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Permeability in Academic Continuing Education to Create Open Education Space: The Case of Danube University Krems

Redecker (2014) identifies open education as “to provide every citizen with exactly the kind of learning s/he needs, when, where and how s/he needs it. This is a fundamental shift from most of formal education today where learners generally comply with the when, where and how an institution chooses to provide its educational opportunities” (p. 3). Open education reflects a strong image for vision for future of education in Europe where learners can create their own learning paths by choosing among different learning opportunities, resources and assessment types to meet their learning needs and define what, when, where and how they want to learn (4Ws of Open Education, Redecker, 2014). Implementation of an open education system requires resolution of certain institutional and political issues such as opportunities for increased non-formal and informal learning, skills/competence based learning rather than knowledge based (credit transfer systems), well-developed systems of recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learnings as well as a mind-set regarding new culture of learning independent from formal education.

A key aspect of open education is permeability. Validation, recognition, credit transfer and qualification frameworks creates a permeable education system. Permeability can be defined as the possibility for “learners to be able to move easily between different types of education, (such as academic and vocational) and between different levels (such as upper secondary, or apprenticeship, up to higher education)” (CEDEFOP, 2012, p.1). It is underlined that “permeability must enable learners to transfer and build on all types of their prior learning – formal, non-formal or informal – wherever that learning took place, at school, work” or even during leisure” (CEDEFOP, 2012, p.2). Europe has been a pioneer in permeability, especially with the development of NQF and EQF and in transfers from VET systems to academic higher education. For example, Danube University Krems is a good case for showing how validating and recognising work-based learning and non-formal learning of applicants are done in a transparent way to guide adult learners to a Master’s Degree in academic continuing education.

Validation and recognition of all types of prior learnings have been on the agenda for EU and there have been several steps taken to create a better system of Europe-wide systematic framework hand-in-hand with the development of NQF and national competences. NQF “aims to be a unifying device, to create ladders, linkages and pathways that afford seamless mobility to lifelong learners” (Harris, 1999, p. 124). Within this mobility, RVPL plays a crucial role as paving pathways to education, training and qualifications; promoting workforce development and participation in the labour market; enhancing social inclusion and democratic citizenship; and personal and professional empowerment (Singh, 2015, p. 63).

This paper aims at providing a detailed descriptive analysis of the validation and recognition of the previous learning at Danube University Krems as a university for continuing education for access to academic continuing education. This study adopts the case study approach both at the institutional level and individual learner level. Specific individual cases will be shown as examples of life biographies and professional trajectories of learners which illustrate the path to academic continuing education especially from vocational training without Matura.

Results will be discussed in relation to social inclusion and the role of permeability for social inclusion especially for the concept of open education.