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European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Education and Culture DG

EN

EUROPEAN GUIDELINES

for validating non-formal and informal learning

non-formal
informal
formal

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training. We provide information on and analyses of vocational education and training systems, policies, research and practice.
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Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
E-mail: info@cedefop.europa.eu
www.cedefop.europa.eu

Foreword

This publication presents the conclusions of more than two years of intensive exchange of experiences - involving representatives from more than 20 European countries - in validating non-formal and informal learning. The main objective is to make the outcomes of this common learning process available to a wider audience to support further development of validation of non-formal and informal learning at European, national and local levels.

These guidelines, while inspired by the common European principles on identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning adopted by the European Council in 2004, are not a policy framework approved by a law-making body: they are a practical tool, providing expert advice to be applied on a purely voluntary basis. Their impact relies exclusively on their relevance and ability to add value at national or local levels.

The guidelines address the wide range of policy-makers and practitioners involved in developing and implementing validation arrangements at different levels. It is important to note that validation is not the exclusive concern of education and training institutions; it involves enterprises, sectors, non-governmental organisations, etc. The text aims at capturing this diversity of stakeholders, which is particularly apparent in the check-list for practitioners, offering those involved a practical tool for assessing progress.

These guidelines largely result from cooperation and common learning between countries that takes place within the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes, established in 2006 in the context of the Education and training 2010 work programme. The cluster brings together - with the financial, organisational and analytical support of the European Commission and Cedefop - countries with a particular interest in issues related to validation. The relevance of the issue is shown by the growing participation, from 21 countries in 2006 to 26 in 2009. The work of the cluster on validation has illustrated the potential of 'peer-learning'. The three peer learning activities on validation organised by the cluster since 2006 (in Belgium, France and Iceland) have made it possible to involve experts and policy-makers in identifying the main problems and discussing possible solutions.

Most important, publication of these guidelines underlines that validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning. A rapidly growing number of countries emphasise

the importance of making visible and valuing learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, at work, in the home and during leisure time activities.

The current text should be seen as a first contribution to a set of European guidelines for validation. Further development and strengthening in the coming years is obviously needed and should be pursued by bringing forward the process of cooperation and common learning allowed by the cluster since 2006.

The European guidelines on validating non-formal and informal learning reflect the constructive cooperation between the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture and Cedefop in coordinating the work of the cluster and peer learning activities in this field. This is a cooperation we want to develop further and strengthen in the coming years.

Aviana Bulgarelli
Director of Cedefop

Gordon Clark
European Commission
Directorate General for Education and Culture
Head of Unit
Lifelong learning: contribution to the Lisbon process

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- members of the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes who, through active and constructive discussions identified the main issues to be addressed by the guidelines and how to respond to these (see Annex 3 for overview of participating countries);
- participants in peer learning activities in Belgium (January 2007), France (July 2007) and Iceland (February 2009) who contributed to clarifying the issues and shared their insights;
- the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture and Cedefop for providing the necessary financial, organisational and analytical support to the work of the cluster and the PLAs;
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- Christine Nychas of Cedefop for the technical preparation of this text.

Table of contents

Annexes

List of tables and figures

Tables

Figures

Executive summary

Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning. More European countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home.

The guidelines presented in this publication aim to support this process by identifying the main challenges facing policy-makers and practitioners and – to a certain degree – pointing to possible ways to respond. They should be seen as a practical tool, providing expert advice to be applied on a purely voluntary basis. Their impact relies exclusively on their relevance and ability to add value at national or local levels.

Introduction

Following a short terminological clarification, the introductory part of the guidelines pays particular attention to the interdependence of validation of non-formal and informal learning and certification in the formal education and training system. It is stressed that validation requires the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders than certification in the formal system.

The European perspective

Chapter 2 outlines the European policy context in which the guidelines have been developed. The practice of validating informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for validating non-formal and informal learning.

It is stressed that European cooperation in validation requires regular updating of these guidelines as well as the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. These two instruments should be developed in such a way that they can mutually support each other.

The national perspective

Chapter 3 addresses validation from the perspective of national qualification authorities. The main message is that validation should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system. Treating validation as something isolated from the rest of the certification system could threaten its overall credibility.

The distinction between formative and summative approaches to validation is important for its design. The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the identification of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part of lifelong learning. Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework).

Based on recent developments, the emergence of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) is important for validation. Their development and implementation can be used as an opportunity to integrate validation systematically into qualifications systems. The introduction of validation as an integrated part of these frameworks could improve access to, progression within, and transfer of qualifications.

The organisational perspective

Chapter 4 addresses validation from the perspective of the different organising stakeholders. Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and voluntary organisations are all key stakeholders in providing opportunities to validate non-formal and informal learning. The conclusions in this chapter can be summarised as follows:

(a) validating non-formal and informal learning poses challenges to formal education in terms of the range of learning that can be validated and how this process can be integrated with the formal curriculum and its assessment;

(b) there are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems to document the knowledge, skills and competences of employees. Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with the legitimate interests of individual employees;

(c) the adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative and summative validation;

(d) the third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as simplify their transfer to other settings.

The individual perspective

Chapter 5 underlines that the centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved in validation should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual. Everyone should have access to the validation process and the emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important. It is further stressed that the multiple stage validation process offers individuals many opportunities for deciding about the future direction of their process. This decision-making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.

Validation process structure

Chapter 6 tries to clarify the main processes involved in validation and what characterises these. These processes are orientation, assessment and external audit. Focusing on these separate, but interdependent processes, simplifies evaluation of existing validation procedures and supports development of new validation procedures.

Methods

Chapter 7 looks into the methods used for validating non-formal and informal learning and stresses that these are essentially the same tools as those used in assessing formal learning. When used to validate non-formal and informal learning, however, methods and tools have to be combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning. Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose.

Validation practitioners

Chapter 8 addresses the professional activity of counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. A key message is that preparing and continous training of these people is critically important to the outcomes of validation. Networking that enables sharing experiences and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners. Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support individuals seeking validation.

Conclusions

The guidelines provide a starting point for further European cooperation in validation. It is agreed that this cooperation must have the practical aim of improving practices at national and local levels and, eventually, support individual users. This aim is supported by the inclusion, in Annex 2, of several evaluation checklists for stakeholders at different levels and in different contexts.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and methodology

Validating non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of improving lifelong and lifewide learning. More European countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home.

Recognising the importance and relevance of learning outside the formal education and training context, a set of common European principles for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning were adopted by the European Council in May 2004 ([1]). Formulated at a high level of abstraction, these principles identified key issues that are critical to developing and implementing of methods and systems for validation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. **Fundamental principles in identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning**

Individual entitlements
Identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning should, in principle, be a voluntary matter for the individual. There should be equal access and equal and fair treatment for all individuals. The privacy and rights of the individual are to be respected.

Stakeholder obligations
Stakeholders, should establish, in accordance with their rights, responsibilities and competences, systems and approaches for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning. These should include appropriate quality assurance mechanisms. Stakeholders should provide guidance, counselling and information about these systems and approaches to individuals.

Confidence and trust
The processes, procedures and criteria for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms.

Credibility and legitimacy
Systems and approaches for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning should respect the legitimate interests and ensure the balanced participation of the relevant stakeholders.

([1]) Council of the European Union. *Conclusions of the Council and representatives of the governments of Member States meeting within the Council on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.* (EDUC 118 SOC 253, 18 May 2004). Available from Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/validation2004_en.pdf [cited 3.2.2009].

Since 2004 these principles have been used in countries as a reference for national developments. Following adoption of the principles, stakeholders from various countries have raised the question whether a more detailed set of guidelines for validation could be developed that builds on widening experience in this field.

The establishment (in 2006) of the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes, in the context of the Education and training 2010 work programme ([2]), has made systematic follow-up of the common principles possible. This cluster brings together representatives of 25 ([3]) countries to exchange and identify good practice in recognition of learning outcomes. Building on the conclusions of peer-learning activities on effective practice in validation processes (Brussels, January 2007 and Paris, July 2007), prepared and attended by the cluster, the work on drafting European guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning began in August 2007. The content of these guidelines was identified by cluster members and the text was repeatedly consulted with, and validated by, members of the cluster.

1.1. Why European guidelines?

The European principles for validating non-formal and informal learning were designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries. These objectives reflected the overall objective of giving value to a broader range of learning experiences and outcomes, supporting lifelong and lifewide learning. The guidelines support these goals and offer some detail on the structure and processes of validation. They can be written because national positions have become stronger in this field and greater exchange of practice and policy learning is now possible.

The guidelines are intended to support different development processes in countries, regions and sectors and respect the wide range of different models for validation. Essentially the European guidelines should be seen as an evaluative tool for those involved with validation at local, regional and national levels.

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the 2008 publication of the most extensive inventory to date of practice in validating non-formal

([2]) See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/comp_en.html#2 [cited 3.2.2009].
([3]) See Annex 3 for the list of members of the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes.

and informal learning ([4]) (referred to as the 2007 inventory in this text). This 2007 inventory includes a summary of practice in public, private and voluntary sectors in 32 countries with six case studies presented in some detail. It will be updated biannually and will, with the guidelines, provide countries with an instrument for improving practices in this field.

1.2. Guidelines: the basis in evidence

The guidelines aim to use the evidence that has become available since the 2004 principles for validating non-formal and informal learning were published. They will underline these principles and strengthen the validation process in its various settings. The evidence sources that have been used include:

- the discussions in the peer learning cluster on recognition of learning outcomes (25 countries involved);
- peer learning activities organised by the above cluster in Brussels (January 2007) and Paris (July 2007);
- Cedefop study visit to Portugal (2006);
- three European inventories of national experience in recognising non-formal and informal learning ([5]);
- a wide range of Leonardo da Vinci projects that support validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- reviews of research literature in this field.

The guidelines also consider discussions at the Portuguese Presidency conference on valuing learning in November 2007. The main summary points in this conference represent a current European view of the validation process for non-formal and informal learning. Conference delegates agreed that:

- individuals (learners) are central to the validation process (and therefore should be involved in dialogue about the process, together with self-assessment, reflection, self-realisation and they should receive guidance as necessary);
- it is necessary to create systems in which the results of validation are

([4]) Souto Otero, Manuel; Hawley, Jo; Nevala, Anne-Mari (eds). *European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning: 2007 update: a final report to DG Education and Culture of the European Commission.* Birmingham: Ecotec, 2008. Available from Internet: http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/EuropeanInventory.pdf [cited 3.2.2009].

([5]) For the 2004, 2005 and 2007 versions, see: http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/2007.html [cited 3.2.2009].

transferable to the formal qualifications system if desired by learners;
- the shift to learning outcomes-based approaches within curricula and qualifications systems is facilitating introduction of validation and use of common standards with the formal recognition system;
- there is a clear link between validation procedures and introduction of outcomes-based qualifications frameworks;
- validation can be used for both formative and summative purposes;
- since validation touches upon personal attitudes certain ethical principles should be respected and data should be protected;
- successful assessment methodologies usually combine several techniques but use of portfolios often has a central role;
- quality assurance of validation procedures is key for creation of common trust and credibility;
- there is a need for better data on the financial implications of validation procedures and especially cost-benefit analysis;
- some countries have difficulty in developing a sustainable large-scale system of validation of non-formal and informal learning which builds on and goes beyond project-based practice;
- guidance and training for those who manage and carry out the validation process are essential for the professionalisation of practitioners, communities of practice, and transparency of the validation processes.

These guidelines comprise nine chapters. Following this chapter on the background to the validation process and the guidelines, the second chapter provides a summary of the current position from a European perspective. The third chapter focuses on the national level and provides a rationale for the strong policy interest in this area. The fourth chapter includes a discussion of how organisations in the public and private sectors interface with validation processes. In the fifth chapter the focus is on the main beneficiary of validation processes: the individual. The structure of the validation process is examined in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 covers assessment processes in some detail. In the eighth chapter the roles, skills and values of the people who carry out validation are discussed. Chapter 9 contains a summary of validation principles and guidelines. The annexes support the development of validation processes.

1.3. Terminological challenges

Exchanges of projects and experiences in validating non-formal and informal learning are beset with problems different understandings of commonly used

words or phrases. This challenge was recognised by the Education Council in its 2004 conclusions on common principles for validating non-formal and informal learning. The Council agreed that no single concept would be able to capture the complexities of these processes and therefore decided to refer to identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Identification of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a process which

'... records and makes visible the individual's learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but it may provide the basis for such formal recognition.'

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

'... is based on the assessment of the individual's learning outcomes and may result in a certificate or diploma.'

This distinction between identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning reflects the distinction drawn between formative and summative assessment in research literature (see Section 3.2. for a discussion on the formative and summative purposes of validation).

These conceptual challenges have also been addressed by Cedefop in its updated multilingual glossary of 100 terms used in education and training across Europe ([6]). This glossary considers recent OECD work on qualifications and recognising non-formal learning. It also uses the definitions related to the European qualifications framework. The definitions of terms used in validation are included in Annex 1 of these guidelines.

The term validation of learning outcomes is understood as:

'The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.'

It should be noted that in this definition validation applies to formal as well as non-formal and informal learning. In these guidelines the context of validation is in non-formal and informal settings only and practices for validation in the formal context are not discussed. To make clear the relationship between validation in formal settings and the process applied to non-formal and informal settings, Figure 2 illustrates the main phases involved.

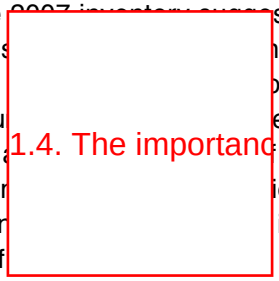
There are some broader concepts involved in validation that do not yet

([6]) Cedefop. *Terminology of education and training policy: a multilingual glossary.* Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2009. [forthcoming].

appear in glossaries linked with it. The concept of social validation of learning is a good example. It is common for a learner to document achievements against standards (occupational standards, qualification standards or advertised expectations for a specific job) and for this documented evidence to be sufficient to gain social recognition, for example being offered a better job or a place on a higher education programme. In this process, that is addressed as 'social validation of learning', certification and formal recognition (by institutions awarding qualifications) do not occur.

