



European inventory on  
validation of non-formal and  
informal learning – 2016 update  
Synthesis report





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# Foreword

There is a strong consensus on the benefits of making more visible those skills and competences that people have gained through life and work experience. Individuals should be able to demonstrate what they have learned in all walks of life, so that this is valued and used in their career and for further education and training prospects.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning can make a major contribution to the EU's ambition of achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, as set by the Europe 2020 strategy. It can make a significant difference in better matching skills and labour demand, promoting transferability of skills between companies and sectors and supporting mobility across the European labour market. It can also contribute to fighting social exclusion by providing a way for early school leavers, the unemployed and others at risk, particularly low-skilled adults, to improve their employability.

The European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning is a fundamental support to implementing the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The recommendation asks Member States to establish validation arrangements by 2018, allowing individuals to identify, document, assess and certify their skills to obtain a qualification (or parts of it). The inventory is closely linked to the European guidelines on validation which provide policy and practical advice to Member States and stakeholders on implementing validation.

The 2016 update of the inventory provides a unique record of how validation is being used at national, regional and local levels in Europe. It examines the current situation and developments for 33 European countries since the 2014 update, illustrated by good practice examples; there are also thematic analyses of key issues relating to the design and implementation of validation initiatives. It is the end result of a two-year process and is based on the work of a large network of national experts, extensive review of documents, and interviews with key stakeholders.

These reports aim to encourage more dialogue between the different stakeholders in developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to support Member States so that more learners and workers acquire and make visible new skills to support their career and further learning, so enhancing their quality of life.

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# Executive summary

## Background and context

The aim of this synthesis report is to present the current situation in validation of non-formal and informal learning ('validation') in Europe and to report on progress towards the 2012 Council recommendation on validation (Council of the European Union, 2012). It has been prepared at a time when the need to increase workforce employability and human capital is high on the policy agenda at European and national levels. The *New skills agenda for Europe* <sup>(1)</sup> aims to make better use of available skills and equip people with the new ones needed to help them find quality jobs and improve their life chances. Under the skills agenda, the proposed *Upskilling pathways* for low-skilled adults <sup>(2)</sup> promotes opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2016).

Validation aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible socially, in the labour market or in the education system, through its identification, documentation, assessment and certification. It has the potential to contribute to achieving the goals set by the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission, 2010) as a tool for better matching skills and labour demand, supporting mobility across sectors and countries and fighting social exclusion.

The outcomes of the 2016 inventory provide a good indication of the validation landscape across Europe and how this compares to the aims set out in the 2012 Council recommendation. Alongside the revised European guidelines on validation (Cedefop, 2015), the 2016 inventory serves as a tool to identify areas needing further attention in the coming years. Nevertheless, this report makes no attempt to describe 'one single route' to producing successful validation systems. Taking the Council recommendation as point of reference, national, regional and/or local circumstances must be taken into account when establishing validation arrangements and designing well-performing systems.

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(<sup>1</sup>) The European Commission's agenda for new skills and jobs:  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=958> [accessed 3.2.2017].

(<sup>2</sup>) The Education Council of 21 November 2016 reached a political agreement on the text of the proposal for a Council recommendation on establishing a skills guarantee, with the name changed to *Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults*.  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224&langId=en> [accessed 3.2.2017].

## Method

This synthesis report <sup>(3)</sup> forms part of the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (the European inventory). It is accompanied by 36 country reports <sup>(4)</sup> and four thematic reports <sup>(5)</sup>. The synthesis is primarily based on analysis of the data collected through a ‘country fiche database’, completed by country experts, providing data according to a set of standardised indicators.

Data were collected by learning sector and subsector, and included both multiple choice and single response questions on:

- (a) the country situation as a whole;
- (b) education sector, divided into:
  - (i) general education (GE);
  - (ii) initial vocational education and training (IVET);
  - (iii) continuing vocational education and training (CVET);
  - (iv) adult education (AE);
  - (v) higher education (HE);
- (c) the labour market; and
- (d) the third sector.

## Progress towards the Council recommendation

Table 1 provides information on a series of indicators on 10 principles outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation on validation (Council of the European Union, 2012). Each of the 10 principles has been classified in relation to their current position. The level of development is expressed by the number of countries in each category as determined by the experts reporting on each country. The Council recommendation is not prescriptive regarding how progress or achievement should be measured in relation to the principles it outlines. The information provided is one possible interpretation of the degree

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<sup>(3)</sup> The contents of this synthesis report – with country reports and fiches – cannot necessarily be taken to reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission, Cedefop, the EQF advisory group members or the members of the external quality assurance panel. Neither the European Commission nor any person/organisation acting on behalf of the Commission is responsible for the use which might be made of any information contained in this report.

<sup>(4)</sup> EU-28, EEA EFTA countries, Switzerland and Turkey.

<sup>(5)</sup> Validation and open educational resources; Funding validation; Validation in the care and youth work sectors; Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

of development on these principles, based on available information. It should not be read as a final assessment of the state of development in achieving the recommendation. The information provided refers only to the education sector and subsectors, except for indicators on the national qualifications frameworks (NQF) and skills audits (referring also to other sectors, such as the labour market and third sector).

**Table 1. Current position and degree of progress in relation to the recommendation principles**

<b>Recommendation principle</b>	<b>Level of development</b>
Validation arrangements in place	High
Information, advice and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures	High
Guidance and counselling is readily accessible	High
Links to NQF and in line with EQF	High
Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	High
Transparent quality assurance measures (QA) are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment	High
Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)	Medium
Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within six months of an identified need	Medium
Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors	Low
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	Low

*Source:* 2016 European inventory country fiches.

Classifying the principles into three groups (low, medium and high) suggests that principles where efforts should be prioritised are provision for professional development of staff and prioritisation of disadvantaged groups. Progress on these has been modest compared to 2014 and they continue to be among the principles where fewer countries are in line with the 2012 Council recommendation principle.

Attention should also be given to the transparency of quality assurance measures, synergies with credit transfer systems, and skills audits. The position on the other principles is more advanced.

## Key findings

### **Validation arrangements are planned or in place in all 36 European countries covered by the 2016 inventory <sup>(6)</sup>**

National approaches to setting up these arrangements vary; some countries take a national approach, while others focus on specific sectors. Opportunities for validation exist across the different sectors of education and extend into the labour market and third sector to varying degrees.

### **Greater attention has been paid to ensuring coordinating institutions are in place at national levels**

The variety of validation arrangements requires coordination across sectors. Twenty countries <sup>(7)</sup> have established national mechanisms (such as institution coordinating good practices and principles to promote consistency) to coordinate validation across the broad sectors of education, labour market and the third sector. In the education sector, 32 countries have an institution in charge of coordinating validation at national level in at least one subsector where validation exists. These institutions are typically government or national organisations, such as agencies or awarding organisations. However, they do not always coordinate validation across all education subsectors with validation; certain subsectors may be overseen by other stakeholders. Nonetheless, progress achieved represents significant advances in coordinating validation since 2014.

### **Roles of different stakeholders reflect the specificities of the different sectors**

Various institutions and stakeholders have responsibility for different aspects of validation in the education sector. In addition to coordination, government organisations tend to be involved in awareness raising and promotion, the

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<sup>(6)</sup> Arrangements are in place in at least one subsector of education in all countries, except in Croatia, where a system for validation is under development.

<sup>(7)</sup> Belgium-Flemish Community, Belgium-French Community, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.



design of national strategies, and the design of quality assurance mechanisms. Raising awareness involves a range of stakeholders, including training providers, employer organisations and individual employers, national organisations, public employment services (PES), chambers and youth organisations. Training providers are key providers of information, advice and guidance (IAG) and delivery, and the identification, documentation and assessment stages of validation.

A range of stakeholders is also involved in the labour market, including national organisations, government organisations and education and training providers. This suggests that validation in this sector is more 'embedded' in the national context than in the third sector, where there is a predominance of civil society and youth organisations and less involvement from other stakeholders.

### **Most countries have multiple sources of funding**

While a small number of countries have a single source of funding for validation, most have multiple sources. After national public funding, individual funding is the second most common source in all sectors and subsectors, except the third sector. Private funding sources were reported to have a limited role, suggesting that there is room for improvement in engaging the private sector (employers) and other stakeholders (social partners) in supporting validation arrangements financially. The thematic report on funding validation (Cedefop, 2016c), produced for the 2016 inventory, explores this topic in greater depth.

### **Validation is mostly used for awarding parts of qualifications, credits, gaining exemptions and accessing educational programmes**

It is most common that these arrangements of validation allow individuals to obtain parts of qualifications, normally through credits and exemptions. Validation is also used to grant access to formal education. The award of other types of non-formal qualifications/certificates and the development of training specifications are less common outcomes.

### **Links between validation and the NQF have increased**

Since 2010, there has been a marked increase in the number of countries where learning recognised through validation can be used to access formal education or to acquire credits or (part of) qualifications linked to the NQF. There is a link between validation arrangements and the NQF in at least one sector (education sector, labour market, third sector) in 31 countries.

Within education, there is a link between validation and the NQF in at least one subsector in 28 countries (78%). Validation in this sector is mostly used to acquire modules or part of a qualification. The link between validation and the NQF is more common in initial vocational education and training (IVET), continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and higher education than it is in adult or general education. Labour market validation initiatives are linked to the NQF in 80% of the countries where there are validation arrangements, while in the third sector very few countries were reported to have validation arrangements linked to formal education.

### **Most countries are using the same standards for validation as for formal education**

Three quarters of countries use exactly the same standards for validation in at least one subsector of education as those used in the formal education system. In 12 of these countries the standards used for validation are the same as those used in formal education in all subsectors. Further, in all education subsectors except IVET, there is a higher share of countries that do not differentiate between the certificates obtained through validation and those obtained via formal education than countries where there is such a difference.

### **Progress is needed to reach disadvantaged groups**

There is potential for validation arrangements to reach a wider range of users. Opportunities are reaching the low-qualified and low-skilled jobseekers, but more is needed to reach disadvantaged groups. At the moment, disadvantaged groups, including low-skilled individuals, early school leavers, jobseekers/unemployed, individuals at risk of unemployment, older workers, migrants/refugees and people with disabilities, benefit least from validation.

### **Data on take-up remain limited**

Data available on the take-up of validation remain limited across all sectors and not fully representative of the validation initiatives in the countries covered by the 2016 inventory. Where data are available, an upwards trend can be observed.

The development of comprehensive monitoring systems for validating non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) is still at an early stage across Europe and it is not yet a clear national priority for most countries.

### **Information, advice and guidance is available in most countries but is not always a requirement**

All countries with validation arrangements have provision for IAG in at least one education subsector. Six countries were reported to have IAG provision in a single subsector; in other countries, IAG is available for between two and five of the subsectors. IAG is most commonly offered in IVET, CVET and higher education. The aspect most commonly covered is the process of validation itself.

### **The four phases of validation are interconnected**

Identification, documentation, assessment and certification are interconnected as outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation on validation. All four validation stages are used in all sectors but in different combinations. Certification is comparatively less common in the third sector, general and adult education than in other sectors. The data show that in education, all four stages of validation are being used in one or more subsectors in most countries. The most commonly used stages in general education, IVET and CVET are assessment and certification. Documentation is the most commonly used stage in adult and higher education. In the labour market, validation incorporates a certification stage in 13 countries. Only seven countries incorporate certification in the third sector.

