

Validation of prior learning within adult education in Denmark

Status report regarding Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007

Summary and perspectives

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2010



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Summary and perspectives

This is a systematic summary of the study questions relating to differences and similarities with regard to results from the six following chapters relating to general adult education, general upper secondary subjects at Adult Education Centres (VUC), adult vocational training programmes (AMU), adult vocational basic education programmes (GVU), short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU) and medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programmes). These abbreviations will be used in the following.

The summary has been structured in the same way as the education chapters under the themes spread, application, barriers, quality and organisation. The results of the studies of prior learning assessment carried out by the National Centre of Competence Development (NCK) have been included in order to assess the consistency of the results of these studies with the results of the present study (Nistrup, U., and Lund, A., 2008 and 2010). Furthermore, a few reflections on the themes have been included.

Prior learning assessment and credit transfer

Prior learning includes a person's total qualifications, knowledge, skills and competencies, irrespective of where and how they were acquired. Act no. 556 of 6 June 2007 extended validation of prior learning in the adult vocational training area etc. to education areas in which it already existed (AMU and GVU), and it introduced validation of prior learning in the areas in which it did not already exist (general adult education, general upper secondary subjects at VUC, VVU, and Diploma programmes). Validating skills or qualifications prior to being admitted to an education programme or an individual subject is not entirely new, however, as a basic set of rules for credit transfer already existed and continues to exist.

For example, for VVU and Diploma programmes, the education elements passed according to "the decision of the institution in the individual case or according to the rules laid down by the institution" in the curriculum can "be replaced by education elements" covered by the curriculum regulations. With regard to the individual subject system, people can receive credit after their actual subject-relevant qualifications have been assessed (curriculum regulations on credit transfer). Therefore credit transfer is about whether people admitted to an education programme are entirely or partly exempt from specific classes and/or associated tests.

However, although credit transfer and prior learning assessment share similarities, for example they can both include documentation in the form of exam certificates etc., there are differences, including that prior learning assessment is based on prior learning which may, for example, have been obtained at work or from a hobby and which has not necessarily been documented beforehand but which is assessed specifically by the institution conducting the prior learning assessment. In addition there can be different provisions on credit transfer, for example stipulations that a qualification is out of date (periods of limitation), which do not apply for prior learning assessment. Similarly there are provisions which do not apply for credit transfer, for example in relation to issuance of certificates of competency or education.

In some areas, such as VVU, credit transfer is relatively widespread but, as this study documents, there are institutions which would rather transfer credit than carry out prior learning assessment, and in so doing they do not help spread prior learning assessment as much as they could.

The spread of prior learning assessment

The spread of prior learning assessment within the six education areas varies considerably:

- 29% of institutions providing VVU conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009. None of the institutions have conducted more than 50 prior learning assessments within a single profiling process, and no prior learning assessments at all have been conducted within 7 out of 16 profiling processes.
- 42% of VUC conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009 within general adult education. The largest number of prior learning assessments conducted within a single subject at an institution is 15, and only one institution has conducted prior learning assessments in more than ten subjects.
- 50% of institutions providing Diploma programmes conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009. One institution conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments and this was within a Diploma programmes course in management. Prior learning assessment has not been conducted within other commerce and economics Diploma programmes or within media and communication. Moreover, only one institution has conducted prior learning assessment within the technical field (including IT).
- 70% of VUC conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009 within general upper secondary subjects. Four institutions conducted prior learning assessments in more than ten different subjects in 2009. Moreover the majority conducted less than five prior learning assessments in 2009.
- 71% of institutions providing AMU conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009. Within the continuing training field for trade, administration, communication and management, four institutions conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments. Within transport, two institutions conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments, within the metal industry three institutions conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments, and within other industry one institution conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments. In addition, within all 11 continuing training areas at least one institution conducted prior learning assessments in 2009. The questionnaire survey also reveals that a few institutions have conducted as many as about 1,000 prior learning assessments within AMU.
- 91% of institutions providing GVVU conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009. Within the commerce field, three institutions conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments, within health, care and pedagogy one institution conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments, and within production and development also one institution conducted more than 100 prior learning assessments. In addition, within all 11 vocational education and training areas at least one institution conducted prior learning assessments in 2009.

