



Expert Seminar

FamCompass: Assessing and validating family competences

Brussels, Saturday 24 October 2009

Minutes

Present were: experts active in different fields (assessment of prior learning, adult education, employment), invited by the partners in the FamCompass project.

See annex: List of participants, or go to www.famcompass.eu to download it.

Joris Dewispelaere (HIG, BE) welcomes all participants and briefly repeats the goals of this meeting:

- to exchange experience in the development and application of APL tools and methods and look for possible links with FamCompass;
- to explore the possible application of FamCompass in educational programs and on the labor market;
- to discuss the input given during the FamCompass conference.

Six experts gave a presentation: go to www.famcompass.eu to download them.

1. Mr. **Ronny Leenknecht**, Coordinator Research and Development at Socius, Support point for social-cultural adult work (BE), presents **OSCAR**.

As an introduction Mr. Leenknecht explains what organizations and activities the sector of social-cultural adult work in Flanders implies.

Oscar is a portfolio for competences acquired in non-formal educational settings and through voluntary work, to be launched on the 27th November (see www.oscaronline.be).

It was developed by Socius, in collaboration with 'Steunpunt Jeugd', Service Centre for Youth Policy in Flanders.

Mr. Leenknecht explains how Oscar *identifies* (discovers, documents, describes, defines) competences, *assesses* them to specific standards, but does *not validate* them with an official legitimization or homologation.

An assessment by Oscar results in a certificate, which is informal but nevertheless recognized by a great number of organizations in the social-cultural adult work sector.

How does Oscar relate to FamCompass?

- Both instruments are based on the portfolio methodology.
- They share a strong definition of competences.
- Oscar implies a larger range of competences.

What Oscar can learn from FamCompass:

- implement reflection tool in the instrument.

What FamCompass can learn from Oscar:

- concluding certificate with room for comment, both by organization as applicant;
- FamCompass must stick to specific focus on family competences, clearly related to professional and educational profiles in education and care.

Questions & comments:

- Lisa Vernon (UK/Fi): the Finnish 'Learning book' from which Oscar started is a good example of looking at learning experiences in a very open way, valuing the experience of youngsters.
- Joris Dewispelaere (BE): in FamCompass we look for competences acquired by adults after substantial family experience. Wouldn't it be also interesting to have an instrument based on which youngsters can learn to reflect on what they learn in family life?
- Lucia Schuegger (DE): this might be interesting but it would start from another perspective: in FamCompass we look for care-*givers*, while young people are care-*receivers*.
- Lisa Vernon (UK/FI): Still there is continuity in the perspectives - see the projects of social work with young fathers in prison.

2. Mr. Marc Troch, Expert Methods & Instruments in Competence Centres with the VDAB, Flemish Agency for Employment (BE), explores APL processes in Flanders.

Currently he sees two processes to have prior learning assessed:

- Certificates of competence: competencies of a candidate are compared with an occupational standard, set by a national board;
- Portfolio- method in (higher) education to get exemptions for (parts of) a formal training program, organized and assessed by one of the five associations of colleges and universities in Flanders.

He sees room for a third way:

- Portfolio gathering evidence for employers in direct relationship with a job offer. It will be up to the applicant to convince the employer that his/her experience is relevant for the job offer.

Questions & comments:

- The labor market in many European countries, especially in the sectors of education and care, is still very (too?) much certificate oriented to open up to this approach, says Alexei Medvedev (DE).
- How will applicants prove their competences? And is it not a contradiction to demand formal proof of informal learning? Asks Aleksandra Matyska (SL).
- Marc Troch replies: Is there always need for evidence? Often applicants (try to) convince employers that they own the requested competences, merely based on a CV and a job interview; an additional portfolio will strongly support the applicant's position.
- Joris Dewispelaere (BE) adds: competence oriented thinking rather than certificate oriented working is ongoing process in the EU.

