

Tools of Assessment in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Within Vocational Education in Denmark

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Introduction

In 2007, an Act extended the possibilities of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Danish adult education within general adult education, adult vocational education and training, and short-cycle and medium-cycle postsecondary adult education. An evaluation in 2010 showed that the level of RPL activity remained limited and that this was associated with various barriers (EVA, 2010; Andersen & Laugesen, 2012). Since then, activity has increased, but a study from 2013 showed that still only few of the adults (aged 25 years or older) who started a vocational education program were benefiting from a shortened program on the basis of RPL (EVA, 2013).

From the fall of 2015, a new Act has changed the legal framework for vocational education in Denmark. One of the significant new elements is the introduction of one track for young people and another track for adults. According to the Act, adults must begin the vocational education with RPL, and on that basis they can have their program shortened (credit), if they have relevant prior learning. To support schools' efforts to conduct high-quality RPL, the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA, 2014; EVA 2015) made two studies of the practice in schools with regard to RPL and credit. This article is based on these two studies, with a focus on the tools of assessment the vocational schools used to assess prior learning.

Both studies focused on samples of schools with relatively high RPL activity or a high potential for RPL activity because of the large number of adults enrolling on their programs. The first study was a qualitative study that involved nine education programs at 17 vocational schools. The second study was a quantitative study that involved 188 enrollments in 17 programs (one respondent represented one education program at one school).

On one hand, this research design made it possible to identify a range of tools of assessment used in practice at vocational schools; on the other hand, it made it possible to obtain quantitative data on the volume of the use of these tools of assessment at the vocational schools with high or potentially high RPL activity. However, this also means that the samples are not representative and that the volume of the use of tools of assessment at these schools may be higher compared to the average for vocational schools in Denmark.

In addition to this issue, there has been a specific focus in both studies on differences and similarities between areas of education in regard to the tools of assessment they use in practice. This research aimed at examining the assumption that many vocational schools and vocational education programs only make use of a limited range of tools, and whether there is potential for expanding the use of specific tools.

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the following aspects: definitions of RPL, approaches to RPL, applications of RPL, barriers to use of RPL and perspectives on RPL.

Definitions

Prior learning is defined as a person's total qualifications, knowledge, skills and competencies, irrespective of where and how they were acquired (Danish Ministry of Education, 2004; Andersen & Laugesen, 2012; Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015). In Danish legislation, RPL has to be conducted in relation to specific, formal educational goals. In this paper, the term RPL is used as the overall term for the entire assessment and recognition process, as well as the formal results of this process. This definition of RPL is in accordance with the concept validation of nonformal and informal learning, which is widely recognized in Europe (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Villalba-Garcia, Souto-Otero, & Murphy, 2014).

This broad definition of RPL is also reflected in, for example, the Canadian prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) concept that covers a systematic process involving the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e., skills, knowledge and values) (Day, 2000, pp. 7-8; Moss, 2011, p. 396). Other definitions are narrower, for instance by focusing in particular on experience-based learning (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013).

Approaches

The literature review shows different approaches to RPL: Harris has presented four ways of seeing RPL (Harris, 1999; Barros, 2013): (i) A procrustean model, linked to a qualifications or standards framework. In this model, RPL practices recognize only those aspects of individuals' prior learning that match prescribed outcomes or standards (Barros, 2013, p. 438). (ii) A learning and development model. In this model, the most important issue is recognizing prior learning in order to access formal learning and training courses or in higher education contexts (Barros, 2013, p. 440). (iii) A radical model. In this model, experience, learning and knowledge are closely interrelated and a priority of the model is to build a more democratic society (Barros, 2013, p. 441). Finally, (iv) a Trojan Horse model. In this model, RPL practices aim to value prior learning in and of itself and to work toward a more equal and dialectical relationship between disciplinary knowledge (theory) and experimental knowledge (practice) (Barros, 2013, p. 442).