### **Most validation arrangements use a combination of methods**

Commonly used methods are portfolios, a combination of methods, and tests and examinations. The popularity of methods varies by subsector and further research into this could provide useful information for validation practitioners. The use of standardised tools is not widespread. Where such tools are used, they tend to be developed at national level, rather than regional.

### **Countries are creating specific quality assurance mechanisms for validation**

There is increasing movement towards provision of some specific form of quality assurance for validation. This might be through a compulsory framework or non-compulsory guidelines specifically for validation. The number of countries which were reported to have in place quality assurance frameworks specific to validation has doubled between 2014 and 2016. Quality assurance for validation is often provided through guidelines/codes, or is covered through an existing quality assurance framework. An important strength of the quality assurance arrangements in place is consistency, as quality procedures tend to be similar across institutions.

### **Professionalism of staff involved in validation is still limited**

Qualifications and competences of staff involved in validation were identified as a challenge in 2014. This continues to be the case in 2016. Many countries report that there are no mandatory (imposed) requirements for staff. Where requirements are mandatory, the most common approach is to require qualifications which are not specific to validation. It is more common to have requirements for assessment than for staff involved in information, advice and guidance. Most countries reported that staff involved in validation do not have a right to training <sup>(8)</sup>.

### **There is increasing provision of skills audits.**

There has been a significant increase in the number of countries which offer skills audits over the past two years but progress is required to make it standard practice to offer a skills audit to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment.

Over half of all countries included in the inventory were reported to integrate skills audits within existing arrangements for validation. Although the data are not strictly comparable <sup>(9)</sup>, this suggests a slight increase in activity from 2014 where there was opportunity to undergo a skills audit in just under half of countries.

A total of 14 countries make it standard practice to offer a skills audit to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment. Overall, there has been a considerable degree of activity on this principle.

## **Conclusions and challenges**

The key message from the 2016 inventory is that Member States are gradually placing validation of non-formal and informal learning higher on their policy agendas. All countries under study offer the opportunity to individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences validated or are developing arrangements to do so. However, this is not necessarily widely spread across

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<sup>(8)</sup> The question in the country fiche database referred to a 'right' to training. The low response rate does not necessarily mean that training does not exist, rather that it may not be a 'right' for all staff to undergo such training.

<sup>(9)</sup> The 2014 country fiche asked: is there a right for unemployed people to undertake a skills audit? The 2016 country fiche asked: are skills audits, as defined in the Council recommendation integrated within the approach to validation arrangements?

all sectors within countries. There is still considerable diversity and fragmentation of practices but progress has been made in creating or identifying national coordination institutions. Education remains the main sector in which validation is developed, but there are also numerous initiatives in the third sector. Labour market initiatives are less common, and involvement of employers is still limited. Information on the number of beneficiaries and participants in validation is still limited, which restricts potential for adequate monitoring, cost-benefit analysis and impact assessment of validation.

Decisive action is still required to meet the 2012 Council recommendation principles in a number of areas. The analysis suggests that the main challenges to meeting the 2018 deadline are in professional development of validation practitioners and prioritisation of disadvantaged groups; these principles have comparatively low activity and reach.

By contrast, having ‘information, advice and guidance’ (IAG), providing ‘guidance and counselling’ and promoting ‘equivalence of standards between validation and formal qualifications’ are in a more advanced stage of development in the countries covered by the inventory.

The key findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. **2016 inventory summary key findings**

<b>Validation arrangements</b>	Validation arrangements are in place in 35 of 36 European countries covered by the 2016 inventory (*).
<b>Outputs and outcomes of validation</b>	Validation is mostly used for awarding parts of a qualification, mainly in conjunction with credits or gaining exemptions as well as for accessing education programmes.
<b>Users of validation</b>	Opportunities for validation are reaching low-qualified and low-skilled jobseekers, but progress is needed in use of validation by disadvantaged groups.
<b>Take-up of validation</b>	Data on take-up remain limited. Where they are available, an upwards trend can be observed.
<b>Stages of validation</b>	The four stages are interconnected as outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation. All four stages are used in all sectors but in different combinations.
<b>Coordination</b>	In recent times, greater attention has been paid to ensuring coordinating institutions responsible for validation are in place at national levels.

<b>Stakeholder involvement</b>	There is strong variation in the level and nature of stakeholder involvement in validation across countries. Variations in the roles of different stakeholders reflect the specificities of the different sectors.
<b>Funding</b>	Countries tend to have a number of sources of funding for validation. National public funding is the most common source.
<b>Information, advice and guidance (IAG)</b>	IAG is available in most countries but is not always a requirement.
<b>Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks</b>	The number of countries where there is a link between validation and the NQF has increased, although the strengths of links between validation and NQFs varies across sectors.
<b>Standards and certificates</b>	Three in four countries use exactly the same standards for validation, in at least one subsector of education, as those used in the formal education system. However, in many instances, it is possible to identify from a certificate if the qualification has been awarded through validation.
<b>Quality assurance</b>	There is increasing recognition that validation arrangements require specific forms of quality assurance.
<b>Professional competences of practitioners</b>	Professionalisation of validation practitioners through specific professional qualifications and/or competence development remains a challenge in 2016.
<b>Skills audits</b>	There has been a significant increase in the number of countries which offer skills audits.
<b>Validation tools</b>	Commonly used methods for validation are portfolios, a combination of methods, and tests and examinations. More can be done in the standardisation of tools and the use of ICT.

(\*) Arrangements are in place in at least one subsector of education in all countries except Croatia, where a system for validation is under development.

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

# Introduction: aim and method

This synthesis report <sup>(10)</sup> forms part of the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (hereafter, the European inventory). The European inventory provides an overview of validation practices in Europe in 36 country reports <sup>(11)</sup> which describe current validation national arrangements, and four thematic reports, which look at certain aspects of validation in greater depth <sup>(12)</sup>. The aim of this synthesis report is to present the current state of play and to report progress towards the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning <sup>(13)</sup> in Europe as a whole.

The synthesis is based on an analysis of the data collected through a 'country fiche', which was completed by country experts alongside the country reports. The fiche mapped the situation in each country according to standardised indicators. Data were collected as follows:

- (a) the country situation as a whole;
- (b) the education sector:
  - (i) general education (GE);
  - (ii) initial vocational education and training (IVET);
  - (iii) continuing vocational education and training (CVET);
  - (iv) adult education (AE);
  - (v) higher education (HE);
- (c) the labour market;
- (d) the third sector.

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<sup>(10)</sup> The contents of this synthesis report – as with those of country reports and fiches – cannot necessarily be taken to reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission, Cedefop, the EQF AG Members or the members of the external quality assurance panel. Neither the European Commission nor any person/organisation acting on behalf of the Commission is responsible for the use which might be made of any information contained in this report.

<sup>(11)</sup> EU-28, EEA EFTA countries, Switzerland and Turkey. There are three reports for the UK (England and Northern Ireland; Scotland; Ireland) and two for Belgium (French Community and Flemish Community). These regions will be referred and counted as 'countries' in the current report.

<sup>(12)</sup> Validation and open educational resources; Funding validation; Validation in the care and youth work sectors; Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

<sup>(13)</sup> Council of the European Union (2012).

By labour market, we refer here to initiatives in which private sector institutions play a central role (alone or in collaboration with public sector institutions). These initiatives might be promoted, for example, by employers or their associations. In the third sector, validation initiatives might involve youth work or volunteering or might be validation arrangements developed by third sector organisations such as charities or NGOs, to support a variety of target groups (such as third country nationals, the unemployed, young people facing exclusion, people with a disability). They might or might not be connected to formal education activities. In this sense, there might be some overlap between the sectors but it was generally possible to differentiate between the sectors. The collection of information by sector allows for a more accurate picture of the country situation and greater potential to draw relevant conclusions, especially given the fragmented nature of validation observed in the 2014 inventory.

The analysis is presented by country ‘count’ and so it is useful for the reader to have an understanding of how to interpret the numbers and charts presented in this report. Questions within the country fiche were a mix of multiple choice and single response options, with some allowing for free-text entries. The questionnaire for the education subsectors was the same across all five. Different questionnaires were used for the labour market and third sector. Responses to the questions included within the ‘general’, labour market and third sector parts of the country fiche database were answered once only for each country. This allows for some disaggregated analysis, which is useful to understand more accurately the European situation in relation to specific aspects. However, the report mainly focuses on the overall situation in Europe.

Where the ‘number of countries’ is presented, this refers to the number of countries which gave an answer to each question. For education subsectors, when presenting the ‘count of countries’, the data figure represents the number of countries where the indicator applies in at least one subsector of education where there are validation arrangements (but may not apply to all subsectors in that country). Each country is counted once, regardless of the number of subsectors where the category applies. For multiple-choice questions, this means that the totals come to more than the total number of countries with validation arrangements in place. Further information on how to read this report is provided in Annex 1.



Comparisons with 2010 and 2014 are mainly based on general findings from the synthesis reports produced for those inventories, because of the changes in the way data have been collected and also the change in the total number of countries covered in each inventory update <sup>(14)</sup>.

Validation is a complex issue, approached in very different ways across the countries of Europe. While it is hard to apply standardised indicators to such a complex topic, the report at a European level has to find some common ground for comparison. Nevertheless, the outcome of the analysis work gives us a good indication of the validation landscape across Europe in 2016 and how this has changed since the previous inventory in 2014 and prior to that in 2010.

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<sup>(14)</sup> The 2016 and 2014 inventory updates covered 36 countries covered in 33 country reports. The 2010 inventory update covered 32 countries described in 34 reports.

# Progress on the Council recommendation principles

## 2.1. Introduction

This section provides information on current progress towards 10 principles outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012) on validation of non-formal and informal learning <sup>(15)</sup>. It also provides information on the existence of validation arrangements in the different countries covered by the 2016 inventory.

Table 3. **List of Council recommendation principles covered in the overview figures**

1	Validation arrangements in place
2	LAG on benefits, opportunities and procedures is available
3	Guidance and counselling is readily accessible
4	Links to NQF and in line with EQF
5	Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes
6	Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment
7	Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors
8	Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)
9	Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation
10	Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within six months of an identified need

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(15)</sup> No data were collected in the inventory on the use of EU transparency tools, a further principle outlined in the recommendation, due to the lack of national level data. The special Eurobarometer 417 on the European area of skills and qualifications provides information on awareness of the Europass CV, Language passport, Europass mobility and Youth pass at national level, but not on their use: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_417\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_417_en.pdf) [accessed 3.2.2017].

It should be noted that the Council recommendation is not prescriptive regarding how progress or achievement should be measured in relation to the principles it outlines. The information provided here is one possible interpretation of the degree of development on the principles outlined in the recommendation, based on available information. The discussion aims to provide information for illustrative purposes and to aid exchanges and identification of potential areas for action. The information provided refers to the education sector, as it was not possible to collect information on the principles in the other sectors. Only in the case of NQF and skills audits do the indicators also refer to labour market and third sector.

