



Is Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning a Familiar or Unfamiliar Process for Academics and Policymakers?

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Abstract

The article analyses the awareness of accreditation of prior experimental learning at European level. The research was conducted in 4 countries, namely Denmark, Greece, Iceland, and Italy. The choice of the specific countries was not random but based on/originated from the different cultures in North and South Europe and also different approaches to adult education. The target group was academics with experience in teaching in higher education and policymakers in the field of Education and in adult education. Also, the target group members were qualified for such procedures (whether the results refer to) either for the labour market or the education sector. The feedback was recorded through interviews of 68 academics and policymakers in the four countries. The current research focuses on the accreditation of prior experiential learning for entering higher education using a different path than the traditional one established in each country. The aim of this research is to establish/suggest another step/way to record the current situation in a European context and to contribute to further development and motivation. From the results, we can conclude that the information and awareness of the issue among both academics and policymakers is not in the same level in the four countries where the survey was carried out.

Keywords: adult education; Awareness; Evaluation; Certification; Recognition

1. Introduction

The origins of the procedures regarding the identification of prior learning can be found in the United States where the long-standing practice of giving credit to assessed learning (Rothblatt, 1991) facilitated the identification of learning beyond the classroom. Simosko (1991) estimates that by 1991 more than 1200 American colleges offered assessment and accreditation to prior learning. However, the discussion of acknowledgement of prior experiential learning is not new in Europe either. At the European Union level, the first findings were recorded in the White Paper (European Commission, 1995) which considers 'key' qualifications and competences which can be acquired at different levels and theoretical structures, and more generally the sum of broader knowledge based on the combination of informal, non-formal and formal learning. In March 2000 the Lisbon European Council acknowledged education, training and employability as an integral part of the Member States' policies for achieving the strategic goal of 2010 so as to make Europe more competitive through a Knowledge Society (Lisbon European Council, 2000). The Council decisions concerning specific educational objectives were recorded in the Education Council report to the European Council on 14 February 2001 (5680/01 EDU 18), and on 14 June 2002 the *"Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe"* was published. This act proposed a detailed work programme which indicated the need to find ways of formally validating informal learning experiences (C142/01, 14.06.2002). The joint interim report of the Council and the Commission (26 February 2004) to the Spring European Council, entitled *'Education and Training 2010'*, explicitly stated that common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning should be developed. In this context, several initiatives were developed at European level such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as well as instructions to Member States to develop National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), where, in conjunction with the Bologna Agreement, each Member State could develop a process of validation of qualifications as a result of overall learning. For the development of such a process, a guide was also proposed and issued by Cedefop (2009 and 2015) in cooperation with the European Commission to enable Member States, involving experts in the field, to formulate corresponding policies. On 20 December 2012, a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning was published in the Official Journal of the European Union (European Council, 2012).

1.1. What does Accreditation of Prior Experiential learning mean?

But what do we mean by Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning? The process is known under different names in different countries. They are APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning), CCC (Crediting Current Competence) and APEL (Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning) in the UK (Garnett, et 2004), RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa and PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) in Canada. France has a more sophisticated system in which the assessment is known as Bilan de competences, Bilan des competences approfondi or Validation de Acquis des Experiences (VAE). The United Nations agency UNESCO has formulated a "Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education" to standardize the terminology and definitions used in higher education (Unesco, 2022). In any case, and whatever term is used, all expressions agree on describing the fact that prior knowledge is not only a general set of experiences

attributable to developmental stages through which an individual may have passed, but includes all the knowledge that an individual acquires because of his or her social roles, such as those associated with race, social class, gender, culture and national traditions. For example, Nigel Hart used the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) taking into account the circumstances and processes taking place in the Australian case, and focused on awarding credit for learning outcomes (Hart, 1991). He argues that an RPL system will only work in an 'outcome-oriented' environment, i.e. where performance can be demonstrated with tangible evidence. Experiential learning can be described as knowledge and skills acquired through everyday life, work experience and study that are not formally certified by an educational or professional accreditation. It can also include post-instructional learning provided by an institution that has not been assessed in any of the public examination systems (Carneiro, 2011). The processes that take place in an accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) lead to the crediting of this, and the awarding of academic credit with the current legal status of the country or institution carrying out the process (Scott 2010). In any case, all sources express the same essence but with different expressions depending on language, culture, local policies and the diversity of local development (Andersson, 2013).