The statutory RPL practice in vocational education for adults in Denmark is closest to the first of these four models; the procrustean model: The individual's prior learning is measured against specific vocational training and educational goals and matches are recognized, while the rest of the knowledge, skills and competencies are not recognized. The prior learning that is recognized can give rise to a shortened period of education or training. The primary aim is thus credit rather than access, just as in the second model. Furthermore, with regard to models (iii) and (iv) above, the explicit aim of the Danish RPL model of vocational education is neither to contribute to a more democratic society – as in the third model – nor to contribute to giving experimental knowledge a more equal status in relation to disciplinary knowledge – as in the fourth model.

Applications of RPL

The primary focus of RPL is recognition of competences in a formal educational context. Such recognition may give rise to various uses, including access to education (admission), or shortening or even fully replacing a period of training or education (credit). Moreover, RPL may have other important benefits: Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) summarize research in this area by pointing out that RPL processes can support the participant's "self-confidence, self-awareness and self-esteem when prior experiences are made visible and recognized" (p. 351).

A recurring conclusion in international literature is that RPL has only to a limited extent helped to broaden access to higher education, and that this may be associated with resistance in the form of certain institutional practices and cultures that have difficulty in recognizing learning acquired outside institutions of learning (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Pitman & Vidovich, 2012; Moss, 2011). A study from Denmark from 2010 also showed only limited use of RPL within higher adult education, both in terms of admission and credit. However, the study did also show that this was not just something that applied to higher education. It was rather a general phenomenon across many educational levels and linked to a number of economic, cultural and other barriers (Andersen & Laugesen, 2012). The same study showed, however, that RPL was used less in basic general adult education and less in higher adult education, but relatively more in the field of basic vocational adult education and training in Denmark.

Barriers to RPL

Several factors may explain why RPL has not become more widespread. In the Danish study (Andersen & Laugesen, 2012), the two most important barriers to the spread of RPL were: (i) lack of public awareness of RPL, and (ii) financial barriers relating to conducting RPL. The study also identified a range of other internal (inside the institutions) and external (outside the institutions) barriers. Moss (2011) pointed to another factor that can be a barrier. She emphasized that when skills must be recognized, no matter where, when or how they were acquired, it requires know-how by the assessors about nonformal learning arenas. The assessors must not only be familiar with the content of what is taught in the educational institutions, but also with the innovations taking place in companies. This is particularly relevant in relation to adult vocational education, where many skills and competences are acquired directly in practice (Moss, 2011).

Perspectives on RPL and the importance of the tools of assessment

On the basis of reading international literature, Hamer (2012) summarized three different critical perspectives on RPL: (i) A critical instrumental perspective that focuses on "inadequate tools, processes and promotional practices in place to engage learners or make RPL a sufficiently streamlined process." (ii) A critical pedagogical perspective that focuses on "an absence of various learning and assessment methodologies tailored to specific needs of marginalized groups." (iii) And a critical epistemological perspective that questions whether "alternative knowledge can be embraced or negotiated through RPL" (p. 116).

The three different perspectives look at different types of challenges for the successful implementation of RPL. This article shares elements with the first perspective in particular and focuses on the use of tools of assessment in RPL processes within vocational education in Denmark because this perspective deals with challenges that are essential for the quality of RPL. However, this does not mean that the other two perspectives are less important. On the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that all three perspectives deal with key challenges that need to be addressed to ensure widespread use of RPL of high quality and with respect for the participants' prior learning.

In the literature on RPL, there are various proposals for tools of assessment that can be advantageously used in relation to specific objectives, including, for example, making silent learning or learning skills visible (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015). Furthermore, Hamer (2012) noted that it is easy to find a lot of RPL materials by a simple online search. However, it is not the intention of this paper to provide an overview of all possible tools of assessment or the best tools of assessment. Our approach has been inductive, in the sense that our aim has been to identify the tools that the vocational schools in Denmark *actually use* in RPL and to quantify the spread and volume of this use.

