

Validation of Non-Formal, Informal and Formal Competence in Norway

Introduction

The Competence Reform Report No. 42 to the Norwegian Parliament (1997-98) and the handling by the Parliament of the principle and central issues of this report have been the basis of Norwegian competence reform. The reform contributes to the development of the individual's, the workforce's and society's need for competence. It is both a reform of the workplace as well as of education, including all adults both inside and outside the workforce. The reform builds on the recognition of the fact that a well-educated population is the nation's most important resource for preserving and creating jobs, ensuring quality of life and preventing the rise of new class distinctions.

The Competence Reform is a process that has come and is coming into being in a close interaction between both sides of trade and industry, the education system and the authorities. It has a broad understanding of knowledge and a long-term perspective.

Documentation and validation of *realkompetanse* is one of the central aims to be striven for in the Competence Reform. In dealing with the report in January 1999, the Norwegian Parliament adopted the following measure: 'The Parliament requests the government to establish a system that gives adults the right to document their *realkompetanse* without having to take the path of traditional examination schemes.'

Via the three-year '*Realkompetanse Project*' (1999-2002) a basis has been developed for establishing a national system for the documentation and validation of *realkompetanse* (Circular F-10-02). The Department for Learning and Workforce Development of the Ministry of Education and Research has had the overall administrative responsibility for the project, while the Norwegian Institute for Adult Education (VOX) has had the operative and professional responsibility for followup and further development. The planning and implementation of the project has taken place in close cooperation with both sides of trade and industry and the providers of education. Since 1 September 2000, the project has been controlled by its own executive committee.

The Realkompetanse project is evaluated in an external professional environment, Agenda Utvikling og utredning AS. The evaluation is subsequently followed up by an internal follow-up linked to the Research Council. Sub-report 1 was available in June 2001, and Sub-report 2 in April 2002. The concluding evaluation report was available in April 2003.

The target group for the national system for the documentation and validation of *realkompetanse* is all adults who wish to have their *realkompetanse* evaluated in relation to the education system, the workplace and organisational activities. Adult immigrants who wish to have their *realkompetanse* documented and validated via occupational testing are also part of the target group. It is a central objective for the established national system and its further development that it has legitimacy in both the workplace and the education system.

Clarification of concepts

Realkompetanse: By *realkompetanse* is meant the formal and informal competence that adults have (Provisions of the Education Act – Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education).

On the basis of this definition, *realkompetanse* means in practice the sum of all competences that the individual has acquired via the education system, paid and unpaid work, organisational activities as well as family and social life. This does not mean that formal competence must be checked but that it is included when *realkompetanse* is validated.

Documentation: A certified document that indicates the *realkompetanse* that a person has.

Public documentation: Documentation of a person's competence assessed in relation to the requirements of the public education system. The public forms of documentation used are certificates of competence, craft certificates and the like.

Validation of *realkompetanse*: A process where the individual has his/her competence assessed in relation to various areas of use.

One System – various schemes – common principles

On the basis of the recommendations contained in the final report from the Norwegian Institute for Adult Education, the department has decided that the national system for documentation and validation of *realkompetanse* is to comprise the following main elements:

- *Schemes for documentation and validation of realkompetanse leading to further education.*

Adults who have a right to further education also have a right to documentation and validation of their *realkompetanse* as a basis for acceptance and a suitably tailored course of study. The responsibility for assessment lies with the local county authority. When a certificate of competence is issued, the approved *realkompetanse* equals a pass mark.

- *Realkompetanse assessment/occupational testing for job qualification.*

Amendments to the Education Act will mean that from March 2003, adults will also gain the opportunity of having a *realkompetanse* assessment that aims directly at job qualification. The amendments to the Act will also mean the right to a certificate of competence. This scheme will be of special importance to immigrants.

- *Schemes for the documentation of realkompetanse from the workplace.*

The documentation must be designed in such a way that it is of use both to the employer and the employee. It should consist of a CV and a certificate of competence from the employer. The scheme is voluntary.

- *Schemes for the documentation of realkompetanse from courses and participation in voluntary activities (third sector).*

The particular nature of the organisation has to be the point of departure for the documentation scheme. The scheme is voluntary. This documentation of *realkompetanse* is in addition to the certification already being used.

- *Realkompetanse as a basis for acceptance at higher education level and for shortening the period of study.*

Applicants who are over 25 and have no further education can be accepted for study at a university or institution of higher education on the basis of *realkompetanse*. *Realkompetanse* will also allow a shortening of the study period, or exemption from examinations or tests. The individual educational institutions evaluate for themselves if the candidate's *realkompetanse* satisfies the acceptance requirements for particular subjects and courses of study.

To ensure national equality between these various schemes for documentation and validation, the following common principles are to be established:

- Guaranteeing the individual's rights via anchorage in laws and agreements
- A method of organising that gives proximity to the user
- A national procedure that is open and recognisable
- A systematic approach to information and guidance
- The basis for assessment (reference points to which the competence can be related)
- Guidelines for assessment
- Guidelines for documentation.

The Norwegian System of Documentation and Validation of *Realkompetanse*, Seen in Relation to the Issues of the Mandate

Career planning

The documentation schemes that have been developed via the *realkompetanse* project give an individual a better basis for seeking a job or further education or training. This applies to schemes for the documentation of *realkompetanse* in the workplace and third sector as well as schemes developed by the National Public Employment Service.

The education system

With effect from 1 August 2000, the Education Act gives adults born before 1 January 1978 who have completed 'grunnskole' (primary and lower secondary levels) or a corresponding education, but who have not completed any further education, a right to be accepted for further education on the basis of *realkompetanse*. This education is to be adapted to the individual's requirements.