1.4. The importance of validating non-formal and informal learning

Indications from the 2007 inventory suggest that validating informal and non-formal learning is [illegible]nce across Europe. Further, the commitment of large [illegible] OECD activity in this field and participation in the Eu[illegible]eer learning cluster indicate that validation is seen as a[illegible] national policies on education, training and employ[illegible]idation can be seen as part of education, training ar[illegible] is significant and illustrates the bridging character of



Expansion and diversification of education and training policies towards a broader, lifelong learning perspective, widens the focus from the delivery of qualifications by formal education and training institutions to include other, more flexible routes to qualification. These are sensitive to different ways in which people have developed their knowledge and skills and the way they live their lives. To ease such flexible pathways, validating non-formal and informal learning makes visible the learning gained outside learning institutions. Across a country this represents a vast untapped resource of invisible knowledge and skills and, in addition to the rights of individuals to have their learning recognised, its increased visibility could lead to significant economic and social benefits for individuals, communities and countries.

1.5. Routes from learning to certification

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is organised differently across Europe. The system for validating outcomes can be designed as an integral part of the existing formal education and training system; when this is the case it is

seen as another nationally endorsed route to recognition of learning outcomes and possibly to certification. In some countries validation of non-formal and informal learning operates in parallel with the formal system. It is managed differently but uses some of the infrastructure from the formal system, such as educational benchmarks or standards for formal qualification. It can also be an entirely separate process leading to distinctive recognition that bears no institutional, standards or certification link to the formal system.

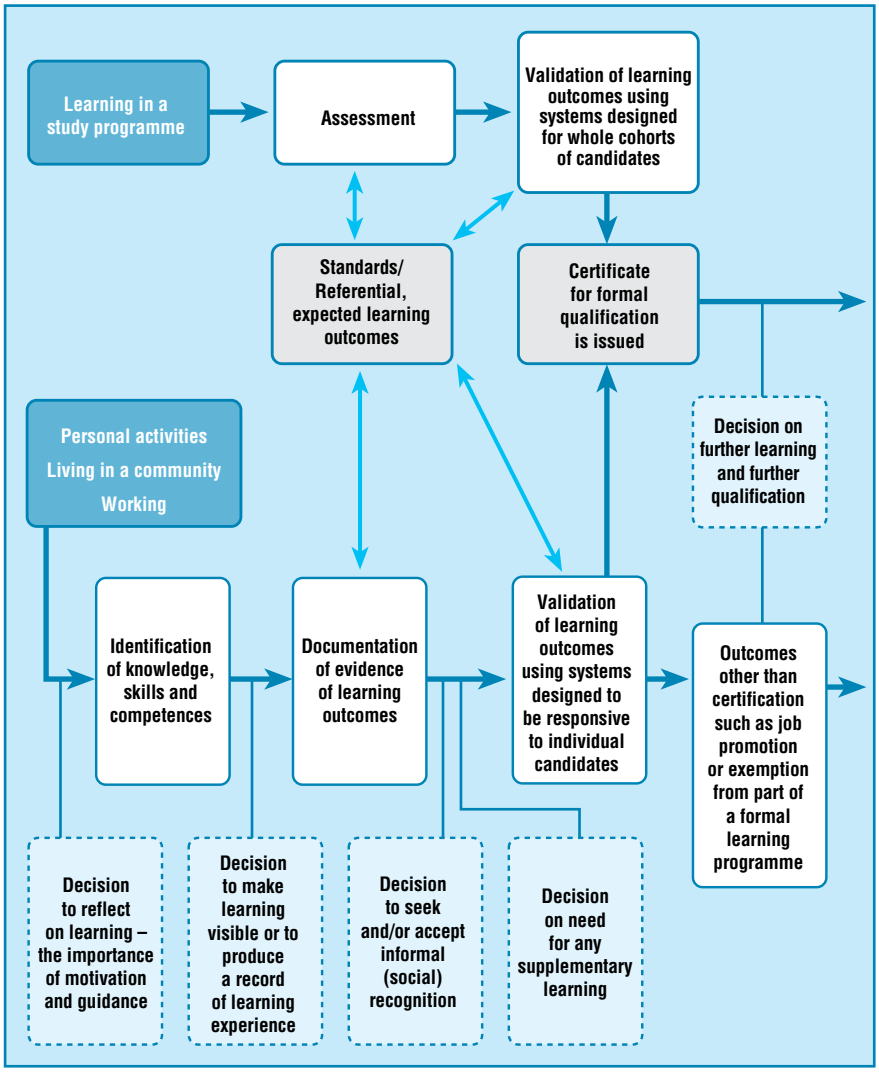
For the purpose of these guidelines, it is useful to set validation of non-formal and informal learning against the process for the formal system. First, it emphasises the existence of the validation process for informal and non-formal learning and, second, because it helps to show that validation of non-formal and informal learning can establish its legitimacy through use of the same standards or benchmarks in the formal process. Figure 2 aims to show in broad terms how formal and informal systems can align with each other. At the top of the diagram we can see the formal system and at the bottom we can see the informal system. As learners participate in these systems they move to the right hand side where they can obtain certification of their learning. The black arrows show this pathway from left to right. In both systems the individual has choices of learning and how it can be made visible. Generally the nature of validation processes outside the formal system presents many more choices for the learner than in the formal system. This is because the process of validation and the learning careers can be more complex and because it serves a greater diversity of purposes. The grey boxes at the bottom of the diagram show some of this complexity in terms of the choices learners can make. In the case of the formal system, the learning and validation environment is likely to be simpler.

While validating non-formal and informal learning is designed to be more sensitive to the circumstances of an individual learner, it is essential for status and trust that the summative element of the validation is based on the same standards as in the formal system ([7]). The red arrows in the diagram signal use of common standards by different validation processes; this use of common standards provides consistency and comparability of outcomes ([8]).

([7]) This point raises important questions of how standards are defined. Input-based standards may provide a serious obstacle to validating non-formal and informal learning by limiting the number and range of learning pathways and experiences considered to be relevant. A more in-depth discussion of standards can be found in Section 3.5.

([8]) Meaning the validation approach in the formal system and the validation approach for non-formal and informal learning.

Figure 2. **Routes from learning to certification**



1.6. Stakeholder roles

The number of stakeholders and agencies involved in validating non-formal and informal learning can make it difficult to see the whole picture from any one perspective. The integrated view presented in Table 1 maps out and extends current boundaries of thinking on how, where and why validation

occurs. Five distinctive but interrelated levels of management by stakeholders are described: individual learners, organisations, education and training, national and regional policy-makers and European policy-makers. This integrated view can be used to broaden understanding of the practical challenges of validating non-formal and informal learning when developing and implementing validation approaches at all levels.

Table 1. **An integrated view of validation of non-formal and informal learning**

	Who is involved?	What are the results?	Why are they doing it?	How is this done?
European level	EU Commission and Council EU agencies, Cedefop and European Training Foundation (ETF) Social partner organisations Ministers of education and training Employment ministers	European qualifications framework (EQF) Europass Common European principles for validation Draft European guidelines for validation European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) and European credit transfer system (ECTS)	Comparability and transparency Increased mobility Competitiveness Lifelong learning	Open method of coordination (OMC) Technical cooperation (peer learning) Experimental and research programmes (Lifelong learning programme, Framework research programmes)
National level (including regional stakeholders such as local government)	Ministries Qualification authorities Social partners NGOs	National curricula Qualifications	Knowledge society Mobility Innovation Skills supply	Systems Projects Networks Financing Legal framework
Education and training sector	Local government institutions Private institutions Assessment centres Vocational schools Universities Specialist recognition centres	Education programmes (standards) Certificates recognising participation Diplomas	Education for all Tailored training Shortened study period Increased admission	Defining assessment and validation methods
Business sector	Business managers Human resource managers Trade union representatives	Occupational standards Competence profile Work descriptions	Modernisation Competitive advantage Resourcing Career planning Training	Mapping Counselling Assessment Validation
Voluntary sector	Communities NGOs Projects	Skills profile	Social and personal reasons Employability	Mapping Youthpass Europass CV
Individual	Candidate Employee	Motivation lo learn Self esteem Proof of knowledge and skills Personal reasons	Personal reasons Employability Mobility Career advancement Entrance to education	Supplementary learning Documentation Taking part in assessment

1.7. Summarising current experience

It is possible to summarise some of the factors that can make a validation process for non-formal and informal learning a success. Drawing on the 2007 inventory it is clear that the following are important factors:

- partnership working and consultation;
- sufficient financial and human resources;
- training and guidance for staff involved to support policy and legislation;
- use of clear reference points such as standards and qualification levels;
- developing methodologies which are learning-outcomes-based;
- quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation to ensure fairness and build confidence;
- learning from others and sharing experiences.

Similarly it is possible to identify common barriers to successful adoption of a validation system for non-formal and informal learning:

- the resources that are available are not sufficient to meet the demand for validation or sustain it;
- insufficient volume of training for staff responsible for validation;
- uncertainty in planning due to variation in the scope and quality of pilot projects;
- lack of collaboration between stakeholder groups;
- lack of buy-in to the validation process from companies;
- high levels of trust in the traditions and culture of validating formal learning;
- perceptions of lengthy and complex procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning;
- poor access to information about validation procedures;
- low personal expectations from potential candidates for validation, especially low-skilled males;
- employers' fear of greater contractual/salary demands;
- large variety of methodologies that can hinder reliable assessment and trust;
- consideration, by the private sector, that validation of non-formal and informal learning is a public sector responsibility;
- lack of a legal framework for validation processes;
- private sector unwillingness to share experiences/policies;
- hostility towards non-traditional qualifications.

Fundamentally, success requires that validation is broadly accepted as

being relevant for reaching overarching political goals like lifelong learning employability and social inclusion. Success will also require that validation is ‘mainstreamed’ and becomes an integrated part of qualifications systems: politically, legally, administratively and financially.

CHAPTER 2

Effective validation practice: the European perspective

Guidelines

Validation practice for informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the European principles for quality assurance of education and training, and the recommendation for a European quality assurance reference framework for VET ([9]).

European cooperation on validation should be further developed, in particular by regularly updating and improving these guidelines and the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

European level tools and frameworks (European qualifications framework, Europass, European credit systems) could be used to promote validation and to improve comparability and transparency of the outcomes and so build trust across national boundaries.

2.1. Making validation processes comparable

From a European perspective, strengthening the comparability of approaches to validation at different levels and in different contexts is important: this is part of developing trust at international level. It has been said that the national and regional methods and systems developed so far can be considered 'islands' of validation. Lack of system comparability makes it difficult for individuals to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, at different levels and in different countries. These guidelines can develop links between these islands and enable policy learning, increased transparency and greater common trust.

([9]) European Commission. *Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training.* Brussels: European Commission, 2008. (COM(2008) 179 final). Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0179:FIN:EN:PDF [cited 3.2.2009].

2.2. Quality assurance instruments

Quality assurance processes across Europe set benchmarks for validation procedures. The European principles for quality assurance in education and training ([10]) can increase cross-national trust in these validation processes. The principles are as follows:

- quality assurance policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training systems;
- quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions;
- quality assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions or programmes by external monitoring bodies or agencies;
- external monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance should be subject to regular review;
- quality assurance should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes;
- quality assurance systems should include the following elements:
  (i) clear and measurable objectives and standards;
  (ii) guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement;
  (iii) appropriate resources;
  (iv) consistent evaluation methods including self-assessment and external review;
  (v) feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement;
  (vi) widely accessible evaluation results;
- international, national and regional quality assurance initiatives should be coordinated to ensure overview, coherence, synergy and system-wide analysis;
- quality assurance should be a cooperative process across education and training, involving all relevant stakeholders, within Member States and across the community;
- quality assurance guidelines at community level may provide reference points for evaluations and peer learning.

([10]) See Annex 3 in: European Parliament; Council of the European Communities. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, 2008, C 111, p. 1-7. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008: 111:0001:0007:EN:PDF [cited 3.2.2009].

These European guidelines seek to show how the above quality assurance principles can establish consistency of application across the many national contexts for validating non-formal and informal learning. Many factors can provide or undermine confidence in either the methods used in validation or the outcome achieved. The success of national and local validation processes depends on the confidence they inspire. As far as possible, national validation processes should be compliant with the European quality assurance principles and the follow-up to these ([11]). The relevance of these principles for future development of validation of non-formal and informal learning requires, however, that more emphasis is given to the quality assurance of certification, and in particular how standards are developed and renewed, how the learning outcomes approach is applied, and how different stakeholders (also outside education and training) are involved in and contribute to certification.

2.3. Other European policy tools

European networks for improving cooperation in quality assurance procedures (ENQA ([12]) for higher education, ENQA – VET ([13]) for vocational education and training) play an important role for many nations and institutions in improving the quality and transparency of education and training. These networks are mostly concerned with the quality of institutional practices and programmes but they also highlight the general principles of quality assurance that apply across education, training and processes leading to qualification.

There are other European level policy tools that have important interactions with validation processes. The European qualifications framework for lifelong learning (EQF) ([14]) will support the validation processes by providing European

([11]) The general principles outlined in the European guidelines have been specified by frameworks covering sub-sectors of education and training, notably higher education and vocational education and training. The CQAF – the common quality assurance framework for VET, initiated in 2008 - is an example of the latter.

([12]) European network for quality assurance in higher education (www.enqa.eu).

([13]) European network for quality assurance in vocational education and training (www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/projects_networks/quality/).

([14]) European Parliament; Council of the European Communities. Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, 2008, C 111, p. 1-7. Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF [cited 3.2.2009].

benchmarks for qualification levels across Europe and encourage the embedding of validation systems with formal qualifications systems. The qualifications levels in the EQF will help to create transparency in qualifications levels and comparability across nations and regions. The structure of the EQF descriptors – that set out knowledge, skills and competence in terms of learning outcomes – is proving to be a useful tool in developing national qualifications systems. In many national settings development of validation systems has been hampered by, among other things, the need to define the learning that individuals must demonstrate to reach a standard. When learning programmes are defined by length of study and topics to be covered it is difficult to define the actual learning required. It is possible that the current trend to increase the 'outcome' formulation of standards, possibly as a result of the formulation of learning outcomes in the EQF, will also enable validation processes to lead to formal qualification. In other words there is likely to be increasing convergence in the definition of standards expected in validation of non-formal and informal learning and those expected for formal qualifications (see Figure 2).