Methods

As mentioned earlier, this paper is based on two studies; a qualitative study and a quantitative study, with

complementary purposes.

The qualitative study

The purpose of the qualitative study was to uncover the practices that took place at 17 selected vocational schools within 10 selected education programs in terms of RPL and different forms of credit for persons aged 25 and more. In regard to RPL, the study focused specifically on tools of assessment and methods used at schools, as well as the shortening of the education program on that basis of recognition (credit).

The study focused on a non-representative sample of vocational schools and a non-representative sample of vocational education programs. One important reason for this was a finding by the Danish Evaluation Institute that showed that adults (25 years and more) were very unevenly distributed between schools and between education programs. The study showed that 72 percent of those aged 25 or more who took part in a vocational education in 2011 in Denmark did so within just 10 education programs (EVA, 2013), although there are more than 100 different vocational education programs in Denmark. On the basis of this, the 10 vocational education programs with most people aged 25 or more in 2011 in Denmark were selected. One of the 10 programs was later excluded from the sample because it was facing major changes. The remaining nine selected programs were:

1. social care and health
2. office
3. construction with wood
4. passenger transport
5. service assistant
6. electrician
7. retail sales
8. road freight transport
9. industrial operator.

Data collection was further defined with respect to the number of vocational schools including in the sample. The nine vocational schools with most people aged 25 and more who qualified for a shortening of their vocational education *and* the nine vocational schools with most RPL in relation to a so-called GUV were chosen (GUV [basic adult education] is a specific legal framework for vocational education for adults based on RPL. From the fall of 2015, GUV will be replaced by a new track for persons aged 25 or more, called EUV, vocational education for adults). Because one of the schools was on both lists, the final number of schools was reduced from 18 to 17. In this way, we have ensured that the study had a particular emphasis on the vocational schools having the most experience with RPL and/or shortening of vocational education.

The schools were asked to appoint up to three contact persons from different programs within the sample of the nine selected programs. Schools were asked to select these contact persons (as much as possible) from education programs with the most adult learners. The contact persons received a list of questions with focus on their experience with tools of assessment and methods used to assess RPL within the program they represented at their school. A total of 31 out of 39 possible written statements were received as a result of this process.

Based on the written statements, 10 of the authors were chosen for a phone-based follow-up interview (about half an hour each) to discuss their experiences and assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of different tools of assessment and methods. In addition, two focus-group interviews with informants from different schools (about two hours each) and nine telephone interviews with representatives from

professional committee with responsibility for the selected programs (about half an hour each) were conducted. The focus group interview contributed with perspectives across education programs and schools, while the interviews with professional committees contributed with more general perspectives on RPL within the specific education programs.

Data collection for the qualitative study took place from May to June 2014.

The quantitative study

The quantitative study was a survey including 17 vocational education programs at a number of different schools. Development of the questionnaire was based on the results from the qualitative study, for example in relation to the specific tools the respondents were asked about. Responses were received from 130 out of 188 possible respondents. This gives a response rate of 69 percent.

The respondents were identified as follows:

- Within each of 12 vocational entry areas, the two programs with most persons aged 25 or more in 2011 were selected (=24 programs).
- The schools that provided at least one of these 24 programs in 2014 were selected
- For each of these schools, the two (and one if it was not possible to identify two) programs among the 24 selected programs with greatest activity (measured as number of participants per year in 2013/2014) were selected.
- Programs were excluded from the list if:
 - less than four schools provided the program
 - less than 60 (full-time) adults per year attended the program
 - less than 50 percent of the total activity took place within the program.

This method of non-representative selection of respondents means that we have focused the study on those schools with a high potential for RPL.

This selection method meant that the number of programs was reduced from 24 to 17. The total number of schools (including departments) within the 17 programs identified using this selection method amounted to 200 units (= respondents), which together accounted for 83.8 percent of the total activity for all 24 programs at all schools providing these programs. The 200 respondents were subsequently reduced to 188 after validation of the respondent list. The list below shows the 17 selected programs. Those marked with an asterisk were also included in the qualitative study.

