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Case Study: Competencies acquired through work place learning related to higher education

The case study:	The story
Description of the context	**Web links to institution/ organisation website**: www.liu.se and http://www.liu.se/polopoly_fs/1.10669!/validus%202.pdf **Case study**: This case describes the process and results from a validation project, financed by The Delegation of Validation (Valideringsdelegationen), the Swedish authority for validation during the years 2004 to 2007. The project focused on validation of non-formal and informal learning acquired by candidates through work-place learning, in the field of national trade union occupations, related to the following three courses in higher education: 1. **The individual and the work-place group, 7,5 HE cp (Higher education credit points)**. 2. **Multitude in society and working life, 7,5 HE cp**. 3. **Management and organisation of health care- and welfare systems, 7,5 HE cp.**
In which sector is it taking place?	**Sector:** Validation of work-place learning related to higher education

In which organisation is it taking place?	**Organisation and background:** This case study is based upon the report *"Validus II – Report from step 2 of a cooperation project concerning validation of trade union occupational knowledge acquired through work-place learning"* (from a project called "Validus", driven in cooperation between Linköping University, Lund University and the national trade unions called Kommunal and ST (The Union of Civil Servants). The validation took place at Linköping University, Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning.
Explanation of the organisation's function & purpose – The background to the case study/ *a landscape* of the case study	The primary purpose of the Validus project was to; *"Develop a general model with flexible solutions for validation of knowledge acquired through work-place learning. Thereby, the competencies of the individual may be identified, and the value of such may be confirmed and credited toward higher education studies"*. (Schultz, L. & Sandberg, F., 2007, Validus II, p 2.)

The main task for The Delegation for Validation was to support and form the development of the problems of validation according to the legitimacy, quality and working methods.

Within the project, a model for validation was first developed and then the project group wanted to try the model by giving candidates the possibility to join a validation process based on this model. The project started with identifying what knowledge and competencies individuals seemed to have acquired by working in the field of national trade unions. During this initial phase it was also important to find possible ways of bridging the gaps between higher education and working life.

The project arranged a pilot group made up of representatives from the trade unions mentioned above. The representatives were interviewed and their knowledge and experiences were identified. Based upon the results of the interviews, a model for validation was developed in which the intended purpose was to validate the knowledge of the candidates in two subjects: work-place environment and workplace rights. For various practical and organisational reasons, it was not possible to relate the knowledge of the |

	candidates to courses in this field; therefore, the project had to find other courses with content closer to the actual field. (See the courses presented above.)
Description of the VNFL-IFL candidates:	
Who are they?	20 people (15 from the trade union Kommunal and 5 from the trade union ST) with work experience in national trade unions were invited to join a validation process. Of these 20, eight dropped out, leaving 12 people who joined the validation process.
Background and aims? Why the VNFL-IFL?	According to the candidates, the most important aim of the validation process was to formalise their knowledge and competencies. They wanted to be given credit points and paper qualifications. They wanted to be able to prove their knowledge by having this documentation in case they might change work places in the future. They also wanted to be given the opportunity to reflect upon their work and their self-esteem and to be able to feel stronger in their work positions. Some of them viewed the validation process as a way of being given competence development; others viewed the validation process as a way of being given credit for the knowledge they already felt they possessed – a way of formalising the knowledge.
Description of the advisers/assessors, evaluators perspective of the validation-process	The authors of the report (Linda Schultz and Fredrik Sandberg) functioned as competence advisers/tutors to the candidates during the validation process. Their roles were to support the candidates throughout the process. The competence adviser and the teacher, who was also the course coordinator, were responsible for creating "tools" for the validation process, such as information about the validation process, support for candidates in choosing the course(s) they wanted the validation related to, and interview guides/conversation guides. The teacher created special case tasks related to the courses. The tools will be described below. The teacher/course coordinator and the competence adviser found it important that both the candidate and the teacher showed mutual understanding during the conversation. The result of the conversation