Each of the elements in the Europass portfolio ([15]) also interacts with validation systems since they document learning. In particular the structure of the Europass CV serves to encourage recognition of learning through expecting documentation of evidence for the learning of particular types of knowledge and skills, including personal skills. The CV is completed by individuals and the process of development is essentially a reflective one where individuals consider the types and levels of learning they have achieved. Encouragement to identify learning, and therefore competence and qualifications levels, is an important first step towards full recognition, validation and certification.

Existence of the European credit transfer and accumulation system for higher education ([16]) and commitment to the credit transfer system for VET (ECVET) ([17]) are based on their potential to give value to learning achieved in other institutions and outside the home country. The learning in question is currently often formal; however, these tools have the potential

([15]) Europass consists of five documents: curriculum vitae (CV), mobility, language passport, certificate supplement, diploma supplement. See: http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/

([16]) European credit transfer and accumulation system ECTS. See: http://ec.europa.eu./education/programmes/socrates/ects/index_en.html [cited 3.2.2009].

([17]) See: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm [cited 3.2.2009].

to allow transfer of informal and non-formal learning if essential elements of comparability and trust are in place. The standardised modes these credit transfer processes use, such as describing learning through defining outcomes (instead of programmes), is a powerful mechanism for increasing trust. Consequently, engagement with these credit transfer tools offers the potential to improve validation of non-formal and informal learning. Just as validation can benefit from the existence of credit transfer processes, it can be argued that credit transfer processes, such as ECVET, will benefit from validation of non-formal and informal learning processes, particularly the assessment methodologies commonly used ([18]).

([18]) For a discussion of the relationship between validation and credit transfer, see: Bjørnåvold, Jens; Le Mouillour, Isabelle. La validation des acquis d'apprentissage en Europe; un sujet d'actualité. *Actualité de la formation permanente*, 2008, no 212, p. 75-83.

CHAPTER 3

Effective validation practice: the national perspective

Guidelines

Validation of non-formal and informal learning should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system.

The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the 'identification' of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part of lifelong learning.

Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework).

Entitlement to validation could be considered in cases where non-formal and informal learning is seen as a normal route to a qualification, parallel to formal education and training.

Developing and implementing national qualifications frameworks could be used as an opportunity to integrate validation systematically into qualifications systems.

Introduction of validation as an integral part of a national qualifications framework could be linked to the need to improve access to, progression within and transfer of qualifications.

The sustainability and coherence of national systems of validation should be supported by regular cost benefit analysis.

3.1. The social and economic rationale for national validation strategies

The extent to which users trust a validation process depends on national and local practices. The 2005 inventory of practice ([19]) indicates that the strength of these national and local practices hinges on the approach to three challenges:

1. what links there are between (the different forms) of validation of non-formal informal learning and national qualifications systems;
2. what kind of standards (referential) are used for validation of non-formal and informal learning;
3. how the long-term sustainability of validation of non-formal and informal learning is ensured.

Discussions of these three challenges form the basis of this section of the guidelines.

([19]) See: http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/ [cited 3.2.2009].

National and local policy-makers have expressed strong social arguments for engaging more fully with validation of non-formal and informal learning. The 2005 European inventory explains these arguments in full and provides examples of practice to support them. Here we summarise the main points to clarify the social and economic policy objectives.

Validating non-formal and informal learning is expected to:

- support mobility within education/training and in the labour market by improving access and mobility of individuals, both into and within education and employment;
- promote efficiency within education and training by helping to ensure that individuals are able to access tailored learning opportunities;
- promote equality of opportunity for individuals to achieve recognition for their skills and competences, regardless of where these were acquired, so helping to establish a level playing field in education/training and the labour market;
- support disadvantaged groups such as immigrants and refugees, the unemployed, older workers;
- support lifelong learning by making it more likely that lifelong recognition of learning is possible;
- achieve coherence with other (EU) countries;
- address sectoral needs in relation to skills shortages or to comply with regulations regarding professional qualifications;
- support the response to demographic change;
- combat a qualifications deficit.

These are wide-ranging expectations of validation which may – partly at least – explain the increased level of interest in establishing national policy and practice in this area.

3.2. Relationship with national qualifications systems

The concept of a national qualifications system is now widely accepted ([20]) as all aspects of a country's activity that result in recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and putting in place national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance

([20]) OECD. *Qualifications systems: bridges to lifelong learning*. Paris: OECD, 2007.

processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

The most prominent forms of recognition arise through certification of formal learning programmes; oftensome form of assessment is used to validate this learning. While this approach is prominent in terms of formal recognition of learning, it is possibly not as significant when it comes to the proportion of learning that it recognises. Non-formal and informal learning takes place every day and in almost all settings where people live and work. This suggests that most national qualifications systems do not recognise the bulk of learning taking place in a country, hence the strong policy interest in broadening the range of learning recognised.

Not all forms of validation of non-formal and informal learning result in award of a qualification. The assessment process that leads to validation can have two main forms. Formative approaches to assessment do not aim for formal certification of learning outcomes, but provide feedback to the learning process or learning career, indicating strengths and weaknesses and providing a basis for personal or organisational improvement. Formative assessment fulfils a very important role in numerous settings ranging from guidance and counselling to human resource management in enterprises. Summative approaches to assessment and validation aim explicitly at the formalisation and certification of learning outcomes and are linked to, and integrated into, institutions and bodies authorised to award qualifications ([21]). Both formative and summative assessment have a role in validating learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings. However, in validation leading to certification it is summative assessment that is important. The process of summative assessment needs to consider national standards (see Section 3.5.) and must be operable by national qualifications awarding bodies. This implies that use of summative approaches for validating non-formal and informal learning needs to be strongly linked – or possibly integrated – into national qualifications systems. This link can take many forms and rapid development of national qualifications frameworks may be seen as a development of particular importance (see Section 3.4.).

An important issue is the extent to which non-formal and informal learning is accepted and established as a normal route to a certificate or qualification

([21]) A qualification is here understood as ... the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcome to a given standard.

By integrating validation of non formal or informal learning with the national qualifications system, the legal status, governance, stakeholder involvement and financing of the validation becomes more transparent. The standards on which the validation processes are based can also be the same and the result is unified certification of learning outcomes which does not concern itself with different routes to learning. This opening up of qualifications to a broader set of learning experiences and pathways can be seen as closely linked to the shift to learning outcomes characterising current education and training policies and practices, in particular development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks (see also Section 2.4.).

3.3. Validation legal standing

Some countries have introduced a legal right to summative validation of non-formal and informal learning for their citizens. This right is not always universal; sometimes the right to validation is part of the right of adults to access and complete general or upper secondary education. This legal right can be seen as an effort to integrate validation of non-formal and informal learning into qualifications systems and to address lifelong learning in a concrete way. Most European countries have been reluctant to introduce a legal right in this field. This seems partly to be motivated by cost concerns, and partly by a preference for a decentralised, formative approach to such validation.

At the same time, discussion with leading national experts in the peer learning cluster for recognition of learning outcomes suggests that validating (and certifying) non-formal and informal learning is becoming more integrated inTO qualifications systems and frameworks. Individual access to validation has to be considered. A decision to establish validation of non-formal and informal learning as a normal route to qualifications – parallel to the traditional route – may require that individuals have a right to access and make use of validation, just as they have a right to access and use formal education and training.

3.4. National qualifications frameworks

Setting up a national qualifications framework (NQF) is relevant to validating non-formal and informal learning. The shift to learning outcomes promoted by the EQF, and increasingly part of new NQFs developing across Europe, may prove important for further development of validation. The emerging

NQFs may be said to operate according to four main aims ([22]):

- to ease establishment of national standards for learning outcomes (competences);
- to relate qualifications to one another;
- to promote access to learning, transfer of learning and progression;
- to promote the quality of education and training provision.

Each of these four aims may be directly related to further development of methods and approaches for validating non-formal and informal learning. The key advantage of frameworks in simplifying such validation is that the classifications of qualification levels are usually written in the form of learning outcomes. These levels are independent of any specific kind of qualification and open up the possibility of non-formal and informal learning being validated at a particular level, to be used as a basis for the award of a partial or complete qualification. Development of validation of non-formal and informal learning and NQFs have a common objective. They enable individuals to make progress in their learning careers based on their learning outcomes and competences, not based on the duration and location of a particular learning programme.

An objective shared by many emerging NQFs is to relate qualifications to one another and reduce barriers between education and training sectors, promoting access, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. Systems for validating non-formal and informal learning can contribute directly to this objective. If introduced systematically, as a part of the overall qualifications system, this validation will open up qualifications to a broader set of users, for example by certifying work experience and voluntary work.

3.5. National standards for learning outcomes

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is inconceivable without a clearly defined and agreed reference point. Standards influence validation practices in two main ways. First, the impact of validation depends on a standard and how it is defined and interpreted. Standards may effectively be defined and formulated in such a way that they exclude validation. Second, the standard

([22]) Coles, Mike. *Qualifications frameworks in Europe: platforms for collaboration, integration and reform*. Paper presented at the conference 'Making the European learning area a reality', Munich, 3-5 June 2007. Available from Internet: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/glacier/qual/eqf/mike_coles_eqf.pdf [cited 3.2.2009].

can also influence the credibility of validation. Validation referring to visible standards defined and supported by the main, relevant stakeholders will greatly increase acceptance among users – individuals as well as employers – of these practices.

A standard that is too narrowly defined may not be able to accommodate some highly relevant learning taking place outside schools and colleges. While much attention has been paid to validation methodologies, relatively little has been paid to standards and how they influence the final results of the validation process. In general, qualifications – and validation of non-formal and informal learning – relate to two ([23]) main categories of standards; occupational and education-training standards. These two categories operate according to different logics, reflecting different sets of priorities, motivations and purposes.

Occupational standards are classifications and definitions of the main jobs that people do. Following the logic of employment, these standards will focus on what people need to do, how they will do it, and how well they do it. They have to be written as competences and formulated in terms of outcomes. They exist in all European countries but each nation has its own style of derivation and presentation of the standards. Occupational standards form a bridge between the labour market and education because educational standards (syllabuses and pedagogies) can be developed from them.

Education-training standards, following the logic of education and training, focus on what people need to learn, how they will learn it, and how the quality and content of learning will be assessed. The main interest is thus formulated in terms of input (subject, syllabus, teaching methods, process and assessment). Educational standards are normally written as teaching specifications and qualification specifications. For example, to be a skilled plumber you need to study particular subjects at a certain type of institution for a specified period and use a stated textbook or manual. Occupational standards are increasingly influencing the way educational standards are written: as learning outcomes which are statements of what a person knows and can do in a work situation.

Many approaches to validating non-formal and informal learning relate to the second category of standards, those designed specifically for the education and training system. The critical question is whether these standards

([23]) In some countries we note that assessment and qualifications standards are developed as a third, separate category of standards.

are defined through specification of teaching input or learning outcomes (as required in occupational standards). Outcome-based approaches are generally used for vocational education and training (as the link to occupational standards will normally be stronger) but the situation in other parts of the education and training system might be different. A particular question should be asked about practices to validate non-formal informal or learning developing in higher education. Higher education institutions largely operate validation autonomously and in relation to their internal (educational) standards.

Emerging national qualifications frameworks may influence the way standards are formulated and used. Currently, descriptions of national qualifications levels are often implicit and based on duration and location of education and training programmes. Developing NQFs can lead to establishing explicit, coherent, learning outcomes-based standards for qualifications that could accommodate outcomes of learning in non-formal and informal settings. Additionally these implicit levels could depend on entry requirements to learning or work and on work-related licences to practise. In the future it will be crucial that definition of these national standards for learning outcomes considers the particular requirements posed by validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Standards may be considered a key factor in guaranteeing the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. An often heard argument against summative validation is that resulting qualifications are inferior in quality to those delivered by formal education and training. This is based on the assumption that the learning processes in question have not been controlled or overseen by any appropriate expert body. While it is correct that non-formal and informal learning is non-standardised, (sometimes) non-intentional and always reflects specific individual experiences, this does not provide any basis for drawing conclusions on the quality of these learning processes. Awarding a certificate based on learning outcomes acquired outside formal systems, therefore, relies heavily on assessment in relation to an agreed standard. As long as it can be documented (and this is the task of methodologies developed for this purpose, see Chapter 7), this argument against validation can be addressed. Some scepticism towards validation may be based on lack of visible standards (it is not clear to users which standards are applied) or on too weak standards (main stakeholders have not been involved in defining standards). A particular danger occurs when validation is based on standards separate from those used in formal education and training, giving the impression that validation is inferior. As

indicated in Figure 2, mainstreaming validation will normally require one set of standards used for formal, non-formal and informal learning.

Appropriate definition of standards can support development of validation for non-formal and informal learning. At the same, validation practice in these contexts may provide useful feedback for validation in formal systems. A systematic approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning may offer external benchmarking of standards used in the qualifications system, in particular if these experiences can influence dialogue between stakeholders involved in defining and reviewing standards. Such external standards may also be useful for validation in the formal system, making it possible to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different routes to the same qualification.

In addition to occupational and educational standards which are primarily concerned with the content (or knowledge, skills and competence) of learning there are standards that apply to the process of assessment, validation and certification of learning. These process-based standards are equally important in improving trust and developing currency of qualifications earned through informal or non-formal learning:

- assessment or evaluation standards (such as criteria defining types of qualifications, syllabi for qualifications, assessor qualifications);
- validation standards (such as rules for methodologies, jury practice, availability of information, advice and guidance);
- certification standards (such as criteria for awarding a certificate, (legal) definition of who can make awards, regulation practice).

All these standards make it easier to trust qualification quality but this requires that they are visible, based on input from relevant stakeholders, and regularly reviewed and updated. Thus the concepts of quality and trust are intertwined and depend on clear and relevant standards, both for formal and non-formal and informal learning.