1. agriculture
2. agricultural management
3. construction with wood*
4. data and communication
5. pedagogical assistant
6. electrician*
7. gastronomy
8. hairdresser
9. nutrition assistant
10. office*
11. passenger transport*
12. retail sales*
13. service assistant*

14. social care and health*
15. storage
16. vehicle mechanic
17. web-integrator.

Data collection for the quantitative study took place from September to October 2014.

Findings

The findings below are organized in relation to the different tools of assessment the qualitative study identified and the quantitative study focused on. The following tools of assessment are presented and in the order listed:

- dialogue with or without documents
- checklists
- statements from previous or current employers
- practical tests and exercises
- written tests
- logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation.

Dialogue with or without documents

The qualitative study shows that dialogue between a supervisor, a consultant or a teacher on the one hand, and the participant on the other hand normally plays the key role in assessing the participant's prior learning. This dialogue usually takes place at a personal meeting at the vocational school, but it can also be conducted by telephone. The participant will often have forwarded relevant documents to the school before the dialogue. These documents may consist of certificates of education or training, statements by previous or current managers, etc. In addition, some schools ask participants to describe and/or to reflect on experiences and skills acquired at work.

The dialogue gives the participants an opportunity to tell about their own experiences and competences, and the assessor has an opportunity to ask about documents and experiences. The dialogue as a tool of assessment has the advantage that it provides an insight into the participant's background and perception of their own competencies. However the study also shows that the tool has some limitations because it requires that the participant is able to articulate the skills acquired and to reflect on how competences have been developed.

The study showed that dialogue as a tool of assessment works well when the assessor has a thorough knowledge of the competencies required for the jobs at which the programs are aimed. (This finding is similar to that of Moss, 2011). Whether the assessor has sufficient competences in RPL to ensure both quality and efficiency is also an advantage. Schools can benefit from having someone who is responsible for RPL, as well as a convenient division of labor. However, to get sufficient professional experience if the RPL activity is limited can be a challenge.

The survey shows that all education programs at schools used dialogue as a tool of assessment in RPL at least once during the school year 2013/2014, and 99 percent involved some kind of documentation (n=109). A total of 92 percent of the respondents said they always or almost always used dialogue, while 96 percent said they always or almost always used documentation, including training certificates. Furthermore, 91 percent also assessed that dialogue and 85 percent said that documentation is always or almost always a suitable tool of assessment.

The survey showed that half of the programs at schools use dialogue together with practical tests and/or written tests, while the other half do not use these tools as follow-up to complement the dialogue. This finding is shown in Table 1.

	Number	Percent
RPL includes only the dialogue	52	48 %
The dialogue is usually followed up with both practical tests and written tests and possibly other tools of assessment	28	26 %
The dialogue is usually followed up with one or more written test	14	13 %
The dialogue is usually followed up with one or more practical test	14	13 %
Total	108	100 %

Source: The survey. Only respondents who have made at least one RPL in the school year 2013/2014 are included. The question was: How do you use the dialogue as a part of RPL?

Checklists

The qualitative study shows that it may be appropriate for the assessor to use a checklist of educational goals in order to get a more systematic assessment of the participant. This tool can be used during the dialogue and/or in connection with other tools of assessment. Some schools and professional committees have developed checklists for RPL in which the educational goals are described and translated into something more specific. The study suggests that such kinds of checklists can make it easier to assess the extent to which the participants have met the goals of the education program.

The survey showed that 60 percent of the programs at schools used checklists at least once during the school year 2013/2014 (n=109). A total of 59 percent of these respondents (n=66) said they always or almost always used this type of tool, while 35 percent said that they used this type of tool half of the time or most of the time. As many as 67 percent of respondents (n=64) that have been using this type of tool also assessed that it always or almost always was suitable for assessment, while 27 percent said that they found this type of tool suitable for assessment half of the time or most of the time. See Table 2.

