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Prospects and challenges: work-integrated learning as a key component of validation in higher education

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1.   Introduction

Quality of education is defined by Unesco (2015) as one of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, with the mission statement to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all citizens. This postulation encompasses the concept and practices of lifelong learning as the organising principle for educational reforms. Despite the variation across possible definitions and interpretations of lifelong and life-wide learning, and their entwinement with another key concept, continuous learning, it is incontestable that higher education institutions (HEIs) face unprecedented challenges, if they do not implement practices where acquired competences have an equal weight regardless of their context and origin. We need to promote educational change that aligns with the drastic societal change of the last decades. From the viewpoint of education providers, the sustainable development goal on quality education entails huge challenges, and therefore the change needs to be fostered and monitored with engagement, by acknowledging the shared agency of "[…] individuals, education and training institutions, and regulating governments" (Boeren, 2019, p. 277).

This contribution seeks to unfold the conditions, experiences and challenges of the framework that steers validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) in the field of higher education. Based on the experience of the author, stemming from co-operation and participation in a number of development projects enhancing validation processes in Finland and beyond, practices of VNFIL are considerably more heterogenic, when compared to processes related to formal learning. Given the variety of obstacles related to functional VNFIL in higher education, this is not surprising.

In its traditional perception, learning at higher education institutions needs to take place within the institution and align with its regulatory processes, resulting in structured evidence that must be documented and assessed according to a standard, to be formal. "Non-formality" and "informality" refer in this viewpoint to learning contexts and outcomes that are challenging to define: they are fluid, mutating, dynamic, occasionally unpredictable, and occur outside the educational institution. Definition challenges remaining, those learning contexts may nonetheless be demanding and have dimensions of formality and structure, if one considers other aspects of learning than interventions of lecturers and embeddedness in a standardised curriculum. Real-life professional contexts, corporate-level development work, missions in volunteering

and even hobbies provide a multitude of opportunities for learning – the challenge is to design a framework where heterogenic outcomes are considered, valued and transformed to correspond to curricular requirements without compromising quality and by maintaining transparency of the process. Peters and Romero (2019) insightfully suggest that learning ecologies should be perceived as a continuum, rather than defining formality, non-formality and informality as distinct categories.

The challenge of valuing learning and acquired competences, rather than completion of courses, signifies a substantial mindset shift in most higher education institutions. Moreover, it implies mutations in perceptions of the role of lecturers and other academia, with expectations of more collaborative practices both in administration and in delivery modes of education. The weight of traditions in higher education may be overwhelming, however introducing changes with more variety in learning contexts, in a carefully designed and monitored process, does not mean sacrificing quality of education. In light of broader societal changes, quality of education should encompass new dimensions as well.

To overcome challenges and sheer obstacles for VNFIL, the concept of *mindsets* is fundamental. Fang, Kang and Liu (2004) define mindsets as a complex set of "[…] basic assumptions, beliefs, core values, goals and expectations shared by a group of people who are committed to a specific field, and what they will use as rules to guide their attitudes and practice in the field" (p. 299). There are optimistic dimensions in this vista on mindset construction, when applied to the context of higher education on an organisational level: shared visions, commitment, structure-seeking and activity. Steering the process towards the goal of implementing high-quality education with genuine possibilities of validating all learning is a mission that all counterparts in higher education should embrace. This paper unfolds a case from a Finnish higher education institution where signs of a paradigmatic mindset shift start to be visible, in spite of evident challenges that still need attention.

2. Three dimensions of validation: process and experiences from Haaga-Helia UAS

In Finland, higher education institutions have a broad autonomy, and there are no national imperatives on validation as a process, although it is considered as a responsibility of each institution to cater for it. Universities and universities of applied sciences participate in annual performance negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Culture and validation practices are screened in this cooperation, with all other indicators of performance, such as number and employment rate of graduates, timely graduation, student feedback, internationalisation activities, published work of lecturers, and corporate collaboration in the framework of projects. Needs to develop concrete frameworks for validation have nevertheless been recognised, and a parliamentary expert group designated by the Ministry is working towards more precise national guidelines and standards, to be achieved in 2023.

The Bologna process, the long experience in applying the ECTS and the introduction of the European Framework of Qualifications have facilitated flexibility of study paths and transitions across institutions in cases where there is formal evidence on achieved learning outcomes, such as a degree certificate or a transcript of records. As long as this documentation is official and depicts achievements from higher education institutions, recognition processes function relatively well in Finnish HEIs. With VNFIL, the scenario is more complex and at present, universities of applied sciences are more active than research universities in introducing validation of non-formal and informal learning in their processes. Various specialisation programmes conducted in the framework of continuous learning provided for non-degree seeking adults contribute to this development.

