Recognition of
Prior Learning and
inclusion in the
light of increased
migration

Conference report
**Refugees' impact
on Bologna reform**

Swedish Council for
Higher Education

Malmö University 12–13 June 2017

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Background to the conference

Recognition of prior learning has been a topic in the Bologna process since the ministerial meeting in Berlin 2003. "Ministers underline the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality. They are taking steps to align their national policies to realise this goal and urge Higher Education Institutions and all concerned to enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the recognition of prior learning. They emphasise that such action must be an integral part of higher education activity."

However, the Bologna Implementation Report from 2015 stated "...the recognition of non-formal and informal learning clearly remains an area where further action is needed. This applies to the recognition of prior learning as a basis for allocation of credits towards a qualification and/or exemption from some programme requirements and even more so to recognition of prior learning as basis for access to higher education programmes."

The commitments in the Yerevan Communiqué

Thus the ministers within the EHEA committed themselves in the Yerevan Communiqué in 2015:

- to remove obstacles to the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of providing access to higher education programmes and facilitating the award of qualifications on the basis of prior learning, as well as encouraging higher education institutions to improve their capacity to recognize prior learning;
- to review national qualifications frameworks, with a view to ensure that learning paths within the framework provide adequately for the recognition of prior learning.[1]

The recommendations of the Council of the European Union

Recognition of prior learning and lifelong learning is also a priority within the European Union. In December 2012 the Council adopted a recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The recommendation states that the member states should:

1. have in place, no later than 2018 /.../ arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to:
   - have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources;
   - obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences /.../
2. include, as appropriate, the following elements in arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning /.../:
   - Identification;
   - Documentation;
   - Assessment;
   - Certification of the results of the assessment[2]

The current refugee situation

With about 1.3 million refugees coming to the EU in 2015 more than 50% of which are in the age between 18 and 34, the issue of recognition of prior learning and alternative learning paths has become even more urgent[3]. Many of the newly arrived are just about to start their post-secondary education or have studied at higher education institutions without being able to finalise their studies.

1. www.ehea.info/pid34363/ministerial-declarations-and-communiques.html

2. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32012H1222(01)

3. http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

This conference was arranged within the framework of the Bologna Working group 2 on Implementation and focused on RPL and opportunities for lifelong learning.

The survey in the registration

The survey responses regarding the conditions and challenges in working with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was an asset in the planning of the conference, in particular the group discussions. The results confirm that there are challenges of a legal, economic, and procedural nature to overcome. The respondents also stressed the need for more cooperation and exchange of best practise, both nationally and internationally.

The majority of the participants indicated that there are regulations in place for RPL in their countries. However, if one excludes the Swedish responses (which constituted the majority of the responses), about 1/3 answered that there are no regulations in place and that formal documents are necessary.

Time, consistency, financing, ranking and language the biggest challenges

Some survey questions referred to the challenges of using RPL for access and credit transfer for both the general population and newly arrived migrants. The answers revealed that, besides language, the biggest challenges are the time-consuming process, difficulty in achieving consistency in evaluations and decisions, and financing the evaluation process. There were no substantial differences in the answers concerning RPL in general and RPL for newly arrived migrants.

Student ranking is also a challenge when access is granted through RPL. Financing the process is also a challenge which was highlighted.

One comment that reflects a typical response on the survey is the following: "the admission process of refugees and the testing of the qualifications is a time consuming process and in order to consistently make the same decisions it requires lots of coordination on the part of the deans of study of individual fields of study for example."

Wish for guidelines and exchange of experience

When asked what should be done at both national and international levels, the most common survey answer was that national guidelines should be developed. At the international level, the most common suggestion was that there should be more exchange of experience across borders. Others express the need for common guidelines. The answers indicate that the guidelines[4] that already exist are insufficient or not very well known. The issue of guidelines was raised several times during the conference.

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4. The EAR-manual http://ear.enic-naric.net/ema-nual/ and the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publi-cations/3073

Survey results

Consistency in evaluations and decisions as a challenge in working with RPL for access to Higher Education, for newly arrived migrants

- 6 %
- 7 %
- 18 %
- 31 %
- 38 %

- No challenge
- 1. Minor challenge
- 2.
- 3.
- 4. Very difficult challenge
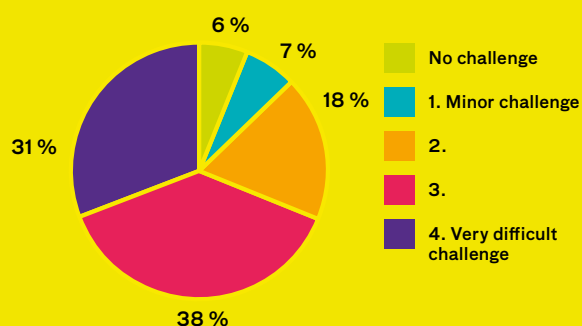
Language as a challenge in working with RPL for access to Higher Education, for newly arrived migrants

