

ДИСКУССИИ

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RECOGNISING NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING: MODERNISING RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION OR IRRELEVANT?

Abstract. *The aim of the investigation is to assess the relevance or otherwise of the Validation of Non formal and Informal (VNIL) for Russian universities. VNIL practices have been in existence since the 1930s and are in use around the world but not in Russia. The paper defines VNIL and the practices associated with it. It discusses why policy makers in UNESCO, the OECD and the EU believe there should be more widespread adoption of such practices, to meet the needs of citizens and organisations in a globalised economy.*

Methods. The paper reviews leading literature in the subject including extensive international reviews of practice. A case study is included to illustrate how VNIL is used in one university in England.

Results. The paper concludes that VNIL is as relevant for pedagogic practice in Russia as elsewhere.

Scientific novelty. The subject is a new one for a Russian readership, with few if any papers published in Russian.

Practical significance. The paper briefly outlines the main uses of VNIL and its main practical significance is to spread ideas in respect of contemporary pedagogical practice in higher education.

Keywords: Validation of Non formal and Informal learning; Experiential Learning; European Qualification Framework.

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ПРИЗНАНИЕ НЕФОРМАЛЬНОГО И НЕОФИЦИАЛЬНОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ: МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЯ РОССИЙСКОГО ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ ИЛИ РЕГРЕСС?

Аннотация. *Цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы оценить уместность или, наоборот, бесполезность «валидации неформального или неофици-*

ального обучения» (VNIL) для российских университетов – методов, которые существуют с 1930 гг. и используются во всем мире, но не в России.

Методы. Проведен обзор ведущих научных исследований по заявленной проблеме, а также анализ литературы по практическому применению системы VNIL.

Результаты. Описано социологическое исследование, которое демонстрирует, как система VNIL применяется в одном из университетов Англии. Рассмотрены причины, почему представители ЮНЕСКО, ОЭСР и политические деятели ЕС полагают, что данная система должна получить широкое распространение в мире. Главный аргумент состоит в том, что она отвечает потребностям граждан и организаций в сфере глобальной экономики. Автор приходит к выводу, что система VNIL столь же важна для педагогической практики в РФ, как и в других развитых странах.

Научная новизна. Система VNIL является недостаточно изученной в России. Данная публикация – попытка восполнить этот пробел. Дано авторское определение понятий «система VNIL» и «методы VNIL».

Практическая значимость. С целью распространения данной системы VNIL излагаются главные преимущества ее применения в современной высшей школе России.

Ключевые слова: валидация неформального или неофициального обучения (VNIL); эмпирическое обучение, европейские квалификационные рамки (единый уровень оценки знаний, квалификаций и компетентности студентов вузов (в рамках Болонского процесса)).

Introduction¹

Non-formal and Informal Learning (NIL) contains two concepts not one. Non-formal learning refers to unplanned and unstructured learning gained from direct experience, especially in the workplace, whilst informal learning is best understood as planned, structured learning gained outside the formal educational system (Bjornavold 2000). Since both forms of learning exist outside schools, colleges and universities they are not formally recognised and it is difficult for others to place a value on their worth, unlike learning which occurs in formal educational settings. We know that someone who has been performing in a job and has attended training events for many years has acquired much learning but we do not know how much and at what level. Validation is therefore the process of translating such learning into recognised qualifications or academic credit as part of a formal qualification. In many countries it has been possible to convert this learning into academic credit and qualifications for many years although the term 'Non-formal and Informal Learning' does not appear to be, as yet, widely used. The most commonly

¹ VALERU is a TEMPUS funded project led by Danube University Austria designed to introduce VNIL systems and practices in Russian universities. The authors are all participant members (<http://www.valeru.eu>).

used terms include Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (Eire, Australasia, South Africa); Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and Prior Learning and Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) (USA, Canada); Validation de Acquis des Experiences (VAE) (France); Validering (Sweden) and the Accreditation of Prior Learning (UK).