1.2. Accreditation in Higher Education

In the current research we focused on the recognition and accreditation of prior learning in relation to higher education and in particular on whether it can lead to admission or further education within a higher education institution. The Bologna Treaty, which was the beginning of the development of a single European Higher Education Area, includes policies aimed at recognising prior learning and promoting lifelong learning. The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 set the goal for the European Union to become 'the most competitive and dynamic economy based on the knowledge society' by focusing both on education - as higher education institutions play the most important role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge - and on supporting vulnerable groups, including people from different backgrounds, and their access to higher education. The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning also recognises the need for a tool that can compare qualifications across a wider range than just those acquired through higher education. However, both the Bologna Treaty (1999) and other policy actions that have taken place since then have not found the same degree of implementation in all EU Member States (Cedefop, 2018). Each country adopts different approaches to the implementation of ratification, depending on their national circumstances. The 2018 data show that 20 countries have developed or are in the process of developing national arrangements (such as legal framework, strategy and/or policy) covering the education and training, labour market and tertiary sectors, while 16 countries have developed or are in the process of developing sectoral arrangements for validation. The distinction between a national or sectoral approach attempts to capture the extent to which validation policies correspond to an overall approach or whether they are developed differently for different sectors.

Taking the above into account, we examined the current system of higher education admission in 4 different countries, namely Denmark, Greece, Iceland and Italy, and what is in place in relation to the recognition of prior learning for higher education admission. At this point we should mention that the right to education is enshrined in the constitutions of the above countries as a fundamental right, with access to general, public and free education for

all. Higher education is structured in similar ways in all the countries in question and, following the Bologna process, includes a three-cycle system of study. That of the bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. In Denmark the person concerned applies for admission to, for example, the undergraduate level of a particular department of a particular university. There are pre-requisites that he/she must have, e.g. for undergraduate level he/she must have completed a course of study at secondary school. Admission is through the quota system, namely Quota 1 based on average grades in secondary education and Quota 2 a system for 'correcting' low grades through the recognition of practical experience and other methods. A committee consisting of professors, students and administrative staff makes the final decision on whether or not to admit, based on academic criteria, for a particular HEI. The Quota 2 system gives an opportunity to students who may not have good enough grades to be accepted for academic study at university level. For example, applicants can spend a period of e.g. 1 school year in a transitional high school or supplement their degree with credits gained by attending additional courses or work experience or by an internship. All of this experiential knowledge can help raise their grade point average. Admissions are allocated according to criteria published by the educational institutions to which the applicants apply for admission. The number of places on quota 2 in some programmes is very limited compared to the number of applications submitted each year.

In Greece, the general requirements for admission to higher education (for nationals and foreigners) at degree level are as follows. In order to gain access to higher education institutions, Greek students must pass the Panhellenic examinations in Greek, organised by the Ministry of Education. Greek students who have completed a course of secondary education in Greece or abroad, as well as Cypriot nationals, can take the national examination. Attendance at higher education institutions is free of charge for all except for some postgraduate courses where students pay a contribution towards the costs. In Iceland, an undergraduate course of study can be followed after passing a written examination. Each university can set its own rules on admission criteria. These rules are recommended to include elements of recognition of prior learning. However, this has not yet been implemented by any higher education institution in Iceland. Although all higher education institutions are under the scientific supervision of the Ministry of Education, which provides free education, Icelandic universities, because of their autonomy, charge students an amount related to administrative costs. Finally, in Italy, an applicant can apply to an Italian university and be accepted after taking a written examination. The examinations are in Italian and there is an admission basis where the person concerned, if he passes, is admitted to higher education.