- 4 %
- 8 %
- 22 %
- 32 %
- 34 %

- No challenge
- 1. Minor challenge
- 2.
- 3.
- 4. Very difficult challenge
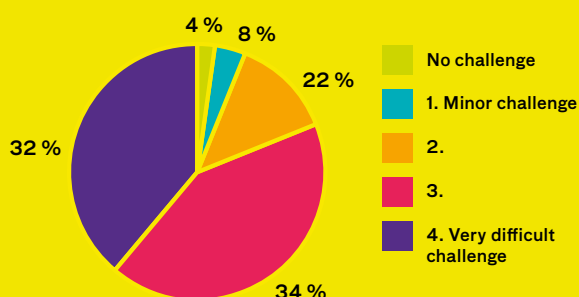
Time consuming process as a challenge in working with RPL for access to Higher Education, for newly arrived migrants

- 2 %
- 4 %
- 13 %
- 39 %
- 42 %

- No challenge
- 1. Minor challenge
- 2.
- 3.
- 4. Very difficult challenge
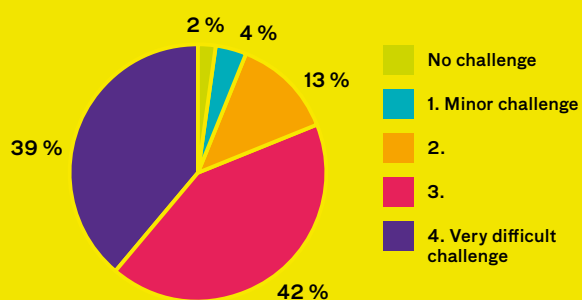
The majority of the participants represented HEIs

- 5 %
- 6 %
- 4 %
- 8 %
- 10 %
- 7 %
- 60 %

- Higher Education Institution
- ENIC-NARIC
- Government authority
- Ministry
- Other stakeholder organisation
- Student union
- Other
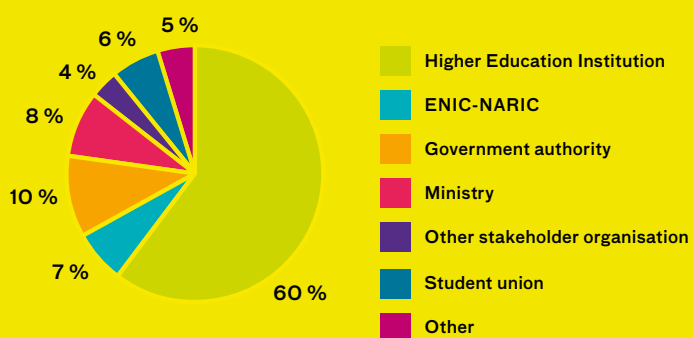
Summary

The aim of the conference was to discuss the state of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in the light of the increased migration. The high number of refugees coming to Europe 2015 put focus on the in many cases not functioning structures concerning access to higher education and credit transfer from unfinalized study programmes. Also, because of demographic reasons, the need to facilitate possibilities for LLL is urgent in many countries. Many European guidelines for how the assessment or validation of competences are already available, but are not commonly known or not implemented.

The conference offered opportunities for peer learning, within the EHEA, on procedures and methods for RPL. Stakeholders presented policies and practical examples of RPL. Some countries have well established systems in place, and others have adjusted laws and regulations to adapt to the situation and to increase the possibilities for access to higher education for new and wider groups. Special focus was attended to access and inclusion of newly arrived migrants in higher education. The conference concluded that there are still many things to be done, and that there are big differences in implementation of RPL structures and legal frameworks allowing alternative paths to Higher Eduacation between countries in the EHEA.

Further, it was stated that a learning outcomes based system is necessary for successful work with validation and RPL. There is a fundamental need for continuous guidance and counselling to the individual throughout the process. The issue of quality and consistency in the validation process was addressed as a key factor, which stressed the importance of clear routines for RPL at HEIs. Funding of RPL processes, and to give incentives for HEI faculty and staff to prioritize the task was highlighted.

The conference, which had a mix of participants from stakeholder institutions, policy organizations, ministries and HEIs from 23 countries also showed that there is a wide gap in policy and practice in many countries. There is a lack of monitoring of what is happening at institutional level, and a need for exchange and discussion of practices among HEI staff; faculty, student counselors and admission officers.

Anders Ahlstrand & Cecilia George
Coordinators of the conference
Swedish Council for Higher Education

Day 1

Welcome

Vice Chancellor Kerstin Tham welcomed conference participants to Malmö University, established 20 years ago with a vision to nurture diversity. She proudly declared that 30% of the university's students have a non-Swedish background, and that a high proportion of all of Malmö University graduates find jobs after they complete their degrees. She concludes that "This is a very timely run conference".

Ulf Melin, Director General, Swedish Council for Higher Education, underscored the importance of life-long learning (LLL) and alternative pathways into higher education. He believes that in recent years, the huge influx of refugees in the EU makes achieving structures even more important.

