



OBSERVAL Case Study in Flemish speaking Belgium

Family Competences Portfolio (FamCompass)

Recognizing and Validating Competences Acquired in Family Life to shorten educational curricula and enhance job-application

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ABSTRACT

In their roles as educators, home makers and care givers, men and women obtain a lot of competences in family life. The FamCompass is a portfolio-tool developed in an european partnership which validates these family competences. Developed in accordance to profiles of educational curricula and of professions in the field of family science, social work, remedial pedagogy and care for children and elderly, it can be used both in procedures of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and by job-coaching centra and career-counsellors. In APL procedures it proves competences in order to shorten educational careers in higher education and thereby lowers thresholds for minority-groups. In career-counselling it empowers clients and enriches their application-portfolios.

INTRODUCTION

Women and men get substantial life experience in raising children, living with a partner, taking care for elder relatives and managing their household. A lot of this experience is relevant to professional training and work in the social and educational field and the field of care. Think for example of organising to live with a child with a learning disability or taking care for a partner with a chronic illness.

It looks obvious to valorise competences obtained in family life when a mother or father wants to re-enter the labour market after some time out, for instance having cared for children, or as an 'older student' entering a course to find a new job. However, although some tools exist to describe (general) competences acquired in family life with a view to enter the labour market, no instrument focuses specifically on entering formal learning curricula. FamCompass Portfolio fills this gap. Based on experience in working with the portfolio method and according to developing standards in APL-procedures and assessment of competences (Janssens (2008), Lichtenberg (2007), Imhof (2009)), we developed a specific portfolio instrument within the European Grundtvig-project FamCompass. Partners in this project were: Higher Institute for Family Sciences (BE, coordinator), Comenius University, Department of Andragogy (SK), Deutsches Jugendinstitut e. V. (DE), Institute for Creative Proceedings (PL), Romanian Institute for Adult Education (RO), Vilnius College of Higher Education (LT) and Västra Nylands Folkhögskola (FI).

The scope of FamCompass is in the center of the target of the European Life Long Learning Programme. This aims to help adults to improve their knowledge and competences, develop their personal skills and increase their employability. The FamCompass is especially in line with the Grundtvig-Subprogramme among others aiming at the validation of non-formal and informal learning and can be used to shorten educational curricula and in career-counselling contexts.

FAMILY COMPETENCES IN EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILES OF COMPETENCES

Developing a portfolio to look for family competences starts with questioning what 'a family' means and what 'family competences' mean. To us a family means relationships between a parent (parents) and children (own children, adoption relationships, patchwork / extended family...). It also means the relationship(s) between partners. Further it means the relationship(s) between parents and/or children and/or grandparents. Education and care are main topics in family-life. Family can be defined as intergenerational welfare work on a continuing basis. Household management and social security is a third topic.

To find out which could be a common list of relevant family competences for the 7 participating countries, we gathered competences that can be trained in family as described in educational and occupational profiles. Then we looked which competences from the different profiles for instance in pedagogy are common and which you could learn in a family for instance raising a child with a (learning) disability. For the purpose we analysed:

-educational profiles: Family Sciences, Social Work, Remedial Pedagogy, Palliative Care (Belgium), Educators, Nursery School Teachers, Family Child Day Care, Home Visitors in the Opstapje Program (Germany), Vocational Qualification in Management (Finland), Maternal Assistant (Romania), Pre-school educator (Lithuania)

-professional profiles: Childcare, Care for the Elderly (Belgium) ,Family Child Day Care (Finland), Social Emergency Worker (Poland).

Starting from these profiles offers the possibility to grant exempt of parts of educational curricula or entering a job after having demonstrated the competences acquired in family life by the portfolio. To raise the reliability and validity of the instrument, we choose to follow the guidelines for portfolio development as used in university associations working with APL-procedures (Associatie KULeuven, 2005).

THE INSTRUMENT

The FamCompass Portfolio has several parts that complete each other and cross-validate the stories persons tell about their family experience.

