

PROCESS DEVELOPMENT FOR ENHANCED DEMONSTRATION OF COMPETENCES: RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AS A MUTUAL INTEREST OF STAKEHOLDERS AT HAAGA-HELIA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions meet challenges emerging from a variety of perspectives: expectations to train skilled specialists for working life; societal and demographic mutations especially in ageing Europe; financial constraints; fluctuations in motivation towards long-term and goal-oriented studies among younger generations; as well as competition between institutions themselves. Life-long learning is an objective embraced by governments and working life; however, the investments that higher education institutions make to enable professional transitions are not always compatible with their visions and missions. It is a complex task to implement a study process that enables lifelong learning and full recognition of prior learning without compromising quality and while maintaining balance between the academic and professional vocations of higher education.

One of the key factors in responding to the above-mentioned challenges is to design and implement competence-based curricula that are built upon the competence requirements stemming from contemporary professional profiles in various sectors. Moreover, the curricula need to be enhanced by structural refurbishment that aligns to them, which is challenging since processes in higher education institutions tend to be somewhat stable and they are always subject to both national legislation and academic traditions. However, higher education providers need to embrace constant process development in order to fulfil the expectations of stakeholders both in academia and in the surrounding society.

With more than 10,000 students, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences is the second largest University of Applied Sciences in Finland. Various stakeholders have an essential role in our educational processes: boards of experts from fields related to each academic unit comment on curriculum development and pedagogical initiatives, students' associations cooperate with lecturers and administration in daily work and the large body of Haaga-Helia alumni includes professionals who are keen on contributing to the development of degree programmes. The input from the alumni is valuable in terms of internship opportunities offered for current students, real-life projects integrated into courses and commissioned theses. Furthermore, our alumni can contribute to assessment of learning in the framework of work-based learning.

This practically oriented paper unfolds the process of validation of work-based learning at Haaga-Helia UAS, as a crucial part of the global context of recognition of prior and ongoing learning at the institution. Abiding with the Nordic Model of validation (Road Map, 2018), the notion of "validation" is applied here as an umbrella term, where recognition and accreditation are embedded. Work & Study (W&S) is a pedagogical initiative developed as a complementary option to UAS studies in order to obtain the full benefit of working alongside undertaking higher education studies. The Work & Study process is presented to highlight the value that higher education institutions gain from intensive cooperation with all stakeholders in the context of recognition of learning. The question of enhancing lifelong learning with a professionally and academically relevant approach is at present a prerequisite for all competitive higher education.

W&S is an essential component of validation of non-formal and informal learning at Haaga-Helia and a key facilitator of professional transitions. It is a process reflecting the ideal of lifelong learning and the vision of the institution as opening doors to future careers, whilst maintaining an ongoing dialogue with various stakeholders within and outside the institution (Mäkelä & Moisio, 2017).

PROFESSIONAL TRANSITIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

In Finland, a student attending a University of Applied Sciences works on average 18 hours and studies during 34 hours per week. More than 50% of students are employed in the field of their studies, which is a higher percentage than in other EU countries (Hauschildt *et al.*, 2015). An important part of the student body completes part-time degree studies while working full-time, and seeks new career opportunities whilst accumulating experience and enhancing their competences. These competences are both generic and field-specific. Career opportunities may be positioned either in the current field of work, where the student is aiming at promotion and new challenges in the present organization, or they may target novel professional fields and possibly a new job.

Regardless of the nature of individual career aspirations, students desire to get their capital of competences validated, hence higher education institutions face an increasing demand for up-to-date and transparent processes of recognizing prior informal and non-formal learning, of which a major part occurs at work. This applies to most countries (Helyer, 2016). An endeavor of this kind necessitates carefully designed support from institutional processes throughout the study cycle: curriculum design, guidance and counselling activities, delivery of study modules, as well as career and recruitment services which need to be implemented in accordance with the fundamental pedagogical vision. Since the mission of Finnish UAS institutions is to combine higher education with a solid professional foundation, integration of work with UAS studies and the opportunity to validate learning occurring at workplace is an indispensable factor of success. To succeed in this mission, one needs to provide continuous training for lecturers, academic advisors and placement coordinators, and maintain constant dialogue with the counterparts outside the institution. Transitions are facilitated and information flows functionally when the stakeholders know each other and the goal of enhanced employability is shared. In all, functional validation processes of work-based learning can be defined as a bridge between the workplace and the higher education provider (Armsby & Helyer, 2016).