Regarding domestic EQF monitoring rules, in the countries we surveyed, we found that there is implementation of European legislation through NQFs. In Denmark in particular, both the EQF and NQF have been adopted and implemented through institutionalised procedures where they simultaneously promote quality assurance in both degrees and higher education institutions (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). On the other hand, in Greece, practices have been adopted that reinforce the Bologna Treaty and the Lisbon ratification. Moreover, in 2007, by decision of the Ministry of Education, the European Credit Transfer System was officially adopted by all Greek Universities. In 2010 (Law 3879) the creation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established according to the EQF standards and the 8-level classification. In Iceland, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture monitors the quality of teaching and research carried out in HEIs to comply with the

NQF (Ministry of Education, 2006 and 2008). Finally, Italian legislation formally adapted its rules to the EQF in 2018, but the process of adapting the national qualification framework to European standards, with the aim of developing a framework based on learning outcomes, had started in 2003. At this point we should emphasise that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a non-traditional route to higher education entry is a point that the European Commission is developing through the European Education Area and aspires by 2025 to promote mobility and academic recognition of qualifications for all EU citizens (European Commission, 2018).

2. Methodology

In order to proceed with our research, we decided to formulate a common methodology, for all 4 countries, so that the results would be measurable, qualitative and comparable. The qualitative research methodology using written, verbal and observational data was chosen as the most appropriate as the main purpose of this stage of the research was to elicit opinions and impressions about the awareness or lack thereof on the issue of validation of prior learning. The research instrument was the interview, an important feature of which is transactional, seeking information from the researcher and providing information from the respondent. The interview is characterized as a thematic approach where the researcher has a series of topics and discussions through which the researcher tries to capture the views of the target group. In no way is this discussion/interview random but a well-organized process where the researcher depending on the responses tries to record the views of the target group. There are different types of interviews. The structured, semi-structured, undirected and focused interview. The structured interview is characterised by a closed situation, where the researcher guides the interviewee with specific questions. In our research, we believe that this type would not help us to capture all aspects of the issue as the topic we are investigating is quite novel for process groups and the uncertainty that an important element might be missed was strong. Thus, we were led to the semi-structured interview format. The semi-structured interview is an open-ended situation with flexibility as, although the objectives of the research determine the questions, the content, order and wording of the questions are at the discretion of the researcher and are shaped by the researcher during the process. This type is characterised by a relatively informal style that is more akin to a conversation than a formal question and answer format. In this context, for the purposes of our research, an interview guide was produced which included both demographic information and questions related to the purpose of the research.

We used the content analysis method to analyse the data. Content analysis was defined as a research method specifically developed to investigate a wide range of topics, the exploration of which serves as a basis for drawing conclusions. At this point, we should note that it is a method and not a tool or technique as the data around which the study revolves is 'natural' qualitative communication material that was not created by the researcher but spontaneously produced by the target group. The researchers who conducted the interviews converted the recorded material into text. The written material was then organized into categories so that each response was entered into a specific thematic area. The data was then coded keeping in mind the specific criteria that would serve the purposes of the research and would provide answers to our research questions. In addition, the themes as well as the concepts that

emerged from our material were entered by highlighting the attitudes, beliefs and dispositions of the respondents. With the above in mind, we created the categories presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Axis1 - Level of target group's awareness and involvement in the accreditation of prior experiential learning

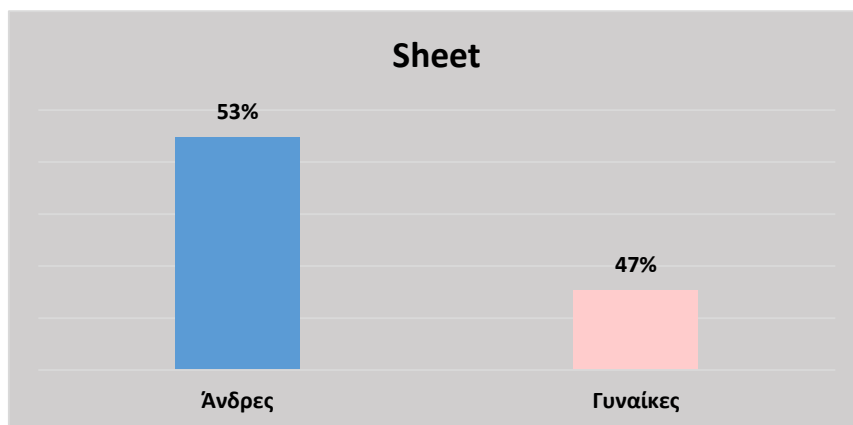
| Axis 1 | |
|--------|---|
| 1.1 | Do you know what accreditation of experimental learning is? |
| 1.2 | Have you participated in such activities? |
| 1.3 | If the answer to 1.2 is yes, please explain the type of the procedure and the role of the interviewer |
| 1.4 | Are you familiar with the accreditation activities in your country? |
| 1.5 | If the answer to 1.4 is yes, please open a discussion according to the answer |