The fact that 190 delegates from about 23 different countries gathered in Malmö for the conference shows that the topic of RPL is important in the Bologna Process and that there is a lot of work to be done, according to Melin.

Anders Ahlstrand of the Swedish Council for Higher Education, one of the organizers of the conference, drew a line from the Bologna Conference of Ministers in Berlin in 2003, which urged the HEI and all concerned to enhance possibilities for LLL, including RPL – to the Yerevan meeting in 2015 that stressed similar issues.

> *If you need to readdress the need for RPL after 12 years it´s a sign that not enough has been done.*
>
> ANDERS AHLSTRAND

He presented some results from the survey that was conducted by the Swedish Council for Higher Education before the conference to find out what the obstacles were the survey was answered by conference participants: HEI staff, government authorities, Enic-Naric officers, and other stakeholders. See the background chapter for details.

Anders referred to the conference title "**Refugees' impact on Bologna reform – Recognition of Prior Learning and inclusion in the light of increased migration**" and said that it came about as the conference organisers asked themselves if the recent migrant situation would make the issue of RPL pressing enough to actually make the Bologna reform commitment on RPL happen?

Before introducing the first speaker **the moderator, Tobias Smedberg**, explained the use of the red and green slips of paper the participants got upon registration. On several occasions the participants were asked to use them to take a stance on questions posed either by him or a speaker.

Setting the scene

Recognition of Prior Learning, inclusion and alternative study paths in the Bologna Implementation Report

David Crosier, Higher Education Coordinator, Eurydice, started by asking the audience whether they believed that more or fewer than five countries have made progress in implementing RPL in their educational systems between 2012 and 2015.

The number of green cards (yes) and red cards (no) in the audience was about even. The answer was five, exactly, Crosier told us.

Too little progress has been made since 2002, and that message was the purpose of the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué in 2015, he explained. In only 20 countries in EHEA has RPL been possible in some or all education institutions, and in 28 countries, RPL is not possible at all for admission.

"We have a general attitude in the policy level and the higher institutional level that RPL, inclusion, mobility, diversity are positive processes. But there are still key players that are more reserved," Crosier said.

In the Bologna Implementation Report there is also a chapter on the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC). Even though LRC doesn't mention RPL explicitly, it's highly relevant for RPL. Crosier clarified that most of the countries that have embraced it are northwestern European countries, which he pointed out on a map of Europe. Eastern European countries are not yet

following the LRC, which is problematic, according to Crosier, because those countries are the ones that have been drained of young people going to Western Europe to attend HEI.

"And a way to respond to that demographic loss would be through life-long learning and RPL, but that is not happening yet," Crosier said.

He flagged new studies from Eurydice. They would look into obstacles and see if there is enough guidance for key actors. One of the tasks that Eurydice has taken on is data collection to get a better picture of what is happening. That work will continue, Crosier said.

"And we also need to do a better job gathering and sharing good practice. To look at what works and spread it," he added.

The refugee situation – a Bologna Reform stress test?

European stakeholders' view on the current situation and the future

The question whether the current situation is a stress test or not for the RPL reforms was not fully answered. However, new activities have begun and new tools have been developed as a result of the refugee situation, and it keeps the stakeholders on their toes. The speakers tended to agree that the policies that have been developed in EHEA the last decade would solve many of the problems, but only if the policies were implemented, which too often is not the case.

Michael Gaebel, Director of the Higher Education Policy Unit, European University Association (EUA), concurred that the refugee crisis affected universities and caused a lot of activity all across Europe.

EUA has created an interactive "Refugees Welcome Map", where one can see what institutions are doing across the EU. 2015-2016 was all about "first aid", he noted: This aid was delivered through culture, sports, and education (language, welcome courses, and courses for domestic populations as to how to handle this situation).

But from 2016 focus shifted to information and provision of recognition, language courses, preparation and bridging courses, access and admission, career guidance, and very limited alternative provisions and online/e-learning.

As enabling factors for RPL, Gaebel sees institutional strategies, funding, and national support mechanisms as key. Collaboration with other HEIs, government organizations, and NGOs is required. Integration requires accommodation in work, school, university, and social and cultural settings. And he sees a need for improving local and national strategies and policies.

Gaebel also sees a big need for career guidance. Most migrant students want to study medicine, economics or law. "We have to point out other learning paths and career paths, perhaps some that they haven't heard of in their home country," Gaebel said.

Blazhe Todorovski, Vice President of the European Students' Union (ESU), underscored

that it should be everyone's right to be able to get skills and competences assessed according to the Lisbon recognition convention (LRC), regardless of documentation. There are already plenty of regulations, documents and frameworks that have been worked out over the past 15 years. The problem is that countries which have already agreed on the commitments don't implement them. "This is what must be addressed in the BFUG. If everybody just followed the regulations they have agreed on, a lot would be done to give the refugees fair access to higher education," he said.

Mette Mørk Andersen, Policy Officer for the European Commission, said: "Yes, refugees are putting stress on the Bologna reforms, inclusion and integration", and called for better cooperation between relevant actors, ministers, and practitioners. "During the refugee crisis, we saw that methods to collect documents and assess documents were developed and implemented in a handful of countries. How can other countries take part of this knowledge and learn? That is a crucial question," she said.