Overall, the spread of prior learning assessment is least within VVU, general adult education, general upper secondary subjects at VUC and Diploma programmes, while it is most widespread within AMU and GVVU. In other words, the spread of prior learning assessment is greatest within vocational education and training at basic levels. This picture shows a more subtle result compared with NCK which concluded that prior learning assessment takes place "within all areas of the further and continuing education system in Denmark", although they added that "it takes place to only a limited extent in most areas" (NCK 2010:70). In contrast, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) has reached a different result for AMU. The NCK concluded that within AMU there is a "limited spread" of prior learning assessment, while as mentioned, the Danish Evaluation Institute found that AMU is actually prominent with a relatively high level of activity within prior learning assessment.

At the same time the overall picture is characterised by the fact that there is a relatively large group of institutions, within all the education areas, with no prior learning assessment activity, except GVVU. A small group of institutions, primarily within GVVU and AMU, has a relatively high level of prior learning assessment activity. The Danish Evaluation Institute can agree with NCK's view that the great differences in the level of prior learning assessment activity from place to place "could indicate certain institutional aspects which affect the spread and implementation of the task". We will return to this matter in the section on "Barriers".

Application of prior learning assessment

The result of a prior learning assessment has to be documented by issuing a certificate of admission, certificate of competency or a certificate of education (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008:16). Certificates of admission can be used for GUV, VVU and Diploma programmes. Certificates of competency can be issued for all six education areas, while certificates of education cannot be issued for general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC.

The documentation shows that the prior learning assessments which are carried out are applied very differently within the various education areas. Within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC, prior learning assessments are typically conducted because participants need a certificate of competency to continue in the education system, e.g. when universities have admission requirements including specific subjects at specific levels. Both general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC can issue certificates of competency for part subjects or full subjects. However, the legislation does not allow certificates to be issued for a full general preparatory examination (general adult education) or higher preparatory examination.

Validation of prior learning within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC will therefore typically replace teaching and possibly tests/examinations which would otherwise be alternatives for participants. In simple terms this means that prior learning assessment at VUC may on the one hand result in VUC losing ordinary course members, while on the other hand participants and society win time and resources if, with the aid of prior learning assessment, participants can avoid having to complete courses and tests in material they already know about.

In AMU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full AMU (education targets) or for individual subjects which are included in a common description of competency, and they can issue certificates of competency for parts of these. However, the documentation shows that issuing certificates of competency, and especially issuing certificates of education, is the exception rather than the rule. Instead, prior learning assessment is primarily applied in AMU to draw up personal education plans and to a limited extent to shorten courses. In other words, to a great extent prior learning assessment is applied in a manner which resembles the legislation prior to 2007, under which it was not possible to issue certificates of competency and education.

In GUV, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programmes and certificates of competency for parts of these. The 2007 legislation has not led to changes, so that here prior learning assessment is conducted as a foundation for a personal education plan in order to complete a training programme individually organised for adults.

In VVU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programmes and certificates of competency for parts of these. However, neither of these is very common. None of the eight respondents who replied that their institution conducted at least one prior learning assessment in 2009 stated that they had issued either certificates of competency or education. A single respondent stated that they had used prior learning assessment as the basis for personal education plans.

In Diploma programmes, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programmes and certificates of competency for parts of these. However, overall certificates of education are rarely issued: only within Diploma programmes for management are there examples of institutions issuing certificates of education, and only two out of eight have done this. Within the other seven Diploma programmes areas, certificates of education have not been issued. As mentioned previously, this picture also involves the fact that there is a certain amount of resistance to the right to receive a certificate of education in the Diploma programmes environment.

Certificates of competency are more common, especially within Diploma programmes for management and the pedagogical Diploma programmes. In the Diploma programmes area prior

learning assessment is primarily applied for admission to Diploma programmes where the applicants have not already met the admission requirements.

