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The Benefits of Recognizing Prior Informal and Non-formal Learning

***Abstract.** Learning and education are widely discussed topics, naturally focusing the attention of business, academia, and potential higher education students. Recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning is a concept that was introduced into higher education in 2015. Although it has to be embraced by the academic community and institutions in the first place, involving an awareness as well as practical implementation of enabling mechanisms, is it is arguably the most relevant to potential students. It is realized today that recognition of prior learning may bring most benefits to those professionally active, creating new educational opportunities that they could use to increase their chances of remaining in employment. A market research project has helped assess the likely benefits for all stakeholders in the validation and recognition process – universities, employers, and potential students.*

***Keywords:** education, recognition of prior learning, non-formal learning, informal education*

Introduction

Learning and education are pivotal enough to have become widely discussed topics, focusing the attention of business, academia, and – potential and existing – higher education students. The ongoing transition from production- to knowledge-based economy, with the central place given to information and knowledge

derived from multiple, formal and informal, sources, has a major impact on the economic growth of countries and the increasing wealth of societies. At the same time, learning – incidental, informal and non-formal – is becoming, alongside formal instruction, a key ingredient of the education process.

Formal education is delivered in accredited institutions where the curricula and certification policies are aligned to national and international regulations and standards. **Informal education** is traditionally identified with such forms of learning that are voluntary and that are practiced outside the formal education system. Informal learning occurs in environments that are not organized and structured in terms of objectives, outcomes and duration. It arises, for example, in performing professional duties (work experience) or daily activities related to family or leisure. **Non-formal education** is, in contrast, an organized process composed of scheduled activities, where the objectives and time frame are known in advance. It comprises, in particular, in-company training, foreign language learning, or distance learning programs involving the use of open educational resources. Non-formal learning hence primarily takes place at training seminars, distance learning courses, foreign language courses, and through other similar programs and initiatives geared to imparting or updating knowledge, skills, and experience.

Although knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning are not certified or attested by the award of a diploma, degree or another formal qualification, these forms of learning can be seen as a means of reducing inequalities in access to education as well as an underpinning for further formal education.

The pursuit of new learning outcomes is inscribed in society's economic growth, just like lifelong learning spans all stages of an individual's schooling as well as personal and professional life.

The current efforts on embedding mechanisms for recognition of prior learning into European education systems are originally based on the Council (of the European Union) Recommendation of 20 December 2012 (2012/C, 398/01) that mandated all EU member states to put in place fully functional systems for validating non-formal and informal learning by 2015. In Poland, the pathway for validation of prior non-formal and informal learning was opened by the July 11, 2014 amendment to the Law on Higher Education. However, the amendment does not go beyond laying down a framework for valorization of prior learning, leaving the ins and outs to the discretion of higher education institutions (cf. Drewniak, Voss 2015; Prewysz-Kwinto, Voss 2014; Prewysz-Kwinto, Voss, Walczak 2013).

The paper aims to outline the likely benefits that the implementation of a Europe-wide system for validating prior non-formal and informal learning can bring. To obtain insights into this issue, a number of interviews were conducted with scholars, university authorities, employers, representatives of the public administration sector with responsibility for education and employment, and, last but not least, with existing and potential higher education students.

1. Basic issues in the process of validating prior learning

The Final Declaration of the 5th Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Youth (Bucharest, April 27-29, 1998) encouraged European states to promote equality of opportunities by recognizing the training, skills and abilities acquired through non-formal education and by finding ways of endorsing the experience and qualifications acquired non-formally [Council of Europe 2000]. Acting on this policy statement, the European Steering Committee for Youth (*Comité Directeur Européen pour la Coopération Intergouvernementale dans la domaine de la Jeunesse* – CDEJ) set up the Working Group on Non-Formal Education to define a conceptual framework and identify the key aspects of non-formal learning at European level. In October 1999, the Joint Council on Youth (CDEJ and the Advisory Council on Youth) of the Council of Europe's youth sector held a symposium dedicated to discussing these issues. The symposium proposed that non-formal education and human rights education be regarded as priority areas for action in the youth sector across the EU. Its outcomes were summarized at the Thessaloniki Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Youth on November 7-9, 2002 [Doświadczając uczenia 2004].