The professional transitions of Finnish higher education students are fluctuating and dynamic, reflecting multiple opportunities to combine work and higher education studies. This applies to both full-time and part-time students in the context of Universities of Applied Sciences which fulfil a vocation to cater for the needs of qualified professionals in various fields. This feature distinguishes UAS institutions from research-oriented universities, and establishes an imperative to nurture active relations with related industries.

The concept of Work & Study encapsulates the entire process of integrating work and degree studies at Haaga-Helia: information from pre-entry level to graduation phase, process management, validation of work experience, documentation, training of practitioners, counselling and guidance, cooperation with stakeholders (companies, organisations, Haaga-Helia Start Up School and alumni) and quality assurance. Moreover, dimensions of self-reflection and of company feedback are built into the process. At present, it is being developed from an initiative into a fundamental pedagogical principle, overarching the entire learning process of students and working styles of staff members.

This holistic model challenges the pedagogical mindset where lecturers deliver and assess something that students absorb, without the participation of outside actors or contexts.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS OF THE WORK & STUDY INITIATIVE

Experience from cross-sectional cooperation and innovation have led to a model of tri-dimensional validation practice at Haaga-Helia UAS: demonstration of competences stemming from informal and non-formal learning as well as work-based learning is applied, in addition to accreditation of transfer credits from prior higher education studies. All are built into a continuum where students have various options in constructing their study paths and for having their competences validated (Fig.1). The institution provides this framework and its implementation, whereas students need to engage in active participation and self-reflection from the beginning of their studies until graduation.

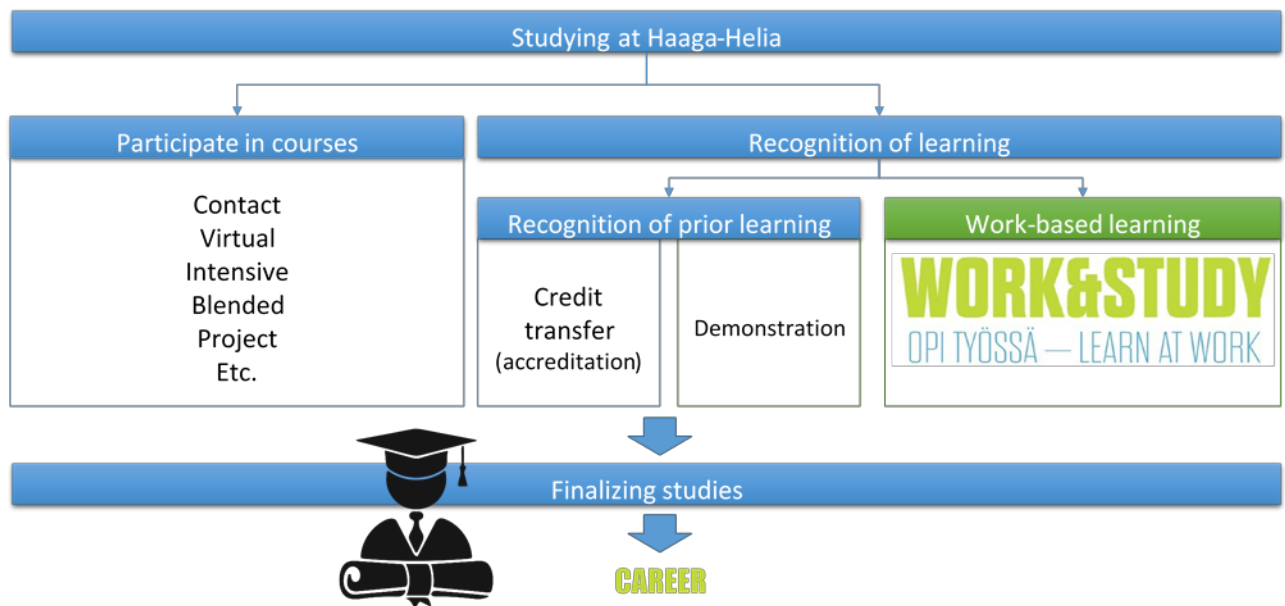


Figure 1: The study and validation context at Haaga-Helia UAS

Work-based learning in the form of Work & Study constitutes an essential learning field for students with permanent jobs or for those who already act as entrepreneurs, yet it also offers an opportunity to accumulate competences and gain credits for those students who are at the starting point of their professional life, since mandatory internships are eligible in the process. The fundamental condition of acceptance is that the student can achieve by working the same intended learning outcomes which are described in the course syllabus.