A first glance: general information

Beneath the 'classics' as level of education and occupation, in this part of the portfolio we ask for a detailed family description and especially for a short review of important phases in family life. For instance a person can point to a life time in which s/he took care for a father with dementia. Later in the portfolio the person can extend on this.

I. Part 1 The kaleidoscope of family experiences: listing your competences

Following the general information, the first part of the portfolio gives an overview of family competences as to different areas of family life.

The list of competences starts with the area:

1. Education of and care for children. These competences are both about more or less uncomplicated development and about specific problems persons are confronted with, when raising children. It is about sustaining physical, psychological and social development, about dealing with school problems or with more or less severe illness.

Examples of competences in the field of education of and care for children

12 I am able to stimulate creativity, artistic expression and game play

24 I am able to support a child confronted with divorce of its parents

The person is asked to mark on which level (rank 0 - 4) a competence is owned. When a competence doesn't seem relevant for the purpose of the portfolio, it can be skipped. The levels on which a competence can be obtained are defined in relation to the European qualification framework. They suppose a growing amount of experience with and autonomy in applying the competence. For instance level 2 states: "You have family experience of the competence but you do not or only seldom reflect on it", while the highest level (4) states: "The competence is an integrated part of yourself, you use it readily also in an unpredictable situation and you reflect on how to improve it".

2. Partner relationship: second area of competences. What did a person learn by living in a partner relation? Again the competences are about the partnership, experiencing an uncomplicated stage of the relationship and about the need for more extended caring for instance when a partner gets ill.

Examples

74 I am able to create a balance between standing up for myself and being close to my partner

90 I am able to analyse the need for help of a partner (disability, illness)

3. Caring for elderly relatives: the third major field referring to family competences. Again the scope is from helping with the typical transitions as getting retired up to the care for a parent who needs special care in a home for elderly.

Examples

95 I am able to give guidance to a senior during difficult transition in his/her life (retirement, going to a nursery home: information about services, emotional support)

104 I am able to give emotional support to senior confronted with death of a partner, family member or friend

4. Household management and social security: fourth field inserted in the list of competences. The relations with children, partners and elderly ask for a lot of time management and for specific actions in the field of running the everyday household and the administrative obligations or necessities.

Examples

110 I am able to create a balance between work, family responsibility and leisure

104 I am able to follow up administrative tasks: insurances, taxes, unemployment aid, family allowance

5. General competences: the overview of competences ends with a section comprising general competences. These are about problem solving, communication skills, stress management. These competences are very open because of their general content. Therefore they open the reflection about family competences in a broader way.

Examples

2 I am able to identify individual learning points based on critical reflection of my own functioning

19 I am able to lead and participate in a discussion in a constructive way

II. Part 2: Unfolding the competences

The second part of the portfolio enlarges the colours and patterns of the family kaleidoscope by offering the opportunity to write in depth about what a person experiences as his/her strengths and

weaknesses in relation to the competences. First this can be done in an open, spontaneous story like way. In a second move competences are made concrete in the six steps STAR-method, looking for the specific description of the starting situation, task, action, result, evaluation, strengths and learning points.

These two steps of deeper reflection are made for each of the domains of competences described above.

Example: reflection on strength and weaknesses as to the field 'Relationship with, education and care of children'

"As strength I see : setting boundaries (f.i. Fixed time for sleeping), care and nursing (f.i. Washing at evening (nails)), stimulating self-regard"

"As a 'growing' point: to better develop the children's communication skills; finding a good balance between protecting and letting go"

Example: reflection with STAR-method as to competence 94 'I am able to understand elderly people when coping with retirement or loss of physical abilities'

(1) Situation: My father did need to learn to live with a partner with a disability

(2) Task: I gave support in the household

(3) Actions: -Organising family-care -structuring of his life - support with the process of acceptance: a lot of time spent talking about it

(4) Result: They got through it together and are happy in spite of the disability

(5) Evaluation: In the beginning I gave a lot of support and then slowly less. At the moment they can take care for themselves being supported by professional help

(6) Reflection on further learning points: It is a difficult task to support an elderly person during the acceptance phase of a sudden disability. I keep searching for the literature about this process to assimilate new information

The examples show that the two ways of exploring the competences are complementary and give the person different paths for reflection. These reflections are also a good starting point for eventual competence oriented interviewing in which frequently the STAR-method is used.