Therefore, in general, the situation is that prior learning assessment is primarily used to give access to the education programmes which institutions provide themselves, rather than other uses including validation of competencies to replace education and teaching and for direct utilisation in the labour market. In addition, the limited issuance of certificates of competency and education means that people miss out on the opportunities to use such certificates in the labour market, e.g. in connection with job seeking.

This picture is underpinned by looking more closely at the 26 participants interviewed by the Danish Evaluation Institute. Of these, 22 indicated that their prior learning assessment was primarily for use in education, while four indicated they would use it in connection with a job. Of the 22 participants who were to use their prior learning assessment for education, 17 were to use their prior learning assessment for education at the same institution as that which was responsible for assessing and validating their prior learning. Given that, within several education programmes prior learning assessment is primarily applied in admission to an institution's own programmes, and that interviews with participants indicate that the institutional interests in recruiting new applicants can influence the outcome of assessments, it is important to look more closely at how institutions can separate organisation of prior learning assessment from their financial interests in conducting education/training courses with many participants.

There is no overall database of certificates of competency and education. If the Danish Ministry of Education wishes to monitor these, such a database, with information about certificates issued, analysed by education programme and institution, could be a good tool to help target efforts to promote the spread of these certificates. However, this should be weighed against the administrative burden for the institutions involved in such an initiative.

Barriers to spread

There are large barriers across all the education areas, partly in relation to the financial aspects in conducting prior learning assessments, and partly due to public awareness of prior learning assessments. All other barriers are minor when compared with these two themes.

Lack of public awareness is the greatest barrier

Of the respondents who represented institutions, by far the majority indicated that lack of public awareness and knowledge about prior learning assessments was a barrier to them becoming more widespread. A total of 80% within Diploma programmes agreed with this, 82% within GUV, 85% within AMU, 86% within VVU and 96% in general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC.

These figures are supported by the interview survey and they point to one of the most important barriers to the spread of prior learning assessment in Denmark. This barrier was also identified by NCK in their study, in which they write "an important barrier to validation of prior learning becoming more widespread is the lack of public knowledge. Far too few people are aware of the opportunity". (NCK 2010:66). With this background, the Danish Evaluation Institute recommends that the Danish Ministry of Education and providers make a special effort to increase awareness and use of prior learning assessment, e.g. through disseminating good experience with prior learning assessment.

Financial aspects are the next most important barrier

A large majority across the education areas point to financial aspects as a barrier. The percentage of institutions who assess that a "taximeter" is required for documentation and guidance work, ranges from 80% within Diploma programmes, AMU, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC, to 89% within VVU and 92% within GUV.

As the regulations for taximeter funding differ from area to area, a similar question was also asked about profitability in more general terms. Here, the percentage who deem that it is difficult

to see how prior learning assessment can be profitable for the institution fluctuates from 72% within general adult education, 74% within general upper secondary subjects at the VUC, 76% within AMU, 80% for Diploma programmes, up to 82% within VVU and GVU. In their study, NCK also conclude that “the low or non-existent taximeter funding” is an important barrier (NCK 2010:64 and 76), although NCK does not quantify this in more detail. With this background, the Danish Evaluation Institute recommends that the Danish Ministry of Education reconsiders the financial incentives structure for conducting prior learning assessments.

It is important to note that these assessments of barriers are as they are perceived by the education institutions. Had we conducted a questionnaire survey amongst participants or potential participants, it is possible that, e.g. participant payment, which can be relatively high for VVU and for Diploma programmes, would have appeared as an important barrier for utilising prior learning assessment.

Legislative barriers

The NCK concludes in its 2010 report that the “legislative barriers” were not “mentioned very much in the survey” (NCK 2010:63). In this respect, the Danish Evaluation Institute saw a more differentiated picture. On the one hand only few consider legislation on prior learning assessment either too general or too detailed. Just as only few point to other legislative barriers. On the other hand we can see that about one-third of the respondents within five out of six education areas consider that the legislation does not secure sufficient standardisation of prior learning assessment work in Denmark. In this context the Diploma programmes area stands out as an exception, as only one in six respondents representing the Diploma programmes area held this view. The data material provides no further basis to describe how the respondents think such standardisation could appear. However, it is reasonable to assume that the institutions regard standardisation as a way in which prior learning assessment could be made more uniform, e.g. by using specific procedures or tools to make prior learning assessment less demanding on resources.