These conclusions and recommendations were followed up by the inception of such Europe-wide programs as Youth, Socrates or Leonardo that were, in conjunction, intended as a support vehicle targeted at both formal education and non-formal learning.¹ The Youth program was specifically focused on non-formal learning, offering instruments that strove to engage young people in gaining new skills and abilities outside of formal education. At the same time, it facilitated social cohesion and cultural integration and, by adding a European flavor to local projects, helped galvanize youth into action at local level and play an active role in shaping Europe's future.

Observers following the keynote documents and watching the tide of debate at European level would have noticed a growing consensus among EU institutions that non-formal learning is highly relevant to education in knowledge-based societies.² It is now widely acknowledged that non-formal learning practices should be seen as an intrinsic component of education. Hence, non-formal learning emerges as a de facto partner for the formal education system.

A challenge that must be addressed is how to bring certification into non-formal learning (since it implies a degree of formalization). There seem to be good

¹ Cf. www.mlodziez.org.pl/sites/mlodziez.org.pl/files/publication/2172/przewodnik_po_programie_2013_yf.pdf [accessed 13.10.2016].

² Council of Europe 1999: "recognises that formal educational systems alone cannot respond to the challenges of modern society and therefore welcomes its reinforcement by non-formal educational practices." Cf. also: Doświadczając uczenia 2004: 31.

reasons to try and protect non-formal learning from excessive formalization. At the same time, there has to be a way to validate non-formal qualifications, and it does not seem possible to avoid e.g. testing to determine the extent to which non-formal competencies meet the standards applicable to formal education, such as the criteria set forth in syllabi, learning outcomes, course descriptions, etc. Documents that could be used in validating non-formal skills and qualifications include e.g. portfolios, vouchers, alternative diplomas and attestations of skill or ability, employer-provided credentials (descriptions of responsibilities performed and projects completed), testimonials and reports from non-governmental organizations, etc.

The fact that higher education institutions would be involved in valorizing non-formal learning barely undermines or alters the formal education system. Nevertheless, it seems that some of the recent developments (a high dropout rate that incurs excess costs, tough competition in the market, a demographic low, uncertainty about the value of university degrees) will effectively stimulate traditional educational institutions to implement procedures for recognition of prior non-formal learning.

As a matter of fact, lifelong learning spans nearly all of an individual's lifetime, from pre-school education to retirement. Given the nature of the lifelong process of informal and non-formal skill development, it is difficult to prescribe the quality and level of education that falls within the same field but was attained in diverse ways. Importantly, the framework and mechanisms for validating skills and competencies should be built around equality of opportunities and quality standards.

Admittedly, the quality of non-formal and informal learning may largely vary. Higher education institutions should realize that certificates attesting to their students' competencies may not easily fit into their pre-defined learning outcomes. Pressures on product quality, efficient customer service, more effective sales, etc. have recently inflated the need for continuous skill development and documenting achievements with relevant certificates. This is precisely the kind of documents that may be filed by students for consideration in the validation process [Voss et al. 2015: 20-22].

New skills are in demand in all areas of professional activity, hence difficulties in defining what on-the-job training, or learning through work experience, actually is. Further, workplace is not where one can obtain a valid certificate of competency; what occurs in such settings is, rather, informal or implicit learning. Once put in place, a validation mechanism would definitely work better if employers could certify skills acquired in the workplace. Therefore, in countries with full-fledged recognition systems, the business and the academic community work together to define learning outcomes that could be consistently applied within validation procedures. What is at stake, too, is developing a common methodology for assessing skills and qualifications. In the end, it will be a win-win for all parties involved in

the process. Employees will require less time to update or upgrade their education and will be sure to develop exactly the skills that their employers want. Higher education institutions will be able to publish brochures for prospective students applying for recognition of their prior learning, including complete and accurate information about what kinds of non-formal learning can be recognized and how they have to be documented. A functional validation system makes it possible to design individual study paths, as long as potential students are clear about how university describes knowledge, skills, and social competencies for specific fields/programs of study, and how learning outcomes are assessed in each of these areas.