	depends on the relation between the teacher and the candidate, that they manage to create an open-minded atmosphere. It is important that the teacher has competence in the content of the course, as well as pedagogic skill, combined with a humble attitude. The candidate on the other hand, needs to be able to describe his/her practical experiences and knowledge and at the same time be open to the theoretical discussions. The conversation is therefore a mutual process, wherein theoretical and practical knowledge may meet.
The validation-process – description of tools	The validation process was divided into the following 8 steps: 1. *Information about the validation process* 2. Preliminary validation questions 3. *The choice of course. Formal documents, CV and self- assessment* 4. *Conversation* 5. *Case* 6. *Documentation, evaluation and assessment* 7. *Feedback to the candidate* 8. *Supplementary education* **Step 1.** The project created an information document describing some of the background discussion about validation and containing an explanation of the process to be followed. They also arranged an information meeting where the candidates were given a chance to ask questions. **Step 2.** During this meeting the candidates were asked some preliminary questions, such as: *"What do you know about validation?"* *"Why do you want to join the validation process?"* *"What kind of results do you expect from the validation?"* *"What kind of experiences of higher education do you have?"* *" How do you feel about higher education?"* *" In what way do you think validation may be helpful for your development in your working life?"* **Step 3.** After these opening questions, the candidates were offered three

courses to choose from, such that the rest of the validation process would be related to these courses. Formal documents and qualifications were also collected in this step, and the candidates made self-assessments.

Step 4. In cooperation between the competence advisers and the course coordinator, a guide for conversation was constructed related to each course of 7,5 HE cp. Before the conversation, the candidates were instructed to prepare themselves by reflecting upon their work experiences, work place learning and their practical knowledge as if
they were looking at themselves from an outside perspective. The conversation guide was constructed in relation to the content of the courses, followed by questions related to specific situations and work tasks, such as *"What do you do?" "How do you do it?" "What do you think you are doing especially well in your work?"*

Step 5. The course coordinator created specific case tasks related to each course content and educational targets. It is important that the construction of the cases is based upon practical situations and not upon course literature and theoretical perspectives. The candidates were given one week to finish their work on the case task.

Step 6. The main purpose of this step was to identify the candidates' knowledge as related to the course plans so that the candidate could be granted credit for such knowledge in the form of higher education credit points. The assessment of the validation process was carried out by the teacher/course coordinator. The teacher responsible for each course found that it was possible to identify many candidates' knowledge
  as equal to *parts* of the courses and therefore eligible for credit; but they also found it difficult to identify knowledge as equal to *the complete* content of a course. The candidates exhibited extensive knowledge of and experiences related to several of the theoretical aspects of the courses. The cases were written from what the teachers called a "reflection upon practical knowledge". The teachers also found that some of the theoretical aspects were missing, as the answers in the cases were not discussed from a theoretical perspective. The answers from the candidates joining this validation process were discussed from a theoretical point of view, and the final result of the assessment was satisfying. All the candidates could be

| | given credit for their knowledge equal to somewhere between 40 – 80 % of the course contents.

Step 7-8. The course coordinator was also responsible for explaining options to the candidates who might want to pursue supplementary education given that the validation failed to confirm 100% competency with regard to a given complete course. The candidates were also offered career counselling by career counsellors at the university. |
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| **Assessment of the validation model:** | After the validation process, the candidates were able to assess the model and the process and were given the opportunity to express their opinions regarding both.

Some advantages mentioned: The candidates found that the validation model and process had been clearly described. They were satisfied with the fact that their knowledge acquired through working life could be acknowledged in the form of the granting of higher education credit points. They thought that the conversation with the competence advisers and teachers had been satisfying. The possibility of validation also made them more conscious about their competencies. After the validation, they were more comfortable with enrolling in academic courses.