There are many reasons why VNIL practices have been adopted and appear to be increasingly so. First, developments in theories of learning and knowledge challenge assumptions made in respect of both on campuses. Second, it is often seen as a way of widening participation in the formal educational process for otherwise excluded groups, particularly adult learners. Third and more recently developments in economic growth and human capital theories have resulted in higher education being seen by governments as less a pure public good and more a prerequisite for economic prosperity. This has resulted in pressure from governments and supranational bodies to accommodate new models of learning, including VNIL. Third, the increasing recognition of the necessity for formal learning throughout our working lives ('lifelong learning') requires the development of different approaches to pedagogy. In particular the requirements of adult learners in the workplace participating in higher education are significantly different from those of younger, full time students with little or no professional experience. Finally the explosion of and demand for knowledge (the 'knowledge society') relevant to application has resulted in the creation of new forms of syllabus where practical learning is central. The rest of the paper weaves these various strands into an account of how practices have developed and their potential for application in Russian higher education.

Developments in theories of knowledge and learning: origins in US practices

Many of the twentieth century developments in learning theory have occurred within the tradition of American pragmatic and social constructivist thinking. Pragmatists regard thought not so much as a means for interpreting the world but as the basis for problem solving and action. The most important figure in this respect is John Dewey (1910) who considered reflective thinking, the cognitive process underpinning conscious actions as central to the way we learn in the real world. Dewey considered reflective thinking a rational, linear process with four conceptually distinct phases. In stage one we consider various suggestions as the possible solution to our problems; in the second stage we try to imagine how each of our suggestions might work in practice; in the third stage we develop a kind of working theory as the basis for action; in the fourth stage we elaborate the idea, perhaps refer to evidence; in the fifth and final stage we act and test the idea in practice. If it is to Dewey we owe the idea of reflective learning, it is from Kurt Lewin (1951) the term 'experiential learning' originates. Lewin was a Gestalt psychologist

whose interest lay in the way individual behaviour is governed by the totality of the environment surrounding them and their interaction with it. The starting point for Lewin is therefore not an internal thought process but an external stimulus. Lewin called the total external sphere inhabited by an individual their 'lifespace'. Within it are 'fields', such as school, home, workplace and so on. Lewin developed his ideas on experiential learning following a group leadership learning programme in 1946 where participants debated one with another what they had learned from the experience. These discussions also included the originator of the programme so that discussion also included analysis of the theories underpinning the development programme. Lewin concluded that active learning best occurs immediately following direct experience in an environment where others are able to enter into dialogue. More generally learning can be said to relate to particular experiences within our lifespace and the fields within. These ideas are very similar to those of the Russian Vygotsky (1978) and his concept of the 'zone of proximal development'. Vygotsky was a contemporary of Dewey and Lewin but he was not translated for many years and his contributions to learning theory were only recognised in the West from the 1970s. Vygotsky's influence has been in other areas of practice- notably his concepts of 'Zones of proximal development' and 'scaffolding'.

Both Dewey and Lewin gave currency to the validity of what we might now call non-formal learning and from the 1930s onwards a number of American universities have allowed those without formal qualifications access to courses on the basis of open examination. The biggest impetus to this form of access occurred after World War II. Most of those fighting in the War lacked formal qualifications but held technical qualifications awarded by the Armed forces. In 1946 The American Council for Education began evaluating military programmes/ experience as the basis for university level learning. In 1947 the Educational Testing Service was founded to devise standardised entry exams. Other bodies followed suit. Over the years other assessment practices developed and the idea that students without recognised qualifications could still qualify for entry to university admission by exam gained acceptance (Travers 2012).