3. Mrs. **Cristina Stanescu**, Coordinator Project for Maternal Assistants in Timis County (RO), **links FamCompass to foster care.**

This project participated in the testing of the FamCompass instrument. It proved to be useful to help recruit and assess parents interested to become foster parents.

They will use FamCompass to assess and validate family competences with (voluntary) maternal assistants.

Questions & comments:

- Lisa Vernon (UK/FI) sees proof in this project of the possibility FamCompass gives to open up employers in the care sector to competences based curricula and recognizes this in projects of the Family Learning Network (volunteers working with older generations).
- Joris Dewispelaere (BE) adds that also in his country organizations for voluntary work show interest to use the FamCompass.
- Barbara Thiessen (DE) warns that in foster care specific competences are needed (work with traumatized children). These require a high level of (self) reflexion. They are not 'covered' by the FamCompass that mostly focuses on 'normal/average' family relations.
- Mrs. Stanescu states that FamCompass can be very useful as a starting point and as part of a broader assessment of this target group.

- Beata Marcinkowska (PL) sees two ways to formulate and assess competences: top-down (applicant must meet set standards) and bottom-up (applicant opens employer's perspective on possible competences).

4. Mrs. **Karine Janssens**, APL coordinator the University of Ghent (BE), **replies to the 'challenges'** that were formulated at the end of the **FamCompass conference**.

Mrs Janssens participated in the **REACTION project**. This Grundtvig 1 project started in 2005 with the aim of creating a common model for the recognition and accreditation of experiential learning (APEL). They did research on existing APEL practices in the partner countries to explore different approaches and to identify common principles and they developed models for the implementation of APEL in higher education.

For more information and main results of the project, go to www.reactionconference.ugent.be or reaction.vdu.it.

Following research on APL in Flanders she is active in a network of professionals in APL, **EVC wiki** (<http://www.evcwiki.ugent.be/index.php?position=2x1x0>) of which one of the FamCompass partners (Joris Dewispelaere, BE) is also a member.

Her comments on the 'challenges':

(1) Accreditation (APL), not only recognition (RPL) of family competences:

Not necessarily contradiction: both goals are possible for different users.

However, we must realize that formal accreditation requires specific quality standards and procedures.

- Validity is crucial => do we actually test what we want to test?
(Example: we might rather be testing the competence to reflect on a competence rather than executing the competence itself)
- To measure you need indicators. Some tips:
 - Indicators must be tangible/visible actions and behaviors;
 - indicators must be tested with the right reference group (for example, students that already passed): the criteria you set for APL-applicants should also be applicable for regular students;
 - test indicators with different assessors: they must link the same indicators to the same competences;
 - make sure all assessors identify the same indicator behind the action or behavior they observe (for example: putting forward extra questions by an applicant can be assessed positively - 'this person works thoroughly' - or seen as a negative aspect - 'this person doesn't understand sufficiently')

(2) Apply FamCompass for different users and target groups

Main remark: Persons from different background should have the same opportunities to make a good portfolio. Coaching and guidance are essential.

- To compose a good portfolio is hard work; APL-tools are often quite complicated.
- Applicants of all levels need to be introduced to competence oriented thinking; it is not self evident that they understand how this works, even for highly qualified students.

(3) Train (institutional) users and assessors.

This is essential and the real start of dissemination and use.

Some tips:

- try and influence the culture in an organization: competence oriented thinking takes a mental shift;
- gain trust in instrument: show good practices to convince both teachers and decision makers in an organization;
- don't forget to also train the guides or coaches; show them how to work *with* the applicant;
- in the assessor's training within an organization, have discussions on concrete indicators and criteria; this exercise is essential to have all noses pointing in the same direction.

