

Family experience as relevant practical training for studying family sciences

Work in progress: Development of the FamCompass portfolio

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Caroline is 36. She trained as a secretary and worked for the social services of a municipality for four years. She has two children from her first marriage who are now 12 and 14 years old. Her partner died 6 years ago from cancer. Two years ago she moved in with Jan, who himself has three children, who are 7, 9 and 11 years old. Jan's children stay with them every week. Caroline stayed at home after the birth of her second child. In recent years she has become involved in a parent and school council. The oldest child had considerable learning difficulties and after a long search he received help in a rehabilitation centre. Now Caroline would like to go back to work, preferably in the social sector. She wonders whether her life experience could be used to reduce the time she needs to undertake higher education studies that would give her access to this professional field.

Many people who, after several years of a career break, wish to find work again or somewhere else, have gained life experience which could be relevant for numerous training courses and areas of work. Examples include caring for children or caring for a dependent partner or parent. The knowledge that you acquire in the often complex search for the best support for children, caring for each other, in the household and in organising your family members, often leads to a degree of maturity with a great deal of knowledge and skills, whether explicit or not.

Based on this consideration and the growing need for professional workers in sectors such as childcare, welfare work and caring for the elderly in our greying society, it is in fact obvious that training providers should be considering the possibility of acknowledging and recognising competences acquired in the family. Although valuable projects have already seen the light of day (e.g. the 'Competentiespiegel' (skills mirror) from Vokans), there is no instrument that specifically records household competences in relation to professional bachelor degrees. This is despite the importance that is attached to recognising skills acquired 'previously' or 'elsewhere' (Recognition

of Prior Learning (RPL)). The Higher Institute for Family Sciences submitted a proposal for a European project within the Socrates programme with the purpose of valorizing these skills – along the same lines as the existing RPL procedures - within formal education and with regard to the labour market. In November 2007 we received the green light to develop a portfolio instrument with partners from other countries that would specifically record the skills that one has acquired as a mother or father in one's family. We gave this project the name of Family Competences Portfolio-Developing, an instrument for the assessment of family related skills and competences, or FamCompass for short.

The European context: stimuli for lifelong learning

The project is linked to the European Commission Education and Training 2010 programme which, among other things, aims to facilitate access to education and training. An important indicator in this regard is the number of adults who participate in lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is one of the Commission's major concerns for a number of reasons. Not only because it increases chances of employment or improving one's professional profile, but also because it promotes 'active citizenship', prevents marginalisation and offers opportunities for personal development.

Continuing training and schooling of adults will become essential in coming decades in a society with a decreasing number of workers. At the same time, the Commission is concerned about equal access for all citizens to education and training, and it seeks to adapt and stimulate these in the context of increasing migration.

The development of methods for recognising acquired skills and competences when someone wishes to participate in a training course is closely linked to a concern for lifelong learning. 'Recognition of Prior Learning' is now happening more frequently according to specific procedures, although these still vary greatly from country to country. It is even so that the RPL by an educational institution, employer or trainer in one member state does not automatically lead to recognition by another institution, employer or trainer in the same member state.

Recognition of Prior Learning in Flanders

Since 2005 universities and colleges of higher education in Flanders have applied a statutory procedure to the recognition of previously acquired competences or qualifications. Portfolios, interviews and assessment centres are mainly used in this context. The 'certificate of professional competency' that can be obtained via approved testing centres concerns specific professions that

one may have mastered through experience. Until now the accreditation procedure has been developed for 20 professions, including that of childcare supervisor.

Finding out whether it is desirable or possible to coordinate procedures and methods is one of the objectives of the research contracts implemented last year by the University of Antwerp and the University of Ghent at the request of the Ministry of the Flemish Community. Along with an overview of the existing portfolio methodology, focus group meetings were held with representatives from the education sector, the socio-cultural sector and the employment sector. This resulted in the establishment of a knowledge network in relation to RPL, which we hope will lead to the creation of a central knowledge centre and increased coordination of existing RPL procedures.

Cooperating in developing a portfolio for bringing 'family competences' into focus

We determined the following objectives for this project, on the basis of the knowledge and experience that adults can bring to training in Family Sciences and as Senior Citizens Consultants and based on the expertise of our project partners:

- We wish to develop a procedure and instrument in order to measure and validate knowledge, skills and competences that men and women have acquired in their family life (in the partner relationship, in bringing up children and in caring for the elderly);
- We will test the instrument and develop indicators for exemptions within various training contexts;
- We aim to have this instrument used:
 - to facilitate the intake for education and training programmes
 - to grant exemptions in relation to shorter training pathways
 - to validate these skills and competences in the labour market in the childcare and child guidance sectors.

The project outcome we aim for is an effective instrument for the measurement of knowledge, skills and competences as regards the family, which can be used in different adult education and employment settings. Facilitation of shorter training routes mainly concerns social work, remedial education, family coaching, senior citizens consultants and caring for senior citizens.