Checklists are especially common in the area of education within office, commercial and business (in this sample, this means these programs: retail sales and office), with 79 percent of these respondents having used the tool at least once in the year 2013/2014. On the other hand, the tool was used least (40 percent) in the area of education within food, agriculture and events (in this sample this means these programs: agriculture, agricultural management, gastronomy and nutrition assistant).

Statements from previous or current employers

The qualitative study had only a few examples of using statements from past or current employers or managers as part the assessment process. This tool is a part of another tool of assessment: the documentation (mentioned earlier). Experience with this kind of tool was diverse: some informants found that the tool was a valuable contribution to RPL, while other informants found these kinds of statements difficult to use, e.g., because of lack of precision.

The survey showed that 57 percent of the programs at schools used statements from past or current employers or managers at least once during the school year 2013/2014 (n=109). Of these respondents, 33 percent

(n=63) said they always or almost always used this tool, while 49 percent said that they used this tool half of the time or most of the time. A total of 55 percent of the respondents (n=62) who have used the tool also assessed that it was always or almost always suitable for assessment, while 34 percent said that they found this tool suitable for assessment half of the time or most of the time. See Table 2.

Statements from previous or current employers are especially common in the area of education within office, commercial and business (in this sample, this means these programs: retail sales and office), with 83 percent of the respondents having used the tool at least once in the year 2013/2014. On the other hand, the tool was used least (37 percent) in the area of education within engineering, construction and transport (in this sample this means these programs: construction with wood, data and communication, electrician, passenger transport, service assistant, storage, vehicle mechanic, web-integrator).

Practical tests and exercises

The qualitative study showed that some schools use practical tests as a tool of assessment. These programs find that practical tests give a reliable picture of what the participant can do in a realistic setting. It is also a tool of assessment that is useful to address the needs of participants who are less skilled at speaking, but are better in a practical context. Some teachers used standardized tests, while others adapted the tests to the specific challenges and the specific participants. The study indicates that some schools find it costly to use practical tests as a tool of assessment. In order to reduce costs, they are looking for alternatives, for instance conducting practical tests in groups.

The study showed that some programs use exercises, workshops and role-plays as a collective process of integrating guidance and assessment in which they try to get participants to reconstruct experience-based behavior. The idea is to get participants to mimic some of the work processes they know from their previous or current jobs to demonstrate their skills and competences. The assessor follows the process and assesses participants' skills in relation to the academic objectives of the education program. Where necessary, additional questions to the participants can clarify the competences that have not been shown (see also Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015, about the use of role-plays as a tool of assessment).

The survey shows that 48 percent of the respondents used practical tests at least once during the school year 2013/2014 (n=109). Of these respondents, 34 percent (n=53) said they always or almost always used these tools, while 42 percent said that they used this type of tool half of the time or most of the time. A total of 59 percent of the respondents (n=51) that used this type of tool also assessed that it was always or almost always suitable for assessment, while 25 percent said that they found this type of tool suitable for assessment half of the time or most of the time. See Table 2.

Practical tests and exercises are especially common in the area of education within engineering, construction and transport (in this sample this means these programs: construction with wood, data and communication, electrician, passenger transport, service assistant, storage, vehicle mechanic, web-integrator), with 76 percent of the respondents having used the tool at least once in the year 2013/2014. On the other hand, it was used least (17 percent) in the area of education within office, commercial and business (in this sample this means these programs: retail sales and office).