She presented a tool released by the Erasmus +, the Online Linguistic Support (OLS), which refugees can request for testing their language skills and follow an on-line language course, one of the most important factors for success and access to higher education. According to Mørk Andersen, more than 5,000 refugees have already completed the OLS, and around 50,000 have requested the test from their universities.

Michal Karpíšek, Secretary General of the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), admitted that work on RPL might be lagging behind in Eastern Europe. But he said there are good reasons also for these countries to embrace the idea and that RPL has a great potential for up- and reskilling in lifelong learning.

"One problem is that many countries in Eastern Europe lack trust in RPL. There are few national policies, and few regulations have been implemented. And the cost for RPL, who is paying?" he asked.

After the presentations, the audience was asked to answer two questions from the moderator Tobias Smedberg: First, should there be guidelines for RPL specific for the higher education sector? The audience almost all raised their green cards for yes. And second, should the guidelines be binding? Almost all participants raised red cards: no.

These answers pinpointed the dilemma EHEA faces; it is easier to set up and agree on guidelines and regulations than to actually follow them. Mørk Andersen said that she is familiar with the problem, and that there is always difficulty in making institutions do new things that haven't been tested, especially when there is no funding behind these measures.

Gaebel was a bit harsher in his comments: He reminded the conference goers and panel participants that the Bologna Process is a voluntary process, but once signed up, participants cannot cherry-pick what they will or will not follow.

Policies for Recognition of Prior Learning

Four examples on policy regarding RPL in the Bologna context

The refugee situation has forced certain countries such as Germany and Sweden to develop new policies regarding RPL. France, on the other hand, leans on a long tradition when it comes to recognizing non-traditional learning in higher education. Also presented was the EAR Manual, a practical guide with principles and step-by-step procedures to implement the LRC.

Resolution on admission to higher education for refugees in Germany, reform to recognize prior

Miriam Wiederhold, Head of Section of Germany's Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK), which hosts the German EnicNaric, explained the KMK resolution from 2015 that made it possible for HEIs to allow access and admission to studies for applicants who lack upper-secondary credentials, on account of their flight from their home country.

Around 700,000 refugees asked for asylum in Germany in 2016, most of them from Syria. As a result, the number of applications for professional recognition has increased dramatically, with more than 7,000 in 2016 from Syrians alone. That number will continue to rise during the next few years. In addition to that, there are growing number of applications for recognition of credentials from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq and other countries.

The KMK resolution is a three-step procedure to facilitate for refugees to gain access to higher

education: First, it covers the refugees' legal status, followed by step two, a plausibility check of their educational biography. Sometimes refugees bring documents such as student identification cards or academic transcripts. If these are considered adequate proof, the procedure is done. And finally, if necessary, the third step is to establish proof through a series of tests, such as TestAS (described in a later presentation by Hanna Reuther).

KMK also publishes a handbook, "Access to Higher Education for Refugees," to support the HEIs.

Sweden's National Strategy for Validation

Since 2015, a national delegation has been working in Sweden, with the aim to fulfill the EU recommendations for validation, according to **Elin Landell, Director of the National Delegation for Validation in Sweden**. The over-arching National strategy for validation has recently been presented.

Sweden has a highly knowledge-based labour market. Only 5% of jobs require no specific skills. There is a shortage of skilled labour, both with vocational skills and higher educational diplomas.

But there is also a widening gap between Swedish-born and foreign-born residents when it comes to employment. The proportion of unemployed foreign-born residents is higher in Sweden than in many other European countries.

Many of the refugees that come to Sweden have skills and competences that are highly needed. The aim for the Swedish National Strategy is to validate significantly more individuals' prior learning. Validation should be available across the country, at all levels of the educational system and for a broader range of qualifications in working life.

> *Validation as a pathway to a qualification should have the same high level of legitimacy as formal education, which is not always the case today.*
>
> **ELIN LANDELL**

The target groups for validation are many, and the aim of a validation can vary, she continued. "However, in all cases, validation is a matter of ensuring that an individual's skills meet established criteria. Following a validation, the individual should receive a qualification that has legitimacy and value for further education or in the labour market."

The EAR Manual – Best practice according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention

The European Area of Recognition (EAR) Manual was endorsed by the EHEA Ministerial Conference in Bucharest in 2012. It is a practical guide to implementing the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC), which dates 1997 and celebrates its 20-year anniversary this year.

LRC is the only binding document in the Bologna process, but the implementation has been slow, stressed **Kristina Sutkutė, Information and Assessment Officer, ENIC-NARIC Lithuania, Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC).**

Sutkutė explained that the slowness to implement LRC is in part due to that established systems tend to defend themselves, and in part because the LRC is a very theoretical piece of work with few concrete guidelines. The EAR Manual, available in two versions: one for ENIC-NARIC officers and one for HEIs, was developed to solve this latter problem. The EAR Manual's chapter on recognition of Non-Traditional Learning provides principles, step-by-step procedures to recognize students' learning history, and examples of best practices. It recommends clear and transparent criteria and it focuses on learning outcomes.