## 2.2. Progress activity

Figure 1 presents an overview of development, reflected in the indicators from the inventory country fiches produced by the country experts. The indicators cover different principles outlined in the recommendation and further elaborated in the European guidelines on validation. The figure is based on the number of countries reported as having met the specific principle: if a country was reported to have the principle in at least one education subsector, it was ranked as meeting that principle.

The data show that progress is high in relation to validation arrangements in the countries covered by the inventory. Validation is possible in all countries under study except Croatia, where the arrangements are planned to be in place by 2017. Almost all countries have available information, advice and guidance (IAG) on benefits, opportunities and validation procedures – sometimes as a requirement for validation initiatives, other times not – and most countries provide guidance and counselling for validation <sup>(16)</sup>. Validation initiatives often also comply with the principle of employing agreed standards, equivalent to those used in qualifications obtained through formal education programmes and presenting links to NQFs in line with the EQF. Over 30 countries meet the criteria of these principles in at least one education subsector.

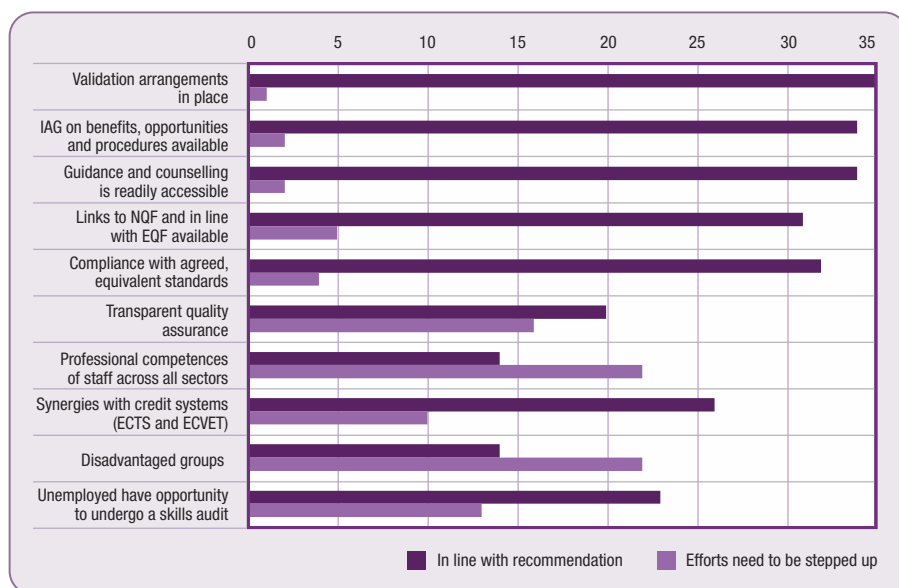
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<sup>(16)</sup> The indicator for guidance and counselling is less stringent than the recommendation principle. The recommendation mentions 'appropriate guidance and counselling' being readily accessible but, given the challenges in measuring its degree of appropriateness, the indicator referred simply to provision (presence) of IAG.

The degree of progress is medium in relation to three other principles: transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment <sup>(17)</sup>; synergies between validation arrangements and credit systems such as the ECTS and ECVET; and skills audits for the unemployed. Between 20 and 26 countries meet the criteria in relation to those in at least one education subsector.

Progress is much lower on two principles: development of professional staff competences across all sectors <sup>(18)</sup> and disadvantaged groups being likely to benefit from validation. Fewer than 15 countries meet these criteria and over 20 need to step up their efforts.

Figure 1. **Overview of existence of activity**



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(17)</sup> For the indicator on quality assurance, the recommendation referred to ‘transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks (...) that support reliable, valid and credible assessment’ (Council of the European Union, 2012) whereas the indicator referred, again, to existence of a quality assurance framework that is consistently applied across institutions.

<sup>(18)</sup> The indicator on professional development is more stringent than the Council recommendation. While the recommendation requires that ‘provision is made for the development of professional competence of staff across all sectors’ (Council of the European Union, 2012), the indicator used to capture this principle referred to a right for training for staff involved in the provision of IAG or assessment in validation.

## 2.3. Progress on comprehensiveness of activity

Analysis of activity taking place can be complemented by analysis of how comprehensive it is. This is shown in Figure 2 which gives the number of sectors where a specific principle is met, as opposed to illustrating whether a principle is met in at least one sector. This is important as the aim is that validation becomes an accepted route to certify skills and competences that cut across all sectors. To construct the figure, information on all five subsectors of education was included in the analysis. Countries were classified into three different categories according to the criteria in Table 4, for all principles except the two related to the NQF <sup>(19)</sup> and skills audits <sup>(20)</sup>; in these different methodologies were used to take into account that the analysis included data on a larger number of sectors.

Table 4. **Scoring table for comprehensiveness**

	0-1 sectors	2-3 sectors	4-5 sectors
Category	Urgent action required	Efforts need to be stepped up	In line with recommendation

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

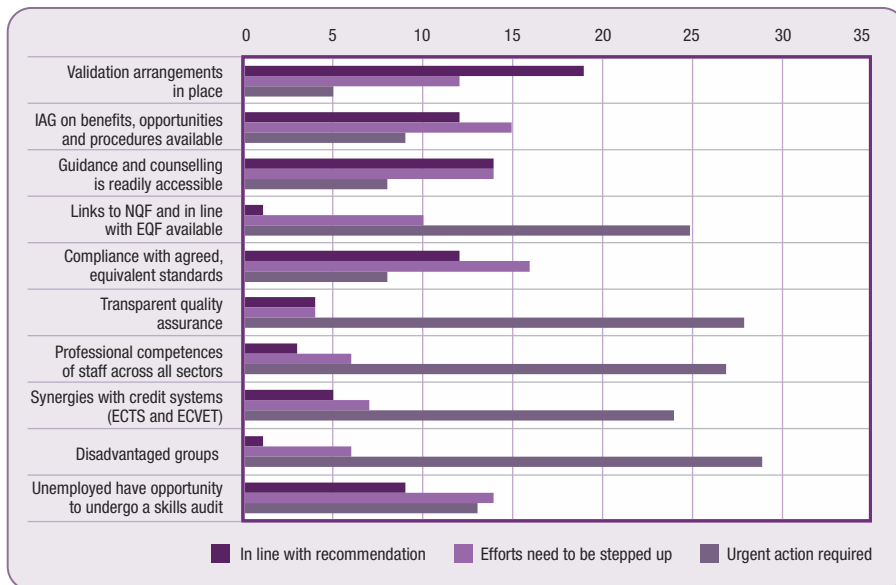
This analysis highlights that, for most principles, the comprehensiveness of activity is limited. Principles are only met in some sectors (and subsectors of education) and progress is uneven. Validation arrangements are in place in almost all subsectors of education in 19 countries, with work towards establishing comprehensive validation systems that cover all subsectors of education.

However, more work must be done on the principles outlined in the recommendation. There is a group of three indicators where the degree of

<sup>(19)</sup> For the principle on links to NQF, the scoring was ‘urgent action required’ if the criteria was not met in relation to any of the three sectors, or only in one: education (any subsector), labour market or third sector; ‘efforts need to be stepped up’ if two sectors (education (any subsector), labour market or third sector) met the criteria and ‘in line with recommendation’ if the three sectors met the criteria (education (any subsector), labour market and third sector)).

<sup>(20)</sup> For the criteria on the skills audits principle, we looked at whether skills audits as defined in the recommendation were integrated into the country’s validation arrangements and whether it is standard practice to offer the opportunity to undertake a skills audits to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment. Individual countries were ranked as in need of urgent action if none of the two elements present; ‘efforts need to be stepped up’ if one element was present; and ‘in line with recommendation’ if both elements were present.

Figure 2. Overview of comprehensiveness of activity



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

comprehensiveness is relatively advanced, having the principles in almost all subsectors in at least 10 countries: ‘IAG on the benefits, opportunities and procedures’; ‘guidance and counselling readily accessible’; and ‘compliance with agreed standards’. Nine countries fulfil the two criteria selected to monitor skills audits: they have skills audit included in their validation arrangements and provide audits to the unemployed.

A group of five indicators shows limited comprehensiveness across European countries. As with Figure 1, more progress is needed in activating disadvantaged groups to benefit from validation as well as on the provision of professional development for validation staff. In the case of synergies with credit systems, quality assurance measures and links to NQF, the level of comprehensiveness contrasts with the existence of activity. For these principles, few sectors are able to meet the criteria across countries. The low degree of comprehensiveness for NQF could be expected given the low links between qualifications obtained in the labour market or third sector and NQFs. When looking at NQFs links within the education sector only, there is a medium level of progress with 11 countries with some links in at least four subsectors of education.

It is possible to classify each principle in relation to their progress towards the 2018 deadline. The principles are classified into three groups (low, medium and high). Table 5 combines the current position on existence of activity and degree of comprehensiveness in relation to the selected principles <sup>(21)</sup>. The table shows that, while European countries are introducing some of the principles, further work is needed in making validation a reality across sectors. Both, in terms of activity and comprehensiveness, the data suggest that those principles where efforts should be prioritised are the provision for professional development of staff and prioritisation of disadvantaged groups. Attention should also be given to the transparency of quality assurance measures and synergies with credit transfer systems, as well as in the provision of skill audits.

**Table 5. Current position and degree of comprehensiveness in relation to the recommendation principles**

Recommendation principle	Existence	Comprehensiveness
Validation arrangements in place	High	Medium
IAG on benefits, opportunities and procedures	High	Medium
Guidance and counselling is readily accessible	High	Medium
Links to NQF and in line with EQF	High	Low
Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	High	Medium
Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within six months of an identified need	Medium	Medium
Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment	Medium	Low
Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)	Medium	Low
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	Low	Low
Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors	Low	Low

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(21)</sup> As no principle is applied in a widely comprehensive way (obtaining the 'in line with recommendation' score in a large number of countries), principles are scored as either 'B' – set of more comprehensively applied principles – or 'C' – set of least comprehensively applied principles – in this dimension.

Countries are moving towards comprehensive NQFs that encompass all qualifications and that include validation opportunities. However, most countries have not yet developed the connection to labour market and third sector initiatives. Provision of IAG, guidance and counselling and compliance with agreed standards seem to be in place in most countries but they need to be further spread across sectors.

Table 5 provides a summary of progress, but does not qualify in what way the principles are being implemented. The following sections provide a deeper look into each of the principles and give a fuller picture of the situation in Europe.



# National approach to validation (policies, strategies and priorities)

## 3.1. Validation arrangements

**Main progress since 2014:** it is not possible to compare strictly; however, activity on validation seems to be increasing.

**Key message 1:** validation arrangements are in place, or planned, in all 36 countries covered in the 2016 European inventory. Those subsectors of education that are closer to the labour market were reported to have validation arrangements in place more frequently than other education subsectors.

**Key message 2:** 20 countries have mechanisms (such as a national institution coordinating good practice and national principles to promote consistency) in place to coordinate validation across sectors (education, labour market, voluntary sector).