While the majority of Colleges and Universities only recognised experiential learning as demonstrated by successful completion of a standardised exam, others were also willing to accept evidence of learning of a less standardised nature. A Commission on Non-Traditional Study was created in 1971, funded by the Carnegie Corporation and other philanthropic donors. Their initial survey of practices resulted in a three year research project called the Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) from 1974. In 1977 it established itself as a non-profit making body and re-named itself the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (<http://www.cael.org/home>). Its mission was and remains the creation of common approaches to the assess-

ment of experiential learning and its propagation. This was greatly assisted by the creation of a number of new institutions (13 between 1968 and 1974) aimed principally at adult learners and with PLA as part of their curricula. The institutional mission of these establishments associated experiential learning with ideas of social justice since many of their students came from what are referred to as 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Rather than exams PLA in such institutions was assessed on the basis of a portfolio of evidence.

In the following years increasing numbers of institutions recognised PLA not just as the basis for admission but also as a credit bearing constituent of accredited programmes. These developments in the US are widely seen as extending the educational provision of hitherto excluded groups, especially adults. Adult learners not only have experience to draw upon but are held by many to require a different approach to formal learning. The theory of andragogy as opposed to pedagogy (literally the leading of children) holds that adults have a strong preference for determining their own learning requirements tailored to their individual circumstances (Knowles, Holton and Swanson 1998). Traditional curriculums have therefore been adapted in many US institutions so that credit can be awarded for practical experience.

The globalised economy, distributed knowledge and lifelong learning

While the growth of VNIL practices has historically been spurred by a concern by educationalists to enable formerly excluded social groups to participate in the formal educational system, in recent years there has been new motivations. In contrast to earlier initiatives which have been essentially bottom up more recent economic changes and our understanding of them has led to an interest by policy makers at a strategic level so that the pressure to spread practice is now also top down. In recent years international bodies including UNESCO (2012), the OECD (2010) and the European Union (CEDEFOP 2009; European Council 2012) have all advocated the greater use of VNIL in the formal education system.

The interest of policy makers appears to reflect a variety of factors. First there is undoubtedly an increased global demand for accredited learning, often from adults seeking part time study. This is manifest in the development of public universities, often using e-learning such as the Indira Ghandi National Open University in India (1.8 million students) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) (250,000 students) (Brown 2011). Accompanying this is the unprecedented growth of private provision similarly exploiting technology via companies such as Laureate, Kaplan and Apollo (Altbach and Levy 2005; Cummings 2006). Such provision has very high attrition rates and often poorly serves the needs of students (United States Senate 2012). Policy makers may wish to see a type of provision better suited for adult learners.

A second reason is an increasing awareness of the role education plays in the process of economic development. Historically theories of economic growth have been dominated by explanations involving trade and technology but since the 1960s, human capital theory, which emphasises the ability to exploit the factors of production, has come to dominate. Schultz (1963) an agricultural economist, demonstrated that improved yields did not depend upon greater investment in fertilisers and farm machinery but in educating farmers to better exploit technical progress. Schultz then extended his approach to demonstrate that the yield on investment in people across all sectors was greater than the returns from investment in physical capital such as new plant and machinery. Becker (1964) extended Schultz's analysis to explain that public investment in education and even health care could be regarded as investments in human capital. More recently Lucas (1988) has demonstrated how the accumulation of human capital is facilitated by both formal education and learning by doing. Barro and Sala I Martin (2004) have produced strong empirical evidence on the positive effect on economies of spending on education. Aghlion and Howitt (1998) argue that the rate of economic growth can only be increased by additional investment in technology, to increase productivity and that this process is in turn facilitated by extra investment in human capital.

A third reason is the change in the global economy and labour market. While it is probably the case that investment in human capital has always underwritten economic performance, the development of such capacity has greater salience in a globalised economy where much routine work has been replaced by capital. Workers now need to ensure that they continue investing in learning, formal and non-formal as the life cycle of occupational roles shortens and becomes more complex (Field 2006). Reich (1989) has described how the labour market is dividing between what he calls 'symbolic analysts'- workers able to work with abstractions- whether it is linguistic, mathematical, software and so on- and the rest. This group, who invest heavily in learning at all stages of their lives, are the winners in the global labour market. They are the city traders, writers of software, marketeers, multilingual, mobile and international in outlook. Traditional university provision with its emphasis upon undergraduates is often ill suited to their needs.