"It means that the pathway doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how the applicant got the qualifications," Sutkutė said. "Qualification frameworks may then be used to compare the outcomes of non-traditional and traditional learning as a description based on learning outcomes."

A quote from the guidelines gives a hint of the idea: "Recognition of foreign qualifications should not focus on a detailed assessment of formal criteria related to the foreign qualification, but should, as much as possible, take into consideration what a person knows, understands, and is able to do. This can be achieved by taking into consideration the learning outcomes of qualifications." (EAR Manual for Higher Education Institutions, second edition 2016, p. 48)

The EAR Manual is a living document and continuously updated, Sutkutė explained. It's supported by training platforms and a peer-review mechanism, and the Enic-Naric offices should provide information and help for universities to implement the LRC.

Sutkutė encouraged the conference attendees to have trust in the system.

> **"** *We should accept the decisions made by competent RPL authorities. The learning pathways may look different than from those of traditional students. But they are solid and there is no need to question these decisions.*
>
> KRISTINA SUTKUTĖ

The French national system for Recognition of Prior Learning (VAE)

"In France people can achieve a full degree without attending any formal study course and without passing any exams," **Eliane Kotler, Professor at the Universit**é **Nice Sophia Antipolis, France,** told a somewhat surprised audience.

France has a long tradition of recognizing non-traditional learning, beginning in 1934, explained Kotler. Back then the government provided exams for access without formal qualifications to engineering programmes for people with at least five years of relevant work experience.

The system has been elaborated continuously, and since 2002, the Social Modernisation Act provides the right to every citizen involved in working life to get recognition of his or her prior experience, in order to get a degree or a vocational or other diploma in any subject. Most validation concerns higher education.

The law takes into consideration non-formal, informal and formal prior learning, acquired in various situations (professional or professional-like experience, volunteering, leisure activities and so forth). It states an individual right in the Life Long Learning (LLL) frame and can be used to deliver full or partial qualification.

Kotler briefly described the process, which includes several steps and a jury that makes a final decision to give a full or a partial degree, or rejects the applicant. The total duration for the individual to go through the process is approximately

one year. This aspect as well as the costs are the main problems.

All HEIs are obliged to follow this law, and in 2014, 4,300 degrees were awarded on basis of VAE, which is 1% of all HE degrees in France (out of a total of 420,000). 37% where Bachelor's degrees, and just as many were Master's degrees.

In the discussions that followed the question was raised whether or not any of the policy work given in the four examples would have happened without the refugees. Landell said that the needs of the current situation has affected the targets of the work, but the process started earlier.

"In Sweden, the framework was there but not the tools," Landell said.

Kristina Sutkutė reminded the audience that the Background paper procedure concerning fair recognition of refugees' undocumented credentials has been included in the LRC since 1997, and the EAR manual's Chapter 13 was written before the war in Syria, but the events is a push to put it into practice.

Alternative routes into Higher Education for refugees – experiences of Kiron Open Higher Education

Florian Rampelt, the Director of Education for Kiron, reported that MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses, have developed rapidly in the past four or five years. MOOCs generally don't lead to a formal qualification. However, MOOCs could be an alternative way to enrol refugees in higher education, Rampelt said.

Kiron's model builds on MOOCs and adds to "in real life" components to them. The online study program that Kiron started in 2015 have the mission to enable access to higher education for refugees through digital solutions.

Kiron gathers students online, clusters them in proper subjects, and then enters agreements with HEIs to make it possible for the students to continue into regular higher education. At the most, the students can get one year of Kiron courses recognised.

Kiron has put a lot effort into building trust with the increasing number of universities with which they cooperate. Crucial is, according to Rampelt, that the university must have an ownership of the validation process.

Kiron have developed their courses in line with existing European agreements such as the LRC, the European Qualification Framework, ECTS and also the KMK in Germany.

After Rampelt's presentation, the audience was asked if they would accept MOOCs as a part of RPL. The majority raised their green cards, signalling a yes.

My way into Swedish Higher Education

Fiona Winders, former student Malmö University and Selma Music, former student, University of Borås and University of Gothenburg

What are the students' perspectives when it comes to moving to Sweden and trying to make their way into the higher education -- or a job that is appropriate for their education levels?

Fiona Winders moved to Sweden from England at the age of 43, with a solid professional background as a local political secretary, organizer of election campaigns, and a manager of small NGOs, but with little in the way of formal credentials. She expected to find work as soon as she had learned Swedish. But instead of finding a job, she found herself on a Kafkaesque journey between institutions that turned a blind eye toward her long professional history. It took her 10 years to get a job comparable to the one she had left.

"It was very frustrating. My lack of degree was never a problem for me in England. And my Open University courses and my experience was worth nothing here in Sweden," she said.