Country experts report validation arrangements are in place in at least one subsector of education <sup>(22)</sup> in all countries except Croatia. A system for validation is under development within the context of the Croatian qualification framework (CROQF) pending a new ordinance on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning (planned for 2017).

National approaches to setting up arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) vary; some countries take a national approach, while focusing on specific sectors. Opportunities for validation exist across the different sectors of education and extend into the labour market and third sector to varying degrees.

As shown in Figure 3, arrangements for validation in the labour market are in place or in development in 15 countries <sup>(23)</sup>. By labour market we refer

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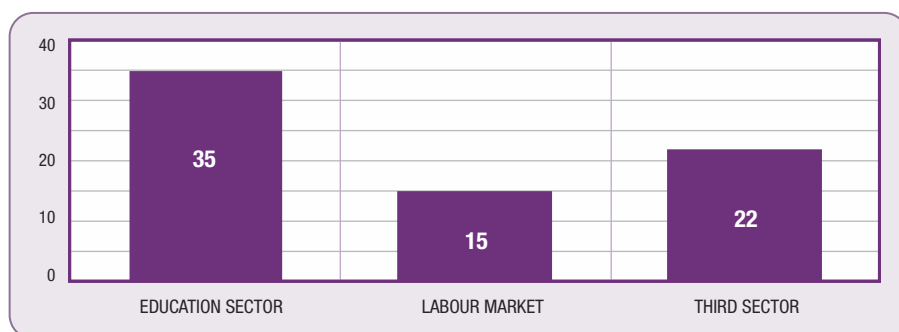
<sup>(22)</sup> General education, initial vocational education and training, continuing vocational education and training, higher education and adult education.

<sup>(23)</sup> Belgium-Flemish Community, Belgium-French Community, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, Turkey, UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales.

here to initiatives in which private sector institutions play a central role (alone or in collaboration with public sector institutions), aiming to enable individuals to access private sector jobs or to move within the private sector labour market (to support career development). These initiatives might be promoted, for example, by employers or their associations.

In the third sector, validation initiatives are in place to varying extents in 22 countries <sup>(24)</sup>. These initiatives might, for example, support youth work or volunteers, validate non-formal learning opportunities offered by third sector organisations, or might be developed by third sector organisations, such as charities or NGOs, to support a variety of target groups (third country nationals, the unemployed, young people facing exclusion, people with a disability).

Figure 3. **Validation arrangements by education sector, labour market and the third sector** <sup>(25)</sup>



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

### 3.1.1. National or sectoral?

Most countries' approach to validation consists of creating national arrangements (such as a legal framework, strategy and/or policy) encompassing education, the labour market and the third sector <sup>(26)</sup>; as illustrated in Figure 4. Eight countries <sup>(27)</sup> were reported to have national

<sup>(24)</sup> Austria, Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, UK-England and Northern Ireland and UK-Scotland.

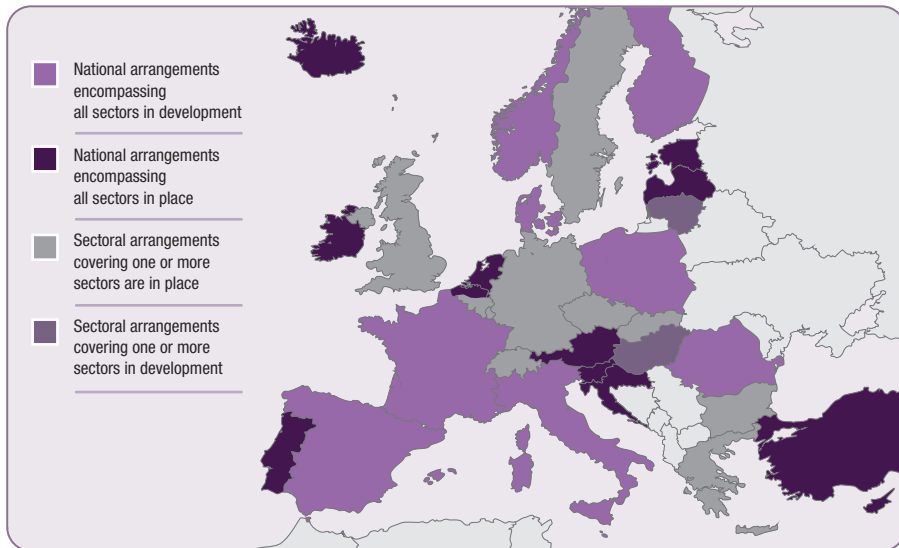
<sup>(25)</sup> Annex 1 provides a commentary on how to read this report. This explains how the tables/charts have been formulated based on the available data.

<sup>(26)</sup> It is possible that the country experts, in responding to this question, refer only to 'education' and its subsectors, rather than 'learning' as a whole, including the labour market and third sector.

<sup>(27)</sup> Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Norway, Poland, Romania and Spain.

arrangements encompassing all sectors and 13 countries <sup>(28)</sup> are developing such arrangements. Another set of countries (13) <sup>(29)</sup> has opted for arrangements focused on specific sectors. Two countries (Lithuania and Hungary) are working on developing validation arrangements for specific subsectors of their formal education systems. Many of these strategies, sectoral or comprehensive, are in an early stage of implementation and further work is needed to back-up the strategies with resources. Evidence from the country reports and collected through Cedefop’s conference on validation <sup>(30)</sup>, indicated that more needs to be done in terms of resourcing and staffing validation initiatives. This goes hand-in-hand with professionalisation of validation practitioners, as described later.

Figure 4. Approach to validation across European countries

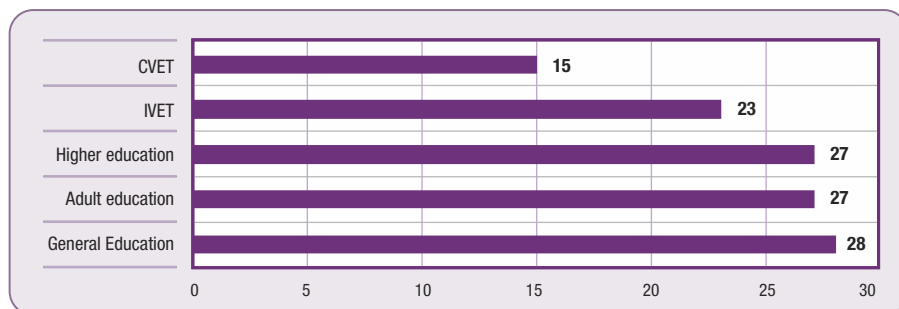


Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(28)</sup> Austria, Belgium-Flemish Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Turkey.  
<sup>(29)</sup> Belgium-French Community, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland and UK-Wales.  
<sup>(30)</sup> Cedefop conference: *How to make learning visible: strategies for implementing validation of non-formal and informal learning*, 28 and 29 November, Thessaloniki, Greece: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/events/how-make-learning-visible> [accessed 3.2.2017].

The 2016 inventory data collection allows specific sectors of education to be explored more systematically. Data show that those subsectors more closely linked to the labour market were more often reported to have validation arrangements in place. Validation arrangements are most commonly found in the CVET sector followed closely by the IVET and higher education subsectors. Validation arrangements are less often in place in adult and general education, as shown in Figure 5. This is a pattern already observed in 2014, as VET has been traditionally the sector leading validation efforts in most countries. Certain countries, such as the Czech Republic, Greece or Cyprus, only have validation arrangements in VET.

Figure 5. **Number of country updates reporting validation arrangements, by education sector**



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

### 3.1.2. Consistency and complementarity across sectors

Having validation strategies that encompass different sectors, seems to drive countries to create systems for coordination. A total of 20 countries have established national mechanisms to coordinate validation across education, the labour market and the third sector. These mechanisms may include, but are not limited to, establishing a national institution coordinating good practice or producing national principles to promote consistency. In most cases the coordinating body is at ministerial level, such as in France where the general institutional framework for validation (*validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE)) is under the responsibility of the ministry in charge of lifelong learning (currently the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Vocational Training and Social Dialogue). However, other countries might create working groups, such as the Inter-Ministerial Commission in Spain. In Sweden a new national delegation for validation has been established to follow, support and urge on coordinated

work to develop validation on both a regional and national level.

A few countries have national mechanisms to coordinate validation in conjunction with regional and/or sectoral level arrangements. These tend to be countries with clear regional governance structures (Spain or Switzerland) or with strong decentralisation and training provider autonomy (Denmark, Norway). In Denmark, for example, implementation of validation initiatives is highly decentralised; the tradition here is that legislation provides a framework that outlines the roles and responsibilities of education institutions in relation to quality assurance, evaluation, and developing quality systems. Coordinating mechanisms in place at national level are missing in just under half of the countries covered under the 2016 inventory.

Table 6. **Countries with mechanisms to coordinate validation across sectors**

Mechanisms to coordinate validation at national level	Mechanisms to coordinate validation in conjunction with regional/sectoral arrangements	No coordinating mechanisms at national level
BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, DK, EL, ES, FR, IE, IT, IS, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SE, SK, TR	CH, DK, ES, NO	AT, BG, CY, CZ, DE, EE, FI, HR, HU, LU, LT, LI, SI , UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Wales, UK-Scotland

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches. Multiple responses possible.

Section 4.2 provides additional information on the stakeholders involved in coordinating validation nationally.

### 3.1.3. Prioritising validation and rationale

Despite the promotion of consistency across sectors, validation is still very much an education issue. The data show that validation is prioritised (in provision of public funding or developing policies for validation) in at least one education subsector in 25 <sup>(31)</sup> of the 36 countries under study. CVET is the most commonly prioritised sector (for 18 countries), usually in combination with IVET or adult education. Nine countries consider all sectors equally <sup>(32)</sup>.

<sup>(31)</sup> Belgium-Flemish Community, Belgium-French Community, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland and UK-Wales.

<sup>(32)</sup> Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and UK-Wales.

A total of 11 countries <sup>(33)</sup> were reported as prioritising validation in the labour market usually in combination with one specific sector in education (IVET, CVET, adult education or HE); this is particularly relevant given the proposed *New Skills Agenda for Europe* and its promotion of validation as part of the upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults. Denmark, Iceland, Italy and the Netherlands were the only countries reported as prioritising validation in the third sector. As reported in the 2016 thematic report on validation in the social and health care and youth work sectors, a key purpose of validation practices in the youth sector is to support young people entering the labour market and improving their chances of finding a job by making competences gained visible. Cedefop’s thematic report provides further information and examples on these issues (Cedefop, 2016a).

Table 7. **Countries by sector priorities**

At least one subsector of education prioritised	Priority on the labour market	Priority on the third sector	All sectors equal
BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, IS, IT, LT, MT, NL, PL, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR, UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales	BE-fl, CY, DK, ES, IS, IT NO, NL, SE, TR	DK, IS, IT, NL	IE, LT, LU, HU AT, PT, RO, SI, UK-Wales

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches. Multiple responses possible.