3.6. Sustainable and cost-efficient systems

The question of sustainability of national systems of validating non-formal and informal learning is becoming a key national issue. Some projects that have successfully established procedures to validate non-formal or informal learning have failed to secure continued financial support. This was either because the project goals (which are always limited in scale) have been met or the infrastructure for validation proved too expensive for key stakeholders

to implement as a national scheme. Therefore the question of how validation approaches can be valued as cost effective in the long term for all stakeholders has become key for policy-makers as well as stakeholders ([24]).

The first sustainability consideration is to determine what will need to be sustained. Validation can take many forms and the following elements have to be considered:

- who are the beneficiaries of the process;
- the expected volume of candidates;
- what has to be put in place (infrastructures, human resources, processes);
- what are the costs (set up and maintenance);
- who are the partners in operating the process;
- what are the long-term forecasts for validation, candidate numbers and costs.

One of the findings of the 2007 European inventory ([25]) was that lack of national mechanisms combined with a wide diversity in provision can lead to problems. Users who know of provision can be confused by different validation practices. The approach to validation based on supporting micro-scale initiatives that are relatively inexpensive and highly candidate-centred, are problematic and potentially counterproductive when it comes to seeking system level structured funding.

Practice suggests that key sustainable funding sources include:

- government funding specifically linked to research and validation pilot schemes;
- government broad funding streams where validation can make a contribution, for example social interventions engaging the unemployed or developing inclusive policies for migrants;
- government initiatives, for example increasing skills supply in a specific part of the labour market;
- private funding of projects linked to business need, mainly from larger companies but also from sectoral representative bodies;

([24]) Cost benefit analysis will be the subject of a peer learning activity to be organised in Iceland in 2009.

([25]) Souto Otero, Manuel; Hawley, Jo; Nevala, Anne-Mari (eds). *European inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning: 2007 update: a final report to DG Education and Culture of the European Commission*. Birmingham: Ecotec, 2008. Available from Internet: http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/EuropeanInventory.pdf [cited 3.2.2009].

- employer funding for individuals seeking a skills audit;
- funding from charities and voluntary bodies wishing to document non-formal and informal learning arising from voluntary work;
- funding from institutions and awarding bodies wishing to open access to programmes and qualifications;
- financing (or cofinancing) from individuals putting themselves forward for validation.

A key area of discussion is the extent to which the candidate should pay for validation. There are complex issues here, especially with the lowly qualified and those returning to education and training. Many countries see charging individuals as unacceptable. For those countries that do charge fees, the following three options are possible:

- fees based on the time spent completing validation;
- a common basic fee, irrespective of time spent or the number of certifications awarded;
- a fee based on the volume and level of certifications applied for and awarded.

Each of these has benefits and problems. While there are reasons for making individuals bear some of the costs (so that they take more responsibility for their learning) they are not the only beneficiaries of validation. Education and training providers also benefit from validating non-formal and informal learning and this constitutes a reason for them to bear some of the costs. For example:

- new and experienced learners are attracted to the institution;
- learner recruitment and retention rates tend to increase;
- teachers can learn from candidates, for example about developments in the workplace; this is useful for curriculum and pedagogy;
- teachers can gain valuable insights into different and non-dominant cultures of knowledge, which can and should form a useful adjunct to traditionally academic ways of thinking about knowledge;
- engaging with validation of non-formal and informal learning means that curricula can build meaningful links with the communities they seek to serve;
- the process validation encourages staff to understand what their curriculum actually requires of learners and to clarify issues such as the meaning of particular levels, notions of academic coherence and equivalence.

One of the key determinants of costs of validation is the assessment methodology involved (see Chapter 6). More research is needed on this to unravel the relative costs and benefits for different validation models.

CHAPTER 4

Effective practice in validation: organisational perspective

Guidelines

Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and voluntary organisations are key stakeholders in providing opportunities to validate non-formal and informal learning.

Validation poses challenges to formal education in the range of learning that can be validated and how it can be integrated into the formal curriculum and its assessment.

There are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems to document the knowledge, skills and competences of employees.

Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with those of individual employees.

The adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative and summative validation.

The third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as facilitate transfer to other settings.

The work of different bodies involved in validation requires coordination through an institutional framework.

The institutional route to validation and certification should not lead to certificates that are seen as of different status based on the route taken to achieve them.

Validation is not something which concerns only national (public) stakeholders. The 2007 European inventory indicates that validation is increasingly playing a part in enterprise human resource development strategies. This is also the case in third sector or voluntary organisations.

In this section the types of organisation that assist validation of non-formal and informal learning are considered. First the formal education sector is discussed, followed by the contribution made by the private sector. The adult education and voluntary (or third) sectors also make a contribution. The final section considers institutions that support validation in general.

4.1. Formal education

Validating non-formal and informal learning is a major challenge to national education systems, particularly to traditional ways of providing and recognising

learning. It is often the case that people feel safe when learning achievement is benchmarked against the time a learner has spent in tuition with expert teachers in a school or college. When this traditional benchmark is substituted by learning gained in a wide range of very diverse settings, trust has to be restored. The ways that non-formal and informal learning are defined, assessed, validated and certificated must be quality assured to raise trust and confidence. The way standards are defined and supported will also influence this trust and confidence. Validating non-formal and informal learning makes institutions better at recognising what people actually can do, hence presenting them with a new instrument for meeting some of the basic social challenges that have previously caused problems. At the same time, it becomes possible for the education system to develop its own role in developing competences.

Many countries find unacceptable the level of drop out from basic education and failure to engage again those who make the wrong choice when initially choosing education. One of the contributing factors is that the design of the established learning culture in the education system is not sufficiently adapted to the needs of the individual. By making the recognition of non-formal and informal learning an integrated dimension in the national education system, waste of learning and competences could possibly be converted into visible and usable competences.

Concrete challenges for education providers include how existing procedures to validate formal learning can be adapted to meet the needs of learners outside the formal system. Questions include:

- how to avoid validation of non-formal and informal learning being seen as undermining existing formal education and training, for example by reducing the number of full-time pupils and students;
- how to create incentives (economic and otherwise) that stimulate formal education to adopt validation methodologies;
- how existing education objectives can be converted into competence objectives in each individual area of education;
- how work on methods that are relevant and reliable for an assessment of prior learning can be organised, simultaneously guaranteeing education quality;
- how to ensure coherent practices, based on consistent national standards;
- how pedagogical methods can be adapted to incorporate greater roles for guidance and counselling;
- what the administrative requirements are for guidance/counselling, documentation, assessment and validation?

However education providers are likely to see significant benefits by engaging with validation of non-formal and informal learning, which can:

- address the needs of mature learners and part-time students, by recognising alternative forms of entry requirement and shortening the period of study through earning exemptions;
- engage people who are developing knowledge, skills and competences in third or voluntary sectors, work-based learning, trade union learning and community learning;
- improve support strategies for retention, guidance and learner support by identifying the needs of learners before entry;
- contribute to curriculum development on the nature of learning, knowledge and assessment. It is integral to the development and operation of work-based learning programmes;
- improve transparency of decisions regarding entry and credit, by developing a consistent, and recorded, approach to validation for entry to or exemption within a programme;
- lead to the development of learning partnerships between colleges, universities, employers, professional bodies, and community learning and voluntary sector learning providers, using formative and summative assessment which may require collaboration between learning providers across different education and training sectors to ensure the needs of the learner are most effectively met.

4.2. Private sector companies

It is broadly accepted that the workplace is a significant learning environment. Where workplaces are conducive to learning there is likely to be benefit for all with an interest in the company. Indeed, some employers are beginning to use validation procedures ([26]) to identify, assess and make full use of these learning processes. Validation, building on existing appraisal processes, makes it possible to identify skills gaps and to tailor company training around this information. At the same time good appraisal processes offer formative assessments that enable an individual to identify the skills and competences they possess as well as their further learning needs.

([26]) It is worth noting that the term validation is not in common use in companies; a term like competence measurement is more likely to be used. The activities as such are clearly relevant in this context.

The common outcome of such formative assessment is to support career development. Work modernisation is often a driving force for an audit of competences: the formative nature of a validation process can be used to develop work practices in line with company plans. We can also observe cases where enterprises undertake summative validation, making it possible for their employees to have their learning experiences recognised according to national standards. Presently, however, the formative approach seems to be dominating, limiting transferability of results of validation to the enterprise or the sector.

These benefits are shown in a wide range of examples of employer involvement in validation processes in the 2007 European inventory. It also contains some concrete survey information that can be used to tailor new validation processes in companies. When employers engage in validation processes with employees it can:

- increase motivation and interest in workplace practice on the part of the employee/learner;
- reduce the amount of time needed to complete a qualification and therefore require less time away from the workplace;
- generate new ideas and developments in the workplace as a result of a process of reflection on practice by the employee/learner;
- improve employee retention and reduce recruitment and training costs.

In some cases the company needs to demonstrate that its workforce is highly qualified, for example when competing for contracts or seeking insurance for safe working on an assignment. When this is the case the normal duration of professional training programmes can make such qualifications very expensive. Validation can lead to exemptions for some learning and thus reduce direct training costs and indirect opportunity costs for losing people from the workplace during training.

The organisation of companies (even small ones) provides a framework that can help the validation process to develop, function and link in with services external to the company. Table 2 illustrates a generalised process of validation operating within a company that is essentially driven by the skills needs of the company but which leads to immediate and tangible benefits for the individual workers. It is important to state that this table highlights a series of elements in a process and is not intended to be a useful model in its own right.

The final stage of company validation of employee competences is sometimes the final stage only for the company. The employee is presented with further opportunities for progress and certification. Five generic choices are available:

Table 2. **A generic process of validation for companies**

Build commitment	The company becomes aware of the opportunities and understands what will be done and how it will be done, the costs, and the possible outcomes. The commitment to a skills and competence documentation is shared across decision-making levels. Plans for company development of a recognition scheme are explained to all stakeholders.
Company competence profile	Define all types of expected functions within the company and, for each type of job, the competences expected from each worker doing these jobs.
Involve candidates	The involvement of candidates requires information about the process, the objectives, the opportunities for the candidate and any critical/difficult situations that they will face.
Portfolio completion	The candidates complete the portfolio reporting all educational, training and work experiences and inserting evidences of documented or non-documented competences acquired. This may be done, for example, using a self-evaluation questionnaire on behavioural competences.
Assessment	On the basis of the portfolio an assessment group can start to evaluate the profile of individuals. An external assessor can be involved.
Personal development plan	Results of assessments are discussed with candidates and within the company and become the basis of a personal development plan that takes into consideration of the candidate's competences and the company plans.
Vocational training	Tailor-made training is defined using the personal development plan as a base.
Validation of competences	The competences are validated by the company and documented and provide credit to start a new job or to get into a vocational training route.

- to do no more in terms of making their learning visible and enjoy the benefits (personal and work related) that the process has brought;
- to seek further learning opportunities within their current job, for example updating certain skills;
- to look at qualifications beyond the company and, in the light of this, examine their documentation to identify further learning necessary for certification;
- to seek learning opportunities in a new job in the company;
- to seek learning opportunities in full-time study outside the company.

Making company validation processes compatible with national systems can be advantageous to companies (in using tried and tested processes that are well known) and to employees who want to use their validated work experience for certification. External reference points, for example sector or branch competence profiles and/or standards, can also be used to strengthen compatibility and ensure the transferability/portability of the skills and competences in question.

Company involvement in validation is important if the bulk of personal learning, which is probably work-based, is to be made visible. It is also important to appreciate that the company process can raise expectations of further learning and certification, as outlined in the last three choices above. Thus a company's involvement should be based on long-term, sustainable human resource development that benefits all partners. Having said that, the company's interest in validation is usually driven by short- and medium-term needs in terms of human resources and strongly focused on modernisation of work practices and upskilling of the workforce. This is especially the case for small and medium-sized companies.

It is possible that the drive for visibility and upgrading of individual competences will not be seen as entirely beneficial from an individual perspective. For example, employees may see themselves as not in control of the validation of their own competences. They may also feel unable to challenge validation decisions in the way they might if validation is the responsibility of an independent jury (as often in the formal education system). These two cases illustrate conflicts of interest between company and employee that can challenge the integrity of a company scheme. The European principles for the validation of informal and non-formal learning make clear the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest such as these by putting emphasis on process transparency and the close involvement of a range of stakeholders. In companies these can be employee representatives or other company employees who are not hierarchically superior nor in potential competition with the person undergoing validation. Individuals have protection at European and national levels against misuse of their personal information through data protection legislation. Information supplied to third parties for validation purposes cannot be used for other purposes, such as restructuring a workforce or for remuneration decisions without the permission of the individual.

The company may also seek formative validation of competences of potential employees during recruitment. The company may have a need for particular skills that are not sufficiently reflected in formal qualifications or it may be that the number of people with a specific skills set are not coming forward for employment and there is a skills shortage. In such cases recruitment agencies can arrange for candidate self-assessment against a specific company skills set. The job centre may carry out the early stages of validation themselves. This approach illustrates another important aspect of validation in company human resource management.

Not with standing issues of long-term sustainability and conflicts of interest, it

remains the case that the need for employer involvement in national validation processes is crucial. Without employer involvement, capitalising on the workplace as a learning arena is reduced and the implementation of large-scale validation of learning across the population is restricted. Sustainability can also be supported by more systematic intervention at sector or branch level, for example by introducing supporting competence frameworks and standards, providing a reference point and easing transfer. Mobilising employers, by explaining the human resource development advantages and the time commitments that are necessary to manage the scheme, allows a fair cost-benefit analysis to follow. The critical interventions with companies seem to be:

- availability of documentation showing the experience of companies in the validation;
- availability of advice to the company from local experts;
- a positive partnership with trade unions;
- independent counselling for employees;
- the lack of sector and branch strategies and supporting frameworks for validation;
- the availability of technical advice on summative validation methods based on standards.

The involvement of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) in the validation process presents special challenges because resources and capacity for developments are limited. However, the SME is an organisation that typically experiences a continuous need to develop skills in its workers. Research shows that SMEs are positive about the process of validation but that the intervention by external agencies needs special consideration ([27]).