Selma Music came to Sweden from Bosnia in 2005 and now works at the University of Borås. Her first step was immigration academy, after three months of Swedish studies at an immigrant course. She was a teacher in Bosnia but could in the end only validate a small part of her previous education and certification in Sweden. "I was left alone, with no one to ask the questions I needed answers to. It was very much a struggle on my own," she said.

A person moving to Sweden need more guidance on several occasions, they both summaries their experiences and continues - If you are not already familiar with the system, you need help asking the right questions.

But there were upsides, Winders said: "Getting in was hard. But while there I met fantastic teachers, and good people. But it must be easier to get in," she concluded.

Day 2

Global challenges and the importance of Recognition of Prior Learning and alternative study paths

Pam Fredman, President of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Rector of the University of Gothenburg, broadened the discussion from Day 1 and brought in a global perspective. She reminded the audience that the Bologna Process as well as the Lisbon Recognition Conventions are not very well known outside Europe.

"Therefore, we must not put up barriers for students coming from other parts of the world because they do not have the system that we have," Fredman said.

She also mentioned the UNESCO's work on a Global convention for recognition, which is planned to be presented at the UNESCO General Conference 2017. The draft Global convention emphasizes the necessity of recognition also of non-traditional learning.

As president of IAU, working with 650 member institutions around the globe, Fredman stressed that the intercultural dialogue is necessary in RPL.

> **"** *We also have to recognize what is beyond theoretical knowledge. We should not go into details but rather look at academic capacity. How do the students put their knowledge into context, what are their capacities for critical thinking?*
>
> **PAM FREDMAN**

There are many ways do this. Fredman emphasized the need for open minds and for sharing best practices, as well as to build trust. She highlighted the IAU World Higher Education Database (WHED), a collaboration with UNESCO, which collects and presents information from 18,000 academic institutions around the world, and constituting a means for trust as such.

What can Higher Education Institutions learn from the Vocational Education sector?

Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational training, supports development of European vocational education and training (VET) policies and contributes to their implementation. The agency is helping the European Commission, EU Member States and the social partners to develop the right European VET policies.

Ernesto Villalba Garcia, expert at Cedefop, described validation as basically a process that aims to make competences visible. Validation simply requires identification, documentation, assessment and certification. However the process must be individual-oriented and based on individual-informed decisions. Therefore it is necessary to have an integrated guidance and counselling system, and services must be connected and coordinated.

Villalba Garcia described a whole toolbox for validation from the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning that includes a combination of methods: portfolios, tests, interviews, debates and dialogue, evidence extracted from work, observations, simulations and third-party reports. Even though the guidelines were developed for the VET-sector, it will also work well for HEIs. In fact, the Cedefop Inventory that collects data from 36 countries about validation shows that there are HEIs using the guidelines.

The tools can be placed in two categories: All learning, irrespective of where and when it takes place, is valuable for the individual and for society. And formal learning needs to be supplemented by validation of non-formal and informal learning.

He also mentioned the European Inventory that collects data from 36 countries about validation[5].

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5. www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

What does recognition of prior learning look like in practice?

What structures are in place, and what still needs to be done?

Four examples from European countries with experience in creating structures for RPL and alternative ways into higher education show differences as well as similarities. Some structures work but are not perfect.

Overall these four examples presented at the conference showed that RPL conducted in a proper way works. It works with students from different backgrounds and also when applied to refugees without documents. Experiences from Germany show that foreign students enrolled through validation or the TestAS examination are motivated and have good chances to complete long university programs.

But these RPL systems are not without problems. The obstacles include lack of guidance and information to students, no monitoring of the RPL process, and low engagement from faculty, who are overloaded with other work.

Other obstacles arise when it comes to central funding systems, especially with crediting students on an RPL basis. Why would an HEI spend resources on giving a degree to a student on the basis of prior learning, when it would be more profitable for the institution (even if not for the society), and also more in line with the central tasks of teaching to enroll the student in a full program?

Example from Malmö University
Mia Andersson, Study and Career Adviser at Malmö University, has several years of experience of working with diversity among students, as well as with RPL/validation.

Malmö University has had systems for RPL in process for several years, both for admission and crediting. While she and her colleagues see a lot being accomplished, Andersson also presented a list of obstacles and problems. "There is a lack of monitoring, a lack of supporting structures and a lack of knowledge" she said. "Generally, the process of RPL is not seen as a part of the task of higher education institutions."

Improper and inadequate funding for RPL at a national and consequently also at institutional level, as well as low incentives for teachers slow down the processes, Andersson explained.

> **"**
> *Teachers, the subject-experts that are absolutely necessary for RPL, are often hard to motivate.*
>
> **MIA ANDERSSON**

But Andersson also sees good things coming. Monitoring is being developed. The Swedish National Delegation for Validation has flagged flaws in the system; the delegation also stressed that resources must be reallocated and that the applicants need better information, delivered earlier in the process.

"The refugee situation shed light on a situation that should have been addressed anyhow," Andersson said.