In the W&S approach, skills and competences required by various courses in the degree are gained by working, by documenting it and by connecting their practical work with a theme-related knowledge base, also referred to as a theoretical framework. The process (Figure 2) starts when students acquaint themselves with the intended learning outcomes of upcoming courses in their degree programme. When the intended learning outcomes are sufficiently related to the tasks of the student's working environment (including voluntary work, internships and placements), the student discusses the opportunity for W&S with the employer. Engagement of the employing organization is a prerequisite in order to obtain feedback on students' performance, and also to ensure that there is support for the process outside the UAS institution.

Intended learning outcomes are screened against the work context: if the match is adequate and the organization supports the endeavour, the students fill in an application form with

her preliminary plan and sends it to the W&S coordinator who can be either a lecturer or an academic advisor. The coordinator checks the plan, discusses it further with the student to establish solid documentation for the lecturers involved, and forwards it to the lecturer(s) of the study modules that are planned to be completed by W&S.

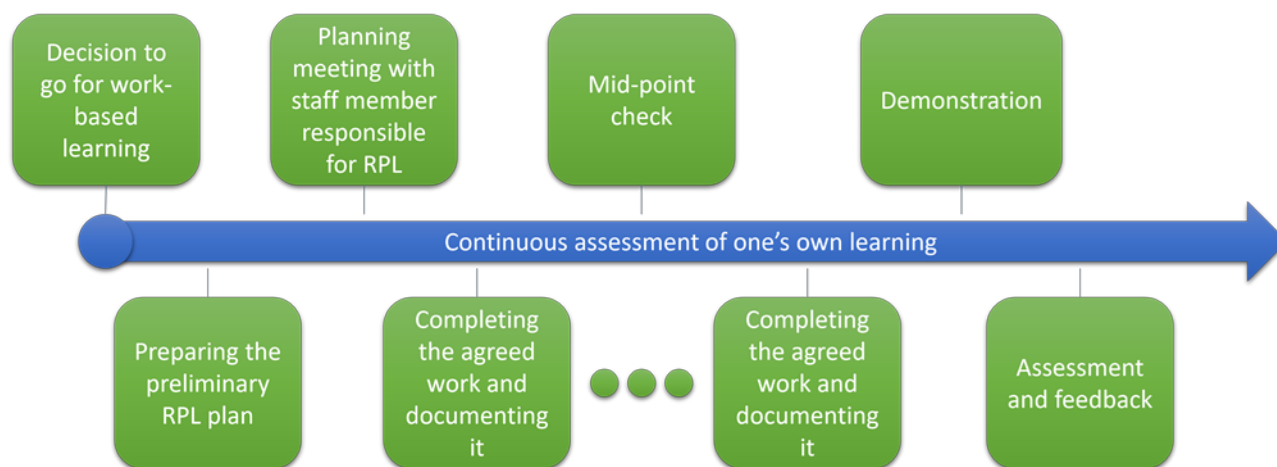


Figure 2: The process of Work & Study for the student

Together, the student and the lecturer decide on the schedule; on the assignments and portfolios to be completed; on possible theoretical background to be studied alongside working; on reporting style and on other details. Moreover, they agree on the nature and schedule of the demonstration of acquired competences. Feedback from the employing organization is also an essential element of the process, yet the final assessment is quality assured by lecturers in charge of the course, who conduct it with the same criteria under which the regular course is assessed. Practice, theory and individual reflection are involved in the embedded learning process, where the criteria suggested by Armsby and Helyer (2016) prevail: evidence on learning should demonstrate relevance, sufficiency, authenticity and currency.

Extensive documentation on W&S is available on the student intranet, and guidance and counselling professionals provide the student with any support needed. Student entrepreneurs may obtain additional support at Haaga-Helia Start-Up School where the specific needs of young entrepreneurs are dealt with, and where mentors and lecturers qualified in entrepreneurship coaching monitor the learning process.

All students at Haaga-Helia may conduct studies through W&S, including full and part-time students, and students in our open UAS path without degree student status. Moreover, exchange students and international degree students may apply for W&S if their schedules can accommodate it and work opportunities are available. When designed with modern pedagogies of learning-by-doing and embedded learning, the process results in more equal learning environments for all. There is no limit for ECTS points obtained by W&S; however, this option is meant to enhance flexibility and employability, rather than become the principal way to study.