Accompanying these changes to the global economy are changes in the requirements for and distribution of useful knowledge and uncertainty about the ability of universities to adapt to change. Gibbons et al (1994) distinguish between 'Mode 1' and 'Mode 2'. Mode 1 knowledge is universal, peer reviewed and formally constructed. It is typically knowledge constructed in and transmitted by universities. By contrast Mode 2 exists in many contexts, has multiple stakeholders - in commercial research centres, in professional bodies, in groups of practitioners. It is not universal but situated (Lave and Wenger 1991) and enables us to run businesses, professions, governments, universi-

ties. The increasing complexity of Mode 2 knowledge and the failure of universities to recognise its value has resulted in industries and companies to increasingly create their own qualifications outside the academy. Indeed it can be argued that the dominant model of the public university based upon that originally developed at the Humboldt University in Berlin (Schwingses 2001; Thorsten 2003) is better suited to the requirements of the nineteenth and twentieth century than the twenty first. The key organising principle of universities- subject discipline (Becher 1989) is poorly adapted to facilitate the development of professional knowledge, which is organisationally specific (Nonaka 1991), trans-disciplinary (Nicolescu 2002), is diffuse and may be tacit rather than explicit (Polanyi 1983) and is likely to be embodied in actions rather than formally described (Eraut 1994). Unsurprisingly there are many who believe our approach to vocational qualifications needs fundamental change to ensure its continuing relevance (Billett 2009, Boutin et al 2009; Hall 2009).

Validation of Non-formal and informal learning-varieties of practice

Perhaps the final reason for the interest of policy makers is that while VNIL has been successfully delivered for decades it is still an essentially marginal activity in universities although there is no shortage of literature describing practices. There are a number of pan-European surveys (Corradi, Evans and Valk 2006, Weber 2013; CEDEFOP undated, European Commission 2014) as well as shorter papers summarising European practices (Colardyn and Bjarnevold 2004; Annen 2013). Global surveys include the OECD (undated), Werquin (2010) and Harris, Wihak and Breier (2011). The Prior Learning International Research Center (PLIRC) at Thompson Rivers University in Canada holds an international database of papers and research (<http://ideasketch.tru.ca/>). There are also a number of smaller national studies including Canada (Belanger and Mount 1998), the USA (Brigham and Klein-Collins 2010), Australia (Service Skills Australia 2010), Scotland (Whittaker et al 2011), Denmark (Andersen and Laugesen 2012) and England and Wales (NIACE 2013). There are also shorter summaries of practice in Slovenia (Omerzel and Sirca 2007) and Italy (Di Rienzo 2014). From the literature it can be concluded that although practices are increasing over time, especially in the USA, France, Canada, Australia, South Africa and the UK, there is still some way to go.

The literature demonstrates that VNIL is used for a variety of purposes. As indicated it is sometimes used as the basis for admission to a formal programme of study. It is also used as part of an educational programme, using either what has been called a 'Procrustean' approach, where the non-formal learning of the student is only accepted so long as it is consistent with a pre-defined curriculum or 'Trojan horse' where the curriculum is adapted to meet the acquired learning of the individual (Anderson, Fejes and Ahn 2004). There

are also two methods of assessment- 'credit exchange' where a student is awarded credit or a qualification on the basis of a portfolio evidencing achievement or the 'learning development' model where the portfolio is used as the basis for the award of credit but assessment is on the basis of reflective learning from the experience evidenced in the portfolio (Pokorny 2011).

