

*The overwhelmingly large part of conscious human action which is based on learning, memory and experience, constitutes a vast mechanism for constantly confronting past, present and future. People cannot help trying to forecast the future by some form of reading the past. They have to.*

Eric Hobsbawm (1981)

In modern society it is of primary interest to enhance human learning potential, capacity and flexibility. It makes no difference whether one is working, learning, volunteering or seeking employment. The emphasis is on the extent to which someone can contribute to society, in his/her (voluntary) work, social activities and private life. In order to be able to deal with people's learning potential, terms such as knowledge, skills and attitude are qualifying and are subsumed under the common denominator 'competences'. However, competences include more than that. They also implicitly refer to the talent to adjust to changing circumstances, flexibility or deployment potential.

A competence is actually to know how to act in a certain way. Whether someone is competent becomes clear from his or her actions (Lyotard, 1979). Competences not only include professional competences but social and personal competences as well. Competences are in a continuous state of flux. Learning – and thus developing and using competences - begins from birth and continues throughout life. Everyone already learns lifelong, it only needs to be valued and guided.

The present society has a major interest in capitalising on this. It already takes place in part, since more formal educational pathways can be followed in the school system during certain periods in life. More non-formal and informal pathways are followed at other times in life. The validation of prior learning (VPL) is intended as the instrumentation for dealing with the diversity of these pathways.

In (stimulating) someone's development it is important to know the competences he or she already possesses. While people's knowledge used to be tested primarily by written examinations, methods are now needed to 'measure' people's competences. Testing someone's competences in relation to a qualification, certificate or curriculum chosen in advance is also referred to as *assessment*.

This manual is about creating a common theoretical and practical background on concepts regarding assessing and mentoring people's prior learning experiences for the sake of their further development in society. It is both a result of the VPL-project at la Universidad Andrés Bello, Chile as well as an agenda for further exploring and paving the way for personalised lifelong learning strategies, not only in higher education but also in other qualification-levels and – even better – in contexts of work, volunteering, family, citizenship, inclusion-activities and leisure. With this manual, an important step is set in showing that lifelong learning is possible in any context, country and culture, and that there are facilities available in guidance, mentoring and assessing someone's prior learning that will enable people to reach out to a promising future.

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#### **References**

- Hobsbawm, E. (1981), Looking forward: History and the Future. In: *New Left Review*, 1/125, 1981, pp. 3-19.  
Lyotard, J. (1979). *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*. Parijs, Minuit.