and informal learning* (OFFT, 2007). This document sets out in broad terms the stages of the procedure and the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, adopting a common language by proposing a glossary.

A pilot project phase scheduled to last until the end of 2009 is currently underway.

Challenges and problems

In Switzerland’s complex federalist system, there are numerous political levels and partners involved.

Firstly, and by tradition, it is usually experience on the field which provides the basis for any legislation: laws are made only after a period of experimentation. In terms of the validation of non-formal and informal learning, that also means that it is the cantonal authority which can decide to implement projects of this type (or not). This situation explains why levels of experience in this area differ from one canton to another, even before the new law was introduced. Additionally, professional associations also have a role in these initiatives, which means that the political determination to implement procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning is not dependent merely on the cantonal authorities but also relies on specific professional organisations. The actual expression “validation of non-formal and informal learning” does not appear in the new law on professional training, nor in the ordinance by which it will be implemented. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is purely considered as “another qualification procedure” enabling a qualification to be acquired without undertaking training in an institutionalised training setting.

Today therefore – somewhat paradoxically – Switzerland has a new law which opens the way to the validation of educational experience but for which the speed of implementation will depend on the political will of the various partners involved.

Other problems in implementing this new system are also appearing, not only in terms of the methodological complexity of a new evaluation paradigm, but also as regards the fear of dismantling a system of vocational education and training which is deeply entrenched in Swiss training culture.

Finally, another challenge that the Swiss training system will be faced with is that currently there no legal basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in universities and higher vocational education, and experience in these areas remain confidential.

Points of interest/SFIVET projects

- Collective Validation of non-formal and informal learning for specific groups
- Validation of the general culture or basic skills of adults

- Training of professionals involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Sources

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