Some disadvantages mentioned: The main disadvantage of the validation model that the candidates mentioned was the lack of time. Several of the candidates found it difficult to complete the case work while continuing to work full-time. Several of the candidates would have liked more time to write the cases. There is a need to find more flexible solutions for each candidate.
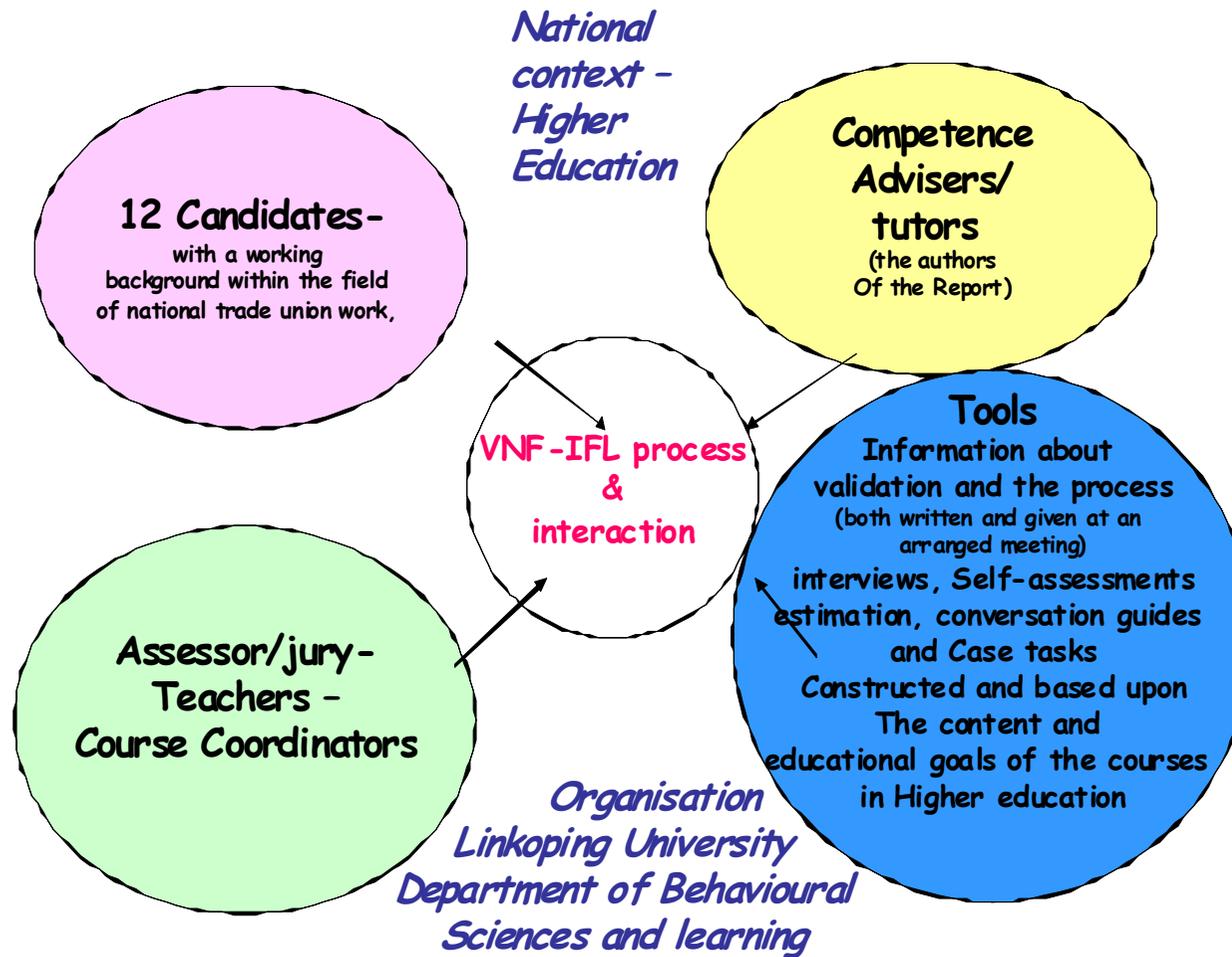
Several of the aims of the validation model and process were achieved. The model appears to work and several of the candidates were able to shorten their study time as a result of this validation process. They received credit in form of 40 – 80 % of complete course content for the competencies they had acquired in their working lives and they were also given the opportunity to enrol in supplementary education so that they could graduate. It can also |

	be noted that the candidates were more inspired and motivated to undertake supplementary education after the validation process.
Conclusions – Summary:	The authors of the report found that one of the critical points in the validation model is the assessment of the cases. The assessment decides the result of the validation and depends a lot on the approach of the course coordinator concerning the definition of knowledge. It is important that the teacher/course coordinator is open to other cultures of knowledge and willing to recognise the knowledge a candidate has acquired and relate this knowledge to academic knowledge. The authors point out that, once again, the relation between the academy and working life is not symmetric because the academy, in the end, is the party in this relation that is responsible for the assessment of the knowledge presented. It seems that the results of this validation process depend at least in part upon personal factors. Another factor that is important for the result of the validation is that the candidates are motivated to go through the process. It is also necessary to inform the candidates about how much work they will need to do as part of the process and how much time the process will take. The lack of time was one of the factors candidates mentioned as problematic in carrying out the validation process.

National context –
Higher Education

12 Candidates-
with a working
background within the field
of national trade union work,

Competence
Advisers/
tutors
(the authors
Of the Report)

VNF-IFL process
&
interaction

Tools
Information about
validation and the process
(both written and given at an
arranged meeting)
interviews, Self-assessments
estimation, conversation guides
and Case tasks
Constructed and based upon
The content and
educational goals of the courses
in Higher education

Assessor/jury-
Teachers –
Course Coordinators

Organisation
Linkoping University
Department of Behavioural
Sciences and learning

The case study – different stories