4.3. Adult education and the third sector

Recognising and appreciating the significance of adult and learning in the third or voluntary sector for the development of skills and competences is a major challenge. These sectors are administratively independent of both the public education system and the labour market, though both provide valuable

([27]) Lillis, Finbar; Stott, Caroline. *Examining the implications of APL and exemption within the QCF in the context of supporting and measuring learner progression*. London: Credit Works, 2007. Available from Internet: http://www.creditworks.uk.com/publications/reports/full/APLFinal.pdf [cited 3.2.2009].

learning contexts to formal education and the labour market. Validation of learning from adult and third sector learning raises the question of how to create closer interaction with formal education and the labour market while, at the same time, safeguarding key attributes of independence and the concept of volunteering. Some questions are:

- how can validation be offered to volunteers without imposing obstacles to learning and participation;
- what knowledge, skills and competences does it make sense to measure through validation;
- how should achievement through voluntary activities be documented to make the learning visible;
- how can validation strengthen the adult and third sectors.

In general terms what kinds of learning do the adult/third sector offer? It includes the following types of competences:

- professional/vocational, academic or practical;
- managerial;
- cooperative and organisational;
- communication and linguistic;
- personal and social.

Such learning opportunities closely interact with life and work and, therefore, it is likely that many people will seek the opportunities for validation of their non-formal and informal learning.

4.3.1. **Adult education and learning**

Adult education and learning is commonly understood as covering all forms of learning at all levels undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training. While this sector is very diverse and complex in terms of provisions, structures and stakeholders, its importance for enabling the learning and validation of knowledge, skills and competences cannot be exaggerated.

To understand adult education and learning it is necessary to distinguish between learning for personal and for professional purposes. Adult learning for professional purposes is normally closely linked to enterprises and the labour market and can be more readily identified as further education or continuing vocational training, etc. The importance of validating non-formal and informal learning has already been underlined (see in particular Section 4.2.).

Learning for simply wanting to learn, in other words for private, social and/or recreational purposes, forms a very important part of lifelong learning, and contributes significantly to knowledge and skills development citizenship, political participation and cultural integration and social renewal. The crucial role

played by this form of adult learning can be seen in many European countries, as documented by the OECD, notably in Nordic countries ([28]). This learning – frequently made possible by voluntary and political organisations – is normally not assessed or formally recognised. This invisibility can raise issues:

- individuals may believe that learning for personal development purposes is less valuable, relevant and useful than education and learning designed for directly professional purposes;
- the important role played by adult learning for professional developments is at risk of systematically being understated, thus reducing its potential positive and long-term influence and impact.

Identification and validation of non-formal and informal adult learning can address the problem of invisibility and help adults become more conscious of their broader, personal knowledge, skills and competences. Using validation must, however, be done carefully. Assessment and validation may be regarded by some individuals as unnecessary and a barrier to engaging more positively in learning. The voluntary character of the process must be emphasised, as must the distinction and necessary balance between formative and summative approaches to assessment.

The relationship between general adult education and validation is important as it raises the question of what is considered as useful, relevant and valuable learning. Experience of adult learning is believed to be a useful means of raising self-esteem and consequentially removing a significant barrier to more formal learning. It may be argued that rapid economic and societal changes actually increase the importance of adult learning for personal development, while reducing the importance of task specific and narrowly defined, instrumental knowledge and skills. The importance attributed to key competences like learning to learn, communication and teamwork illustrates this. The role of identification and validation may be to help individuals to see this important part of their own learning experiences and enable them to strike the right balance between strictly professional and broader personal developments.

4.3.2. **The third sector**

Many people regularly volunteer their services to support fellow citizens. Some do this as an individual operating alone and others join organisations and give their spare time to charities and youth groups. Other people develop a career and earn their living from voluntary organisations.

([28]) OECD. *Beyond rhetoric: adult learning policies and practices.* Paris: OECD, 2003.

Volunteering involves organising and interacting with others, sometimes in challenging circumstances. Experts agree that volunteering experiences generate knowledge, skills and wider competences that often remain invisible. From an individual perspective, experience of volunteering presents an opportunity for validation that generates benefit in terms of jobs and studies. Individuals who undergo validation benefit from its 'soft outcomes' such as improved confidence and self-esteem. Such outcomes may then help an individual to gain access to formal education and/or employment, or simply to take on more variety or responsibilities within their current role.

Working in voluntary organisations is a serious career choice for many people; job progression within such organisations is improved if the competences associated with voluntary working situations can be made explicit. Thus validation is important for individuals and also for voluntary organisations in terms of recruitment practice and employee career development.

Validation of the skills and competences acquired through involvement in voluntary activities offers an opportunity to gain recognition within the sector, as well as by the public and private sectors. It can also help to encourage quality and professionalism within the sector, by introducing methods of capturing and providing evidence of the skills and competences acquired.

Some voluntary organisations play an important role in working with disadvantaged groups. Validating non-formal and informal learning can help the social and economic integration of disadvantaged groups (such as immigrants, older workers or disengaged young people) by demonstrating to them and to the outside world their abilities and achievements.

In countries where a national system of validation is under development, it is important for all relevant stakeholders to be able to participate.

Increasingly, the importance of implementing measures to simplify validation of informal and non-formal learning is referred to in national and European policies. Some voluntary sector organisations recognise their role in delivering such policies and undertake their own validation initiatives with them in mind.

Youth volunteering is particularly important for considering validation for several reasons. First the whole field is based on activities intended to benefit participants by easing personal growth and competence development. Until recently the competences developed remained mostly invisible to all but the individual concerned. However, increasingly voluntary organisations, sponsoring bodies and national governments are asking for concrete statements of outcomes from voluntary activities. Volunteering is also increasingly seen as part of lifelong learning; policies supporting lifelong learning need

to generate concrete outcomes for all participants. These demands are now being addressed through European, national and project based tools: Youthpass and the Europass CV are examples of the first category.

Validating learning outcomes from voluntary activities is highly dependent on the skills of youth professionals. There is much work going on across Europe to define the skills of youth workers and to validate them in practice.

The extent to which learning outcomes acquired from voluntary activities should form part of a summative approach and eventually lead to certification is debated by stakeholders. Many see such summative approaches as in conflict with the voluntary and, in many cases, idealistic character of these activities. Others stress that while the formative aspect of validation may be important, there is no advantage in excluding certification. Validation in the voluntary sector illustrates the principles in Figure 2 very well. Most approaches to validation will be concluded through identifying and documenting learning outcomes. Such identification and documentation may be used as a platform for certification.

4.4. Institutions involved in validation

There is a clear link between the 2004 principles for validating non-formal and informal learning and how institutions offering this service function. This applies in particular to the section of the principles which states that the roots of trust in the process of validation depends on fairness, transparency and quality assurance and the choice of robust methodologies. Institutions are in a strong position to optimise these fundamental elements of trust.

There are many different institutional arrangements for validating non-formal or informal learning. To analyse these different arrangements it is useful to look at of the functions that have to be covered by institutions. The functions include:

- formal development of policies;
- underpinning administrative processes for receiving applications for validation, administering assessment, recording results, advising learners of the outcome, and administering appeals processes;
- procedures leading to the engagement of potential candidates for validation, including marketing which explains benefits and costs, informs about how to apply for validation, who to contact for further information, who to contact for support in preparing an application, and information about timelines, appeals processes, and fees;

- provision of information, advice and guidance during documentation of evidence, covering subjects, modules, competences, courses and qualifications for which validation can be useful for establishing access and exemptions;
- provision of advice to learners on the assessment process, particularly the kind of evidence that can be used, the forms in which it can be presented, and, where appropriate, a guide as to what is considered sufficient and valid evidence;
- arranging for assessment and informing and explaining the learning or competence outcomes that are the focus and the responsibilities and accountabilities of the various participants;
- ensuring the qualifications and skills of assessors, counsellors and other actors are appropriate;
- ensuring a formal judgement on validation of the assessment outcome is made;
- arranging certification of the outcome;
- determining the way in which validation policies, processes and assessments are quality assured (regulated).

These functions can be combined in different ways as they are allocated to different bodies located in an institutional system. The 2007 European inventory should be consulted for examples of institutional systems; some general points about these systems follow.

First, the type of institutional arrangement can vary in size from pan-European recognition of voluntary activities to the way a single school or college validates learning carried out elsewhere. The scale of the arrangements makes a difference to the design of an efficient institutional structure. In large systems the certification function is usually separated from the validation process. This arrangement can be used to create an overarching quality assurance process and can build coherence and consistency, especially in applying standards. A certification agency at government level can offer official endorsement to validated non-formal and informal learning. A central assessment and validation agency can also be used to generate broadly applicable processes that may encourage smaller agencies to offer validation and assessment functions.

Generally, education and training bodies have a dominant position in validation: this helps comparability of standards between informal and formal systems. However, it is possible that the dominance of the formal system could inhibit the development of assessment practices that do not depend on formal learning environments. It is likely that the responsiveness of the

validation process to the needs of candidates is dependent on the different types of institution offering validation to individuals.

The majority of countries seem to tailor validation systems to the needs of particular groups, notably immigrants, individuals with disabilities, unemployed or the low-qualified. While there may be good reason for choosing this approach, it also runs the risk of placing validation outside mainstream qualifications policies and creating ‘A class’ and ‘B class’ certificates, depending on the route to certification.

CHAPTER 5

Effective validation practice: the individual

Guidelines

The centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual.

Everyone should have access to validation and emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important.

The multiple stage process of validation offers individuals many opportunities for deciding on its future direction. This decision-making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.

The first European principle for validating non-formal and informal learning puts the individual at the centre of the process. It insists that the process of making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and competences held by an individual is carried out in a way that remains voluntary and that the results of validation remain the property of the individual. Whether the context of the validation process is work, social communities or higher education, whatever the purpose, the individual is always at the centre.

Validation systems need to acknowledge the fact that it is the choice of the individual to decide to take the first and crucial step to explore the possibilities of at least documenting their learning. Communication strategies about the benefits of validating non-formal and informal learning, explaining how the system works, can motivate the individual to take control of the process.

Individuals who engage with validation as a candidate benefit from personal outcomes such as improved confidence and self-esteem. These soft outcomes may help an individual to gain access to formal education and/or employment, or simply to take on more variety or responsibilities within their current role in society.

5.1. Why individuals seek validation

Evidence from the 2007 European inventory suggests that the perceptions of individuals about the advantages of having non-formal and informal learning validated falls under the following headings.

Gaining credit for learning from experience for purposes of further formal learning: this may lead to entry to a programme of study at a college or university or allow joining at a more advanced level than would normally be the case, thus shortening the study period.

Increased self-confidence: the process of reflection that recognition of prior informal learning involves, and promoting the value of learning by self and others, often leads to increased self-confidence as a learner. This can increase the motivation to continue learning.

Planning for further learning: the process of validation helps learners to think about what they have achieved so far and identify their strengths and skills. This helps to identify longer-term goals and what they need to do to achieve them.

5.2. Choices for individuals

The validation process for non-formal and informal learning presents the individual with opportunities and choices. The grey boxes at the bottom of Figure 2 represent the basic choices to be made but, in reality, many more may need to be made. Table 3 offers a more detailed synopsis of choice situations for individuals. The decision-making in these situations is often supported by provision of information, advice and guidance.

The 2007 European inventory contains concrete examples of the stages in the table and survey evidence of the views of individuals at various stages of engagement.

Table 3. **Choices for individual learners**

Stage of validation	Choice to be made	Notes
Access and motivation	Whether or not to begin thinking seriously about prior learning and whether opportunities for validation are available and suitable.	The motivation to begin the process is important here. Personal reasons can be based on boosting self-esteem or for economic reasons such as getting a new job or through the recruitment process for a formal learning programme. Sometimes employers can initiate this thinking about validation through changes to work practices and presenting new opportunities that require proof of competences. Another important condition for this stage is the extent to which individuals are empowered to manage their involvement with validation and the extent to which they sense they are empowered.

Stage of validation	Choice to be made	Notes
Initiation	To identify in outline the knowledge and skills that have been learned.	The standards that are expected for formal qualification or for a job represent a starting point for identification.
Pre-documentation	How to find out about the requirements of the documentation process? Whether to proceed to documentation?	Accurate, timely and accessible information, advice and guidance are critical to the decision to proceed with the documentation process. It is also critical to the decision to undertake any supplementary learning.
Documentation	How best to carry out evidence gathering and mapping? What is sufficient evidence? What to do about areas of insufficient evidence? Whether to submit for validation?	From the perspective of the individual this is the substantial part of the validation exercise. Issues arising during the process need to be discussed with expert counsellors (on subject content and documentation process). Decisions on sufficiency of evidence will be based on these discussions. The need for additional learning will become clear during documentation. Here too advice will be required.
Informal recognition	Whether to accept or seek informal recognition for the evidence of competences that have been documented?	Sometimes this recognition will be automatic, for example, if it is part of a company appraisal scheme. Otherwise it might be possible to use the documented evidence in the process of seeking promotion or applying for a place on an education or training programme.
Further learning	Whether any further learning is necessary and how best to arrange for learning experiences?	The need for further learning may arise as the standards are used for documentation (learning gaps) or through the need to show recent and up-to-date knowledge of a familiar field. The learning may best be achieved through arrangements for different work experience or though a formal learning programme.
Submission for validation	Does the evidence meet the standards for validation? How best to prepare for interview questions and for independent assessment?	Independent advice is needed on the sufficiency of evidence and how best orally to support the evidence base.
Validation	How to understand and use the various possible outcomes of validation?	Credit, partial qualification or full qualification are the outcomes. Each of these may be useful in different situations.
Certification	Whether to seek certification?	Advice is needed on the added value of certification.
Further qualification	Decision to make a further step in learning and certification.	It is well known that achieving recognition is likely to lead to the desire for more learning and more qualification.

5.3. Counselling and guidance

All national experience reflected in national projects, the work of the peer learning cluster for the recognition of learning outcomes and the 2007 European inventory indicate that potential candidates and those in the process of receiving validation should have access to impartial and informed advice. It is not possible to establish a single process for validation that will accommodate the needs of all candidates. It is widely accepted that the system needs careful tailoring to the needs of the individual and this is, at least partially, achieved by providing information, advice and guidance at the right times.