2.1. Results

The survey was conducted simultaneously in the 4 countries and the interviews were conducted between January 2020 and May 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic and lock down. Due to the general situation, the majority of the interviews was conducted online, using technological tools to ensure that all necessary measures were taken to ensure the protection of those involved. The choice of the sample was not random. The participants had to meet certain criteria. More specifically, to have been at least 10 years in an academic position, at least 5 years in a university management position, at least 5 years in an educational policy management organization, at least 10 years teaching in Higher Education/Universities, and finally at least 5 years an administrative position in Ministry and Regional Governing Bodies.

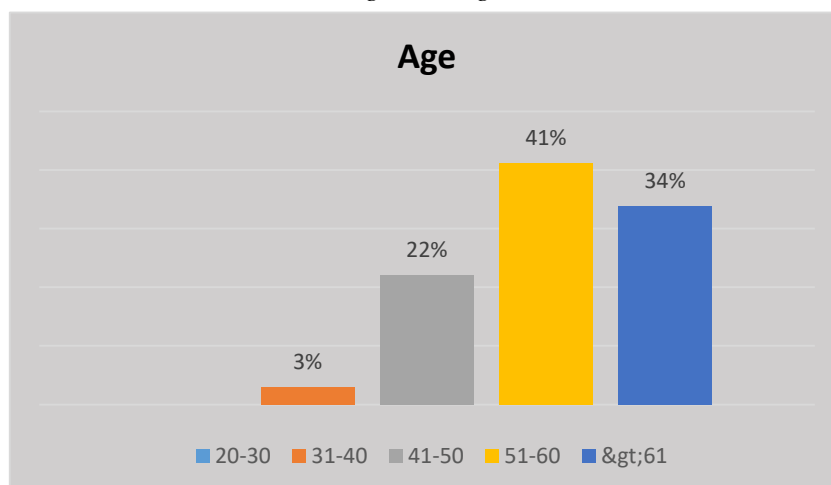
The total sample in the four countries consisted of sixty-eight academics and policymakers: 10 in Denmark, 31 in Greece, 11 in Iceland and 16 in Italy. Among the respondents, 53% were male and 47% female (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sex



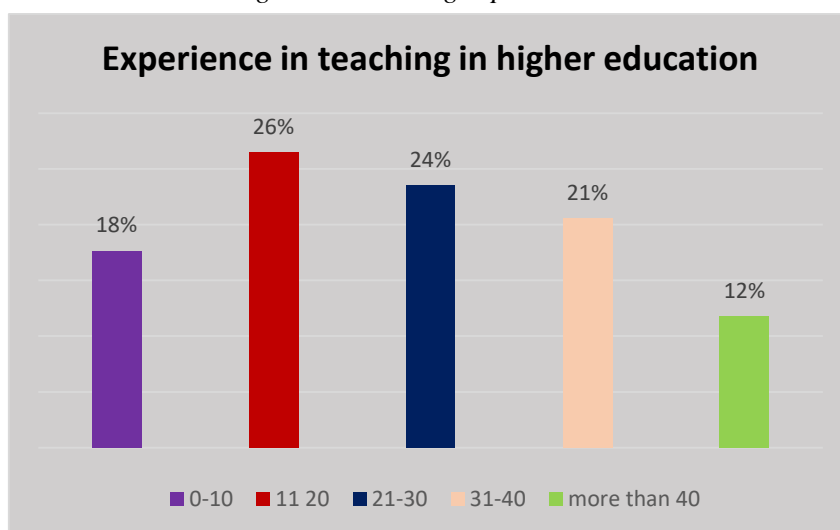
The age distribution of respondents is shown in Figure 2. The majority of the respondents, namely 41%, were aged between 51-60, 3% between 31-40, 22% between 41-50, and 34% over 60.