The administrative freedom has led to a variety of initiatives and practices in the country. However, funding of higher education institutions is based on a combination of the abovementioned indicators, hence the government steers institutions towards a common set of standards and achievements. All institutions are moreover required to regularly undertake a broad quality audit process, conducted by FINEEC, the Finnish Education Evaluation Center, and publish the outcomes of the audit (Karvi, 2021). Several performance and quality indicators connected to funding are entwined with functional validation, e.g. student satisfaction, timely graduation, as well as the advancement of students with part-time or full-time jobs. They are more positive in institutions where also non-formal and informal learning is validated efficiently. This is a positive trigger towards more efficient process development and enables introduction of non-conventional learning outcomes in learning trajectories, although the process takes shape slowly and practitioners face obstacles in- and outside the institution.

It is mandatory for all Finnish higher education institutions to present their recognition and validation process on the website of the institution. Moreover, a more detailed process description and guidelines need to be made explicit for students: how to proceed, whom to contact, which documentation to submit, and where and how to appeal when necessary. This is most often an item on the agenda of the orientation phase at each intake of new student cohorts, and institutions ensure that respective processual guidelines are available in non-public online outlets, such as student intranets. Despite the generally shared viewpoint on the importance of functional validation as an integral part of HE studies, it is noteworthy that there still is a lot of heterogeneity in practices and especially, in ways how practices are depicted and justified.

A recent study by Saari et al. (2021) analysed emergence of validation in curricular texts of institutions providing professional teachers' education in Finland and observed considerable variation in terms of referring to validation as a process, to its significance for the student, and to practical guidelines on how to act. The situation in other fields of study might not be far from teachers' education, which needs to be confirmed by further study. One of the key challenges is to obtain a shared definition: What does one encompass in the concept of validation and how to make it explicit to

future applicants and students? How to describe it to the world of work? What is the added value for companies and organisations where students work?

2.1 Validation process at Haaga-Helia UAS

Haaga-Helia UAS is the second largest university of applied sciences in Finland, providing Bachelor and Master level education in Finnish and English, professional teachers' education, specialisation programmes and a variety of corporate and research cooperation projects annually. The institution operates on five campuses and has an extensive network of corporate partnerships and international partner universities. Since 2020, Haaga-Helia is a member of the European University consortium Ulysseus. There are 11 000 students and 650 employees (Haaga-Helia, 2021).

Validation of learning at Haaga-Helia is articulated in three components. (1) *Credit transfer* is applied to higher education studies and encompasses prior studies completed on EQF levels 6 and 7 that may stem from full degrees or degree studies completed in Finland or abroad, in a time frame no longer than ten years prior to commencement of studies at Haaga-Helia. A formal documentation is imperative. This well-established dimension of academic recognition remains however outside the scope of the present paper.

(2) *Demonstration of competences* signifies the process where learning outcomes from non- and informal contexts are in focus. Since all curricula at Haaga-Helia are competence-based, i.e. designed with explicitly described learning outcomes, it is possible to screen learning and competences stemming from non-formal and informal learning contexts towards the curriculum: Are the learning outcomes compatible with the respective curricular expectations, and to which extent? Are they still actual or outdated? Does the theoretical dimension of learning align with practical competences? Students are encouraged to undertake this self-analysis already at the entry phase, and they can rely on counselling from study advisors, when mapping their competence profile.

When the student has assessed her or his present competences in a given field – this can be a module or a course or their combination – s/he initiates the process of validation, by submitting a brief application form where prior learning and competences are described. Lecturers who are in charge of tuition in the respective course(s) design moreover the assignments and activities that need to be undertaken by the student seeking for validation. In many cases, this is a co-creational activity of colleagues delivering tuition in a given field. A leading objective of the demonstration process is that the assessment criteria of the course or module remain the same in both cases: either completing the course according to the syllabus, or getting it validated via demonstration of competences. Ensuring this pedagogical process requires a lot of expertise from lecturers, in terms of designing adequate demonstration modes. Experiences from Haaga-Helia show that whilst the process is considered as insightful and functional by all counterparts, one of the most important challenges is the fear of a heavier workload for lecturers. Demonstration assignments and process need to be

carefully planned, which takes time. Moreover, standard solutions are scarce – most assignments are tailor-made for each course. Most time-consuming parts of the VN-FIL process are not administrative tasks, but an integral component in lecturers' work profile.