To help the users to make the best possible use of the reflection file, they are offered the main guidelines that will be used by the assessor to evaluate the descriptions.

III. Part 3 Adding evidence by way of references and other documents

The listing and reporting of the competences is a narrative way of presenting oneself. To raise the validity of the reporting, it is useful to ask for relevant references as to the competences persons want to be seen qualified for. Although it is not evident to obtain references for family competences, we received some interesting examples when testing the instrument. For instance, detailed letters and e-mails about a revalidation route and/or therapy or letters that illustrate the steps taken in a divorce procedure.

The criteria used to evaluate the quality of the pieces of evidence are in accordance with those used in other procedures of recognising prior learning in APL-procedures of universities. Among other they deal with authenticity, relevance, actuality and context variation of the evidence.

IV. Part 4 Exploring spontaneous reflection on difficult family-situations

In this section the person is offered two cases. One about a family situation which shows a common conflict in relationships that is mostly solved without external help and one situation in which professional help is necessary. We developed a battery of cases which are relevant to persons using the FamCompass to have different profiles of competences proved; for instance cases relevant to competences for daycare for elderly and cases relevant for taking care of children.

The users are offered some questions as to how they would deal with the cases and the criteria on which the answers to these questions will be assessed. In accordance with the levels of the European Qualification Framework, the assessment looks for levels in which steps of problem analysis, grades of autonomy in handling the situations and integration of competences are evaluated.

Example of case taken form a family context:

“You are a parent of three children, aged 17 years, 15 years and 10 years.

The oldest, Charles, was always a quite responsible person at school and has generally helped around the house. He has now moved on to higher education and has made new friends. You realise that he is spending more money than the allowance you give him. He eats out regularly and has a new girlfriend every week.

Question: You are concerned about where his money is coming from. How would you, as a parent, react to this situation?”

USING THE INSTRUMENT

Beneath the **paper version** of FamCompass an **electronic version** has been developed. It offers the same possibilities to show the competences. Marking competences and describing them in depth are both possible. To support the use of the instrument, different manuals were developed.

The **User's Manual** gives an overview of the step by which the portfolio is to be done. The criteria which will be used by the assessor are listed to help the person make his portfolio as convincing as possible.

The **Guide's Manual** offers some experiences from the testing phases to address different target groups in the best possible way.

The **Assessor's Manual** specifies the general and specific criteria the assessor has to take in account.

The **time** persons need to make the portfolio is dependent on a lot of characteristics such as capacity of reflection, knowledge of the language and motivation. The FamCompass as a whole was made in 5 to 20 hours. Of course this can be spread in time, not only with the paper version, also with the electronic version.

Depending on the aim of using the instrument and depending on the characteristics of the users, the instrument has high **flexibility** and can be adopted in different ways. For instance in an APL-procedure for recognising competences in the field of remedial pedagogy, the list of competences could be reduced to those about education of, and care for, children.

If necessary, the portfolio can be extended by a competence oriented interview. When the portfolio is used in coaching, it could be less relevant to ask for extensive pieces of evidence. Depending on the motivation of the user or on her/his knowledge of the language in which the portfolio is offered, it can be useful to have some parts of the instrument done by interview. For instance the discussion of the case studies can be organised in this way. In any case the user is offered a manual in which the parts of the instrument are discussed with the criteria for assessment.

ASSESSMENT OF THE COMPETENCES: RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

Following the aims of using the portfolio, the assessment criteria need to be more or less rigid as to validity and reliability. Especially when using the instrument to recognise competences in a formal educational curriculum, these criteria are severe. Therefore the Assessor's Manual gives an overview of general principles in assessing prior learning and has specific assessment criteria for each part of the portfolio. The assessment is then done to conform to the validity and reliability criteria for APL-procedures. This means among others things that the assessment should be done independently and with guarantee of the privacy of the applicant. Mostly this will require training for the assessors. The

assessors should be very well informed about the competences the institution looks for and it is useful to have an in-service training in order to reach the same interpretation of levels of assessment criteria.