In the survey we asked the respondents from schools that have used practical testing as a tool of assessment at least once (approximately half of the respondents indicated that they have), how they did it. The result was that:

- 75 percent of the schools use individual tests where the individual participant has to complete a task, while 2 percent of the schools use group-based tests and 23 percent of the schools use both types of tests
- 88 percent of the schools use dialogue between participant and assessor when the practical test or exercise is going on, while 12 percent of the schools have no dialogue when the practical test or exercise is going on
- 88 percent of the schools always have a dialogue after the practical test or exercise has been completed, while 10 percent of the schools have a dialogue sometimes and 2 percent never have one.

In other words, dialogue is a key element for those who use practical tests – before, during and after the tests.

Written tests

The qualitative study showed that some schools use written tests as tools of assessment in addition to dialogues. Sometimes the tests serve to complement the dialogue with knowledge about the participants' basic skills, for instance in literacy or numeracy, and tests can be used to spot if participants have learning disabilities, such as dyslexia.

The survey showed that 47 percent of the education programs used written tests at least once during the school year 2013/2014 (n=109). Of these respondents, 27 percent (n=48) said they always or almost always used this type of tool, while 38 percent said that they used this type of tool half of the time or most of the time. A total of 35 percent of the respondents (n=48) that used this type of tool also assessed that it was always or almost always suitable for assessment, while 42 percent said that they found this type of tool suitable for assessment half of the time or most of the time. See Table 2.

Written tests are especially common in the area of education within office, commercial and business (in this sample these are the following programs: retail sales and office), with 67 percent of the respondents having used the tool at least once in the year 2013/2014. On the other hand, it is used least (25 percent) in the area of education within food, agriculture and events (in this sample this means the following programs: agriculture, agricultural management, gastronomy and nutrition assistant).

Logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation

The qualitative study showed that some schools and some professional committees have developed logbooks, schedules and similar tools for documentation and/or self-evaluation. An example of this was a logbook with two parts: one part for the participant to fill out before the assessment, and another part for the assessor to fill out during the assessment process. The study shows that there are different experiences of how self-evaluation questionnaires serve as documentation and impetus for the dialogue. Some informants have experienced that it is expedient for participants to have an opportunity to evaluate their own skills in written form, and that it serves as a good basis for the dialogue. Other informants have a more critical view on this kind of self-evaluation tool because they experience that some people overestimate while others underestimate their skills and competencies. Therefore, some schools prefer that participants demonstrate their skills in practice instead of only having a dialogue.

The survey showed that 23 percent of the programs used logbooks or similar tools for documentation and/or self-evaluation of the participants' background at least once during the school year 2013/2014 (n=109). Of these respondents, 52 percent (n=25) said they always or almost always used this kind of tool, while 28 percent said that they used this kind of tool half of the time or most of the time. A total of 58 percent of the

respondents (n=24) who have been using this tool also assessed that it was always or almost always suitable for assessment, while 21 percent said that they found it suitable for assessment half of the time or most of the time. See Table 2.

Logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation are especially common in the area of education within engineering, construction and transport (in this sample this means these programs: construction with wood, data and communication, electrician, passenger transport, service assistant, storage, vehicle mechanic, web-integrator), with 37 percent of the respondents having used the tool at least once in the year 2013/2014. On the other hand, it is used least (5 percent) in the area of education, food, agriculture and events (in this sample this means these programs: agriculture, agricultural management, gastronomy and nutrition assistant).

These findings give a new overview of the tools the vocational schools are using to assess prior learning. The survey shows that all programs at the schools included in this research used dialogue and almost all programs used documents as tools of assessment. Checklists, statements from previous or current employers, practical tests and exercises and written tests were used by about half of the programs (between 47 percent and 60 percent), and logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation are used by around one out of four (23%).

However, as can be seen in Table 2 (next page), the specific use of tools of assessment differs considerably between the different areas of education.