Competences are demonstrated and assessed by using a variety of demonstration modes: reports, presentations, portfolios, audio-visual work, written and oral exams, pitching, or role play. In units with a large student body, such as business administration programmes, demonstrations may be organised as collective events (see Demonstration Days, below), however an individual process is often suggested for validation of courses where there are less candidates. Learning may stem from non-formal and informal contexts, and moreover from formal studies on EQF level lower than 6 (Bachelors' degree in the Finnish NQF). In all cases, the precondition is that the learning outcomes meet the criteria of the intended learning outcomes of the degree studies in question, on either Bachelor's or Master's level. The origin and context of learning are not at stake. In theory, all studies can be completed with demonstration, although this is a hypothetical scenario and most students apply for validation of a study load of less than 20–25 ECTS. VNFIL is the right of the student, not an obligation, and many students are inclined to refresh their competences by completing the entire course, even if they might have a lot of competences from prior experience and from studies on EQF level 5.

The full VNFIL process encompasses orientation, self-assessment, guidance, application, demonstration, assessment, formal recognition, documentation, and follow-up. Hence, it aligns with the Nordic Model on Validation, suggested by the Nordic network on adults' learning (NVL, 2021), where the learner is at the centre (Andersson, 2021; Mäkelä & Moisio, 2017). Studies completed via demonstration of competences are not tagged with any specific code or comment in the study register, which marks a difference with credit transfer of formal studies that needs to be indicated therein. Demonstration in the framework of VNFIL is considered as part of the study programme, not only by the institution but also by the social security system ensuring study allocations, whilst transferred credits are not included in the accumulation of ECTS points annually.

Although demonstration of competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts is incontestably a challenging process and requires rigorous process management and monitoring, it is a genuinely rewarding way to encourage students and value learning. Breaking out from certain academic burdens of higher education, it increases student agency (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Taylor & Bovill, 2018) and paves way for more flexibility of study paths. Most Haaga-Helia students work alongside their studies, hence their prior experience includes various work-related competences, as well as other skills. Getting them validated is an interesting option that can reduce the study time, whilst it enhances motivation. For the institution, a functional validation process may become a competitive edge in future, as the decreasing birth rate results in smaller age groups and the competition of higher education institutions becomes even more intense.

Cases (1) and (2) described above draw on learning that has occurred prior to commencement of studies, and the process can be considered as a component of a more traditional vision of "RPL" (recognition of prior learning) or "VPL" (validation of prior learning), widely described in research on education. The third scenario, *Work & Study*, scopes however the future. It is conceptualised as an alternative study mode at Haaga-Helia and stands for a full process of planning and conducting studies in authentic work contexts, to obtain a set of intended learning outcomes of the student's degree. This paper unfolds Work & Study as a promising process of work-integrated learning (Dean & Campbell, 2020) in professionally oriented higher education.

2.2   Three pathways of Work & Study

When conceptualising the process of work-integrated learning at Haaga-Helia (Mäkelä & Moisio, 2017), the overarching objective has been to enable all forms of integration of work and studies. UAS institutions provide professionally oriented higher education, which must include the aspect of studying to become a professional in one's field and facilitate moreover opportunities of synergy across studies and professional contexts during studies. Hence, Work & Study can be conducted with three parallel viewpoints that provide possible pathways for entire study groups, for various lecturer-steered projects, for corporate collaboration, and for individualised study trajectories. In terms of the paradigmatic shift on higher education mindsets (cf. Fang et al., 2004), it is a pedagogical innovation that is gradually overarching all education at Haaga-Helia, providing one solution to the expectations of lifelong learning and quality of education in the changing world. The mission statement of Haaga-Helia (2021) is formulated as "We open doors to future careers." Work & Study is a key enabler in this process.

The *University viewpoint* is a well-established practice; it occurs when a course or a part of a course is conducted via a research, development and innovation project or a case project for an outside customer. Commissioned projects are solidly ingrained in professionally oriented higher education and they provide fruitful occasions to consolidate co-operation relationships of the institution, which is a key success factor in work-based learning practices (Goggin & Sheridan, 2017). In this case, the study mode of a group of students is chosen by the lecturer(s) and the entire group proceeds according to a pre-meditated plan, steered by the lecturer. There may be fewer contact hours than in a conventional, theory-based implementation of the course, and students may be organised in smaller teams, with their respective missions in the project. Outcomes are assessed by the commissioner and the lecturer, and most often there are no traditional exams to assess learning. Practices are manifold however, and an exam based on related theory can be part of the continuum.