2. Admission and completion requirements for higher education courses – knowledge and skill descriptors

What potential students find important is that learning be accessible to everyone, recognizable, and comparable. In line with a European Commission proposal, key areas of skill and knowledge can be identified alongside learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve. It could be therefore assumed that a potential student who applies for recognition of prior non-formal or informal learning should meet the following knowledge and skill descriptors [European Commission 2005]:

1. **knowledge**: the graduate has a firm grasp of detailed theoretical and practical knowledge of a field. Some knowledge is at the forefront of the field and will involve a critical understanding of theories and principles;

2. **skills**: the graduate demonstrates mastery of methods and tools in a complex and specialized field and demonstrates innovation in terms of methods used; can devise and sustain arguments to solve problems;

3. **competence**:

– autonomy and responsibility – the graduate demonstrates administrative design, resource and team management responsibilities in work and study contexts that are unpredictable and require that complex problems are solved where there are many interacting factors;

– learning competence – the graduate can regularly review and evaluate own learning and identify learning needs;

– communication and social competence – the graduate can communicate ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences using a range of techniques involving qualitative and quantitative information; express a comprehensive internalized personal worldview manifesting solidarity with others;

– professional and vocational competence – the graduate can gather and interpret relevant data in a field to solve problems; demonstrate experience of operational interaction within a complex environment; make judgments based on social and ethical issues that arise in work or study.

Another frame of reference is provided by the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, which is an overarching framework for national higher education systems, delineating generic learning outcomes for first-, second-, and third-cycle qualifications. Under the framework, the first cycle qualification (in Poland, corresponding to the degree of licencjat or inżynier and typically including 180-240 ECTS credits) is awarded to students who [Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Frameworks 2005: 32]:

1. have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;

2. can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach (in the broadest sense, encompassing whatever may be relevant in the context of employability or practicing an occupation, and assuming that some of the domain knowledge will be on an advanced level) to their work or vocation, and have competences (in the broadest sense where skills and abilities are taken to be gradable) typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;

3. have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgments that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;

4. can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;

5. have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

These are then the criteria to be fulfilled by anyone requesting credit for a course in recognition of prior learning, to the effect that recognition will signify that the individual has exactly the kind and extent of knowledge and skill that are expected of higher education graduates in a specific field of study.

3. Recognition of prior learning in Poland

Under an innovative project designated as “PI – A New Model of Instruction – Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Higher Education Programs in Management” (Polish: *PI – Nowy model kształcenia – uznawanie efektów*

kształcenia pozaformalnego i nieformalnego w kształceniu na poziomie wyższym na kierunku Zarządzanie) was undertaken an empirical research endeavor aiming to identify the needs and feasibility of implementing a mechanism for validation of prior learning in Poland's higher education system.

3.1. Research methodology

The resulting conception of the implementation process for a system of validation of prior learning was based on the findings of a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire design was informed by an analysis of documents concerning validation solutions adopted in other European countries, e.g. in the United Kingdom or Finland. Participation in the survey was solicited from 1000 third-year students pursuing part-time Management programs in state and non-state institutions of higher education across Poland. The survey was carried out in December 2012 using the PAPI method.³ The questionnaire was broken down into two sections:

- the first section was made up of 10 questions and explored the students' views on the idea of the higher education sector embracing validation of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
- the second section was focused on the respondents' basic demographics, asking for information on their sex, age, work experience, and current employment status.

The questionnaire included both close- and open-ended questions. Some of them were to be answered with just a "yes" or "no". In many cases, however, the respondent was asked to choose one or more items from a set of options. Wherever possible and reasonable, the respondents were allowed latitude to voice their views on a matter. The findings were processed using statistical methods, primarily structural indicators.

3.2. Survey findings

The survey questionnaire was given to 1000 students. A vast majority of the respondent group were aged 21-30 (83.2%) and studied at non-state higher education institutions (76.2%). Further, a prevalent fraction were those professionally active (69.5%) with 2-5 years in employment (51.9%). There were no significant

³ The PAPI (Paper and Pencil Interview) method is a direct data collection technique through a face-to-face interview with a respondent involving the use of a paper-based questionnaire.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondent group

Property		N	%
Sex	female	545	54.50
	male	448	44.80
	unspecified	7	0.70
Institution	state	224	22.40
	non-state	762	76.20
	unspecified	14	1.40
Age	below 20 years of age	13	1.30
	between 21 and 30 years of age	832	83.20
	between 31 and 40 years of age	125	12.50
	above 40 lat years of age	22	2.20
	unspecified	8	0.80
Current employment status	in employment	695	69.50
	unemployed	295	29.50
	unspecified	10	1.00
Years in employment	up to 1 year	108	10.80
	1-5 years	519	51.90
	6-10 years	205	20.50
	11-15 years	41	4.10
	16-20 years	17	1.70
	more than 20 years	12	1.20
	have not had a job yet	79	7.90
	unspecified	19	1.90