Table 2					
Tools of assessment of prior learning used by schools at least once in the school year 2013/2014					
Area of education	Care, health and pedagogy	Office, commercial and business	Food, agriculture and events	Engineering, construction and transport	Total
Programs in the sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hairdresser • Social care and health • Pedagogical assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail sales • Office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture • Agricultural management • Gastronomy • Nutrition assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction with wood • Data and communication • Electrician • Passenger transport • Service assistant • Storage • Vehicle mechanic • Web-integrator 	
	n=27	n=24	n=20	n=38	n=109
Dialogue	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Documents	96 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	99 %
Checklists	52 %	79 %	40 %	63 %	60 %
Statements from previous or current employers	67 %	83 %	50 %	37 %	57 %
Practical tests and exercises	37 %	17 %	45 %	76 %	48 %
Written tests	44 %	67 %	25 %	47 %	47 %
Logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation	15 %	25 %	5 %	37 %	23 %
<p><i>Source: The survey</i> <i>Only respondents who have made at least one RPL in the school year 2013/2014 are included.</i> <i>Respondents had the opportunity to select multiple tools.</i> <i>The question was: Which of the following tools did the school use in the year 2013/2014 in connection with RPL?</i></p>					

The 109 respondents identified that they had used 478 tools. This means that each respondent on average reported that they had used 4.4 tools. Most education programs had used four (32 percent) or five (34 percent) of the seven tools they were asked about. A total of 14 percent of the respondents had used three different tools, while 8 percent had used two tools. Six percent had used six different tools and another 6 percent had used all seven tools.

Table 3 lists the 10 most common combinations of tools of assessment that respondents indicated that they use. Together, these 10 combinations cover 75 percent of all combinations of tools of assessment.

Combination number	Dialogue	Documents	Checklists	Statements from previous or current employers	Practical tests and exercises	Written tests	Logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation	Number of tools	Share of all respondents
No. 1	X	X	X	X				4	12 %
No. 2	X	X	X		X	X		5	10 %
No. 3	X	X						2	9 %
No. 4	X	X	X	X	X			5	9 %
No. 5	X	X	X	X		X		5	8 %
No. 6	X	X			X	X		4	7 %
No. 7	X	X		X				3	6 %
No. 8	X	X		X		X		4	6 %
No. 9	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7	6 %
No. 10	X	X	X	X			X	5	4 %

To sum up, most of the education programs use four or five different tools of assessment. Everybody uses dialogue and documentation. Some also use tools like checklists or statements from employers but not tests, while others include practical testing or written tests together with dialogue and documentation.

Discussion

The research has shown that dialogue plays a key role in RPL at vocational schools in Denmark. Furthermore, dialogue is often the only tool, together with documentation and/or checklists and/or statements from employers, that is used for RPL. In other words, tools without testing. However, the study also showed that dialogue may have certain limitations because it requires that the participant is able to articulate skills and to reflect on how they can be used. Moreover, documents and statements from employers do not necessarily give an updated assessment of the skills and competencies a person has at the current time.

Practical or written tests can, therefore, be an important additional tool of assessment because the participant is given an opportunity to demonstrate – and not only to articulate – competencies and skills in practical settings. Although the practical tests are only used by about half of the programs, they are assessed to be suitable always, almost always or in most cases by 94 percent of the respondents from education programs that have used that kind of tool.

The research has also shown that some tools are used much more within some areas of education than others. There may be several explanations for this. One obvious reason could be that the different areas of education are related to very different professional fields and competencies, for instance the focus on social competencies within social care and health versus more focus on technical competencies within areas like engineering or transport. Some tools will therefore be more appropriate than others in terms of getting a true picture of the participants' skills and competencies in relation to a specific education. Another reason for differences is that schools and/or professional committees within some areas have developed tools for assessment with regard to specific programs. An example of this is standardized practical tests that, together with logbooks, have been developed by the professional committee within the educational area of transport (EVA, 2014).

Vocational education and training in Denmark has (to a high extent) been developed within specific academic environments in an interaction between the social partners and the educational departments at the vocational schools. The social partners within the specific educational field have played, and continue to play, a key role in relation to the specific academic objectives that should be achieved during the education, while how the objectives should be achieved is determined in interplay between the vocational schools and the companies in charge of developing the pupils' practical skills and competencies.