Competences acquired in family life do not vary that much in most European countries. The instrument will be tested in various settings in each of the partner countries, with a view to recognition and utilisation in different European countries.

FamCompass partners – differences between countries

The following will participate in the partnership along with the Higher Institute for Family Sciences: the Deutsches Jugend Institut (DJI), the Centre for Adult Education at the University of West Timisoara (Romania), the Department of Adult Education at the Comenius University (Slovakia), the Faculty of Pedagogics at the Vilnius Institute of Higher Education (Lithuania), the Institute of Creative Proceedings (an umbrella organisation for supervision of education and training in Poland), and the Västra Nylands Folkhögskola in Finland.

The partners are faced with very varied education and training contexts, and major variations regarding the degree to which official recognition is granted to skills acquired elsewhere.

Germany is strongly diploma-oriented. It was only in 2005 that it became theoretically possible to recognise non-formal and informal learning. Application has however stalled on account of disagreements between the federal government and the German states. The German DJI has mainly gained experience from developing their Kompetenzbilanz as regards recognition of competences acquired in the family context. This instrument is especially useful in raising awareness of competences and facilitates access to the labour market. This most of all concerns a development portfolio (a portfolio aimed at personal growth and recognition of competences) that is not linked to training profiles and does not give rise to exemption within formal learning contexts.

In Romania it is possible to gain a certificate based on RPL in various professions, including the social work and child education sectors. This certificate is issued by authorised assessment centres recognised by the National Adult Training Board.

Poland does not yet offer official recognition for RPL, nor has recognition of non-formal and informal learning as such started in Lithuania. It is only possible to gain recognition via comparative examinations. Legislation is being drawn up in Slovakia for certain professions, but not yet for recognition of RPL in formal training courses. Finland does offer well-organised recognition of RPL in professional education and training. With some competence-oriented qualifications account is also taken of competences acquired in the family, but there are no specific methods for the recognition of family competences. A RPL procedure has only been developed to a limited degree in higher education.

Despite the considerable variations in the context, the partners can agree on the development of a common instrument which will cast light on competences acquired in the family.

How does one determine competences acquired in the 'household and family'?

We have selected the portfolio method for the purposes of recording competences. A portfolio makes it possible for others to see what has been acquired in the way of relevant life and work experience. The portfolio may be in paper or electronic form. The idea of a portfolio derives from the folders that artists and photographers make to show off their work. We have chosen this method for a number of reasons. A portfolio gives the user the chance to describe his own strengths in a creative manner. Here one can design the portfolio in such a way as to zoom in gradually in greater detail on competences while personal concrete examples allow the application of competences to be estimated. The parts of the portfolio can more or less function as tests for each other, for example, when examples from one's own family life, case-studies offered and references offered by third parties are being evaluated, both in themselves and globally speaking. The portfolio method forms a standard part of the RPL-procedures in Flemish university and college associations and is also often used in other sectors (socio-cultural sector and career guidance). The portfolio can, where need be, easily be supplemented with competence-oriented interviews or assessments.

In recent years precise criteria have been developed in the context of RPL-procedures to improve the validity and reliability of portfolios. Here at the HIG we can also boast several years of experience in developing and applying the portfolio method to large numbers of students.

Finally, the portfolio can be designed in such a way that the user not only views it as a measuring tool for competences but also as a method that sharpens awareness of the available competences and which offers points of departure for further development. From this standpoint it is the ideal method for fostering lifelong learning and empowerment.

Portfolio at the Higher Institute for Family Sciences

Courses in Family Sciences and to become a Senior Citizens Consultant target adult students with life and/or work experience. Portfolios were developed for both courses, with the aim of defining relevant previously acquired competences and to encourage the trainee in his/her development or to prepare him/her to apply for jobs.

As regards training in Family Sciences, we refer in particular to the Training Portfolio – Further Practical Training, and the Training Portfolio – Study Coaching. With the first portfolio students can request exemption from additional further practical training, which may be required in relation to the dissertation. The portfolio seeks to discover the degree to which competences required to start social work have already been acquired. As well as an overview of relevant life and work

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experience, the holder will complete a strengths and weaknesses analysis in connection with basic competences required for social work, and answer questions regarding a case-study derived from welfare work. The applicant will also write an account of his/her reasons for the exemption request. The portfolio is intended as a measuring instrument but also as a development portfolio on which it is possible to build later. The portfolio regarding study coaching will stimulate the student's capacity for self-management when making choices during training and in connection with the transition to the area of work. This is a development portfolio which at the same time focuses on the named basic competences required for front-line work, but which also emphasises personal meaning as a gateway to creativity and self-management. Every year about 250 students make their first portfolio and some 15 make the second. Portfolios always feature the richness deriving from family-linked competences alongside relevant work experience in normal employment. Sharper and more focused definition of competences is one of FamCompass' objectives.