Because of the large number of respondents within AMU it has been possible to divide them up on the basis of their prior learning assessment activity. After doing this, it is clear that the higher the level of prior learning assessment activity at the institution, the more respondents consider that the legislation does not secure sufficient standardisation of prior learning assessment work. In fact 48% of respondents from institutions which have conducted more than 60 prior learning assessments believe that the legislation should secure a higher degree of standardisation. The documentation provides no further possibility to indicate how this standardisation should be designed, but presumably it is related to the fact that a large number of providers of AMU find it difficult to reconcile thorough individual organisation of prior learning assessment with the financial framework for such prior learning assessment.

Other external barriers

Four other external barriers were identified by a relatively large number of respondents across the education areas. However these barriers were identified by less than half of the respondents.

Firstly there is a shortage of courses for personnel working with prior learning assessment. This was the conclusion of around 40% of respondents within AMU, GVU, and VVU, and about 30% within Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. Therefore there seems to be an unmet need for relevant courses for those working with prior learning assessment at institutions. This result can be compared with the fact that NCK point to the lack of “(formal) education for persons who work with prior learning assessment (NCK 2010:77). With this background, the Danish Evaluation Institute recommends that the Danish Ministry of Education takes initiative to improve the opportunities for skills development for personnel working with prior learning assessment, possibly by developing formal courses in AMU.

Secondly, it is difficult to couple skills development at enterprises with prior learning assessment in the formal education system. This was the conclusion of around 40% of respondents within AMU, GVU, and VVU, and about 30% within Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. Within AMU it is clear that the higher the level of prior learning assessment activity at the institution, the fewer people believe that this is a barrier. This may mean both that more experience makes it easier to manage this challenge, and that a high

level of prior learning assessment activity links with closer cooperation with enterprises with a similar effect.

A consultation statement from a provider of AMU with a lot of experience with both prior learning assessment and collaboration with enterprises points out that the provider does not see any difficulty in coupling skills development at enterprises with education targets. The enterprises with which the provider cooperates, in particular those within trade, administration, communication and management, are very aware of strategic clarification and development, including in the context of the enterprise's basic values. This is not possible within the framework of prior learning assessment, while it is possible to use prior learning assessment in the context of more limited skills targets, for example in relation to IT and language.

At all events it is important to be aware of how to manage this challenge, particularly with regard to vocational training and education. This result can be compared with the fact that NCK points out that enterprises "are more interested in having their employees assessed in relation to the skills profile of their job function, rather than formal education targets" (NCK 2010:67).

Thirdly, it is difficult to couple skills development for participants with prior learning assessment in the formal education system. This was the conclusion of around 30-40% of respondents within AMU, GUV, and VVU, and about 20-30% within Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. Although a minority point to this barrier, it is nevertheless crucial in relation to the entire prior learning assessment concept, as validation of participants' skills development in relation to education targets in the formal system is at the very hub of the scheme. Therefore, this is a barrier to be addressed, including through skills development of employees and development of methods etc. for assessment and validation.

Fourthly, there is limited interest in having a prior learning assessment conducted because there is no wish to use prior learning assessment to shorten education. This was the conclusion of around 37% of respondents within AMU, and around 20-30% within GUV, VVU, Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. It is no surprise that the percentage that considers lack of interest in shortening education is highest within AMU, given that much shorter education/training courses are carried out here. However, it is perhaps surprising that around one-quarter of the representatives from institutions think this applies for the much longer programmes, especially within VVU, and Diploma programmes. This result can be compared with the fact that NCK point out, that enterprises do not always prefer "that their employees have a prior learning assessment with subsequent shortened course. They would rather see employees receive the latest knowledge and have their specialist qualifications upgraded" (NCK 2010:67).