It is clear that even before a decision is made to seek validation, candidates need to know what is the added value, what to expect, what standards have to be met and what form the evidence of learning outcomes needs to take. Similarly, at the end of validation, or of certification, evidence suggests a candidate will want to know of potential routes to further qualification that are available. The whole process of validation is between these two points where candidates will need information, advice and guidance on such things as:

- timelines for validation;
- costs;
- procedure;
- forms of evidence of learning outcomes;
- sufficiency of evidence;
- quality and standards;
- presentation of evidence;
- assessment and how best to approach the process;
- support available;
- appeal procedure.

Timely access to information, advice and guidance is essential: ICT-based systems offer many advantages to users as well as providing -ffective tools for information exchange between candidates and counsellors. The 2007 inventory shows that the trend to developing ICT solutions for guidance within validation systems continues. Many initiatives are on a national scale and it seems clear that ICT systems are the key to further expansion of validation processes, especially in the assessment phase.

It is clear that a distinction can be made between guidance related to assessment issues and more general process guidance. These two categories will require different skills sets in the professionals delivering the guidance.

The need for information, advice and guidance has already been identified in Chapter 4. In the next chapter, and its associated annexes, the provision of guidance is included in the separate sections on candidate orientation and assessment of candidates' learning outcomes.

CHAPTER 6

The structure of validation procedures

Guidelines
The three processes of orientation, assessment and external audit can be used to evaluate existing validation procedures and support the development of new validation procedures.

Learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions is not standardised and predictable. The outcomes of these learning processes are – frequently and typically – diverse and multidimensional. The methods and instruments used to identify, assess and attribute recognition must be open to this particular character of non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes. This is very much reflected in the methods developed nationally, for example through an extensive use of portfolio approaches and by using observation and simulation rather than written tests. There is also a changed attitude to assessment: the applicant and the assessor need to engage with the flexible spirit of the validation processes.

The diverse methods of validation used at national and local levels can be generalised into a basic structure of three stages of validation. They all have an orientation stage, where the individual becomes prepared for the second stage, assessment. Orientation and assessment are subject to quality assurance but there is also a need for a third validation stage: the overall procedure should be checked for effectiveness, fairness and efficiency. In this section the generalised approach to the structure of validation procedures is proposed.

In advance of the basic structural elements presented here there are further general considerations that lead to effective validation procedures.

6.1. The validation process

Effective validation processes are underpinned by some general qualities, supporting orientation, assessment and quality assurance:

- reliability: would the outcome be the same if the process were repeated under the same condition?
- validity: is the learning that is being validated the learning that is intended to be validated?

- safety, security and confidentiality: is the candidate protected from abuse during the process?
- standards/referential: are the benchmarks of content and level of learning well defined?
- sustainability: will the process operate over time within resources of the money and time required?
- visibility/transparency: is the process of validation generally understood and does it lead to wider recognition of the candidate's learning?
- fitness for purpose: does the process reflect the circumstances and intentions of the learner?
- cost-efficiency: can the process be modified so that the benefits (personal and financial) are in proportion to the cost?

These general considerations are amplified further in the checklist that is Table 4 in Annex 2.

Validation procedures can seem complex as many elements interact with others. To simplify the process for the purposes of this guideline it is suggested that there are three distinct stages of validation procedures.

First is orientation of an individual, a broad area covering all aspects of producing and distributing information, interaction of learners with advisers, counsellors, and other significant actors such as employers. Orientation is never complete but it always reaches a significant point when the activity begins to focus on assessing the individual's actual learning.

Next is assessment of individual learning, also a broad area which covers the whole process of assessment from understanding requirements and standards, identification of learning, searching for evidence, organising it for assessment, and following agreed assessment and validation procedures. Validation is the most obvious end point of this stage, but monitoring the effects of validation on learners is an important follow-up activity.

Finally is audit of the validation process. This is easier to define and represents a post validation stage that involves an external, independent review of orientation and assessment. This stage does not harbour all the quality assurance processes: these are present during orientation and assessment. In this stage it is the whole process of orientation and assessment that is under independent scrutiny.

It is possible to identify the key components of each of these three stages. Such a listing of components has been derived from discussion among experts from many countries and can serve as an evaluative checklist for specific validation systems. Moreover, such a checklist can also help in discussions on setting up new validation systems.

When the stages are analysed it is clear that the components of each can

be grouped under four headings. Some components are considered to be about setting the right conditions for validation. A second set is about the actual technical processes or practice requirements. The third set is about what knowledge is necessary for the process to proceed. Finally there is a set of components that are clearly outcomes of validation.

Tables in Annex 2 set out the components that might be part of each stage of the process.

6.2. Orienting the individual

This is a broad area of activity for advisers, counsellors, and other significant actors such as employers. It covers all aspects of producing and distributing information, motivating potential candidates and then offering them individualised advice and guidance on the whole process from identification of learning through to certification. Figure 2 shows that each individual can make many decisions (grey boxes) as they proceed with the process. Guidance offered at appropriate points can make this process efficient and effective for all partners. The orientation stage can take many months and the provision of well-trained advisers contributes significantly to the overall cost of the validation process. The guidance and counselling aspect of this stage is crucially important as it extends through the next stage, that of assessing a person's knowledge, skills and competence against predefined standards.

6.3. Assessing the individual

From the beginning of the assessment stage candidates must understand the requirements and standards expected. They have to ensure that the learning they have identified is properly sampled, well documented, organised and ready for assessment. Candidates also need to know the assessment and validation procedures and the possible outcomes.

6.4. Auditing the process

This is a post assessment process that involves an external and independent review of orientation and assessment. It has nothing to do with any candidate's learning and only concerns the provision of the validation process (orientation and assessment) and its efficiency and effectiveness.

CHAPTER 7

Assessment methods

Guidelines

The methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools used in assessing formal learning.

When used for validation, tools have to be adopted, combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning.

Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose.

Learning achieved through non-formal or informal means is only distinguishable from learning achieved through formal programmes by the context of learning. The tools for assessing learning are essentially the same, though some adaptation of the tools – as well as possible combination of different tools – is necessary to take account of contextual differences, such as the timescale over which the learning took place. This is important as the outcomes of validation of non-formal and informal learning are sometimes perceived as inferior to validation applied to the formal situation because different assessment tools are used or they are applied differently.

There is a range of tools available for assessing learning (irrespective of whether this learning has occurred in formal, non-formal or informal settings). These tools capture different aspects of the outcomes in question, for example being able to reflect practical skills or theoretical reflections in varying degrees. As in formal education, the individual specificity of learning outcomes concerned may require more than one tool, for example a combination of written tests and practical challenges. These learning outcomes may also require tools able to capture specific aspects; for example through practical demonstration, simulation or gathering evidence from past practices. In formal learning specific assessment tools are applied across a large cohort of students and sometimes this makes them difficult to adapt to the needs of a subgroup or an individual.

7.1. Criteria needed to evaluate assessment tools

Before the assessment tool can be selected it is important to look at the learning to be assessed. It is generally accepted that the following criteria need to be considered:

- breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;
- depth of learning required;
- how current or recent are the knowledge, skills and competence;
- sufficiency of information for an assessor to make a judgement;
- authenticity of the evidence being the candidate's own learning outcomes.

Having determined the basis of learning, it is possible to examine the fitness for purpose of different assessment tools. The following criteria need to be considered for each potentially useful assessment tool:

- validity: the tool must measure what it is intended to measure;
- reliability: the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions;
- fairness: the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and assessor bias);
- cognitive range: does the tool enable assessors to judge the breadth and depth of the candidate's learning;
- fitness for purpose of the assessment: ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which it is intended.

7.2. Method classification

According to the 2007 inventory it is possible to classify assessment tools in the following way:

- debate: offers the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate depth of knowledge as well as communicative skills;
- declarative methods: based on individuals' own identification and recording of their competences, normally signed by a third party, to verify the self-assessment;
- interviews can be used to clarify issues raised in documentary evidence presented and/or to review scope and depth of learning;
- observation: extracting evidence of competence from an individual while they are performing everyday tasks at work;
- portfolio method: using a mix of methods and instruments employed in consecutive stages to produce a coherent set of documents or work samples showing an individual's skills and competences in different ways.

It is now possible to extend the classification to encompass some assessment methods that are common but are not easy to classify using the five categories above:

- presentation: can be formal or informal and can be used to check ability to present information in a way appropriate to subject and audience;
- simulation and evidence extracted from work: where individuals are placed in a situation that fulfils all the criteria of the real-life scenario to have their competences assessed;
- tests and examinations: identifying and validating informal and non-formal learning through or with the help of examinations in the formal system.

This is now a useful broad classification and while some categories overlap a little, others may be further distinguished. Some specific validation processes may make use of more than one of these approaches to achieve greater validity, reliability, fairness and fitness for purpose of results. Each of the categories is now expanded to show the range of assessment methods embedded in it. Following this, issues of quality are discussed.

7.2.1. Debate

Candidates can, by taking part in debate, confirm their capacity to sustain a considered argument and demonstrate depth of adequate knowledge of a subject. The debate also offers a context where they can demonstrate communication and social skills.

7.2.2. Declarative methods

Here candidates makes an evidence-based statement about their learning by responding in writing to preset criteria designed to help them be evaluative. The ability to use critical reflection is important and therefore this method is used in conjunction with other methods that have more independent evaluation built in.

7.2.3. Interview

Interviews may be particularly useful in areas where judgement and values are important. Interviews usually accompany other tools for a more complete assessment of a candidate and to allow for commentary and clarification.

7.2.4. Observation

A third party assesses the candidate's behaviour in a particular setting: there is an opportunity to observe real practice. Assessment criteria are set in advance.

This method does not proscribe collaboration with colleagues or fellow learners. Depending on the context, it may be complicated to set up and can be time consuming and costly.

7.2.5. **Portfolio method**

A portfolio is an organised collection of materials that presents and verifies skills and knowledge acquired through experience. It is of particular relevance to validating non-formal and informal learning because it allows the individual candidate to contribute actively to the collection of evidence and also offers a mix of approaches strengthening the overall validity of the process. This is confirmed by the fact that many countries have introduced the portfolio as a central element in their validation approaches.

A portfolio might include documents such as resumés, performance appraisals, references from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues, and photographs of completed work certified by a referee. If self-employed in the past, a candidate might include evidence of running a business using the skills and knowledge being claimed. There is much evidence in the portfolio literature that the selection process included in portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses learners' attention on quality criteria as also documented in the 2007 inventory (as well as its previous versions). In general, we have seen that a good portfolio for validation, in the eyes of assessors, is characterised by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes. The most important risks in the preparation of portfolios identified by the 2007 inventory is when applicants prepare these alone or with little mediation from one tutor. One practice that counters such possible limitations is gathering groups of claimants together specifically to share experience and learning from one another, thus enabling all participants to proceed with greater assurance to preparing their own portfolio for validation. Such sessions can then be complemented with individual tutorials.

One recent trend is use of digital portfolios. Such portfolios offer the possibility to combine text, audio, graphic and video-based presentation of information. They also offer increased capacity to accumulate data that can provide the audience with greater insights into the achievements and successes of the learner. However, digital portfolios carry potential risks, for example the technological novelty of the product can overshadow the purpose of the portfolio and learning to use the technology itself could subsume the learning opportunities of portfolio construction. Further, developing a digital portfolio risks including unnecessary information and material that is not wholly derived from the candidates' own efforts.

Some countries that provide national guidelines, rather than prescribing the methods that should be used for validation, recommend a stage in the process with some form of assessment by a third party (the jury procedure

in France) to ensure greater validity and reliability of portfolios. However, the introduction of third party assessment does not solve all problems. It is still important that quality assurance processes are in place to ensure the consistency and transparency of this third party assessment and ensure equality and fairness in the validation process for all candidates. In general, we have seen that a good portfolio for validation, in the eyes of assessors, is characterised by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes.

7.2.6. **Presentation**

Here a candidate makes a formal presentation to a panel of experts. This form emphasises communicative and analytical skills as well as ability to structure complex information clearly.

7.2.7. **Simulation and evidence extracted from work**

Here a candidate performs in a structured situation modelled on real life. The method allows for testing complex interacting skills sets. It requires clear assessment criteria and may be costly.

There are variations to this popular method, one here a candidate verbally and physically demonstrates their skills. Another variation involves observed role play where actors or peers take on roles to simulate a problem that requires the attention of the candidate.

7.2.8. **Tests and examinations**

In the formal process of validating learning, tests can dominate because of their qualities of wide applicability across populations, low costs and high levels of perceived fairness. In general a test is set so that candidates respond orally or in writing to preset questions (and answers). A test provides direct assessment of specific knowledge and skills. It may advantage candidates with strong written and oral skills and can cause candidate anxiety.

Oral tests may be used to check deep understanding of complex issues and ability to explain them in simple terms.

Many tests employ a multiple choice and true or false format and many well known tests are pretested across populations so that norm referencing of responses is useful. They are considered more objective than many other methods. This type of test is well suited to being completed, marked and graded by computer.

Essays can be used as test items to check the quality and standard of academic writing and use of references, ability to develop a coherent argument,

and to confirm extent, understanding and transferability of knowledge and critical evaluation of ideas. Generally, essay tests are easier to prepare but testing is limited to a narrow sampling of content.

Tests become 'examinations' when the test is applied widely and the quality assurance processes that govern the administration of the test questions and the judging of responses are controlled.

7.2.9. **The form, quality and sources of evidence**

The quality of evidence relates to reliability, validity, authenticity and sufficiency. The last two points are important in validating non-formal and informal learning. In the case of sufficiency, it is not only a question of whether enough evidence has been gathered. Sometimes, in an attempt to ensure rigour, assessors can require too much evidence (extensive triangulation) and thus make the assessment process onerous for candidates and assessors. It is unfair to candidates wanting validation of non-formal or informal learning to expect more than the minimum requirements for learners in formal study.

A more recent development in this field of assessment in validation processes for non-formal or informal learning is use of controlled assessments. The assessment is carried out in conditions where the use of evidence is restricted to certain predefined acceptable forms. In this way fairness of assessments is improved and candidates who, in normal circumstances, would not have the advantage of access to many resources and externality are not discriminated against. The controlled assessment is also indicative of the trend to increase the level of independent assessment which is external to the candidates' normal circle of operation.