Demonstration Days

As in all learning delivered and organized at institutions, knowledge and competences acquired need to be made visible. In the W&S process, demonstration procedures for these

are already planned from the beginning of the process. The culmination points are Demonstration Days at Haaga-Helia: a unique, open event where learning is demonstrated, discussed and hence shared. A variety of tools are applied: pitching, oral presentations, blog and vlog sharing, panels, written assignments, Q&A, displays of tangible documentation as well as portfolio presentation. Furthermore, all students preparing for a Demonstration Day complete a pre-assignment which is submitted to assessing lecturers prior to the event. This pre-assignment is first discussed and then assessed by lecturers, student peers and related industry stakeholders against the competence criteria of each study module. For transparency and reliability, the application of equal assessment criteria is essential, regardless of the type of learning.

Demonstration Days are an occasion to get one's knowledge, skills and competences validated according to the defined learning outcomes of the degree programme and assessed by a multivocal team of lecturers, student peers and, moreover, alumni as industry representatives. Added value is obtained by the complementary process of providing a 5 ECTS credit training programme for those alumni who wish to become co-assessors of learning and participate in Demonstration Days. This training is delivered by the teacher training unit of Haaga-Helia. The trained alumni who volunteer for this responsibility contribute by providing insight into current professional qualifications, thus enabling also the continuous screening of education against evolving working-life criteria. This feature strengthens the institutional connection between education providers and professional life, as well as the personal networks across lecturers, company representatives and various organizations. With this active link between companies and the UAS institution, the event may furthermore become a recruitment opportunity for outstanding students. The Demonstration Day thus establishes a forum for exchanges and a hub for sharing knowledge for all parties, disseminating good practices and enhancing professional networking.

Objectives and framework

The principal aim of the W&S initiative is to improve students' employability, which is one of the most important quality factors laid down for higher education and, moreover, an important element in the funding mechanism of UAS institutions nationally (Mäkelä & Moision, 2017). The mission of Haaga-Helia UAS states: "We open the doors to future careers." There is a dual meaning: our task is to open the doors for students, both young and of more mature age, and to keep the doors open for the actors of working life itself. In competence-based assessment in higher education, competence can be defined as knowledge, skills and attitudes linked with authentic work (ibid.), and W&S is developed to embed this mindset among students and staff, as well as employers.

The objectives of W&S align with the 2015 recommendations of the European Ministers of Education: enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives and making our systems more inclusive, whilst implementing agreed structural reforms. Moreover, W&S embraces the Nordic Model on validation where the ideal is to maintain the student at the center of all action (Road Map, 2018).

Implementation of W&S is flexible in Haaga-Helia units; however, the principles of the process align with the guidelines in all three units (corresponding to university faculties). A steering group with representatives from the student body, management, lecturers and administration develops, supervises and evaluates the process. W&S is in use since 2014 and is constantly being developed and updated. By W&S, the philosophy of validation is embedded in the pedagogical mindset of UAS lecturers and staff and extended towards the recognition of learning occurring in all contexts. Enhanced knowledge on validation of work

experience is disseminated also to industry stakeholders and alumni who are involved in the process.

National initiatives in Finland continuously build upon the principle of lifelong learning, with supporting actions, and the current government strongly emphasizes the responsibility of education providers as key actors in facilitating LLL as well as the transition from studies to working life. Naturally, lifelong learning includes also transitions from working life back to higher education studies, and in this process a functional and reliable mechanism of recognition of learning has a key role. An increasing number of part-time students at Haaga-Helia already have a degree, they work in the related field and yet wish to enhance their competences with an additional degree or a certificate from higher education studies. An efficient validation process is a pull factor for the institution, alongside flexible opportunities to design one's study path in general. This applies, in particular, to part-time students who oftentimes have challenges in time management.

At present, great interest is focussed on higher education institutions which traditionally have not invested in smoothing professional transitions as much as second-level institutions have. In Finland, an ongoing nationwide project funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Toteemi (2018), is one example of combining the efforts of universities and UAS institutions towards more flexible contexts of work-based learning in higher education, with the objective of researching and developing practical models to combine work and studies. The W&S concept at Haaga-Helia is one of these practice-oriented initiatives, and Haaga-Helia UAS also coordinates the two-year Toteemi project which has an international dimension of validation benchmarking.

CONCLUSION

Efficient learning in contemporary higher education contexts requires that the competence requirements of working life are fully taken into account. In order to identify learning outcomes which are both academically solid and professionally valid, higher education providers need to reach out from the ivory tower of academia and create a dynamic network of stakeholders engaged in maintaining dialogue and exchanging development ideas. Participation in the validation of work-based learning is one field where the expertise and contextual experience of these actors, whether they be alumni or other professionals, may become an asset for the institution, provide added value for the external assessor and, ultimately, benefit the student who always must remain at the centre of all pedagogical initiatives.

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