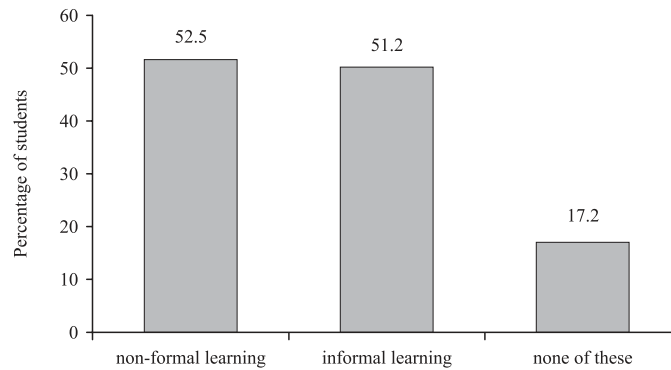
Source: own.

disproportions in the group's gender structure; women slightly prevailed with 54.5%, while men represented 45.5%. The respondents' detailed demographic information can be found in Table 1.

It should be pointed out that knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning were reported by more than 50% of the respondents. A modest 17% of the respondents stated no such prior qualifications (Chart 1).

A closer look at the responses reveals that the percentage of individuals declaring competencies acquired through non-formal or informal learning increases with the respondents' age. For non-formal learning, only 15.4% of the youngest respondents (up to 20 years of age) claimed such competencies, while in the 31-40

Chart 1. The proportion of respondents holding qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning (%)



Source: own.

and above-40 age brackets the proportion soared to 64.5% and 72.7%, respectively. For informal learning, those reporting such qualifications constituted 38.5% of the sample among below-20-year-olds, and nearly 60% in the 31-40 and above-40 age groups. Likewise, the percentage of respondents with non-formal competencies grew with years in employment, approximating 91% among those who have been working for more than 20 years. However, this trend did not hold for informal learning. Similarly, there were no significant differences in that respect between the sexes, with 50% of both male and female respondents indicating non-formal or informal skills. It should be added, though, that there were slightly more women with non-formal competencies (53.9% relative to 50.6%), and more men stating informal competencies (54.6% relative to 48.7%). Current employment status, too, had a marked effect on non-formal learning statistics, with those in employment (61%) stating such learning much more often than those out of work (32.5%). A similar disparity was not, however, observed for skills acquired through informal learning – they were reported by 51.4% of those currently employed and 51.9% of those unemployed.

The respondents having work experience were asked to determine whether there was or is linkage between their job responsibilities and their university education. An affirmative answer was given by 63.9% of the respondents, indicating that they may already have some knowledge and skills consistent with the content of relevant university courses. At the same time, 67% of females and 61.5% of males answered “yes”, and so did 59.4% of state university students and 65.1% of non-state university students. Moreover, the percentage of positive answers increased with age – equaling 46.2% among persons aged below 20, 61.3% in the 21-30 age bracket, 79.2% in the 31-40 age group, and approximating 86.4%

Table 2. Consistency between university course content and the skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning

Reply	Percentage
True for a few courses	63.20
True for a lot of courses	23.40
Not true	13.00
Can't tell	0.40

Source: own.

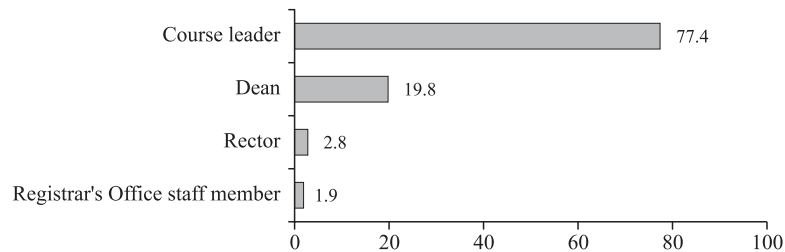
among those above 40 years of age. Also, more respondents currently in employment answered in the affirmative – 70.2% compared to 49.5% among unemployed individuals.