Barriers to adoption

The greatest progress to adoption of VNIL practices appear to have occurred in the USA. A survey in 1980 by the American Council for Education (1981) found that most of the 2000 institutions who responded recognised PLA as credit bearing, 1100 also indicated they accepted portfolios as well as exams. Later research indicated a further spreading of practice and shed light on factors associated with such practices (Hoffman et al 2009). The most important factors are institutional mission, commitment and institutional support. Pitman and Vidovich (2013) in their study of Australian universities draw attention to the widespread belief in a hierarchy of knowledge and reinforced the US finding that institutional mission and status is a key determinant as to whether such practices are adopted. In essence it would seem the less research intensive, more teaching/ student focussed institutions are likely to use VNIL. Another barrier appears to be the dominance of subject discipline. Cooper and Harris (2013) in their South African study found this a major barrier to the adoption of VNIL since it required the highly restrictive 'Procrustean' approach identified above. In similar vein Whittaker et al's (2011) survey of Scottish practice identified the lack of flexibility in curriculum design as a major barrier. Hurlimann, March and Robins (2013) detail how difficult it is to change a university curriculum. A key barrier is 'cumbersome, inflexible and lengthy administrative procedures' (p639). Finally, Sin's (2014) recent study on the use of learning outcomes or in many case their lack of use, also highlights the importance of having a developed understanding among tutors about how learning programmes are constructed as an important pre-condition for integrating VNIL into the curriculum.

Where VNIL has been adopted American research has identified a number of positive outcomes associated beyond the awarding of credit (Travers 2011). There is for example a strong association between the use of VNIL and high completion rates, regardless of all other factors (age, sex, programme, type of institution and so on). Students also obtain higher grades and report a greater transformational effect of learning than on programmes without it.

The spread of practice: a case study of the University of Chester, England

As in the US there is a fairly long history of small scale use of experiential learning in formal educational settings in the UK, notably from the 1950s

where it was an integral part of 'sandwich degrees' – where students completed a four rather than three year bachelor degree with one year spent in industry. But it remained a very small part of the learning landscape until the 1980s. Change occurred largely through the efforts of a generation of radical educationalists in the 1960s and 1970s, one of whom, Norman Evans spent time at CAEL in the US. He established a UK equivalent- the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) (<http://www.learningexperience.org.uk/index.html>) in 1986. Like CAEL the function of LET is to promote and standardise the use of experiential learning in higher education. In 1992 a government agency, provided money to enable LET to pay for small programmes of experiential workplace learning in universities. Chester had been placing its full time undergraduates in work placements since the early 1980s and so applied for funding. As a result of the help from LET tutors were able to find ways to translate the informal experience students gained in a placement into academic credit. Almost thirty years later it is still the case that all full time undergraduates at Chester complete an assessed work placement as part of their Bachelor degree.

During the 1990s tutors were contacted by some of the employers offering places to see if there was a similar programme available for their employees. Other universities, mostly newer, less research intensive institutions were also thinking along similar lines so that during this decade a number of what were and are known as 'Work based learning' (WBL) programmes were created. In 1998 Chester, at that time a constituent College of the University of Liverpool validated its 'Work Based and Integrative Studies' (WBIS). WBIS is an open access programme which combines past and present experiential learning with more conventional subject discipline based modules. There is not space here to explain how it works in detail but interested readers are directed to a forthcoming paper in this journal which will describe its operation in more detail.

Most students begin their programme with a module called 'Self Review and Negotiation of Learning'. In the module they identify their learning achievements to date and identify their learning requirements. From this they devise their pathway of learning within WBIS (ie curriculum), create their proposed award title and provide justification for both. They are invited to consider any claims (for academic credit) for past learning they may wish to make- either experiential (APEL) or certificated (APCL). 'Experiential learning' includes informal learning- gained in the workplace and non-formal learning in the form of unaccredited professional qualifications. Under University of Chester regulations up to two thirds of a named qualification (for example Bachelor or Masters degree) can be obtained in this way. Claims for past learning APEL are assessed on the basis of reflective learning on authenticated experience in the workplace rather than a portfolio-only basis. The practice is therefore in the tradition of the development rather than credit exchange model. To illustrate how this works a short example is set out below.