7.3. Methods of assessment in different sectors

7.3.1. **Formal education**

Tests and examinations are a popular approach among educational institutions for validating non-formal and informal learning. Many higher education institutions in Europe have set up systems for validating competences acquired through such methods. However, this approach can be problematic for individuals accessing validation as a 'second chance', in particular in those cases when they have dropped out of formal education earlier in life; tests and examinations may represent a barrier to access, as they may be associated with previous negative experiences of education and training.

Declarative approaches are more accessible to groups at a distance from formal education and training and can be used to provide an overview of the competences and skills individuals have gained throughout their 'life-wide' experiences, including those acquired at home, through voluntary or community work and in employment. However, declarative methods rely on individuals' ability to provide a realistic assessment of their own competences. In terms of validity and reliability, the strength of this method depends on clear guidelines and standards for the individual to use and on support or 'mentoring' during the preparation phase.

The portfolio approach aims to overcome the risk of subjectivity by introducing a mix of instruments to assess the individual's competences. It can incorporate assessments by third parties and has recently been popular for validating informal and non-formal learning in some public service professions, such as teachers and trainers. There is much evidence in the portfolio literature that the selection process included in portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses students' attention on quality criteria. Use of observation can be found in the vocational education and training sector, involving extraction of evidence of competences while an individual is performing everyday tasks at work, then judged by a third party. Such an approach is assisted by standards or agreed learning outcomes, which is often the case in vocational education and training. The problem of recruiting and training assessors may not be such an issue in the public/formal education sector (compared to other sectors), as staff can be expected to have a good understanding of the assessment criteria for each qualification.

7.3.2. **Private sector organisations**

The need for partnership-working, consultation and sharing experiences is clear for private sector organisations involved in validation. This is all the more important since the place of validation in company business and training plans will always evolve according to the needs of the organisations. Validation is part of broader organisational processes, including company assessment and training agendas.

Stakeholders involved in validation from this sector are generally unfamiliar with education standards and procedures. Staff training within the sector, or collaboration with partners with the relevant experience and expertise, may help to ensure greater success of their initiatives. It seems that declarative and portfolio methods are the most prevalent in the private sector, although the research has also uncovered examples of the use of tests. The portfolio method can also be used in the private sector, for instance by social partners

delivering non-formal training. Declarative and portfolio methods can be used to conduct a summative or formative assessment of the validation beneficiary and are widely employed within the private sector. Summative assessments can help to inform the career development of an individual and may serve as evidence to support career progression and salary increases, while formative assessments can help employers/employees to identify skills gaps and training needs. These methods are seen as a cost-effective and flexible approach. In particular, employees who undertake validation in addition to their daily job are likely to appreciate the possibility to prepare their validation 'application' at a pace that suits their own circumstances and abilities.

7.3.3. **The voluntary sector**

The predominant methodologies appear to be declarative methods and the portfolio method. They represent cost-effective, flexible approaches to the validation, which suit the needs of both the beneficiaries and the voluntary sector organisations. Declarative and portfolio methods also offer a more accessible approach for certain target groups, who may be unaccustomed to, or have had previous negative experiences in, a formal education environment. One of the weaknesses associated with declarative and portfolio methods in the voluntary sector is that it may be difficult to link them to national standards, qualifications and frameworks. It may also be more difficult for providers, without appropriate training, to design and deliver validation initiatives which are linked to them. Moreover, declarative and portfolio methods rely on significant input from the individual beneficiary. For beneficiaries to link their learning successfully to formal standards or qualification frameworks, it is likely that a high level of support would be required by them, which is difficult for voluntary sector organisations to provide due to staffing and resource constraints.

CHAPTER 8

Validation practitioners

Guidelines

Effective operation of validation processes depends fundamentally on the professional activity of counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. The preparation and continuous training of these people is critically important.

Networking that enables sharing experiences and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners.

Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support the individuals seeking validation.

In this chapter the roles, skills and training of validation practitioners are discussed. These practitioners cover all aspects of validation and include those that offer information, advice and guidance (orientation), those that carry out assessment, the external observers of the process, the managers of assessment centres/procedures and a range of other stakeholders that have an important but less direct role in the validation process. These five groups of practitioners are evident in validation systems internationally. It is not possible to say that each of these five groups are distinct from one another; in practice one person or one kind of body can have roles that cross this classification.

The work of validation practitioners is clearly decisive in determining the quality and trust in process outcomes. It is, therefore, not surprising that much has been written on the training and professional development of these people. It is not quite so obvious why the roles of the different kinds of practitioners are not referenced in documentation about validation processes. For example the inventory of validation practices has few references. There are possibly two reasons for this: it is possible that the practitioners aim to be 'invisible facilitators' and the effects of their combined work is the efficient operation of validation that leads to positive outcomes for individuals; and the roles of practitioners can vary in scope and depth so that it is difficult to generalise about their contribution.

The European inventory of practice, however, makes the point that validation processes need to ensure that there is interaction between practitioners within a single validation process and between practitioners and other stakeholders in the validation process.

Each validation process is unique and the roles of the practitioners can vary from candidate to candidate: it is likely that the experience that practitioners gain from different candidates is a very important asset. It follows that

interactivity between professionals in a validation centre through a community of practice is likely to contribute significantly to the development of individuals and to the more effective working of the whole system.

8.1. Counsellors

There is a strong conviction among national experts that counselling individuals and providing information, advice and guidance is crucial to validation success. Starting with the process of reaching out to engage potential candidates for validation, then preparing the candidate for assessment, the role continues by guiding the candidate after the assessment decision.

In these guidelines the assessment stage is treated as separate from the orientation stage. In fact, part of the role of the counsellor is often to work with the candidate to appraise the breadth and depth of evidence of learning in relation to assessment criteria/standards. Some would refer to this as competence mapping. To carry out this process the counsellor has to have a clear understanding of the standards involved.

The counsellor also has to prepare candidates for the assessment process, informing them of procedures, how to present evidence of learning, respond to questions, expectations in terms of behaviour, possible outcomes and so on. This also requires the counsellor to have a thorough knowledge of the assessment process.

The distinctive part of the counsellors' role is their independence from the actual assessment process for an individual and their ability to offer impartial but useful advice.

To fulfil this role counsellors should have:

- a thorough knowledge of the education system (orientation);
- a thorough knowledge of the validation process (information);
- an understanding of the labour market (expected standards and post assessment advice);
- a list of contacts (experts) to answer specific technical questions (social partners and other sector experts).

8.2. Assessors

The job of an assessor is to seek and review evidence of an individual's learning and judge what meets or does not meet specific standards. Assessors

must be familiar with the standards and the potentially useful assessment methods that might be used to reference evidence against standards.

Assessors should be acknowledged as professionals in their sector, as this leads to trust and credibility in the assessment process itself. The authenticity of the assessment situation is likely to be improved when sectoral experts can direct the use of an assessment instrument or judge the outcomes of its use.

Assessors should not be linked to the candidate or their work or social life in any way.

To fulfil this role assessors must:

- be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability);
- have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest);
- be familiar with different assessment methodologies;
- be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates;
- be committed to provide feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems);
- be trained in assessment and validation processes and be knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms.

8.3. Process managers

The third key group of practitioners are the managers of the validation process. Their function is to manage the process, the people and possibly a physical or virtual centre where candidates, counsellors and assessors come together. Process managers can have responsibilities for the public profile of the validation centre, for ensuring equality of access to validation, managing an appeals process and ensuring external review.

One key role is financial management of the process. Whether privately or publicly funded, the task of minimising costs and creating a sustainable operation is challenging.

8.4. External observers

External observers provide a quality check on validation procedures, training of practitioners and outcomes for candidates. Counsellors and the assessors

have distinct roles when engaged with the candidate and the external observer reflects on the maintenance of separation of these roles.

In some settings the external observer is an advisor to counsellors and assessors and helps them to learn from their experience and that of others.

The external observer may have a role in reviewing the efficiency of the process and checking that resource use is optimised.

External observers should:

- not necessarily be expert in the given profession/activity;
- be trained in quality assurance procedures;
- not necessarily have regular or systematic presence;
- be considered as a source of advice;
- operate as an external auditor.

8.5. Interested stakeholders

It is not possible to focus on the practitioners involved in validation processes without referring to a group of supporting stakeholders who do not manage, counsel, assess or manage centres. These stakeholders have an interest in the successful operation of validation and they include:

- responsible people in public bodies that fund the process;
- responsible people in public bodies that have agreed a policy for validation;
- managers of human resources for private companies;
- community leaders that seek engagement of groups of individuals in learning and working;
- education services in the formal sector;
- charities that are donors.

These stakeholders often serve on advisory committees within centres and are important links to the various communities served by validation outcomes.

CHAPTER 9

Summary of principles and guidelines

9.1. The fundamental principles underpinning validation

- Validation must be voluntary.
- The privacy of individuals should be respected.
- Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.
- Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.
- Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals.
- Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
- The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
- Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation.
- The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
- The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

9.2. The guidelines

Effective practices: the European perspective

The practice of validating informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the European principles for quality assurance of education and training, and the recommendation for a European quality assurance reference framework for VET ([29]).

European cooperation in validation should be further developed, in particular by regularly updating and improving these guidelines and the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

European level tools and frameworks (European qualifications framework, Europass, European credit systems, etc.) could be used to promote validation and to improve comparability and transparency of the outcomes of validation processes and so build trust across national boundaries.

([29]) European Commission. *Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training*. Brussels: European Commission, 2008. (COM(2008) 179 final). Available from Internet: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0179:FIN:EN:PDF [cited 3.2.2009].

Effective practice: the national perspective

Validation of non-formal and informal learning should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system.

The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the 'identification' of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part lifelong learning.

Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework).

The entitlement to validation could be considered in cases where non-formal and informal learning is seen as a normal route to a qualification, parallel to formal education and training.

The development of national qualifications frameworks could be used as an opportunity to integrate validation systematically into qualifications systems.

The introduction of validation as an integral part of a national qualifications framework could be linked to the need to improve access to, progression within and transfer of qualifications.

The sustainability and coherence of national systems of validation should be supported by regular cost-benefit analysis.

Effective practice: the organisational perspective

Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and voluntary organisations are key stakeholders in providing opportunities to validate non-formal and informal learning.

Validating non-formal and informal learning poses challenges to formal education in terms of the range of learning that can be validated and how this process can be integrated into the formal curriculum and its assessment.

There are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems to document the knowledge, skills and competences of employees.

Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with the legitimate interests of individual employees.

The adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative and summative validation.

The third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as assist their transfer to other settings.

The functions of the different bodies involved in validation require coordination through an institutional framework.

The institutional route to validation and certification should not lead to certificates that are seen as of different status on the basis of the route taken to achieve them.

Effective practice: the individual

The centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved in validation should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual.

Everyone should have access to validation and the emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important.

The multiple stage process of validation offers individuals many opportunities for deciding about the future direction of their validation. Decision-making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.

Effective practice: validation process structure

The three processes of orientation, assessment and external audit can be used to evaluate existing validation procedures and support the development of new validation procedures.

Effective practice: the methods

Methods of validating non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools that are used in assessing formal learning.

When used for validation, tools have to be adopted, combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning.

Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose.

Effective practice: validation practitioners

Effective operation of validation processes depends fundamentally on professional input by counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. The preparation and continuous training of these people is critically important.

Networking that enables experience sharing and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners.

Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support individuals seeking validation.

ANNEX 1

Glossary of terms

All of the terms below have been negotiated with representatives across Member States and are part of the Cedefop multilingual glossary. This publication has also drawn on work carried out by the OECD and reported in *Qualifications Systems – bridges to lifelong learning, OECD, Paris, 2007*.

Assessment of learning outcomes

The process of appraising knowledge, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria, specifying learning methods and expectations. Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification.

Certificate

An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following a standard assessment procedure.

Certification of learning outcomes

The process of formally attesting that knowledge, skills and/or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard. Certification results in the issue of a certificate, diploma or title.

Formal learning

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

Formative assessment

A two-way reflective process between a teacher/assessor and learner to promote learning.

Informal learning

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is mostly unintentional from the learner's perspective.

Key competences

The sum of skills (basic skills and new basic skills) needed to develop in contemporary knowledge society. The European Commission sets out the eight key competences:

- communication in the mother tongue;
- communication in foreign languages;
- competences in maths, science and technology;
- digital competence;
- learning to learn;
- interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence;
- entrepreneurship;
- cultural expression.

Learning

A process by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences.

Learning outcomes

The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process.

Lifelong learning

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, and which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

Life-wide learning

Learning, either formal, non-formal or informal, that takes place across the full range of life activities (personal, social or professional) and at any stage.

Non-formal learning

Learning which is embedded in planned activities not always explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.

Qualification

The term qualification covers different aspects:

- formal qualification: the formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade (OECD);
- job requirements: the knowledge, aptitudes and skills required to perform the specific tasks attached to a particular work position (ILO);
- personal attributes: the sum of knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences acquired by an individual in formal, non-formal and/or informal settings.

Qualifications framework

An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications (e.g. at national or sectoral level) according to a set of criteria (e.g. using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes.

Qualifications system

A system which provides rules governing all aspects of education and training activities leading to recognition of learning outcomes at national or sectoral level, including:

- definition of qualification policy, training design and implementation, institutional arrangements, funding, quality assurance;
- assessment, validation and certification of learning outcomes;
- mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

Recognition of learning outcomes

- formal recognition: the process of granting official status to skills and competences:
  - through the award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles);
  - through the grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences;

  and/or
- social recognition: the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders.

Standard (or referential)

Expectation, obligation, requirement or norm expected. It is possible to distinguish between:

- educational standard refers to the statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements as well as resources required to meet the learning objectives;
- occupational standard refers to the statements of the activities and tasks

related to – or to the knowledge, skills and understanding needed for – a specific job;
- assessment standard refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed, the level of performance to be achieved by the individual assessed and the methodology used);
- validation standard refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed, the assessment methodology used, as well as the level of performance to be reached;
- certification standard refers to the statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.