The respondents were also asked to assess consistency between university course content and their skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Nearly two out of three respondents believed that their prior skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education were consistent with some of the university courses, while almost a quarter of them decided that the statement was true for most courses. A more in-depth analysis ascertained that the percentage of responses indicating the former answer was similar for all respondent sub-groups, i.e. regardless of their demographic characteristics. Likewise, the percentage of those choosing the latter response, stating that their prior skills and knowledge were consistent with a number of university courses, ranged between 20% and 25% for all sub-groups. The only figures that stood out, whether notably or slightly, were in the 31-40 age group (29.5%) and among those with more than 21 years in employment (41.7%).

The respondents were also asked if they had ever tried, throughout their years at university, to request credit for a course based on their prior non-formal or informal learning. Only an unimpressive 13.9% concurred. The percentage of affirmative answers increased with respondent age, however: insofar as no such attempts had been made in the below-20 age group, those aged 21-30 had tried in 13.0% of cases, and those from the older age brackets returned even higher rates of positive answers – 16.4% among those aged 31-40, and 21.1% among those above 40. Further, positive responses were more often provided by students with more years in employment. In addition, it should be noted that credits were awarded for relevant courses in three out of four cases, and that positive outcomes were more often the experience of non-state university students (78.7%) than of state university students (59.1%). Notably, the percentage of respondents reporting credits for non-formal learning grew with age. In the oldest age group

Chart 2. Actors who have been approached about the award of course credits based on competencies acquired through prior non-formal and informal learning



Source: own.

(above 40) all requests for course credit based on prior learning, whether non-formal or informal, were granted.

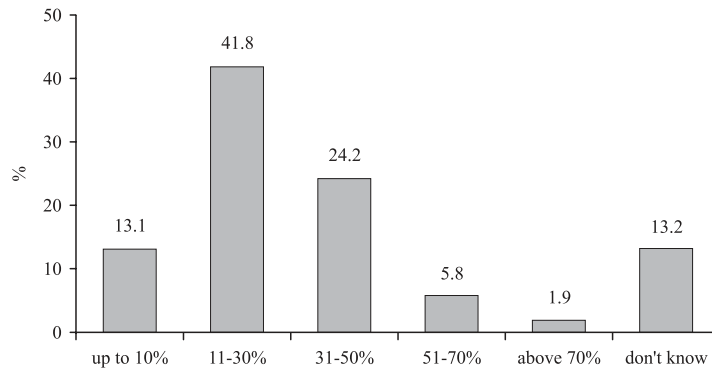
Those who had tried to obtain credit for a course were also asked to state whom they contacted about it. The findings are shown in Chart 2.

More than three quarters of the respondent group contacted their course leader about credit for prior learning, while one in five referred their case to a dean. It should be added that the percentage of those contacting their course leaders was higher among state university students (90.0%) than among non-state university students (73.8%). Conversely, those applying to a dean were more numerous among non-state university (22.6%) than among state university students (10%). Further, the percentage of those contacting their course leaders grew with age, reaching 71.6% among those aged 21-30, 94.7% in the 31-40 age group, and 100% among those above 40 years of age. Rector or Registrar's Office were approached by no one but the youngest respondents below 30 years of age.

The respondents were asked, too, about how many of their university courses can be credited in recognition of qualifications acquired through prior non-formal and informal learning. The findings are given in Chart 3.

42% – the largest faction of the students surveyed – feel that prior learning should be recognized for a maximum of 11-30% of courses/modules in a higher education program. Elaborating on the findings, it can be noted that the respondents' gender or employment status did not have a significant effect on the responses. Remarkable differences were found, however, between students from state and non-state institutions. Non-state university students proved to be less liberal, with 13.8% of them choosing the first (up to 10% of courses/modules) and 45.6% choosing the second option (11-30% of courses/modules), than their peers from state universities – 9.4% and 30.6%, respectively. The third (31-50% of courses/modules), the fourth (51-70% of courses/modules), and the fifth (more than 70% of courses/modules) option were chosen more frequently by state than

Chart 3. The percentage of university courses/modules that may be credited in recognition of qualifications acquired through prior non-formal and informal learning



Source: own.

by non-state university students, with 25.6%, 11.7% and 4.4% responses, respectively, among the former, and 23.7%, 3.9% and 1.1% responses, respectively, among the latter student group.

It should be also observed that support for the first option (up to 10%) increased with the respondents' age, and decreased for the second option (11-30%). There was no such correlation, however, for any of the other options. One might also want to take a note of the fact that the first option was favored, relative to the second option, by individuals with many years (more than 16) in employment.