Questions & comments:

- Andrea Reupold (DE) asks against which standers an APL based on FamCompass is done and if the University Ghent has it done for each curriculum.
=> Every institution using it is to set its own standards.
=> At the university there were projects in the field of Nursery. Besides this, the standards are rather developed on demand.
- Joris Dewispelaere (BE) explains that the indicators formulated in the booklet are rather vague, exactly because this exercise is to be done by each institution using the FamCompass.
- Barbara Thiessen (DE) realizes that the FamCompass in its current shape (trying to correspond to the needs of different partners in different countries) might be still too rough. The EC sets ambitious goals to APL but gives little budget to projects promoting it.
=> Mrs. Janssens refers to the new call for EU programs in February and suggest to grasp this opportunity to organize a sequel to our project, aiming on further dissemination and application of the FamCompass, training etc.

5. Mrs **Ausra Fokiene**, APL expert in the Kaunas Magnus University (LT) presents the **TIMA-Balt project**.

TIMA-Balt refers to 'Transfer of Innovative Methodology for Assessment of VET Teachers' Prior Learning', a Leonardo da Vinci program that runs in the Baltic states (www.vdu.lt/tima-balt). The concluding conference is due in January 2010.

In her presentation she gives a detailed overview of the possibilities and pitfalls when introducing an APL-traject.

Questions & comments:

- Karin Janssens (BE) asks how in Lithuania the teachers got convinced of the use of APL. Especially gaining trust in the reliability and validity is not evident.
- Ausra Fokiene explains that discussions on aims, structure and validity demanded a substantial time investment.

6. Mrs **Odeta Gurskiene**, Vice-Director of the National Qualification Department of the Government of Lithuania, presents the creation of the **National Qualifications System of Lithuania** as an 'instrument for trust'.

As an introduction Mrs. Gurskiene explains how Lithuanians imply 'teaching' in family competences: the Russian regime forbid to use (read and write) the Lithuanian language. In order to preserve this tradition, many parents (especially mothers) thought their children to read and write Lithuanian... which makes language teaching a specific Lithuanian 'family competence'.

The Lithuanian Qualification Framework should be seen as a system of references. Not all sectors are supposed to handle it exactly in the same way. Mrs Gurskiene stresses now is the right time to implement family competences as part of curricula in institutions and that in Lithuania at least one of the educational institutions should start with this as soon as possible.

When looking at the participants in the development of the Lithuanian Qualification Framework, it is clear that (LL) learners also should get involved.

As a conclusion to her presentation she expresses the fear that a lot of good plans and projects related to APL are resting in the desks of politicians and decision makers... She concludes we not only need to train users and assessors, but also the politicians!

Questions & comments:

- In many other countries institutions are equally slow in implementing the national qualification frameworks.

- Many see in their country resistance to the transparency the implementation of the NQF requires.
- It is questioned if the Qualification Frameworks are intended to have easier progress from one level to another for the users - or is it meant to have clearer cut levels?
- Trade unions are also important partners in the implementation of the Frameworks.

Final remark by Mrs. Karine Janssens: competence certification risks to become a fetishism in its own... keep seeing this as an entry to education/employment, not as a goal in itself.

And the future?

Joris Dewispelaere (BE) concludes how we learned it is essential to find allies and partners to apply the FamCompass and together work on the shift to more competence oriented thinking in education and labour.

What plans do the FamCompass partners have to implement the FamCompass with other partners/projects in their country and are there other european networks that can be of help?

- The Polish partner thinks of starting a national community/network to promote competence oriented thinking and suggests that instead of working on a national level we should be networking on a European level, traight to the European Commission, to convince different players of the need of recognizing APL.
- Karine Janssens suggest to link to EUCEN, The European Association for University Lifelong Learning (<http://www.eucen.org/>), and its project: a European Observatory of Validation of non-formal & informal activities (<http://www.eucen.org/OBSERVAL/index.html>).

Joris Dewispelaere ends the seminar with a 'syllogism':

- Life is essentially about relationships.
- FamCompass is about relationships.
- FamCompass is about the essence of life.

Thank you for your participation!