Summative assessment

The process of assessing (or evaluating) a learner's achievement of specific knowledge, skills and competence at a particular time.

Validation of learning outcomes

The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of a validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.

ANNEX 2

Evaluation checklists

This annex offers tools for evaluating the validation processes as they are applied to non-formal and informal learning in any setting. The tools have been developed by the peer learning cluster on the recognition of learning outcomes and are based mainly on discussions in the peer learning activity held in Brussels (January 2007).

The first table sets out some general areas that underpin all validation processes. In the second table the range of components of good orientation processes are defined. The components of an assessment (or evaluation) process makes up the third table. No good quality assurance process is complete without some independent check of procedures; the components of such an independent check is outlined in the final table.

The components in each of the tables have been grouped under four headings:

- conditions required: this covers the way the context of the process is created and maintained for optimum performance;
- knowledge requirements: what practitioners need to know;
- practice requirement: what has to happen;
- expected outcomes: where the process leaves the candidate and what comes next.

Table 4. **Validation checklist: underpinning quality indicators for validation practices**

Underpinning ideas	Why they are important
Reliability	The validation process must lead to trusted results. If the settings for learning and validation vary greatly, then the process of validation must allow for these differences; should the process be repeated then the outcome must be the same.
Validity	The evidence documented for an individual must be directly related to the standards being used for validation. The evidence must not be allowed to shift the understanding of the standards.
Safety, security and confidentiality	Initial and continuing engagement with the validation process from identification through to certification must not be compromised by lack of trust and consequential deterioration in motivation to proceed.

Underpinning ideas	Why they are important
Standards/referential	These are the basis of measuring learning outcomes; they must exist in a clear and unambiguous form that has the confidence of the key stakeholders. The standards are also an 'organiser' for the documentation phase. Without standards the validation process cannot pass the identification of learning stage.
Sustainability	Validation processes can be resource intensive, especially for individuals who present themselves for validation. Trust in validation also depends on the time the process has been operating and the way it is known and understood in communities. Thus sustainability is a key consideration.
Visibility/transparency	The way the assessment and validation process operates must generate trust for the judgements to have meaning. Transparency and visibility of the validation is one of the fundamental features supporting trust. The transparency of using established standards is particularly important.
Fitness for purpose	There are many methods for judging the level and sufficiency of evidence of learning. Not only should any chosen method be suited to the form of the learning but methods in combination should create a sensitive and trustworthy toolbox of methods of assessing learning.
Cost-efficiency	It is generally the case that validation processes for non-formal and informal learning do not have the benefit of large scale application (large cohorts of learning being assessed in similar ways). Therefore economies of scale are limited and costs need to be measured in relation to the expected returns to the stakeholders concerned.

Table 5. **Validation checklist: general conditions, practical features, professional requirement and outcome expectation**

		Components	Explanatory notes
General conditions essential for validating non-formal and informal learning	Orientation phase	Formative process	The primary purpose of orientation is to shape the subsequent assessment stage so that the outcome is optimal for the individual.
		Encouraging psychology	Personal motivation will need to be sustained with encouragement of all participants and the general approach which is taken.
		Engaging individuals and providing access	The initial interactions that overcome obstacles to participation are open and motivating (outreach). The procedures minimise potential obstacles (e.g. financial, psychological).
		Impartiality	The interests of the individual are not compromised by the interests of those managing validation and other stakeholders (no conflict of interest).

		Components	Explanatory notes
General conditions essential for validating non-formal and informal learning	Orientation phase	Visibility of process	Nothing should be hidden. There should be no surprises arising from poor information.
		Visibility for individuals	Printed and spoken information should be structured from the viewpoint of the learner.
		Ethical behaviour	Those who manage orientation must not enter into the personal deliberations of the individual beyond the point which makes the individual vulnerable or uncomfortable.
		Appeal procedure	Even a fair system will lead to issues for individuals in specific contexts: there should always be an opening for the individual to question decisions.
		Defining role of stakeholders	Everyone involved should understand the role of others.
		Voluntary	There should be no compulsion to continue the process in specific ways.
		Owned by individual	All decisions should be made by the individual.
		Flexible	Response to the changing position of the individual should be the norm, therefore there needs to be as few fixed procedures as possible, some may be inevitable.
		Trust	Orientation phase has to generate: · trust in the process and those managing it by the individual; · trust by the other managers of the process in the individual; · trust in the process by those using the outcomes of validation.
	Assessment phase	Privacy and confidentiality	The outcomes of assessment are restricted to the individual and any partners doing the assessment.
		Formative	It is likely that the assessment stage itself will have a formative effect on the individual. This should be generally a positive experience.
		Encouraging psychology	Personal motivation will need to be sustained with encouragement of all participants and the general approach which is taken.
		Access	The choice of assessment tools should be appropriate to the knowledge, skills and competence of the individual (e.g. use ICT only when the candidate is comfortable with computer techniques).
		Impartiality	Unless the conditions engender an objective approach the fairness of the assessment may be compromised.

		Components	Explanatory notes
General conditions essential for validating non-formal and informal learning	Assessment phase	Visibility of process	Nothing should be hidden. There should be no surprises in the assessment procedure.
		Visibility for individuals	All assessment information and procedures should be structured from the viewpoint of the learner.
		Ethical behaviour	Those who make assessments must not enter into the personal deliberations of the individual beyond the point which makes the individual vulnerable or uncomfortable.
		Appeal procedure	It should be possible to challenge decisions on the outcome of assessment from the viewpoint of procedure or fairness.
		Defining role of stakeholders	The individual should know the roles of all participants in the assessment process.
		Trust	Where the expertise and fairness of the assessors is questionable and procedures are perceived as biased, the outcome of assessment will be perceived as having less value (by the individual and other users).
		Focused on the individual	Within the limitations of agreed procedures the assessment process should focus entirely on the written, spoken and other evidence provided for the assessment of the individual.
		Voluntary	While the assessment process may have fixed procedures the individual should be aware that participation in assessment is voluntary.
Practical features of validation of non-formal informal learning	Orientation phase	Information	A full range of accessible information (covering the process requirements) needs to be available to potential candidates.
		Guidance and counselling	These provide important support for self-reflection by the candidate on the learning to be validated and the process of validating it. Some would see guidance and counselling as a counterpart to information. The two components form the basis of the orientation process.
		Privacy and confidentiality	The whole orientation process needs to be private for the individual if self reflection and trust are to be optimal.
		Personal approach	To ensure that the future assessment process is appropriate and individuals remain motivated, they should have access to one or more individuals who are knowledgeable about the position of the candidate and skilled in enabling the assessment process to operate in the individual's interests.

		Components	Explanatory notes
Practical features of validation of non-formal informal learning	Orientation phase	User-friendly	If a process is not user-friendly it is likely to damage self-confidence, motivation and raise other barriers to access.
		Listening	With the individual at the heart of the process, facilitators need to engender a listening culture over and above an expert-information giving one.
		Fairness	Information, guidance and counselling needs to ensure fair treatment of individuals as unfair approaches will undermine access, self reflection on learning and trust.
	Assessment phase	Standards/ referential	Assessment instruments require clear criteria so that users can make judgements about the validity and the sufficiency of learning. Assessment criteria are often based on more generic standards such as occupational standards. The validation process itself is sometimes governed by criteria for their operation. These are often based on educational standards.
		Qualified assessor	A qualified assessor has knowledge and experience of standards, assessment criteria and assessment instruments as well as some knowledge of the validation process.
		Assessment methods	A range of methods (with their associated standards) should be available to tailor to the particular circumstances of a validation. These methods should result in valid and reliable outcomes.
		Self assessment	The central role of the individual means that full use is made of the potential of self assessment (against assessment criteria and standards) by the candidate (e.g. validity and sufficiency of documentation for assessment).
		Further orientation	Assessment is a summative and formative process and further orientation may result from the assessment process.
		Transparency	Assessment instruments should hold no secrets. Their structure and use should be obvious to candidates.
		Authenticity	In addition to valid and reliable outcomes, assessment instruments should be used in assessment situations that provide, as far as possible, a true reflection of the learning and its context.
		Stakeholder involvement	The validity and authenticity of assessment are enhanced with the involvement of the stakeholders who use qualifications and standards. These people (employers and other providers and recruiters) should be involved in assessment processes.

		Components	Explanatory notes
Practical features of validation of non-formal informal learning	Assessment phase	Implementation of the assessment instruments	All the conditions for the assessment have to be in favour of a reliable process (e.g. the structure of the documentation provided has to be clear; the assessment environment should not be distractive).
		Assessment criteria	Standards, such as those defining occupations, are used for a range of purposes. It is necessary to tailor them for specific use in assessment through the creation of assessment criteria.
		Communication	Candidates require information about assessment processes and when and where they will be carried out.
		Appeal procedure	A clearly defined process should be available.
Knowledge requirement for professionals	Orientation phase	Education system	Validation process will draw on the previous formal education and training of the individual and the outcomes may directly link to the system, therefore knowledge of the system is essential.
		Validation system	From motivation of individuals to seek validation through to post assessment possibilities, the rules and procedures of the whole process need to be clear. Knowledge of links to other validation systems is also important.
		Labour markets	Progression in the labour market is a common desirable outcome from the validation process. Knowledge of local and national conditions is important.
		Qualifications	The qualifications available to individuals can present a complex picture. Knowledge of qualification requirements, currency and potential progression routes related to main qualification needs to be up to date.
		Legal provision	The legal foundations of the validation process and individual entitlements need to be understood by managers of the validation process.
		Roles of other stakeholders	The individual is at the centre but the validation process could involve others in the documentation process; it will involve others in the assessment stage and, if certification follows, other agencies will be involved. The smooth operation of validation depends on effective cooperation by different stakeholders, therefore good knowledge of their roles is required.
	Assessment phase	Assessment methods	The range of possible methods and their fitness for purpose for the individual situation needs to be understood.

		Components	Explanatory notes
Knowledge requirement for professionals	Assessment phase	Validation process	From motivation of individuals to seek validation to post assessment possibilities, the rules and procedures of the whole process needs to be clear. Knowledge of links to other validation systems is also important.
		Qualification	Where assessment can lead to certification for a particular qualification level, the knowledge of qualification requirements, currency and potential progression routes related to main qualification is critical and needs to be up to date.
Expected outcomes of validation of non-formal informal learning	Orientation phase	Clear outcome for the individual	The outcome of the validation process should be unambiguous and signal all possible further actions required of the individual.
		Time and effort requirements	Within the constraints of a flexible process there should be clear statements about stages, tasks and time scales expected during the process.
		Documentation of process	There should be an up-to-date record of the validation process, decisions taken and outcomes that is accessible to all stakeholders that need to advance the interests of the individual.
	Assessment phase	Validation outcome	The result of assessment should be communicated without delay and with the option of further orientation.
		Certification	The way the outcome of the validation process leads to a qualification for the individual should be clear.
		Record of the individual achievement	Certification may follow assessment; however a record of the process and its outcome is useful for candidates.
		Satisfaction, further orientation	Following an assessment process the individual may wish to provide feedback on the validation process or seek further orientation.
		Qualified human resources	Not all successful validation outcomes lead to certification and the social recognition arising from validation may be a required outcome for some individuals.

Table 6. **Validation checklist: auditing the process**

		Explanatory notes
Conditions required	External	The external function is designed to build trust in the process by users of the validation process and its outcomes. There will always be tension for those involved in validation work between arrangements and assessments of validation that are user friendly and the impartial judgements required by assessment criteria.
	Independent	A review of processes and outcomes should be independent of all interests in the validation processes. It is possible for external reviewers to be involved with an individual, a sector, an institution or company in some way.
	Expert knowledge	Reviewers should be experienced in validation processes.
	Regular	The process of review should be set to prescribed time scales.
	Transparent	All review criteria and processes should be open for scrutiny.
	Frame of reference	Reviews may not cover all aspects of a validation processes the focus of review should be explicit.
	Individual focus	While the review is of the overall arrangements for validation, the procedure for review should take a viewpoint of a candidate for validation whenever possible.
Knowledge requirements	Frame of reference	The focus of review should be understood by reviewers. Reviewers should be knowledgeable about validation systems.
Practice requirement	Whole or partial review	Attention should focus on aspects of validation that are under review.
	Evidence base	Information about all the orientation and assessment practices relevant to the review should be available and all judgement should be based on this evidence.
	Analytical	The review should aim to be analytical and not descriptive of the validation processes. The analysis should be targeted at creating opportunities for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes.
	Statistical part	The review should include numerical data on, for example, candidate numbers, duration of orientation and assessment, outcomes.
	Expert part	Judgements based on qualitative evidence such as candidate and assessor feedback.
	Style of audit	The formative aspect of validation could be the guide to the style of review with a low profile and interactive style rather than a top down inspection style.
Expected outcomes	Recommendations to improve system	The formative approach would lead to a sense of self improvement for the validation centre experts and reports could offer further suggestions for improvements to procedures and assessment.

ANNEX 3

Countries participating in the peer learning cluster

Austria (from 2008)
Belgium (Flanders, from 2007)
Belgium (Wallonia)
Bulgaria
Czech Republic
Denmark
Estonia
Finland
France
Germany (from 2008)
Greece (from 2008)
Hungary
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Luxembourg
Malta
Netherlands
Norway (from 2007)
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Spain
Sweden
Turkey
UK (Scotland)

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EUROPEAN GUIDELINES

for validating non-formal and informal learning

These European guidelines on validating non-formal and informal learning result from more than two years' cooperation between European countries in the cluster on recognition of learning outcomes and the Education and training 2010 process. While referring to the common European principles on identifying and validating nonformal and informal learning, adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2004, these guidelines provide expert advice to be used voluntarily by stakeholders at national and local levels. The aim is to contribute to developing diverse and high quality, cost efficient validation approaches in Europe, thus supporting lifelong and lifewide learning.

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CEDEFOP | European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Europe 123, 570 01 Thessaloniki (Pylea), GREECE
Postal address: PO Box 22427, 551 02 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
E-mail: info@cedefop.europa.eu
www.cedefop.europa.eu

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