The assessment of the portfolio should be done as a global assessment, which means that throughout the assessment what is being looked for is cross-validation of the different parts. Depending on the indicators used, part 1 of the portfolio offers an overview of the relevant competences and the level at which they are marked. Part 2 (reflection file) can together with part 3 (pieces of evidence) prove some competences. Part 3 and part 4 (cases) can also show competences proven.

At the end of the assessment it is clear that the assessor will have enough information to accept some competences proven and some needing further investigation, for instance by interview.

To enhance the quality of the portfolio assessment several steps could be taken.

1/ Reliability of an instrument means that repeated measurement leads to the same result at different times of measurement and as measured by different assessors. The clear structure and the guidelines for administration of the portfolio promote the reliability. Because persons are changing and memory is not all embracing, of course it can't be perfect.

2/ Training of assessors: concerning the assessors the criteria should be as concrete as possible and training of the assessors is important to reach awareness for sources of bias as: halo-effect, sequence effects and contamination effects. Institutions using the FamCompass are recommended to offer a training for assessors beneath the extensive guidelines which are formulated in the Assessor' Manual.

3/ Validity: An instrument is valid if on ground of the results definite conclusions can be made about the competence you want to measure. Content validity of FamCompass is enhanced by taking competences from educational and job profiles, working with levels of owning a competence, asking for concrete examples and the possible use of a criteria oriented interview. As to construct validity, rules of good practice relating to the portfolio were followed: the different parts of the portfolio sustain each other (for instance the levels in part 1, the detailed descriptions in part 2, the pieces of evidence (part 3) and the reached level in discussing the cases (part 4). But also by using clear criteria for evaluating the reflection file (STAR) and the cases. Face validity is high, taking into account the representativeness of the competences from the point of view of the users. The criterion validity is to be tested by the institutions using the portfolio for their specific purpose.

4/ Indicators: an organisation can develop indicators¹ that specify when a competence is proved by the FamCompass Portfolio.

Developing an indicator is done in three steps: (1) specifying the condition or the results you want to find evidence for, (2) specifying the elements that provide this evidence, (3) evaluating the use of the specified elements for providing evidence as to the aimed condition or results and change them if necessary.

Each organisation will have its own aims using the FamCompass. For instance the FamCompass can be used to measure competences needed for a course or for an educational curriculum. Or it can be used to achieve awareness of family competences in a coaching process to find a job.

Example of developing an indicator for a specific competence from an educational profile

Step 1: In the educational profile of Bachelor Remedial Pedagogy from the High School University Brussels, competence 3.5.3 is stated as: "Promotes and maintains cognitive,

¹ *Definition of an indicator: Element(s) providing evidence that a certain condition exists or certain results have or have not been achieved (Harvard Graduate School of Education)*

emotional, social and motor developments”.

Step 2: The institution could decide that competence 3.5.3 is achieved if the following conditions are met:

-part 1: level 3 or 4 is reached for FamCompass-competence 63: 'Ability to support a child with a physical disability (concrete and promoting self worth)'.
-part 1: level 3 or 4 is reached for the FamCompass competences 14 (I know the theoretical basis of the cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development of a child), 15 (I am able to stimulate the development of self reliance and social adjustment)

-FamCompass competence 63 is discussed in detail in the second part of the portfolio: reflection file, part 2: detailed and relevant description of the six steps following the STAR-method to illustrate a competence

-Part 3 of the portfolio provides at least one piece of evidence that supports having experience in raising a child with a disability

Step 3: When the student is doing practical work, the evaluation can show if the competence is indeed owned. If this is not the case, there is a need to change the conditions to approve the competence.

Generally the development of indicators asks for a group of experts who decide which competences could be proven by using specific parts of the FamCompass, and which variable can be used to check the link. Because the FamCompass can be used in a flexible way, for instance by adding a competence oriented interview or discussing part 4 (cases as to family problems) in an interview, the indicators could also, in that sense, be very different.