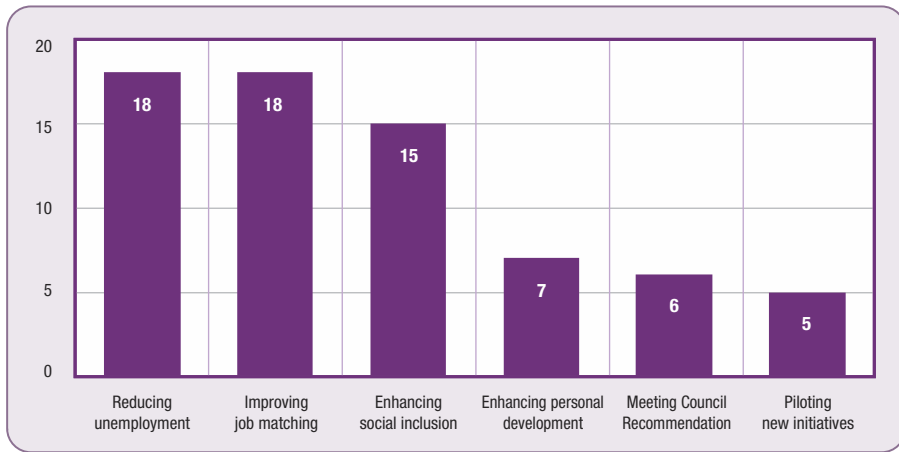
As illustrated in Figure 6, reducing unemployment and improving the match between people’s skills and jobs were the two most common rationales for prioritisation. More than 50% of the countries which prioritise CVET mentioned these two reasons, which might indicate overlap between labour market validation initiatives and CVET.

Validation as a tool for social inclusion was also reported as an important aspect for prioritisation. In a review of the literature relating to social justice and validation, Souto-Otero (2016) notes that validation is seen to have potential to bring about social justice based on widening participation and through recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences of socially

<sup>(33)</sup> Belgium-Flemish Community, Cyprus, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK-England and Northern Ireland.

disadvantaged groups, in particular the low-qualified. Increasing opportunities for personal development or piloting initiatives are less common. Meeting the 2012 Council recommendation on validation is a driver for prioritising certain sectors in six countries <sup>(34)</sup>.

Figure 6. **Number of countries by reason of prioritisation**

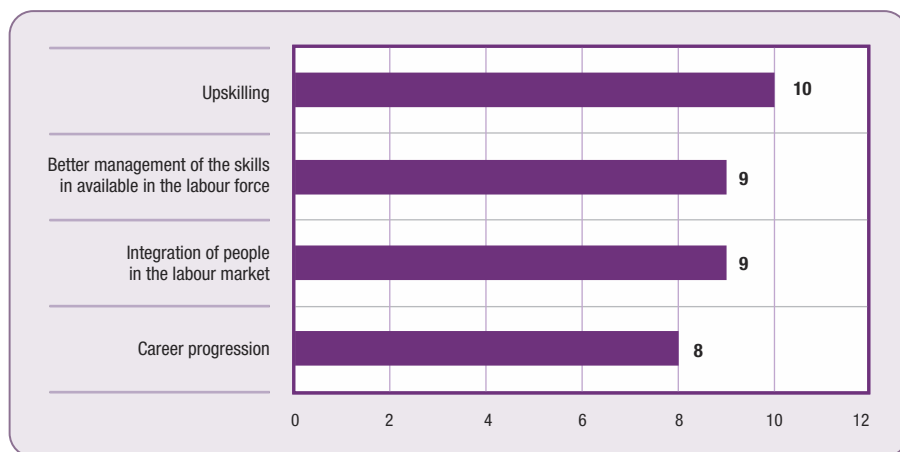


Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches. Multiple responses possible.

Validation has an important role to play in preparing people for the labour market by improving their employability: this could be those already in employment and seeking to change their career path or gain recognition for their skills and competences, or those wishing to join the labour market. The 2016 inventory looked into the main aims of validation arrangements related to the labour market. As illustrated in Figure 7, validation is seen as an important tool for upskilling, integration into the labour market, better management of skills in the labour market, and career progression.

<sup>(34)</sup> Denmark, Estonia, Cyprus, Poland, Spain and Sweden.

Figure 7. **Countries with main validation aim relating to the labour market**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Information not available/do not know: UK-Wales.  
Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

### 3.2. Validation outputs and outcomes

**Main progress since 2014:** there has been a significant increase in the number of countries where learning recognised through validation can be used to access formal education and/or acquire at least a module/part qualification, or credit in formal education.

**Key message 1:** validation of non-formal and informal learning is mostly used for awarding partial qualifications, credits, gaining exemptions and accessing education programmes.

Validation can lead to different types of outcomes: the goal may be to achieve a qualification or career progression, or take stock of one's skills and competences. The 2016 inventory explores the outputs of validation in relation to its articulation with formal education. The findings show that awarding qualifications, or part qualifications, are the most common outcomes of a validation process in the education sector and in the labour market. In the third sector, obtaining exemptions in the formal system is the most reported outcome.



As shown in Table 8, a closer look at the data relating to the education sector shows that validation is mostly used for awarding partial/full qualifications (30 countries), credits (26 countries), gaining exemptions (25 countries) and accessing education programmes (25 countries). In 20 countries it is possible to obtain partial qualifications through modules. Training specifications – the provision of training plans after going through a validation process – are possible in 15 countries.

In 14 countries there are other types of certificate that can be obtained through validation: these include Youthpass certificates for participants of approved projects of Erasmus+ Youth in Action programmes for example <sup>(35)</sup>.

**Table 8. Possible validation outcomes in education sectors where there are validation arrangements**

<b>Award of partial/full formal qualification</b>	
AT, BE-fl, BG, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, TR, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	
<b>Award of other non-formal qualification/certificate</b>	<b>Award of credits</b>
AT, BE-fr, CY, DE, EL, ES, FI, IE, IS, LU, NL, PL, SI, UK (S)	AT, BE-fl, CH, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, HU, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI, SE, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)
<b>Award of modules</b>	<b>Exemptions</b>
AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, DK, EE, ES, FI, IE, IT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, CZ, DK, EE, ES, FI, HU, IE, IS, LI, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SE, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)
<b>Access to formal programmes</b>	<b>Training specifications</b>
AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, IS, IE, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	AT, CH, DK, ES, FI, IE, IS, LI, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, UK (E&NI)

NB: Multiple responses possible.

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(35)</sup> Youthpass is a recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning. It aims at strengthening the social recognition of youth work and supporting employability by making visible and validating competences through certificates (European Commission, 2013). Since its establishment in 2007, 610 621 certificates were issued in 44 030 projects by 19 832 organisations (see <https://www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass/statistics> [accessed 3.2.2017]).

There are some differences in the way that validation is used within the education subsectors. Obtaining credits is the most common way of using validation in higher education, but this is far less common in other subsectors. Exemptions are also more common in higher education than in other subsectors, while award of modules is the most common outcome from validation in CVET. The production of training specifications is also relatively common in IVET and CVET.

### 3.3. Validation users

**Main progress since 2014:** opportunities for validation are reaching the low-qualified and low-skilled but more effort is required to reach disadvantaged groups.

**Key message 1:** common target groups for validation in the education sector are adult learners, low-qualified individuals, low-skilled jobseekers and workers. Yet many countries do not prioritise disadvantaged groups.

**Key message 2:** adult learners, workers and low-qualified individuals are the main users of validation in the education sector in almost a third of countries with validation arrangements in place in one or more education subsectors.

**Key message 3:** in the third sector, the most common target groups are volunteers, young people and adult learners.

**Key message 4:** there are specific arrangements/projects that involve validation targeted to migrants and/or refugees in just over a third of all countries covered in the 2016 inventory.

The 2016 inventory included questions on targeting users and main users of validation for the education sector and third sector only. Determining who are the actual users and beneficiaries of validation is not easy, as data availability is limited. National experts were unable to provide information in around 50% of the cases, which means there is no estimation for several validation initiatives.

Experts were asked to specify the target groups and the main users of validation in each country and sector. In the education sector, validation initiatives normally target adult learners (13 countries), low-qualified individuals (12 countries), workers (10 countries) and low-skilled jobseekers (nine countries) <sup>(36)</sup>. In contrast, the most common target group for validation

initiatives in the third sector is ‘volunteers’ (14 countries), followed by young people (11 countries), adult learners (nine countries), those at risk of unemployment (seven countries) and jobseekers (seven countries).

Main users of validation in one or more education subsector are adult learners, workers and low-qualified individuals. Disadvantaged groups, including low-skilled individuals, early school leavers, jobseekers/unemployed, individuals at risk of unemployment, older workers, migrants/refugees and people with disabilities are users of validation in less than 17% of countries with validation arrangements in one or more education subsector. This suggests that much more effort is required in engaging disadvantaged groups.

Taking a closer look at the relationship between the targeting of users and main users (in the few countries where this is possible), the data show little correlation between the two. Only in Finland, Poland and Switzerland does it seem that validation users correspond in most of the education subsectors to the targeted population. This could be related to the nature (hard-to-reach), needs or size of the target group, as much as to the efficacy of the targeting initiatives.

The 2016 inventory specifically explored the use of validation to support migrants and/or refugees. There are specific arrangements/projects that involve validation targeted at migrants and/or refugees in over a third of all countries covered in the 2016 inventory. The introduction of early skills profiling for third country nationals is likely to lead to an increase in targeting this group and take-up of validation by third country nationals.

### 3.4. Trends in validation take-up

**Main progress since 2014:** there is a trend towards an increase in the number of participants starting/applying for validation.

**Key message 1:** data on take-up remain limited.

#### 3.4.1. Take-up in the education sector

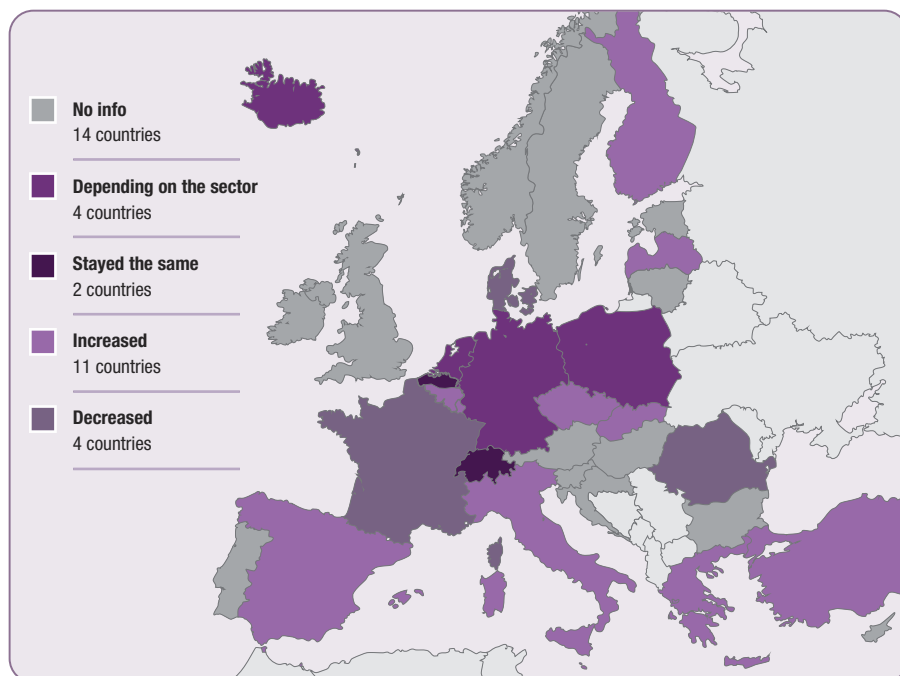
Data available on the take-up of validation remain limited and not fully representative of the validation initiatives in the countries covered by the 2016 inventory. Where there are data on education subsectors, an upwards trend

<sup>(36)</sup> In 11 countries there is no specific targeting of user groups: Belgium-fl, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia and Turkey.

from 2014 was reported, with up to 11 country reports documenting an increase in the number of participants starting/applying for validation procedures (see Figure 8).