A *Company viewpoint* is another option of Work & Study: A company identifies needs for professional development amongst employees or wishes to apply new processes that necessitate further training. In this scenario, a group of employees becomes part-time students at Haaga-Helia for a certain time, and the institution pro-

vides a customised development and study program for them. A part of studies may be conducted with other students, or the corporate group may study as one unit. The most extensive implementations of this mode are long-term processes where the objective is to obtain a full degree, which requires strong motivation and commitment to studies. The most common cases are however cooperation processes with a minor scope. Yet, the benefit is mutual and increased co-operation between the company and the institution may become a hub of potential recruitments. It is noteworthy that positive experiences from this type of co-operation can motivate employees to apply as degree students to Haaga-Helia, to complete their degree at a later stage and benefit of recognition of their prior company-related studies to full extent. A concern in this study mode is to ensure a broader view on the industry, avoiding a situation where most assignments are tailor-made to the same company.

In the context of work-based or work-integrated learning, the focus should be brought on student agency, amidst her/his process of purposeful and meaningful learning (Jääskelä et al., 2021). The *Student viewpoint* refers to cases where a student wishes to get the learning acquired in her/his paid or voluntary work validated in studies. The same preconditions must be met as in validation of prior learning: the learning outcomes must be compatible with the intended learning outcomes of the degree. At various workplaces, UAS students have responsibilities where skills and competences align with those that are incorporated in their studies. The difference with validation of *prior* learning resides in the fact that in Work & Study, the student designs a structured and scheduled plan on how to achieve the learning outcomes, and starts working systematically towards them, being steered by lecturers. This is an individual process where Work & Study constitutes an alternative studying mode, rather than validates prior achievements only. The two processes have in common the need to eventually demonstrate learning and to display evidence, which is more substantial and spans the entire learning curve in Work & Study.

2.3   Work & Study in practice

After the initial self-assessment on compatibility of professional tasks and degree studies, the student submits a Work & Study application and receives thereafter comments from the lecturer in charge of the respective study modules. Study advisors participate in the process by providing processual guidance, whilst substance lecturers ensure evaluation of the Work & Study application that must include a preliminary work plan. It is advised to seek for approval of the workplace already at this stage, in order to confirm that there are no confidentiality issues e.g. with presentation of authentic documentation. Students are encouraged to make a formal contract with the organisation, since it is expected that their representative – a superior, a peer or a customer – provides feedback on the student's achievement at the end. This constitutes an additional voice in the final assessment, although lecturers are in charge of administering the grades, to ensure transparency and equity in the process. When the

application is accepted, it is transformed into a detailed plan where the student takes agency in his or her own learning with the guidelines provided by the lecturer(s).

The "work" component can consist of paid or voluntary work, entrepreneurship, or in some cases even of leisure activities. Active participation in organisations such as the Scouts may increase opportunities for team leadership enhancement, and sport or art related responsibilities, e.g. organisation of tournaments or concerts, enhance event management skills. The focus is always on learning and compatibility with the intended learning outcomes of the degree, not on the context. Naturally, one must ensure that the related theory contents are not neglected, and this challenge is tackled with additional reading and analysis, when judged necessary by the lecturer. In some fields, e.g. hospitality management, experienced professionals with established careers may find a number of occasions to integrate their work to their degree studies, whilst it may be more challenging in some other fields of study.

A standardised process englobes a kick-off meeting, guidance on additional theory studies if needed, regular check-up meetings, and a plan on how the learning obtained via Work & Study is going to be demonstrated and when, before the culmination point that most often takes place in Demonstration Days. Preceded mandatorily by pre-assignments to be submitted prior to the event, these are co-creational occasions where students present their learning outcomes, receive feedback from peers and undergo an evaluation and assessment process ensured by the lecturers. The most optimal structure for a demonstration event combines theory, practice and reflection, which enriches student experience as a learner and enhances her/his agency.

In the best-case scenario, there are alumni from Haaga-Helia participating by providing additional professional feedback as corporate experts in the field. These alumni act on a volunteering basis, and they need to complete a specific training of 5 ECTS in order to participate in Demonstration Days as external feedback providers. The Demonstration Day process has been informally described as a "pedagogical gem" and was awarded the second prize in the global Validation of Prior Learning Prize competition (VPL, 2019). It applies to candidates for Work & Study demonstration as well as for VPL demonstrations.