There may be challenges in documenting knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning so that they can be recognized toward university course credits. For that reason, the respondents were asked to determine which of the documents listed were relevant enough to award course credits against them, which were not so relevant, and which were not relevant at all and should not be approved as a basis for recognition of prior learning. The findings are shown in Table 3.

The respondents clearly deemed that the recognition of prior learning is best based on training courses and seminars or professional certificates and accreditations. This option was indicated by more than three quarters of the respondent group. Two out of three respondents agreed that recognition of prior learning could be based on: work experience, responsibilities attached to a job, offices or honors held, and running a business of one's own. Engagement in voluntary work and running a farm were considered less relevant. An in-depth analysis of the responses did not reveal any correlation to the respondents' gender, current employment status, or work experience. However, the following options declined in relevance with the respondents' age:

Table 3. Forms of prior learning that could or should not be recognized (%)

Item	Definitely relevant	Possibly relevant	Irrelevant
Training courses and seminars	80.4	15.3	3.1
Professional certificates and accreditations	78.6	17.2	3.3
Work experience – proven track record in a position	67.8	27.6	3.9
Responsibilities attached to a job	65.4	29.5	3.6
Offices or honors held (public activity incl. NGOs)	65.4	28.0	5.3
Running a business of one's own	65.2	27.6	6.3
Special awards, honors and distinctions	63.6	28.7	6.3
Personal references/credentials	61.2	30.3	6.8
Voluntary work	46.1	45.0	7.4
Running a farm	45.3	43.8	9.8

Note: Respondents who gave no reply have been omitted from the statistics.

Source: own.

– training courses and seminars were perceived as relevant by 83.3% of the respondents aged below 20, 81.5% of those aged 21-30, 79.5% of those aged 31-40, and 63.1% of those aged above 41;

– offices or honors held (incl. civil society organizations) were considered relevant by: 83.3% of the respondents aged below 20, 66.7% of those aged 21-30, 59.0% of those aged 31-40, and 47.4% of those aged above 41;

– special awards, honors and distinctions were deemed relevant by: 66.6% of the respondents aged below 20, 66.3% of those aged 21-30, 54.1% of those aged 31-40, 31.6% of those aged above 41;

– personal references/credentials were seen as relevant by: 66.7% of the respondents aged below 20, 62.9% of those aged 21-30, 55.7% of those aged 31-40, and 36.9% of those aged above 41;

– community volunteerism was considered relevant by: 83.3% of the respondents aged below 20, 48.3% of those aged 21-30, 36.0% of those aged 31-40, and 20.1% of those aged above 41.

Overall, the older the respondents, the more options were indicated as irrelevant and not to be accepted as grounds for recognition of prior learning:

– training courses and seminars were irrelevant in the opinion of 0% of the respondents aged below 20, 3.0% of those aged 21-30, 3.3% of those aged 31-40, and 5.3% of those aged above 41;

– years in employment were considered irrelevant by 0% of the respondents aged below 20, 3.6% of those aged 21-30, 4.9% of those aged 31-40, and 10.5% of those aged above 41;

- powers and responsibilities attached to a job were deemed irrelevant by 0% of the respondents aged below 20, 3.4% of those aged 21-30, 4.1% of those aged 31-40, and 10.5% of those aged above 41;
- personal references/credentials were regarded as irrelevant by 0% of the respondents aged below 20, 6.4% of those aged 21-30, 8.2% of those aged 31-40, and 10.5% of those aged above 41;
- volunteerism was considered irrelevant by 0% of the respondents aged below 20, 6.8% of those aged 21-30, 8.2% of those aged 31-40, and 15.8% of those aged above 41.

These findings suggest that older individuals tend to be more cautious and skeptical toward documents that could be approved for recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning by higher education institutions.