A reduction in the number of participants starting/applying for validation procedures was reported in the Belgium-Flemish Community (higher education), Denmark (adult education), France (IVET, CVET, higher education) and Romania (CVET). One reason for decline in the Belgium-Flemish Community is reduced advertising efforts by certain institutions because the procedure is considered too expensive or is under revision. In France, it was reported that VAE remains a demanding and sometimes lengthy procedure for candidates in terms of time and effort, leading them to exit the process before applications can be assessed. In 14 of the countries under study no information was available.

Figure 8. **Take-up of validation in the education sector**



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

### 3.4.2. Take-up in the labour market

Across the 15 countries with validation arrangements for the labour market, six countries were reported to collect data on the number of applicants/participants (Belgium-Flemish Community, Italy, Malta, Slovakia, Turkey, UK-Scotland) and seven were reported to collect data on outcomes (Belgium-Flemish Community, Iceland, Italy, Malta, Turkey, UK-England and Northern Ireland and UK-Scotland). Two countries were reported to collect data on 'other' aspects (Belgium-Flemish Community and the Netherlands). The remaining countries either stated that data are not collected or that information is not available for this question.

An increase in take-up was reported in Iceland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands and Turkey. The remaining countries indicated that information is not available, the question was not applicable or that they did not know. This suggests there is room to improve data collection/dissemination of data on take-up in relation to validation arrangements relating to the labour market.

### 3.4.3. Take-up and trends relating to the third sector

Across the 22 countries where validation initiatives in the third sector were reported, 10 countries reported that data are not collected. This may be a reflection of the fact that validation in the third sector tends to be project-based, possibly collected for individual projects but not for the sector as a whole. It may also be explained by the fact that third sector bodies (including youth and civil society organisations) have a limited role to play in coordinating validation. This creates a challenge for collecting precise aggregate data on validation in this sector. Among those countries where data are collected, five collect data on the number of applicants/participants (Belgium-Flemish Community, Spain, Italy, Latvia and Slovakia) and four collect data on outcomes (Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and Latvia). Only Italy collects information on both applicants and outcomes, providing a fuller picture of the use of validation in the sector. This is an aspect to address to obtain a better overview of the use of validation in the third sector.

Since 2014, take-up of validation was reported to have increased in the third sector in six countries (Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia and Finland), to have decreased in two countries (Belgium-Flemish Community and Poland), and to have remained the same in two countries (Denmark and Spain) <sup>(37)</sup>.

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<sup>(37)</sup> Where data are not collected, the indication of trends is based on anecdotal evidence.

# Developing and implementing validation

## 4.1. Basic features: the four stages of validation

**Main progress since 2014:** there is an increase in the inclusion of all stages in the existing processes of validation in education subsectors.

**Key message 1:** the four stages are interconnected as outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation on validation.

**Key message 2:** in education and the labour market, it is most common to use all four stages of validation. In the third sector, most countries use a two- or three-stage approach. Only in six countries were all four stages commonly used.

The overall aim of validation is to make visible and value, through identification, documentation, assessment and certification, the full range of knowledge, skills and competences held by an individual, irrespective of where these have been acquired. The four stages of validation are important because they make the process more flexible and adaptable to individual needs.

All four validation stages are used in all sectors but in different combinations. Within education and the labour market, it is most common for all four stages of validation to be used. In the third sector it is more common to use only identification and documentation, which could be expected given the nature of their validation arrangements. Stages – and their definitions and interaction – can be adapted to local circumstances. In Switzerland, for example, validation consists of five steps: information and advising, self-evaluation, assessment, accrediting, and certification. In Finland, competence based qualifications (CBQs) are regulated by the Vocational Adult Education Act (631/1998) (*Laki ammatillisesta aikuiskoulutuksesta*)<sup>(38)</sup> that defines the validation process in three stages: application phase, completing the

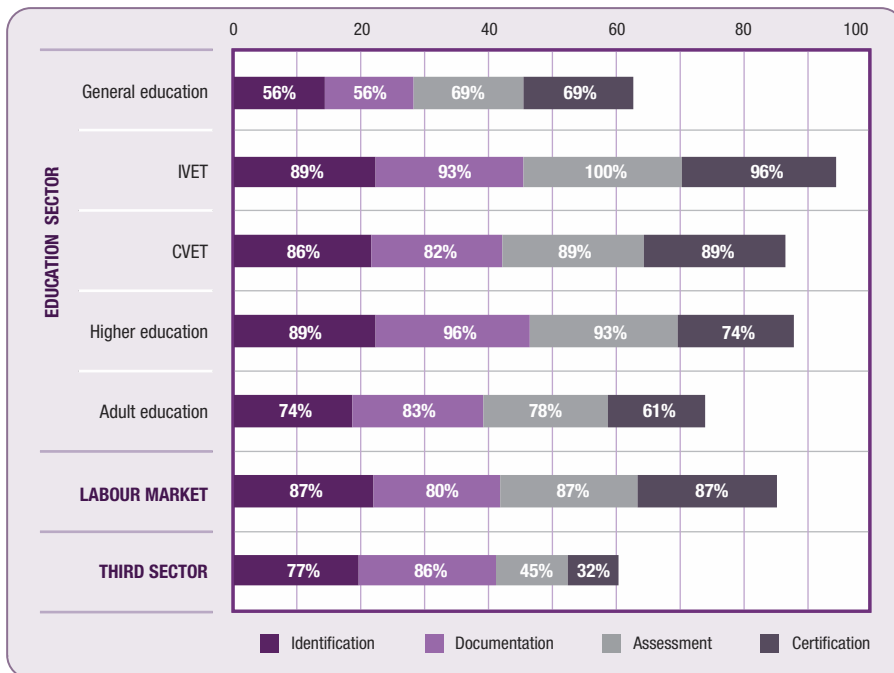
<sup>(38)</sup> Vocational Adult Education Act 631/1998) <http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980631> [accessed 3.2.2017].

vocational skills phase, and the acquisition/certification phase. Documentation is done across the whole process.

The data show that in the education sector, all four stages of validation are used in one or more subsectors in most countries (31). However, in some countries and in some sectors, stages are used on their own; in others they are used in combination with other stages. In eight countries, identification, documentation and assessment are used together but without certification. This might happen when institutions, especially in adult education, are not entitled to award formal certificates or, in the case of higher education, where validation can lead to obtaining access to formal education.

In comparing the situation across the different subsectors of education, Figure 9 shows that the most commonly used stages in general education, IVET and CVET are assessment and certification. The most commonly used stage of validation in adult and higher education is documentation.

Figure 9. **Stages of validation across education subsectors**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Not applicable: GE (6%); CVET (7%); AE (9%) LM (7%); TS (5%).  
Information not available/do not know: GE (13%); TS (5%).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

The data show that validation can lead to certification in all subsectors of education, though less frequently in adult education, compared to IVET, CVET and higher education. The philosophy behind adult education is not necessarily to aim for certification, rather to support adults to increase their competences, gain personal fulfilment or to achieve other objectives <sup>(39)</sup>.

For the labour market, validation arrangements incorporate a certification stage in 13 countries. In the third sector, among the 22 countries with validation initiatives under way, only seven countries were reported as having validation that incorporates certification. This suggests that the third sector, as could be expected, focuses predominantly on formative validation methods, rather than summative. A further consideration is that these two sectors can play a significant role in referring individuals to certification bodies/assessment centres.

Figure 9 suggests that the four stages are interconnected, as pointed out in the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop, 2015). Although data on progress since 2014 are not exactly comparable, the evidence seems to point towards increasing use of the four stages in the education sector; in the labour market and the third sector, integration of stages has remained relatively stable.

## 4.2. Stakeholder involvement in validation

**Main progress since 2014:** greater focus on ensuring coordinating institutions responsible for validation are in place at national levels.

**Key message 1:** government and national organisations (such as national agencies, awarding organisations) are the main bodies with responsibility for coordinating validation.

**Key message 2:** greater stakeholder involvement in CVET and IVET but less within general education.

**Key message 3:** within the education sector, 32 countries have an institution in charge of coordinating validation at national level in at least one subsector of education.

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<sup>(39)</sup> See for instance Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982.



#### 4.2.1. National coordination of validation in the education sector <sup>(40)</sup>

The 2012 Council recommendation emphasises that stakeholders have an important role to play in supporting opportunities for validation. It also indicates the importance of coordinating validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors. The 2014 thematic report on multi-level governance showed that greater coordination between stakeholders was needed (European Commission et al., 2014c). As noted in Section 3.2, 20 countries were reported to have mechanisms (such as a national institution coordinating good practice or national principles to promote consistency) in place to coordinate validation across sectors (education, labour market, voluntary sector).

In the education sector, 32 countries were reported as having an institution in charge of coordinating validation in at least one subsector. The existence of an organisation in charge within each subsector (coordinating institutions within that subsector), does not imply the existence of an organisation coordinating validation across the different sectors (promoting consistency/permeability across sectors).

Coordinating institutions take on a range of different responsibilities: provision of guidance/training to providers; producing/ensuring implementation of national strategies for validation; and collection/monitoring of data at national level. A total of 17 countries <sup>(41)</sup> with validation arrangements have national institutions in charge of validation across all subsectors of education where validation exists; however, it is not possible to determine from the data if this is one national institution working across all subsectors where validation exists or a national institution with responsibility for validation within subsectors. In the other 15 countries <sup>(42)</sup>, there is a national institution in place but it is not always responsible for validation in every subsector of education where validation arrangements are in place.

There are different models of coordination: in some countries, validation is coordinated by a single actor while others have devolved forms of coordination. Six countries have a mix of national and regional coordination arrangements across the education subsectors where validation is in place: Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

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<sup>(40)</sup> Data were not collected for the labour market or third sector for the question on coordination.

<sup>(41)</sup> Belgium-Wallonia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, UK-Scotland.

<sup>(42)</sup> Belgium-Flanders, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, UK-England and Northern Ireland, UK-Wales.

#### 4.2.2. Stakeholder involvement and functions in the education sector

Broad stakeholder involvement is crucial to building trust in the system and having validation outcomes accepted in society. Across the countries covered in the 2016 inventory, various institutions and stakeholders have responsibility for different aspects of validation: this can range from designing national strategies, devising standards, delivering advice and guidance to assessment, as outlined in Table 9. For example, Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning, has responsibility to maintain a national view of the Norwegian approach to VNFIL. The main actors in validation arrangements within the education sector are government organisations and training providers together with national organisations, such as agencies. Such stakeholders are involved to some degree in functions related to the existence of validation arrangements, with different roles and responsibilities. National organisations are less frequently engaged, which could be expected as not all countries have them in place. Most stakeholders participate in awareness raising and provision of information and guidance. However, employers, chambers of commerce and trade unions are less active; more is needed to get them involved in validation initiatives in education. They tend to be involved in the creation of standards.