Figure 2: Ages



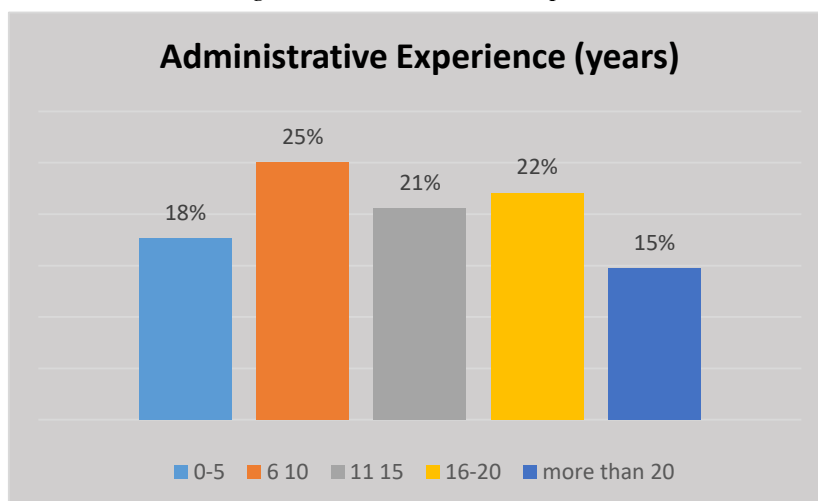
Regarding the experience of the participants in relation to teaching in higher education institutions, it can be said that the participants in the present survey have significant experience as a total percentage of 71% stated that they have been teaching for a minimum of 11 years and a maximum of 40 years. More specifically 26% have teaching experience of 11-20 years, 24% 21-30 years and 21% 31 to 40 years (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Teaching experience



In each of the four countries its members, both academics and policymakers, also have considerable experience in positions of responsibility, such as administrative positions in internal policy, development policy formulation, department chairs, office managers of relevant ministries, etc. (Figure 4). This feature is particularly important as it enhances the level of quality in the final decision making for the formulation of educational strategies at regional and national level for higher education in the respective countries.

Figure 4: Administrative experience



2.2. Discussion

The results of the interviews collected in this first category provide evidence of the level of awareness of academics and policymakers in these countries regarding the accreditation of prior experiential learning. In addition, our analysis of the interviews provides us with information on the participation and role of respondents in processes for recognizing prior experiential learning and the type of processes that are legally approved and recognized at a national level (if any).

More specifically in Denmark, respondents are aware of the university admission procedures and the current legal framework (Ministry of Children and Education of Denmark, 2020). They are also familiar with and fully informed about terminology and also about procedures for validation of prior learning and this is because, as we elaborated on earlier in this article, Denmark, in addition to the traditional way of admission to higher education, where high school graduates are admitted according to their school performance, there is also the Quota 2 system (known as Quota 2) which is based on additional elements such as that of internship and its evaluation, prior work experience and its matching. All respondents are aware of the concept of recognition-validation of prior experiential learning and are aware of the current system in their country. Indeed, policymakers have been actively involved in such processes as they are actively involved in the quota system 2 and have long experience on the issue. On the other hand, academics had not been involved in such processes as their role is limited to teaching or administrative experience within the tertiary education institution and not in the process for admission to it. However, 78% of the total sample have extensive knowledge of the Post 1 and Post 2 system and the procedures for recognizing prior experiential learning applied in Denmark.

In Greece, the way of admission to higher education is one and only and there is no other way of admission apart from the Panhellenic examinations (Law, 2015). The sample of the survey in Greece was both academics and policymakers in education. Unfortunately, there is no widespread knowledge and awareness of what validation of prior experiential learning is. As our sample included people from all fields of science (medical sciences, polytechnics, new technologies and information technology, humanities and social sciences) only those who were personally involved due to a position e.g. administrative position in the national

qualification and vocational guidance certification agency (EOPPEP), or due to a research-academic interest e.g. academics/teachers in higher education in humanities schools were familiar with the topic. Only a small percentage of the 12% sample has participated in prior learning assessment processes, but these referred to the labour market field rather than to the educational level. During the interviews it was pointed out that at national level there have been no discussions on validation/certification of experiential/experiential learning leading to admission to higher education. Such processes have been institutionalised and are only relevant for the labour market according to the job descriptions and their mapping to the EQF.