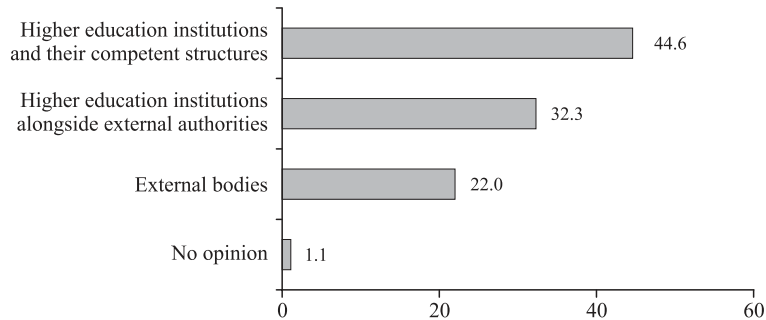
It should be born in mind that, in real settings, there will be a number of cases where a student does have relevant skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning but cannot produce a certificate that attests to these (e.g. the command of a foreign language). Therefore, the respondents were requested to decide whether such students should be given credit for the relevant course based on a preliminary test or exam and then exempt from class attendance. Almost a half of the respondents (47.8%) concurred. 37.4% of the students surveyed decided to the contrary, while 16.3% refrained from giving an opinion. It should be added that there were more state university students (61.2%) than non-state university students (44.2%) who agreed with the proposition. Further, individuals currently in employment were more agreeable to this option (56.8% responding in the positive, and 30.1% responding in the negative) than were those out of work (only 27.1% of positive responses, and 55.8% of negative responses).

The final questions concerned the legal and organizational framework for the validation process. Students were thus asked if relevant legislation should be adopted at the national level.

More than a half of the respondents (53.1%) were in accord with the statement that regulations on recognition of prior learning should be enacted at the country level, while 23.6% of the students surveyed disagreed. 23.3% of the respondents refused to provide an opinion. The responses were broadly consistent in all sub-groups, except in those distinguished by current employment status where the percentage of positive responses was higher among those in employment (59.9%) than among those remaining out of work (38.0%). Negative responses were less common among those in employment (18.1%) than among those unemployed (36.6%).

Further, the respondents were asked who should have the decision making power in recognizing prior non-formal and informal learning: higher education

Chart 4. Where decisions should be made on recognition of prior learning (%)



Source: own.

institutions themselves or, rather, independent external bodies (e.g. NGOs), or both. The findings are plotted in Chart 4.

Nearly a half of the individuals surveyed (44.6%) believed that decisions on recognition of prior learning should be made by higher education institutions or their competent structures. 32.3% of the respondents would split responsibility for these decisions between higher education institutions and external bodies, and 22.0% of them would prefer an external body to administer the process. Overall, a majority of the respondent group held the view that higher education institutions should be in control of the recognition mechanism. On a more in-depth examination, differences in opinion can be discovered between students of state and non-state universities. Whereas more students of state universities pointed to “higher education institutions alongside external authorities” (48.7%) than to “higher education institutions” alone (32.6%) or “external bodies” alone (18.8%), individuals from non-state institutions would be more willing to entrust the decisions to “higher education institutions” (48.6%) than to either “higher education institutions alongside external authorities” (27.4%) or “external bodies” (23.2%). Further, preference for the first response turns out to grow with respondent age, with a score of 30.8% in the below-20 age group and 54.5% among those in the above-41 age bracket.

Respondents who would empower higher education institutions to make recognition decisions were subsequently asked who precisely should make these decisions. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Most respondents thought that the decision making power concerning recognition of prior learning should be delegated to course leaders or competent deans (37.4% of responses on each of these options). Significantly fewer students in the survey would locate the powers at the institutional level, assigning them to dedicated bodies (committees) or rectors. A more in-depth analysis shows that

Table 4. Institutional responsibility for recognition of prior learning (%)

Response indicated	Percentage
Academic teacher (course leader)	37.40
Dean	37.40
Institutional committee for recognition of prior learning	15.70
Rector	7.80
No reply	1.60

Source: own.

more non-state university students would rather see the decisions made by course leader (38.4%) or dean (40.3%) than state university students – 34.2% and 21.9%, respectively. With the other options, the trend of opinion reversed: committees or rectors were more often preferred by students of state institutions (31.5% and 9.6%, respectively) than by students of non-state institutions (12.4% and 7.6%). The percentage of responses indicating academic teachers as those responsible for recognition of prior learning increased with the respondents' age, from 25% among below-20-year-olds to 50% among students above 40 years of age. A reverse trend unfolded in responses indicating deans – it was at 50% among the youngest respondents and at 8.3% only among the oldest age group.

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn from the questionnaire survey involving third-year students in part-time programs in Management and focusing on the recognizability of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning:

1. The students surveyed admit to having skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal (52%) and informal (51%) learning. Only 17% of the respondent group do not have any such competences. As many as 85% of the respondents reckon that university course content is consistent with their non-formal or informal learning.