TestAS, a test for access to Higher Education

Hanna Reuther, Director of the Higher Education Policy Unit, Goethe University, Frankfurt-Main, presented TestAS, a test for access to Higher Education, and how it is used in practice.

Germany launched TestAS 2005 to evaluate foreign students applying for higher education in Germany. The past few years, TestAS also has been used as a tool for assessment of refugees' capacity to follow a higher education programme, when formal documents are missing, and is part of the German KMK resolution for missing documents.

"It's a cognitive aptitude test, measuring the applicant´s general intellectual ability and subject-specific study aptitude. It has good prognostic validity when it comes to future success in academic studies," Reuther explained.

In 2015 and 2016, more than 4,000 refugees took the TestAS, and the numbers are expected increase in 2017.

The results of the test, which has a general and a subject specific part, gives either direct and general access to higher education institutions in a specific sector of higher education, if scores are above average.

If the test result is less than average in the TestAS, it does not give direct access to a bachelor's program, but the applicant can be enrolled in a preparatory program for further studies.

"One of the advantages with the TestAS is that the students who undertake the test have proven to be more motivated and learn German faster than other students," Reuther said.

The Scottish policy for RPL in practice

Ruth Whittaker, Director of Academic Quality and Development, Glasgow Caledonian University, explained the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. Together with national RPL guidelines, this framework has been a driver for RPL for nearly two decades in Scotland.

The key is learning outcomes. "Whatever you've learned and wherever you've learned it, it can be validated and measured," according to Whittaker.

The focus is on fair access. Through the framework, students can gain entry to a program or gain credit within a program or towards a qualification.

But Glasgow Caledonian University has taken on a broader approach to RPL. The guidelines are cross sectorial, not restricted to HEI: "RPL has multiple purposes. It's not just about admission to higher education, but also a way to enhance the transition between formal and informal learning and create pathways for people to plan their careers. It is used in workplaces and to enhance progression between vocational and applied education to theoretical educational pathways," she said.

Whittaker also underlined the value of the RPL process itself, which she said she thinks is underestimated.

> **"**
> *It's a learning process.
> It helps people to identify
> their skills, and hopefully, as
> a result of RPL, people can
> plan their learning pathway
> built on prior learning.*
>
> **RUTH WHITTAKER**

But the activity is still far too low and she sees major difficulties for people with informal learning, when they are asked to transform their knowledge into an academic form. "We are asking our applicants to distort their highly contextual informal learning and twist them into a form that is understandable for the academy. It's like putting a square peg in a round hole", she said.

Whittaker touched on the theme Fredman mentioned earlier in the day: that we need to take a broader look at just what value skills and academic capacities have. This re-evaluation is especially important when we face challenges from large numbers of migrants from outside of Europe entering higher education.

Toolkit for admission of refugees without documents.

Katrien Bardoel, Senior policy advisor, Nuffic, the Netherlands, presented a toolkit that has been developed for Dutch higher education institutions to use for admission, when refugees do not have formal documents of their qualifications.

The Netherlands has a system of credential evaluations for refugees facilitated by Nuffic, included in the obligatory introduction programme, which all migrants follow. When it comes to refugees without documents, there is a special procedure called "indication of education level", based on the EAR-manual's background paper procedure.

2016, Nuffic evaluated more than 4,000 degrees from students coming from refugee-countries. Only a small number of the applicants did not have any documents, "which shows that most refugees gather their credentials before they flee," Bardoel said.

After the "Indication" is issued, the procedure can continue at HEIs. In the toolkit, there is information on legal frameworks, a flowchart and examples of structured interviews. The toolkit is composed to ensure transparency and consistency in the process between otherwise autonomous institutions. The interviews are combined with additional testing in cases where there is doubt, for example, using Toefl, GMAT, 21+ and other long-established tests. (+21 test: all applicants over 21 of age may do a test for access to studies also without documents/formal training)

> "*The ambition is to have a flexible approach to admission for students without documents and develop customized procedures.*
>
> **KATRIEN** BARDOEL

During the following discussion, Bardoel touched on the fact that in The Netherlands, solid procedures exist to recognize degrees from foreign countries, but it is not always as easy to get employment.

"Either the employers are reluctant because they don't trust the system, or they see an actual gap in knowledge. These are the gaps which the universities need to fill with bridging courses. Today the student often starts all over, which is a waste for all," Bardoel concluded.

Group discussions

The participants were divided into small groups to discuss a number of practical cases of RPL. Each group was asked to assess whether a person could

be admitted to studies or not on the basis of work experience, un-finalized studies etc. The purpose of the group discussion was for the participants to experience different ways of approaching validation and RPL and to discuss the practical conditions that needs to be in place to make it work.

The group discussions showed that there is a need for a legislation that not only allows RPL but also encourage it, for instance through funding incentives for institutions and staff. There is also a need for clear institutional practices that are supported by the entire HEI. The central role of guidance and counselling was also emphasized in the group discussions.

Lessons learned
– what is the next step forward?