On the other hand, in Iceland a large percentage of the sample (92%) knows what the subject we discussed is and are also aware of the legal framework in their country. There is a very high level of awareness and information about the recognition of prior experiential learning and the procedures for its completion. The majority of respondents were familiar and there is a common opinion that the recognition of prior experiential learning, which has been a topic of discussion in Iceland for years, needs to be extended to the higher education level. The discussion revealed that when the interviewees talked about accreditation of experiential learning, they understood it in different ways. Some talked about it only in relation to higher education admissions. Admission to be done in traditional ways such as written exams or their experiential learning to be assessed in a different way such as with ECTS credits. The majority of the sample has been actively involved in such processes at secondary level where such forms of recognition exist (Minister of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, 2008). Also another percentage of the sample have worked on relevant projects to formulate the relevant policy. However, in the sample there was a different approach to interpretation of the current law (Minister of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, 2006). In particular, 27% said that the law in Iceland is clear on this and that students assessed by written examinations should have priority in the higher education admission process. Others said that the law explicitly says that students can enter by other means. According to the Icelandic Ministry of Education, the law clearly states that admission is in the jurisdiction of the universities and there is no legal barrier for universities in priorities, so that students with non-formal or informal education can enter despite the number of candidates with registration exams, as long as the admission criteria are clearly advertised in advance. In any case the whole sample was positive to the idea of implementing accreditation of experiential learning at university level.

Finally, in Italy almost all of the sample (93%) knew about the accreditation of prior experiential learning. This high level of familiarity with the issue is due to the fact that the majority had been directly involved in similar processes implemented in the vocational education and training sectors and some were also involved in the design of national and regional education and employment policies for accreditation of prior experiential learning but in relation to vocational education and training and the labour market. At the time when the interviews took place in Italy there was no national legislation providing for procedures for the recognition and certification of prior learning for access to higher education (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of Italy, 2018). However, in Higher Education, students enrolled at university can participate in a process of assessment and recognition of prior experiential learning (receiving a maximum of 9 ECTS) as "practical training" and is considered necessary for young people in the context of school-work alternatives.

3. Conclusion

The issue of validation procedures for prior experiential learning at European level, and in particular in the member countries of the European Union, has already started since the Bologna (1999) and Lisbon Treaties (2000). However, different policies have been implemented in the Member States, resulting in different approaches (Scott 2010). Our research focused mainly on capturing the views of experts who will be invited to contribute to policy making in their countries and implement new policies to organize and formulate procedures for assessment, recognition and accreditation of prior experiential learning for admission to higher education. From our study of the topic we have picked out those aspects and tried to understand the views of the target group through characteristic extracts from the interviews given to us. In all four countries, the general perception of the target groups is that lifelong learning is a key element for the personal development of citizens but also that accreditation of prior experiential learning has the potential to redirect careers and provide access to new educational opportunities.

However, the information and awareness of the issue among both academics and policymakers is not the same in the four countries where the survey was carried out. In Denmark and Iceland, there is awareness of the procedures for accessing higher education through non-traditional routes and legal background, which is known to those directly involved, and which can facilitate the certification of prior experiential learning for admission to higher education. However, the same law leaves it to the discretion of the universities themselves to decide whether to include this different pathway and not to maintain the usual and conventional way of admission through written examinations. On the other hand, in Greece and Italy such procedures are addressed only to vocational training and the labour market at the secondary school level and there is no institutionalized national framework that allows for admission to higher education. Information and especially awareness is not at a satisfactory level as during the discussions opinions were expressed that accreditation for admission to higher education does not exist as a law but it is also not defined as a procedure. In any case, the data analysis shows that accreditation of prior experiential learning for admission to higher education is not practiced in the countries where the survey was conducted.

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