TESTING-PHASES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAMCOMPASS

Testing

The first testing was done in October-November 2008. All partners participated in the first testing with a total of 89 users and 2 or more assessors for each country. This first testing was done with students, course participants of the partner institutions and a minority of external participants.

Users, coaches and assessors were offered a questionnaire evaluating their experience of the portfolio. Although the evaluation illustrated that most users and assessors were positive as to content and style of the portfolio, there were also a lot of stimulating remarks. Most important conclusions were to reduce the number of competences and have them formulated in a less formal way. Part 3 then was enlarged with the strength-weakness-analysis beneath the STAR-analysis.

The second draft of the instrument and manuals was finished by April 2009 and the second testing done May 2009. In this testing we looked for more diversity in levels of education and cultural backgrounds and had different organisations working with our target groups involved. For instance in Belgium 18 persons participated who were coached by organisations focusing on persons with low level of education and/or being members of cultural minority groups. In the second testing 84 users participated and again several assessors for each country. 5 of the test persons were offered an electronic version of the portfolio.

The overall feedback from users and assessors was clearly positive. The content of the portfolio and possible flexibility in use of the instrument were main positive topics. 91% of the participants in the second testing found that the FamCompass Portfolio looked for the relevant competences as to family-life.

Users Testify

“Going through the list of competences really helped me to see how many competences I already have, many of them I never thought of”.

“The FamCompass was a great chance to discover, specify and remember forgotten competences I acquired in family work”.

In spite of this positive evaluation, some further adjustments were made to finalise the instrument. More questions were added to help the users to describe their competences in part 3: strength-weakness-analysis and STAR-method and the introductions to the different parts of the portfolio and the manuals were more specified.

Issues

The testings showed that for people with lower levels of education and language skills careful guidance is necessary. The testings indicated the FamCompass as a challenging instrument for these assesseees, because it is based on the ability to reflect on one’s competences and describe them in written language. Reflecting on and documenting one’s competences is a competence on its own that has to be trained and improved. Guidance of the FamCompass process has to take this into account and be designed as an educational learning module.

Discussion on the evaluation of the testings also showed that family life through the different participating European countries on the one hand provides the possibility to acquire similar competences, but on the other, clear disparities can be observed. These derive from diverse living situations, family traditions and family values. At the same time the differences in one country can be more distinct according to social contexts, rural and urban social contexts or family concepts of minorities in comparison with other countries. For example: Urban life styles and family concepts tend to adjust in all participating countries, but rural or minority family life is quite different from country to country, but also within a country. The FamCompass takes that into account through testing in all partner countries with diverse target groups and the possibility for each participant to add competences or leave out some.

In the Eastern European countries it turned out that because of the political history retention against documentation and assessment of family competences may occur.

PERSPECTIVES IN THE USE OF FAMCOMPASS

The FamCompass Portfolio will be used and further developed in different settings.

The concrete forms also depend on the different stages of development concerning APL in the participating countries (Van Tartwijk, 2007). The Department of Andragogy at the Comenius University (SL), the Romanian Institute for Adult Education (IREA), the College of Higher Education (LI), the Institute for Creative Proceedings (PO) and the Higher Institute for Family Sciences (BE) will use the FamCompass in evaluating competences when entering educational curricula.

In Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Finland and Romania, the instrument will be used developing a standard in care for children or selecting men and women (re) entering the labour market. In Belgium the public employment service VDAB works together with the Higher Institute for Family Sciences on using the FamCompass to assist job seekers in their search for work, to coach employees in their career development and to advice employers in their human resources policy.

The use of FamCompass in higher education is but guaranteed if the governmental authorities validate the instrument as part of APL-procedures. The project partners and other stakeholders therefore take action to have the instrument recognised by the official testing centres.

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Website of the project: www.famcompass.eu

The booklet with the final report of the project and the CD with the instrument and manuals can be ordered by taking contact with Joris.Dewispelaere@hig.be or Lut.Verstappen@hig.be

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