§ 3.5 of the Act, the Practice Candidate Scheme, gives adults with at least five years of documented relevant job practice a right to apply for a craft certificate. The interdisciplinary theoretical exam can be replaced by assessed *realkompetanse*. Practical exams must be taken.

Amendments to the Act of 20.02.03 give adults with the right to further education a right to have their *realkompetanse* documented also when not seeking further education. The amendment also offers an opportunity for assessment and documentation of *realkompetanse* to newly arrived immigrants and registered jobseekers within a right to further education.

From 01.08.01, the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges has been amended so that applicants who are at least 25 years of age do not need to meet the requirement for general study competence but can be accepted on the basis of *realkompetanse*. The educational institutions are obliged to undertake an assessment of whether the applicants' *realkompetanse* is sufficient for them to follow the desired course of study. It is also stated that they have a right to be exempted from parts of a course of study on the basis of documented *realkompetanse*.

Those who have been accepted for a course of study on the basis of assessed *realkompetanse* and who have completed a course lasting at least one year are awarded general study competence. This gives them the opportunity to seek acceptance for all courses of study that do not have special acceptance requirements.

Individualisation of study programme

Further education and training:

Amendments to the Act give adults in further education a right to have their course shortened and adapted. Shortening of the educational programme can take place in relation to parts of a subject, entire

subjects, entire courses and complete courses of education (final competence) for both general and vocational branches of studies, with the exception of subjects that lead to a craft certificate.

Education must be flexible, with real opportunities to combine study with work and family commitments. Education must take into account each individual's personal demands. The schools of further education must organise education with the needs and requirements of the individual as the starting point.

Schemes for documentation and validation of *realkompetanse* provide the basis for this individualisation.

Higher education:

In higher education, the assessment and validation of required documentation take place at the individual institution after the application has been registered at 'Universities and Colleges Admission Service' (Samordna). The validation is to take place both in relation to acceptance and to possible shortening/exemption of parts of the course of study. There must be an individual assessment and validation.

It is the individual university or institution of higher education that lays down the criteria for assessment. Assessment may differ at the various institutions because in addition to the student's qualifications, emphasis is also laid on the subject content of the course of study and the teaching being offered the students. The appeals procedure, against decisions, will also be dealt with through the individual institution.

Issuing of certificates

The main view expressed in the Act and its provisions is that adults can have official documentation issued (competence certificate, craft certificate, or the like) on the basis of validated *realkompetanse* at further education level.

Approved *realkompetanse* equals an examination pass mark.

To have a craft certificate issued, the final examination must have been passed. Approved *realkompetanse* equals a pass mark in the theoretical part of the examination.

Occupation, career development and the grading of wages and salaries

How documented *realkompetanse* from the workplace and third sector are assessed and validated in relation to occupation, career development and the trend of wages and salaries are matters that are decided to a great extent by the individual enterprise, possibly in local agreements. In the private sector, this is in accordance with the assessment and validation of public documentation (competence certificate, craft certificate, and the like).

Seen from the employers' point of view, it is important that the documentation is formulated in such a way that it is valuable within all three areas of application:

Occupation – the documentation should to a great extent fulfil the requirements for 'transparency', in such a way that it is possible to compare person A with person B.

Career development – it is important to have individualised documentation that expresses development potential.

The grading of wages and salaries – here, in addition to the above, a level assessment of the individual is required. (Not only what you are good at, but how good you are at doing it.)

Challenges

The experiences gained from the *Realkompetanse* Project show that Norway has come a long way in developing and establishing the main elements of the system. At the same time, the report from the

project indicates the need for further development at both the professional and the organisational level. This particularly applies to:

- *Legitimacy.* High professional requirements are a prerequisite for equal treatment and for confidence in the schemes. The system must be seen to be cohesive, be user-friendly and have utilitarian value both for enterprises and individuals. Cooperation and good communication between the various players are therefore extremely important – particularly in the future.
- *Competence.* It is very important that the experts in both the work on documentation and validation as well as those responsible for information and implementation are well qualified for their tasks. The training that has taken place in the project period ought therefore to be intensified and further developed.
- *Information and guidance.* There is a need to develop information strategies both centrally and locally. It is particularly important to reach those with the lowest levels of education and those who, for some reason or other, are not part of the workforce.
- *Dissemination of knowledge and experience.* It is important to communicate the knowledge and experience that have been acquired during the project period. At the same time, creative environments and professional networks must be organised for the further development and the mediation of new competence.
- *The ability of the system to communicate across national borders.* Continued cooperation must be organised, at both the Nordic and European levels, so that the Norwegian system communicates well with corresponding schemes in other countries.
- *Anchoring in Act provisions and agreements.* Within the education system the system is already anchored in Act provisions and agreements to a extent. Experiences gained in further work will show whether there is a need for further amendments. In relation to the workplace and ‘third sector’, it is proposed that in the final report from the *Realkompetanse* Project the schemes should be anchored in Acts and provisions and/or in agreements. This will be assessed in future work.

The department views it as strategically important that further development within these areas takes place alongside an intensification of work on establishing the system. This is in accordance with the work strategy as well as the knowledge and experience that has been developed and used during the project period.

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1 “Realkompetanse” is a Norwegian term referring to the following concepts: all the knowledge, abilities, attitudes and insight people have; these may be acquired by means of organized learning, selfeducation, work, participation in organizations, society and family life; a current definition: non-formal, informal and formal competence; henceforth the term “realkompetanse” will be used in this context.