Of the 35 countries with validation arrangements in one or more education subsectors, government organisations mainly assume a coordinating role in 77% of countries (27 countries). By contrast, youth organisations, civil society, the public employment service (PES), trade unions and individual freelancers/consultants have no coordination role in any of the countries with validation arrangements in place.

Government organisations are also frequently involved in awareness raising and promotion of validation, designing of national strategies for validation and quality assurance mechanisms. Government organisations are reported to be least involved in the four validation stages, particularly, in identification and documentation. They play a greater role in assessment and certification than in identification and documentation. This could be expected as education and training providers normally provide such services, as shown in Table 9.

Training providers are mainly involved in IAG and in identification, documentation and assessment stages; they have a lesser role in coordinating validation or contributing to the design of national strategies for it. Some of the functions of training providers seem to be supplemented by IAG providers.

Youth organisations mainly work on awareness raising and promoting validation. Although they contribute to the design of national strategies in 11%

Table 9. **Percentage of countries with validation arrangements by type of organisation and validation function**

	Coordinating role	Design of national strategies for validation	Awareness raising and promotion of validation	Provision of IAG	Design of QA mechanisms	Setting up standards	Identification - documentation	Assessment	Certification
<b>Government organisations</b>	77%	71%	74%	60%	69%	69%	23%	31%	34%
<b>Training providers</b>	23%	31%	74%	86%	66%	63%	83%	86%	0%
<b>Information, advice and guidance providers</b>	6%	11%	51%	63%	6%	0%	20%	9%	0%
<b>Youth organisations</b>	0%	11%	29%	26%	0%	9%	9%	6%	3%
<b>Civil organisations</b>	0%	9%	34%	9%	26%	3%	17%	9%	3%
<b>Public employment services</b>	11%	20%	51%	60%	9%	11%	29%	9%	9%
<b>Private employment services</b>	0%	0%	14%	11%	0%	0%	6%	6%	3%
<b>National organisations</b>	46%	40%	54%	49%	46%	46%	23%	26%	29%
<b>Chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts</b>	6%	29%	43%	34%	26%	34%	17%	23%	23%
<b>Employer organisations or individual employers</b>	6%	26%	54%	34%	11%	51%	14%	31%	17%
<b>Trade unions</b>	0%	23%	43%	26%	9%	40%	9%	14%	9%
<b>Individual freelance/consultants</b>	0%	14%	17%	3%	11%	6%	6%	6%	3%
<b>Not applicable</b>	9%	9%	3%	3%	0%	0%	3%	3%	6%
<b>Information not available</b>	0%	0%	0%	3%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Do not know</b>	0%	3%	3%	6%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%

NB: Multiple responses possible. Data based on the total count of countries across all subsectors of education with validation arrangements in place in one or more subsectors.

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

of all countries with validation arrangements, they are not involved in designing quality assurance mechanisms for validation in any country under study.

The main roles undertaken by the PES are in relation to awareness raising and provision of IAG. This could suggest national governments define a very precise (or even confined) role for PES in the implementation of arrangements for VNFIL.

National organisations are mainly involved in awareness raising and are least involved in the four stages of validation. However, they are one of the main stakeholders involved in certification, together with government organisations and chambers of industry. This is a positive signal for those afraid of regional differences in how validation certification is being practised.

Chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts are strongly involved in awareness raising and promoting validation. They also have a key role to play in IAG, assessment and certification.

Employer organisations/individual employers contribute to awareness raising in over half of countries with validation arrangements in place. Together with trade unions, they also contribute to setting up standards in over 40% of countries.

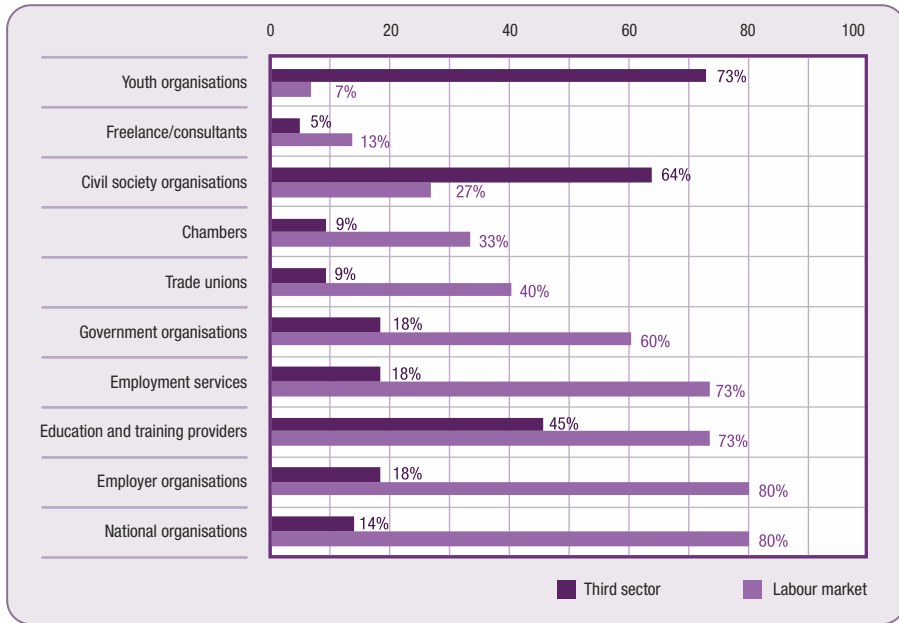
There are variations in stakeholder involvement in the different aspects of validation in education subsectors. There is greater involvement of all stakeholders across all roles in the CVET sector, followed by the IVET sector. There are generally fewer stakeholders involved in validation within general education.

#### **4.2.3. Labour market and third sector stakeholder involvement**

Figure 10 shows clear distinction between stakeholder types across the two sectors. Of the total number of countries that have validation arrangements in place, national organisations have a role to play in 80% of countries (12 countries) in the labour market compared to only 14% in the third sector (three countries).

In the third sector, youth organisations play a role in 73% of countries (16 countries) with validation arrangements in place, compared to only 7% in the labour market (one country). These differences reflect the distinct characteristics of the two sectors. It is noticeable that education and training providers play a role in labour market validation in 73% of the total number of countries with validation arrangements, compared to only 45% in the third sector, reflecting the finding that the most third sector initiatives are not linked to the formal education sector.

Figure 10. Third sector and labour market stakeholder involvement



NB: Multiple responses possible.  
Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

### 4.3. Funding

**Main progress since 2014:** the 2014 inventory did not collect comparable information on funding.

**Key message 1:** national public funding is the most common source for validation across all sectors and subsectors.

**Key message 2:** funding from individuals is the second most common source in all sectors and subsectors, except the third sector.

**Key message 3:** most make use of multiple sources of funding for validation.

According to the 2016 inventory, national public funding is the most common source of funding for validation, followed by individuals. However, few countries have a single source of funding; most use multiple sources. Figure

11 shows the number of countries which use each type of funding in at least one sector where there are validation arrangements. This figure incorporates data relating to the labour market and third sector as well as the education sectors.

Figure 11. **Countries reporting main sources of validation funding**



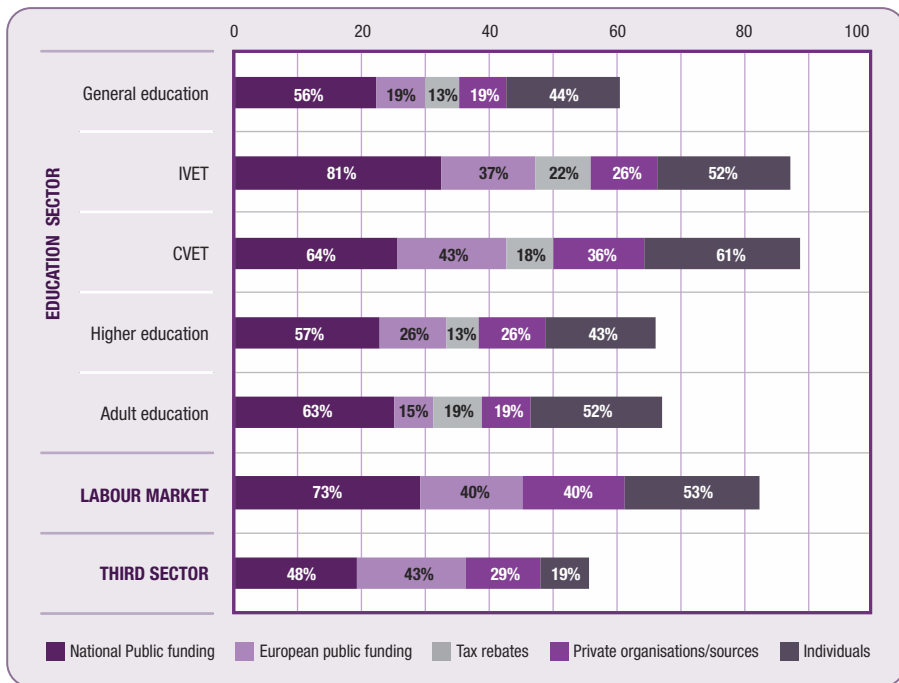
NB: Multiple responses possible. Not applicable: ES (HE), LT (GE), HU (AE, HE), PT (HE), FI (AE, HE), UK-W (CVET, AE). Information not available/do not know/no answer: AT (IVET, AE), BE-fl (CVET), DK (HE), IS (HE, AE, CVET), SI (GE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

Figure 12 presents the data by education sector/subsector, showing national public funding as the most common source. Funding from individuals is the second most common source, except in the third sector. This reflects the fact that, in many countries, individuals are required to pay fees to cover some or all of the costs associated with their validation procedure. As indicated in the 2016 thematic report on funding validation (Cedefop, 2016b), fees charged vary considerably depending on actual costs of validation procedures and the overarching funding framework. In some cases fees may only be required to cover administrative costs, while the remaining costs are covered by public funding, as is the case in Finland. In other instances the fees paid by the individual may be higher because there is no, or limited, public funding in place for any elements of validation.

Private organisations/funding sources were reported to have a more limited role. The highest figure was seen in the labour market, with 40% of countries where there is validation in this sector. It is also relatively high in CVET (36%). This suggests that there is room for improvement in engaging the private sector (employers, social partners) as stakeholders in supporting validation arrangements financially.

Figure 12. **Percentage of countries with validation arrangements by sector and subsector**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Not applicable: ES (HE), LT (GE), HU (AE, HE), PT (HE), FI (AE, HE), UK-W (CVET, AE). Information not available/do not know/no answer: AT (IVET, AE), BE-fl (CVET), DK (HE), IS (HE, AE, CVET), SI (GE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

## 4.4. Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

**Main progress since 2014:** it is not possible to present progress since 2014 <sup>(43)</sup>.

**Key message 1:** all countries with validation arrangements have provision for IAG to candidates in at least one education subsector.