It was mentioned in the group interview with researchers with knowledge of prior learning assessment that a barrier to making prior learning assessment more widespread could be that it has to be conducted in relation to specific education targets, especially within the education areas aimed at persons with low level of educational attainment. This challenge is described in the chapter about AMU. This chapter describes how enterprises are often not interested in education targets linked to a common skills description, but they are more interested in the enterprise's own targets.

Internal barriers

Looking across the education areas there are no statements on internal barriers to which more than half of the respondents within all the areas agreed. However, there is one barrier which between one-third and one-half of the respondents within all the education areas point to, and this is that it is difficult to plan possible individualised subsequent courses. About 50% within AMU and GUV agree with this and about one in three from the other areas.

This is also a well known challenge internationally. The NCK mentions that Norway has experienced difficulties in organising subsequent education/training courses so that they take into account validated prior learning (NCK 2010:78). This barrier is linked to the fact that, as a point of departure, education institutions plan for groups of participants in order to economise on re-

sources, while validation of parts of the education targets means that subsequent education/training courses have to be organised more individually. In some contexts participants can risk having to go in and out of longer education/training courses depending on which elements in the course they have had validated. This can present planning and pedagogical challenges which may negatively affect attitudes to prior learning assessment.

Another internal barrier indicated by many, is that it is difficult to tell applicants what prior learning actually is, and how it can be documented and assessed. In this respect, however, there are somewhat greater differences between the education areas, from less than 30% within Diploma programmes and just under 40% within GVVU and VVVU to almost 50% within AMU and around 60% within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. That as many as 60% find it difficult to tell applicants what prior learning assessment is and how it can be documented and assessed, may make it worth considering whether this could also be related to the attitude barriers described in chapters 4 and 5 in relation to prior learning assessment at more VUC. It is surprising that so many consider this a barrier within GVVU, given that there has been prior learning assessment within this area for many years. However, perhaps this is an indication that this is an important barrier which may help explain the poor level of public awareness of prior learning assessment.

A third internal barrier, which is generally found to be significant, is lack of time to upgrade the skills of personnel at institutions in relation to prior learning assessment. The Diploma programmes area differs here in that only one in five sees this as a barrier, while in the other education areas about 40-45% see it as a barrier.

Other barriers such as that it is difficult to integrate prior learning assessment work into other work at the institution, and that the process related to prior learning assessment is too laborious for participants, were mentioned by 30-40% within the various education areas.

Practice at the institutions

Common for all education areas is that they normally use interviews and include documentation such as CVs etc. in connection with prior learning assessment. However, interviews with participants reveal that there are also examples of participants who have not been to a personal interview. Typically, there is a clarification or guidance interview with a student counsellor within the prior learning assessment interview itself.

As a basis for the prior learning assessment interview, in many cases the participant has made use of a skills file (<http://www.minkompetencemappe.dk/Default.aspx>). Opinions on the usefulness of the skills file vary. Some point out that it would be better to increase the focus of the file towards the various target groups.

Furthermore, there are a number of differences between the education areas themselves with regard to which tools should be applied. Tests and exams are not used in Diploma programmes, while all respondents from general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC, as well as the majority from AMU, GVVU, and VVVU stated that they used tests and exams. Instead of tests and exams, Diploma programmes uses various other tools such as reflection tasks, cases etc. As NCK has described in detail practice for conducting prior learning assessment in various areas in its report (NCK 2010), we have decided not to address this theme in more detail here, but we refer to the report by NCK.

Useful collaboration on prior learning assessment across institutions

In the study by the Danish Evaluation Institute, several informants mention examples of good collaboration on prior learning assessment across institutions. The informants indicate that collaboration with other institutions provides good opportunities to discuss which tools are relevant, and it ensures a sort of alignment in the tools institutions use in a prior learning assessment. Therefore, collaboration can potentially enhance confidence in, and the legitimacy of, prior learning assessment. According to the focus group interviewed, collaboration and knowledge-sharing with other institutions about prior learning assessment is particularly widespread within Diploma

programmes, where providers meet each other in a networking group several times a year. Moreover, informants from VUC mention the great benefit of a common materials database and a manual, in conducting prior learning assessment at VUC. In general, the advantages of collaboration and knowledge sharing were highlighted in relation to skills development and better management of specific cases. The scope of collaboration between institutions on quality development is described in the following section.