In work-integrated learning, especially assessment is a challenging task (see Ajjawi et al., 2020) as it needs to be thoroughly designed already at the planning phase of the entire process and of the assignments to be undertaken in the professional context. Since those contexts are mutating and complex, the intended learning outcomes need to be regularly screened towards the expectations of the world of work. Whilst the lecturers should remain in possession of the assessment responsibility, the input from professional contexts and co-operation networks provide more multivocality in processes of work-integrated learning. This facilitates learning design, enables creation of more authentic assignment types and ensures their trustworthy assessment.

The assessment challenge is related to the need of new perceptions on the concept of *curriculum*: rather than considering the higher education curricula as static documents and frameworks, they should be perceived as dynamic processes (Annala & Mäkinen, 2013; Mäkinen & Annala, 2012). Processual thinking shifts the mindset of

lecturers and steers them towards more genuine co-operation with the related professional fields, which generates and enhances co-creational practices. Although input from the world of work is not always possible for all assignments in Work & Study, it is a dimension that merits continuous attention. Collecting corporate feedback by standardised, simple forms is a component providing an added value for students and assessing lecturers.

The most recent implementation of Work & Study is a pilot group in Hotel and restaurant management degree programme (NQF level 6), launched in 2020. It is designed as a group solution where approximately 60% of the 210 ECTS of the degree are completed in Work & Study mode, according to a common schedule, and the remaining 40% by blended and hybrid learning (Bruggemann et al., 2021). Students are organised in teams, according to their work contexts – such as hotels, restaurants, or sales and marketing – and the teams are led by lecturers with extensive professional expertise of this field. Work & Study assignments are designed in lecturer teams and each semester culminates in Demonstration Days. The estimated study time is 2,5 years instead of the 3,5 years that is set as a norm for most Bachelor's degrees in Finland. The mission is demanding, yet rewarding.

Despite many practical obstacles caused by the Covid-19 during the piloting process, experiences are promising, and the pilot group has revealed itself as a motivating option for students who already possess extensive experience in the field of their studies and engage themselves in an intensive study process. For Haaga-Helia, organisational learning from the pilot is valuable and paves way to more variety in applications of Work & Study, moreover increasing co-creational practices amongst the lecturing body and enhancing corporate collaboration networks. Another group with a similar concept is already on its way, which confirms the need for this type of innovative solutions also in the field of higher education.

Most probably, studies with an extensive emphasis on Work & Study will not become a standard model for all students at Haaga-Helia UAS. Experiences on the concept itself are however so interesting that there will undoubtedly be more opportunities to embed one's own professional contexts more tightly to degree studies in future. There are few more efficient ways to increase authenticity of professionally oriented higher education when the process is designed and monitored skilfully.

3.   Conclusion

To bring the observation back to the topics of the volume: extensive experience from Haaga-Helia UAS reveals a set of conditions that need to be met to enable functional validation of non-formal and informal learning, and there are undeniable challenges in this process. It is noteworthy, however, that this paper unfolds process development from one Finnish UAS institution only, rather than providing an overview of all higher education or the national phase of VNFIL development in Finland.

The institutions should nurture an entrepreneurial mindset where it is possible to experiment and test new pedagogical solutions that may function differently in

different fields. Lecturers are eager and motivated to develop co-operation networks and design innovative pedagogical solutions with those networks, if they can have time and resources for this work. It is not a volunteering activity. They should be encouraged to become "bricoleurs" (Annala et al., 2020) who craft and design guidelines, assignments, corporate collaboration and institutional co-creation, in a framework of trust that is supported by pedagogical management sharing the same vision and providing long-term goals and milestones. On a societal level, institutions and organisations should embrace the objective of efficient and accessible VNFIL as an enabler for lifelong and life-wide learning and as a component of efficient continuous education for working adults.

The challenges are not of small scale: one needs to align pedagogy with objectives, design assessment practices meticulously and transparently, and moreover maintain an unobstructed information flow across all counterparts. Functional validation of non- and informal learning should be understood as a competitive edge for a HEI, and not as a supplementary administrative burden. More thorough understanding of the objectives of VNFIL must be disseminated to the world of work, and moreover to present and future students. The students should be at the centre of all development work and acknowledge their own responsibilities to enact full agency.

The entire process cannot be created in one step: it is an organisational continuum reflecting a mindset of development and trust. If the overarching objective of enhancing validation of all learning is embraced by all counterparts, solutions will be found. Occasionally, this goal may force the academia to glance out or even more, to come out from the cherished ivory tower of higher education, to fully discover opportunities of co-creation with the world of work. Eventually, it may turn out to be a fruitful exercise.

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