A case study of a student translating informal learning into academic credit

Mrs A. works as a Human Relations manager for a financial investment company in Switzerland. She has a Bachelor degree in Business Studies and is completing her Masters degree through the WBIS programme. The company is not a large one but it has a history of high staff turnover and has lost several court cases as a result of breaches of employment law. It is run in an autocratic way by the Chief Executive. The company is commercially successful but has a poor working environment. The student's claim was based upon the successful introduction of routine office procedures (including filing systems) and an Employee Handbook containing a range of policies and procedures to ensure compliance with the law and better relations between the company and employees. The claim was for 20 credits (ECTS) at Level 7 (Masters). Accompanying her portfolio of evidence to support the claim was a reflective review approximately 5000 words long.

In the review she described the steps she took to manage the company in a professional way. She also used academic literature on leadership and organizational power to reflect on the way she was able to build internal alliances which enabled her to introduce systems despite the hostility of the Chief Executive. She also reflected upon the nature of transformational leadership and its incompatibility with successful 'near' leadership- the ability to engage and motivate employees. She concluded by observing the irony that she was given a chance to lead an HR function despite not having a Masters since few of her successors had lasted very long. Despite the difficulties it had been a great learning experience which had enabled her to not only understand the formal HR function better but develop a sophisticated understanding of leadership and organisational politics.

Conclusions and implications for Russian Universities

Russian society has been radically transformed during the past thirty years but as Gorshkov and Kliucharev (2013) note, its educational systems have not adapted sufficiently. Delivery of programmes is outmoded and there has been insufficient engagement with those excluded from formal education. Sergeev (2013) also notes the disjuncture between traditional pedagogic practices in Russian universities and the demands of the modern world. Echoing criticisms made in the West about the lack of relevance of university programmes to the modern labour market Ovsianikov (2013) identifies a gap between the academy and the world of work so that graduates are not sufficiently prepared for the labour market. Against this general pattern it would appear that at least some universities are able to work closely with industrial partners (Golubeva and Tsurkan 2014). Nonetheless there is widespread recognition of the need to change and modernise Russian universities to meet

international standards of attainment. West and Frumina (2012) outline the progress which is being made, including participation in the Bologna process. Mironov (2013) is more cautious. He highlights how reform in universities echoes wider societal attempts to reform and modernise. Historically, attempts to reform in Russia occur periodically occur in waves but are often poorly executed and rarely completed.

This is evident in the partial incorporation of the Bologna process, which has implications for the introduction of VNIL. Oleynikova (2014), notes the failure to introduce the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). ECTS is system of universal academic credit so that it is possible to quantify a volume of learning in a way which makes it transferable and understood. With such a system VNIL becomes a much easier process since it makes it possible to quantify learning so that it can be easily incorporated into a formal academic award which has universal currency. Zolotaryova (2014) makes similar points about the importance of full implementation of Bologna to ensure transparency and universality. He also argues that any credible system must also have an external and independent system of Quality Assurance to maintain consistency of standards.

To return to the question set out in the title of this paper: is VNIL an essential element in the modernisation of Russian higher education or is it irrelevant? Here we can only express a personal view and we believe it to be essential. All of the reasons which make it relevant for every other country in the world means it is also relevant for Russia. Russians of all ages are increasingly demanding access to higher education and we have a duty to meet that demand and do so in ways which meets the needs of all, not just the young. It is also important that Russia does not see its economic future in solely in terms of commodities and production but understands that its greatest asset is its people. That does not mean we view the Russian people as simply human capital, a factor of production. A reformed approach to education, which recognises their learning outside the academy has a role to play in enabling citizens to fulfil their potential and meet their aspirations. Finally we believe our universities should re-engage with a broader concept of knowledge, recognising how it has been expanded and transformed in the modern world.

Having argued that VNIL is relevant for the Russian context we are also obliged to recognise the many barriers which are likely to impede its introduction into the curriculum. VNIL remains a fairly small scale activity in nations where it has been present for many years. Universities are often highly conservative organisations and difficult to change. The cause of change is also not helped by the incomplete introduction of the Bologna process. As others have argued, the completion of Bologna is a prerequisite for modernisation. VALERU and other similar projects have also have a role to play, both

for direct participants and as evidenced by this paper, disseminating ideas in relevant forums.

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