Quality assurance

The Danish Ministry of Education handbook on prior learning assessment within adult education and continuing training places great importance on quality assurance of institutions' work with prior learning assessment (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008). The handbook stresses that work on assessing and validating prior learning is to help ensure legitimacy based on valid and reliable methods. Institutions must develop transparent guidelines ensuring quality, validity and reliability, and clarify the professional groups that are to take on the various tasks (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008: 31-32). Several of the criteria for quality assurance of institutions' work with prior learning assessment have also been addressed in the publication "European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning" by CEDEFOP (2009).

In this connection it is worth noting that not all institutions have a documented system to ensure the quality of prior learning assessments. The percentage of institutions with a documented system fluctuates from 43% within VVU and 48% within AMU to 61% within GVU, 69% within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC and 89% within Diploma programmes. Therefore, there are some institutional differences in how widely a quality assurance system of prior learning assessment is used, and Diploma programmes stands out in particular compared to other education areas.

The general picture of the number of institutions with a quality assurance system deviates from the result in the report by NCK. The report states that "a quality assurance system has rarely been developed or documented" (NCK 2010:52). Perhaps the results are not identical because NCK study dates back to November 2008, whereas the study conducted by the Danish Evaluation Institute is from February 2010. It is likely that many institutions have developed a quality assurance system in the interim period. In addition, an individual respondent's understanding of what a quality assurance system is, may give rise to uncertainty, just as perhaps not all staff at the institution will know that a system has been documented.

Quality assurance of prior learning assessment also requires transparency in the process, so the applicant can understand the purpose of the assessment. For instance, there must be guidelines available to the public for the entire procedure, so that stakeholders can assess whether there is alignment between guidelines and practice (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008: 31-32).

In this connection it may be noted that information about the institution's procedures and standards for prior learning assessment, e.g. on the institution's website, is only made public to a limited extent, except for Diploma programmes, which all do so. Within GVU, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC around 30% replied that they have information available to the public, whereas this only applies to 19% within AMU and 13% within VVU (one in eight).

This is the reason behind the cross-education-area recommendation to all institutions providing prior learning assessment within adult vocational education/training (except Diploma programmes) that they should make information available to the public about the institution's standards and procedures for prior learning assessment, e.g. on the institution's website, and for instance to communicate this through ongoing dialogue with the target group.

Another important element is that the methods ensure reliability, which relates to the concept of being able to repeat results (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008: 33). Documentation to ensure that decisions can be checked, is available at all institutions, but in varying degrees. This documentation is available at all institutions conducting prior learning assessment within VVU,

whereas this is only the case in two out of three within GUV and Diploma programmes. The figure for AMU is 60%, 56% for general adult education (N=9) and 39% for general upper secondary subjects at VUC.

A decisive element in quality assurance is that the assessment is repeatable. This is the reason behind the cross-education-area recommendation to all providers (except VVU) that all education institutions conducting prior learning assessment ensure that assessment and validation of prior learning are documented so that decisions can be tested to strengthen the legitimacy of prior learning assessment. As a minimum it should be possible to see how the process has taken place and on what the assessment is based.

The tools and procedures used by institutions to ensure the quality of the prior learning assessments taking place at their institutions vary considerably; cooperation with other institutions on quality development of prior learning assessment is one of the most common. This applies particularly within Diploma programmes, where all institutions cooperate with other institutions on quality development, while about two in three cooperate in other education areas, except for general upper secondary subjects at VUC, where 44% cooperate.