One hypothesis could be that this structure has been a barrier in regard to thinking *how* to achieve educational goals across the existing divisions of education. The findings shown in Table 2 can give reason to ask whether some programs could benefit from inspiration and knowledge sharing from other programs in regard to which tools to use for RPL.

Conclusion

The research gives a new overview of the tools the vocational schools in Denmark are using to assess prior learning. It springs to mind that a main result is that there is a very varied picture across schools and education programs regarding the tools they use to assess prior learning. Some tools are much more common within some areas of education than others. There may be several explanations for this, including structural barriers and traditions. However, there is reason to assume that there is potential for getting inspiration and sharing knowledge across the existing educational borders.

All programs at the schools included in this research used dialogue and documentation as tools of assessment. While checklists, statements from previous or current employers, practical tests and exercises and written tests are used by about half of the programs, logbooks and schedules for documentation and/or self-evaluation are used by around one out of four. About half of the education programs do not use practical or written tests as tools of assessment.

Dialogue is used by all assessors, but dialogue may have certain limitations. As earlier noted, practical and written tests can therefore be important additional tools of assessment because the participant is given an opportunity to demonstrate – and not only to articulate – competencies and skills in practical settings. The results showed that the respondents who are familiar with using practical tests find this to be suitable to a high extent.

As mentioned in the opening of this paper, a new Act from the fall of 2015 forced all vocational schools to make RPL available for all persons aged 25 and above. In addition, EVA's studies pointed out a need to strengthen RPL practices at the schools. Consequently, EVA and the Danish Ministry of Education agreed that EVA should give seminars on RKV (*Realkompetencevurdering*, or "real competence assessment") for vocational schools. In 2015, four seminars were held in Denmark for professionals who play or are expected to play a key role in the implementation of RPL at vocational schools. Participation was not mandatory, but most of the vocational schools participated with one or two professionals. The seminars had three objectives: To provide the participants with new research-based knowledge about RPL, to clarify the legal base for RPL and to enable participants to share knowledge about RPL across programs and schools. The seminars in particular focused on how RPL processes can be organized and on the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of various tools to RPL.

Although the seminars progressed as desired, the question of developing RPL practices in the schools is not just a question about developing competences. Many other factors affect how the practice turns out. Thus, there is a need to continue monitoring how practice at schools develops. With the purpose of monitoring how RPL practices at vocational schools evolve in the coming years, EVA has launched an evaluation of the new Act on vocational education with specific focus on the adults above the age of 25. The project continues until 2018 and will primarily focus on whether it will be more attractive for adults to be skilled, on how the adults' prior learning is recognized and to what extent educations are shortened. The project will also focus on the extent to which motivating learning environments for adults are established. The data collection will include quantitative data (e.g., data on enrollment and shortening of educations) as well as qualitative data (e.g., case studies).

The present time (beginning 2016) is too early to say anything systematic on how RPL practice develops at the vocational schools after the new Act. However, preliminary results indicate that there are structural barriers that make it harder to develop high quality RPL in practice. For example, the rule that time spent on RKV has to be taken from the total educational time: more time spent on RPL necessarily means less time for teaching. In addition, programs for adults must be at least 10 percent shorter than the similar education for persons below 25 years. At the same time, a new standardized shortening of the educational programs has been introduced by which it follows that certain courses or types of work experience automatically provide specific shortening of the education. All these rules result in a pressure to make the educational programs as short as possible. A consequence can be that schools are less motivated to make good and thorough assessments of prior learning because they might not be interested in further shortening of the educational programs.

How RPL practice at vocational schools will continue to develop in Denmark in the coming years is an open question. Promoting good, thorough and fair RPL is not just a matter of good intentions and access to new knowledge, but indeed also a question of whether the legal framework and conditions and incentives support good RPL practice.

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