2. The credentials that are considered the most relevant in the context of validation of prior learning are training courses/seminars and professional certificates/accreditations. The least relevant qualifications are, in the respondents' view, experiences such as running a farm or voluntary activity. Further, nearly a half (48%) of the respondent group felt that students unable to produce a valid certificate attesting to prior non-formal or informal learning should be allowed to take a final exam while being exempt from class attendance.

3. Prior learning should be recognized toward credit for some, but not all, of the courses/modules in a higher education program. The largest percentage of the students surveyed estimated that recognition of prior learning would be fine within the range of 11 to 30% of courses/modules, while 24% of them would

permit credits to be awarded for 31-50% of courses/modules based on non-formal and informal competencies. Non-state university students were less liberal in this respect – more of them would restrict the recognition mechanism to a maximum of 30% of courses/modules. State university students are more often agreeable to allowing more than 30%.

4. The rules and regulations governing validation of prior learning should be enacted at the national level. 53% of the respondents corroborate to this statement.

5. Relevant decisions, i.e. concerning recognition of prior learning outcomes, should rather be made by higher education institutions, and more specifically – by course leaders or deans. More students from non-state universities indicate teachers or deans, while state university students are more likely to favor institution-wide committees or rectors.

Conclusions

Validation of non-formal and informal learning has come to focus the attention of European and national institutions. Socio-economic transformations have put knowledge and information at the frontier of knowledge-based society, bringing together the worlds of practice and education and making competencies acquired non-formally and informally a cornerstone ingredient of lifelong learning.

The benefits associated with recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning include, in the first place, incentives for potential students to sign up for higher education programs on the one hand, and strengthening the drivers of business-academia cooperation on the other.

Most emphasis is placed in this context on: increased employee availability owing to less time spent studying, time savings due to exemption from attending all courses/modules, a substantial improvement in the labor market position attributable to a tertiary education degree, no need to reiterate what has already been learned (at the expense of concentrating on other aspects), a single institution-wide recognition procedure put in place, a synergic blend of the outcomes of formal and informal education, and a promotional effect on enrolment into a specific institution.

It is therefore easy to see that it is a win-win for all parties to the education process.

Table 5 illustrates how recognition of prior learning affects each of the stakeholders in the process. Clearly, benefits derived by potential higher education students will be commensurate with gains for institutions of higher learning and

Table 5. Benefits of recognizing prior learning outcomes

	Beneficiaries		
	potential higher education students	higher education institutions	employers
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – incentive for adults to study for a degree – less demand on students' time – opportunity to upgrade education to a higher (tertiary) level – new career prospects – no need to reiterate what has already been learned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – single institution-wide recognition procedure in place – synergic blend of the outcomes of formal and informal education – promotional effect to boost enrolment – cohorts and groups more homogenous in terms of previous learning – possibility to implement lifelong learning systems – fostering business-academia links and collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – increased employee availability owing to fewer study-related time constraints – creating an efficient staff development mechanism enabling employees to acquire requisite abilities and acquire additional qualifications – influencing staff morale through learning opportunities

Source: own.

employers. Therefore, although it will take time and effort to put all elements of the recognition mechanism to work in concert, it will, once in place, reshape the realities of the formal education system in a manner that will be welcomed by potential higher education students.

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Korzyści wynikające z wdrożenia procesu uznawania efektów kształcenia pozaformalnego i nieformalnego

Streszczenie. *Koncepcje uczenia się i edukacji stanowią przedmiot szerszej dyskusji i rozważań zarówno w środowisku akademickim, jak i wśród pracodawców i kandydatów na studia. Proces uznawania efektów kształcenia pozaformalnego i nieformalnego w szkolnictwie wyższym został wprowadzony w Wyższej Szkole Bankowej w Gdańsku w 2015 r. i chociaż związany jest z odpowiedzialnym przygotowaniem i zapoznaniem z nim środowiska akademickiego, to przede wszystkim dotyczy kandydatów na studia. Dla grupy społecznej aktywnej zawodowo stwarza on nowe możliwości edukacji i zwiększa szanse utrzymania się na rynku pracy. Badania rynku pozwoliły na ocenę korzyści wynikających z wdrożenia procesu, zarówno dla kandydatów na studia oraz uczelni, jak i dla pracodawców.*

Słowa kluczowe: *edukacja, uznawalność efektów kształcenia, kształcenie pozaformalne i nieformalne*