There are criteria or standards for use in prior learning assessment at all institutions conducting prior learning assessment within VVU, whereas the proportion is almost 80% in Diploma programmes (seven in nine) and around 60% in the other education areas. All institutions conducting prior learning assessment within VVU and Diploma programmes have procedure descriptions for the institution's work with prior learning assessment. The corresponding figure is 78% within general upper secondary subjects at VUC, 67% within general adult education (six in nine), 55% within GUV and 54% within AMU. The other tools and procedures to ensure quality of prior learning assessment are generally used to a much lesser extent.

In all the education areas, about 50% reply that employees evaluate prior learning assessment. Letting the participants evaluate prior learning assessments is more the exception than the rule. Therefore, almost 50% (three in eight) let participants evaluate the prior learning assessment process within AMU and VVU, whereas 34% do so within GUV, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. No participants make such evaluations within Diploma programmes. On the basis of this, the Danish Evaluation Institute recommends that institutions conducting prior learning assessment include participants in systematic evaluations of the prior learning assessment process and use these evaluations actively in improving prior learning assessment work. However, it should be stressed that there is no statutory requirement that participants evaluate prior learning assessment.

Appeals

In April 2010 the Danish Ministry of Education had only received four appeals about prior learning assessment, and they were all related to AMU. None of these cases have been finalised yet (see more about these cases in the chapter about AMU).

The Qualifications Board processes appeals against decisions by Danish education institutions regarding validation of prior learning within GUV, VVU, Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC. The Qualifications Board does not process appeals about legal issues, but takes a position on the decision itself, i.e. whether the prior learning can be validated. Since 2007 the Qualifications Board has heard six appeals, all within the area of Diploma programmes. In all six cases, the Qualifications Board has decided not to allow the appeal on the basis of an expert assessment, has dismissed the applicant's demand to have a prior learning assessment conducted, or has dropped the case due to lack of documentation.

A couple of the cases involve a fundamental and significant matter about a university college which has refused to carry out a prior learning assessment based on written material submitted. The institution has therefore exercised its right to "refuse to initiate a prior learning assessment if it deems that the applicant's documented competencies do not, or only to a limited extent, corre-

spond to the admission requirements or the targets for the education/training programme, or parts hereof, for which the competencies are to be assessed” (see section 15a(6)).

In this connection, it may be considered whether this provision could be in conflict with the intention of the legislation: to provide the possibility to validate prior learning which has not already been validated in the form of “documented competencies”. Perhaps it should be considered to introduce a requirement that all participants must at least be allowed an interview about prior learning assessment in order to promote validation of undocumented prior learning.

The feedback the Danish Evaluation Institute has received from the institutions shows that the institutions have received a very limited number of appeals, and most of these have been from AMU and Diploma programmes. One explanation for this pattern could be the relatively high prior learning assessment activity within AMU, and that participants in Diploma programmes may be more socio-economically advantaged than the average participant in the other areas.

The relatively few appeals indicate that participants are not sufficiently aware of the possibilities of appeal. This is supported by the fact that the Danish Evaluation Institute asked the 26 participants interviewed, whether they were made aware of the possibilities of appeal, and only half gave an affirmative response. There is reason to pay special attention to the low number of appeals. Not least, given that the 26 interviews with participants conducted by the Danish Evaluation Institute show that even though a relatively high proportion of these participants seem to have had a basis for appealing against the process they went through, they did not actually appeal.

Therefore it should be recommended that the Danish Ministry of Education strongly emphasises to the providers their obligation to inform about the possibilities of appeal against prior learning assessment. This recommendation applies in relation to five of the six education areas, but not to general adult education due to insufficient data basis.

Organisation and management

Most institutions have one or more special units working with prior learning assessment. The proportion fluctuates from around 60% within AMU, Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC to just over 70% within GUV and VVU. Moreover, at most institutions management of prior learning assessment is rooted in one or more managers. This applies to almost 90% within general upper secondary subjects at VUC and Diploma programmes, and between 70% and 85% within the other education areas.

However, whether the institution has described a strategy for prior learning assessment varies more, i.e. from almost 20% within VVU and about one in four within general adult education and AMU, to just over 30% within general upper secondary subjects at VUC and just over 40% within GUV and Diploma programmes.