We also gained experience with the portfolio method in relation to training Senior Citizens Consultants. A job application portfolio was developed in the context of the European Grundtvig 2 project 'Second-Chance-Working-Winners' (2005-2007), which targets students who are looking for a managerial position when working with and for senior citizens. Above all, this portfolio is a development portfolio that focuses on numerous important skills and competences for senior citizens consultants.

Portfolio procedures that are used to exempt students from training course sections need to fulfil specific quality requirements. A great deal of experience was gained while working with the Training Portfolio – Further Practical Training with regard to the validity and reliability of the tool used to define life and work experience. Examples of relevant life experience that are often well-documented include taking up care paths for one's own children or foster children (e.g. in the case of autism or mental handicap), organising life together in a patchwork family or learning to deal with stress in the event of illness of a partner or (grand)parent. This is in addition to describing relevant experiences in voluntary work and in the employment market.

FamCompass portfolio

In order to arrive at a set of competences that is representative for the fields of care, child education and relationships and family management, insofar as these are relevant to training courses in related areas of work, we made an analysis of course sections in relation to the following training and professional profiles in Flanders: family sciences, social work, remedial education, care for the

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elderly, palliative care and childcare. Our partners contributed analyses relating to training courses or professional profiles in social work (Poland), adult education (Slovakia), female child carers and home-support (Germany), home helps (Romania), management (Finland) and educator (Germany and Lithuania).

We made a list of relevant competences, for instance, with regard to supporting handicapped children or as regards supporting a seriously ill elderly person, and made a comparison across training courses and professional profiles. We drew up a first version of the competency matrix together with our German partner.

Other sections of the portfolio were developed at the same time. They primarily include a section in which the user precisely describes the circumstances in which the competence will be used and with what outcome. In a third section, the user backs up the possession of the competences as best as possible with the use of external references. The fourth section provides two case-studies relating to more complex family situations, which the student must discuss. These case-studies can vary depending on the training that FamCompass seeks to implement. Finally, it is possible to add a fifth section which looks at relevant personality traits. Specific personality traits may lead to specific possibilities in the field of work. A more extrovert personality will, for example, make contact with people more rapidly, while a more introverted personality finds it easier to enter into deeper conversations. Yet these are only starting points for working on a balance between such extraversion and introversion, for example. Gaining clarity regarding one's own spontaneous strengths and working on the development of their opposites, is the best attitude to take in order to develop into an effective welfare worker.

As an illustration we provide some competences from the first section of the portfolio, such as these appeared in the first development phase of the instrument.

I am able to create a balance between letting go and protecting (dealing with adolescents)

I can offer support as regards learning difficulties (primary school age)

I understand the impact of the birth of a child on a partner relationship (partner relationship)

I can organise a household ecologically (household management)

Besides these specific competences, we take a broad list of more general competences and look at whether they have been acquired and in which context. We assess communication skills, for

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example, and skills in self-care, but in every case insofar as they have been developed in specific areas of family life and insofar as there is a connection with a competence defined in a training profile.

Relevant competences are drawn up on the basis of training and professional profiles and based on information from focus groups made up of graduates, trainers and/or employers.

The quality of the instrument is monitored in various ways. On the one hand, the stated rules for validity and reliability within RPL- procedures are followed in this respect. This includes precise guidelines for assessing the stated competences, for answers in case-studies, and for evaluating the additional references.

The instrument is also being extensively tested as well. The first testing will be carried out in Belgium in the Family Sciences training course and in a second training course or work area. Our partners will perform tests, among other things, in the context of courses in adult education, pedagogic sciences and Cultural Diversity Management. The instrument will be finalised on the basis of these tests, and surveys will be carried out again with a larger number of institutions and interested parties to check the usefulness for these target groups in greater detail, and to provide a first stimulus towards the development of indicators that link the assessment conclusions in the portfolio with the results of training courses or with performances in the work area.

So as to make the FamCompass productive for as many students as possible, we also wish actively to ask policy chiefs in Flanders and partner countries to give the instrument a place in the procedures for recognition of RPL. We would then look to deploy this instrument – as an extension to European objectives – where possible to exploit family competences for the purpose of training courses and the labour market.

Although the instrument is still being developed, the rich range of competences that have been collected and the consensus on the structure of the portfolio already show the possibilities of providing a precise and well-founded picture of the competences that one can acquire in family life in the light of formal training pathways. We look forward to being able to deploy the portfolio for the many mothers and fathers who, somewhere midway in life, wish to involve themselves (again) in professional areas in the wider welfare sector by following a higher education course.

Once family competences have been revealed and recognised, the ball is in the policy-makers' court: to what extent will the state, universities and colleges recognise this instrument as a valid reason to grant exemptions?

Further reading

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Websites

www.famcompass.eu

www.hig.be

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