Cecilia Christersson, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Malmö University and Liva Vikmane, Vice-President, ESU had been asked to take part of the conference with a specific focus on the finale; to propose the next step forward. Vikmane concluded that despite all the guidelines and legal commitments, refugees face much more obstacles and less chance to get access to higher edcuation in Europe and globally than the population in general.

Vikmane wants to see more synergies between policy makers and practitioner and stronger political will. "The important thing now is to make countries follow the existing guidelines and live up to their commitments in the LRC" she said.

Cecilia Christersson said that governments and evaluators need to monitor the continued work with LLL and RPL follow up with what happens to the institutions that take the task of LLL and RPL seriously and those that don't. She wondered: will we have different groups among universities, where the traditional elite universities do not enroll refugees according to RPL?

"We need both trust and courage to give accreditation to refugees without documentation of their educational status. We also need a discussion on what the outcome is of higher education. Do we produce enough good problem solvers? Do we produce people who know what to change and what not to change?"

It is important to follow up of impact of validation process, what happens after the validation has been done?

She believes that a decade from now, HEIs will have a very different approach towards accreditation, diverging in many ways from today's practices. And in the process of getting to that new approach, it is important to be courageous, try new things and not to be too afraid to make mistakes. Going from good example into practice, it might mean that you have to changes things, which is difficult. She hopes that we do not have to wait 10 years for the next conference on the theme.

Finally, Vikmane and Christersson both thanked the organizers of the conference for raising many relevant questions and topics.

Glossary

Academic recognition Approval of courses, qualifications, or diplomas from one (domestic or foreign) higher education institution by another for the purpose of student admission to further studies.

Access Certain qualifications convey the holder with the right to access specific qualifications/courses/programmes at a particular education level within the education system in which the qualification was taken. For instance a first cycle degree usually provides access to second cycle studies.

Background Paper (refugees) In cases where refugees, persons in a refugee-like situation or others for good reason cannot document the qualifications they claim, competent recognition authorities are encouraged to create and use a "background paper" giving an overview of the qualifications or periods of study claimed with all available documents and supporting evidence.

The Bologna Process The Bologna Process launched with the Bologna Declaration, of 1999, is meant to ensure more comparable, compatible, coherent and attractive systems of higher education in Europe. Implemented in 48 states, which define the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) The executive structure supporting the Bologna Process in-between the Ministerial Conferences.

Competence The ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. Some competences are subject-area related (specific to a field of study), others are generic (common to any degree course).

EAR-manual Best practice based on the Lisbon Recognition Convention. It aims to provide guidance and clarity on recognition practices across Europe and beyond.

EHEA The European Higher Education Area. See The Bologna Process.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF) A translation device to make national qualifications more readable across Europe, promoting mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. The NQF of a country relates to the EQF.

Flexible learning paths A flexible learning path refers to any situation in which the graduate has obtained a qualification in a way that is not the standard learning path followed by the mainstream student. The flexibility of the learning path may be:
 - access and admission to the programme not based on the standard requirements in terms of entrance qualifications
 - exemptions of part of the programme based on a previous obtained qualification or period of study;
- exemptions of part of the programme, or the whole programme, based on non-formal or informal learning;
 - credit transfer during the programme.
 - distance learning.

Learning outcome Statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning.

Life-long learning All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, knowhow, skills, competences and/or qualifications.

Lisbon Recognition Convention The key legal instrument for recognition of qualifications across UNESCO's Europe and North America Region. It aims to ensure that holders of a qualification from a signatory country can have that qualification recognised in another.

National Qualifications Framework (NQF) An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications (e.g. at national or sectoral level) according to a set of criteria (e.g. using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes. See EQF.

Non-traditional learning Non-traditional learning encompasses all skills, knowledge and competences acquired outside the traditional classroom setting, through other types of learning activities in a non-formal context and may lead to a set of relevant learning outcomes comparable to learning outcomes achieved the traditional way. It may be considered the overarching term for various forms of learning including informal and non-formal learning.

Qualification Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a recognised programme of study.

Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) The QF – EHEA is an overarching framework for qualifications in the European higher education area, comprising three cycles, generic descriptors for each cycle (Dublin Descriptors) based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. QF EHEA is also known as the Bologna Qualifications Framework.

Recognition of Prior Learning The validation of learning outcomes, whether from formal education or non-formal or informal learning, acquired before requesting validation.

Transfer of credits The process of having credits awarded in one context (programme, institution) recognised in another formal context for the purpose of obtaining a qualification.

Workload Indication of the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

Source: The EAR-manual and ECTS Users´ Guide

**Education, exchange, enrichment
– helping you take the next step**

The Swedish Council for Higher Education is a government agency tasked with providing support to the education sector through a number of various activities. The council is located in Stockholm and Visby.

UHR's activities include:
- coordinating admission to higher education,
- providing information and support to those interested in studying at the higher education level,
- producing the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (Högskoleprovet),
- widening participation and preventing discrimination in higher education,
- recognising and evaluating foreign educational qualifications,
- facilitating international exchanges,
- managing and developing IT systems.

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