Skills development of employees

A total of 80% have developed the skills of their employees working with prior learning assessment within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC, whereas this only applies for two in three within AMU and GUV. On the other hand, this is only the case for just under 40% within Diploma programmes and about 20% within VVU. Across education areas, skills development has primarily been externally at seminars, conferences and courses and through participation in exchange of experience across institutions.

As mentioned earlier, around one-third of the institution representatives deem that there is a shortage of courses for employees working with prior learning assessment.

Information and communication

Communication of knowledge about prior learning assessment, both internally at the institutions and externally, is important for the spread of prior learning assessment. However, there are large

differences in the proportion of institutions within the various education areas, which have informed employees internally in the organisation about prior learning assessment: from 46% within VVU and 56% within Diploma programmes, to 76% within AMU, 80% within GVU, 84% within general adult education and 92% within general upper secondary subjects at VUC. Almost everyone has disseminated knowledge about prior learning assessment at internal meetings.

There are also large differences in the proportion of institutions within the various education areas, which has informed externally about prior learning assessment: from 43% within VVU, 54% within the general adult education, 56% within Diploma programmes and 58% within general upper secondary subjects at VUC, to 70% within AMU and 87% within GVU. Looking at how institutions have provided information in the various education areas, there is a tendency that within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC information has mainly been communicated through a student counsellor and websites, whereas AMU, GVU, Diploma programmes and, in part, VVU have mainly used their own consultants and websites. Among providers of AMU and GVU, there is generally a great deal of outreaching work in connection with enterprises, and therefore it would be obvious to base the dissemination of knowledge about prior learning assessment on this work. This may also explain the high spread of prior learning assessment with some providers of AMU, where a few conducted 1,000 prior learning assessments in 2009. In relation to this, AMU and GVU have a good starting point compared to other education areas.

External communication is vital for the spread of prior learning assessment

This external communication is particularly significant for the spread of prior learning assessment, especially since lack of public awareness of prior learning assessment has been pointed to by all respondents as the largest barrier to the spread of prior learning assessment. Several informants from across institutions in our interview study also mention that they lack external communication of knowledge about prior learning assessment, also from the Danish Ministry of Education.

So the general picture is of insufficient dissemination of knowledge and inadequate marketing of prior learning assessment in relation to participants, enterprises, trade unions and job centres. Therefore, the Danish Evaluation Institute recommends that the Danish Ministry of Education and the institutions providing prior learning assessment make special efforts to increase awareness and application of prior learning assessment, e.g. through disseminating good experience with prior learning assessment.

Moreover, several informants in the Danish Evaluation Institute study mention that the economic recession could give potential for more enquiries about prior learning assessment. In this connection, it may also be important that, for example, the job centres refer unemployed people to prior learning assessment (see the chapter on AMU). A group interview of researchers indicated that in order to make prior learning assessment more widespread, it is vital to involve enterprises and stakeholder organisations. For instance, one barrier mentioned was that several, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, are not aware of the possibility of prior learning assessment.

The interview study shows that there are attitudinal barriers among a large number of teachers at VUC and to some degree at the academies of professional higher education and the university colleges; barriers which we assume have a negative impact on motivation to inform about prior learning assessment. Similarly researchers in the interview study pointed to attitudinal barriers at institutions in relation to making prior learning assessment more widespread. Finally NCK also mentions attitudinal barriers, and that work with prior learning assessment is very much a torch carried by enthusiasts. (NCK 2010). Therefore we recommend that the Danish Ministry of Education engages in dialogue with providers in order to make the possibilities and the perspectives in prior learning assessment more visible.

The 26 participants interviewed by the Danish Evaluation Institute have named those who told them about the possibility to undergo a prior learning assessment, and a slightly different picture appears here, depending on the education area. Within AMU, most participants were made aware of the possibility through their employer, and no one within AMU first became aware of the possibility through a student counsellor or similar at their education institution. Conversely,

for Diploma programmes, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects at VUC, most people were informed about the possibility by the education institution itself. Within GUV and VVU there is a wider spectrum of sources, including trade unions and job centres.