**Key message 2:** although IAG may be available on different aspects of the validation process, it is not always a requirement.

**Key message 3:** IAG provision is most common in IVET (96%), CVET (82%) and higher education (81%).

**Key message 4:** the validation process is the aspect most commonly covered in IAG – either as a requirement or not – in one or more subsectors, in 34 countries.

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation identifies access to appropriate guidance and counselling as one of the conditions that can spur development and implementation of validation (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.3). The recommendation says that Member States should ensure within their validation arrangements that there is widespread dissemination of information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for, validation as well as on the relevant procedures (ibid).

The 2016 inventory included questions on IAG for the education sector only. In 34 of the 35 countries with validation arrangements in place (in one or more education sectors), IAG is provided to candidates in at least one education subsector. In 14 of these countries, there is IAG provision in four or five different education subsectors and in 14 countries in two or three different subsectors. Six countries have provision in just one subsector. Two countries were not able to provide an answer because of the devolved nature of certain education subsectors. For instance, in Denmark, the provision of IAG in higher education is decided by the individual institution and so it is not possible to confirm a national position. Similarly, in adult education in Finland, liberal adult education organisations have varied systems: in some organisations IAG is available, in others it is not. There is no legislation concerning validation in non-formal adult education, so it is up to the providers to decide how they carry out the procedures.

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<sup>(43)</sup> Although IAG was discussed in the 2014 synthesis report, the focus was on awareness of IAG, rather than whether IAG is a requirement.



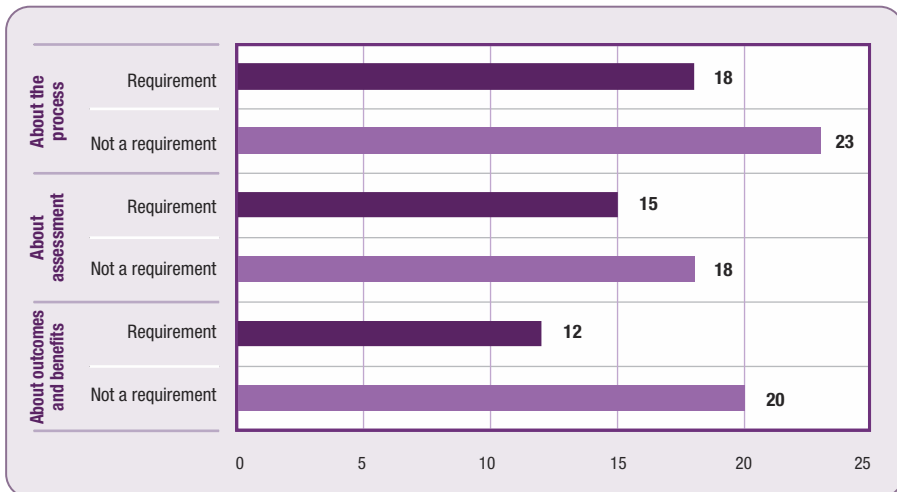
Analysis of the data by subsector shows that IAG provision is most common in IVET (96%, 26 countries), CVET (82%, 23 countries) and higher education (81%, 22 countries). It is relatively less common in general education (69%, 11 countries) and adult education (74%, 17 countries).

For those countries that provide IAG to candidates, activity can be broken down into three aspects: the validation process itself: the assessment of NFIL; and outcomes and benefits. The 2016 inventory explored whether IAG is provided for these three aspects and whether it is a requirement to do so.

The validation process is the aspect most commonly covered in IAG – either as a requirement or not – in one or more subsectors, in 34 countries. Outcomes and benefits are covered in 30 countries (in at least one subsector) and assessment is covered as part of the IAG in 28 countries (in at least one subsector). IAG may be provided on some or all of these three different aspects for any one educational subsector in a country.

Figure 13 shows the number of countries reported to offer IAG. It shows that although IAG is offered in most countries, in many it is not a requirement.

Figure 13. **Countries which provide IAG in one or more subsectors where there are validation arrangements**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Information not available/do not know/now answer: BE-fl (CVET), BE-fr (AE), BG (GE), CY (IVET, CVET), DE (GE), DK (HE), EL (CVET, AE), ES (HE), FI (GE), IS (HE, CVET, AE), IT (HE, IVET, CVET), LT (GE), NL (CVET, AE), SE (HE, AE), SI (GE), UK-W (AE, CVET), UK E&NI (IVET).

Not applicable: UK-E&NI (AE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

## 4.5. Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks

**Main progress since 2014:** within the education sector, learning recognised through validation can be used in 78% of countries to access formal education and/or acquire at least a module/part qualification, or credit in formal education on the NQF; this was possible in only 35% of countries covered in the 2014 inventory.

**Key message 1:** there is a link between validation arrangements and the NQF in at least one sector (education, labour market, third sector) in 31 countries.

**Key message 2:** within the education sector, there is a link between validation and the NQF in 28 countries. In these countries, validation can be used to obtain a (part of or full) qualification on the NQF in at least one subsector of education. In the labour market, there is a link between validation and the NQF in two thirds of countries where validation exists. Linkages between validation and formal education are weaker in the third sector, but some good practices exist.

**Key message 3:** links between validation and the NQF are more common in IVET, CVET and HE than in adult or general education.

**Key message 4:** around 75% of countries use exactly the same standards for validation, in at least one subsector of education, as those used in the formal education system.

**Key message 5:** in 23 countries certificates obtained through validation cannot be differentiated from those acquired through formal education, in at least one subsector of education.

The process of creating national qualification frameworks (NQFs) is still under development in several countries, such as Italy or Spain, where the framework has not been formally adopted; in others, such as Austria, it has recently been adopted but is not yet populated. A proposal for a Council recommendation on the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning is foreseen in 2017. This recommendation will contribute to implementing the political objectives to be set in the skills agenda through improved mobility due to more visible and trusted skills and qualifications.

The 2012 Council recommendation for validation asks Member States to ensure validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European qualifications framework. Linkages may take the form of acquisition of partial/full qualifications on the

NQF, credits, and/or to access formal education covered in the NQF. There is a link between validation arrangements and the NQF in at least one sector (education, labour market, third sector) in 31 countries.

#### 4.5.1. Links between validation and the NQF in the education sector

Although the questions in 2010 and 2014 were not exactly the same as in 2016, the link between validation and the NQF has been explored in each of those updates to the inventory. In 2016, in 78% of countries under study, learning acquired by validation of non-formal and informal learning can be used to access formal education or to acquire some kind of recognition in formal education; this may be in the form, for example, of modules/part qualification, or credit on the NQF. This is a significant increase from the situation in 2010 where this was possible in only 35% of countries covered by the inventory at the time. In 2010 over 50% of countries were reported to be in discussions to develop the link between validation and their national qualification frameworks. Since 2010, this number has declined and is now 25%.

Of the 28 countries where a link between validation and the NQF exists in the education sector, this is mostly used to acquire modules or part of a

Table 10. **Links between validation and NQF in the education sector (in at least one sector of education)**

Learning acquired through non-formal/informal means can be used to acquire any qualification on the NQF (13)	Learning acquired through non-formal/informal means can be used to acquire some qualifications on the NQF (16)
BE-fl, CH, FR, IE, LT, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, UK E&NI, UK-W	BE-fl, BG, CH, DE, DK, ES, FR, IE, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PT, SI, SK
Learning acquired through non-formal/informal means can be used to acquire modules or partial qualification on the NQF (22)	Learning acquired through non-formal/informal means can be used to acquire credits on the NQF (17)
BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, CH, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FR, IE, IS, LU, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, TR, UK E&NI, UK-S, UK-W	BE-fl, CH, DK, EE, ES, IS, IE, LT, LU, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, UK E&NI, UK-S, UK-W
Learning acquired through non-formal/informal means can be used to access formal education covered in the NQF (19)	A link between non-formal and informal learning and the NQF is under discussion (9)
BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, CH, DK, EE, ES, IE, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, SI, UK E&NI, UK-S, UK-W	DE, EL, IT, CY, HU, AT, SK, FI, SE

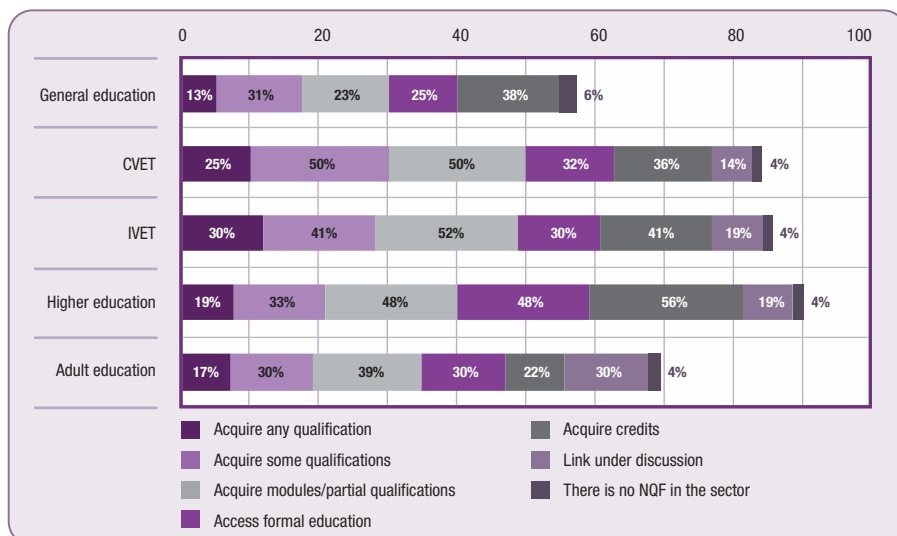
NB: Multiple responses possible.

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

qualification on the NQF. As shown in Table 10, 13 countries make it possible to acquire any qualification on the NQF in at least one or more subsectors of education (most common IVET). In 16 countries, it is possible to acquire at least some qualifications on their NQF in one or more education subsectors (the most common in CVET). Table 10 also shows that 19 countries allow the use of validation to access formal education. In another nine, a link between validation of non-formal and informal learning and the NQF is under discussion in relation to one or more education subsectors (Germany, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia, Finland and Sweden).

Analysis of the data on education subsectors shows there are some variations in the link between validation and the NQF across the five education sectors. As shown in Figure 14, the link between validation and the NQF is more common in IVET, CVET and higher education than it is in adult or general education subsectors. In adult education the goals of learning are often not so much related to obtaining a qualification but rather to getting certifications not related to formal qualifications or supporting adults, gaining personal fulfilment or achieving other objectives <sup>(44)</sup>.

Figure 14. **Link between validation and the NQF across different education subsectors**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Non applicable (FI, DE, LT in one subsector of education or more).  
Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(44)</sup> See for instance Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982.

Higher education performs strongly in the extent to which validation can be used to access formal education. As Figure 14 shows, 48% of countries with validation arrangements in place within higher education allow use of validation to access formal education. The CVET, IVET and adult education subsectors also perform relatively well in this area.

#### 4.5.2. Validation in the labour market and third sector

##### 4.5.2.1. *Link between validation in the labour market and formal education*

Among those countries where validation arrangements exist in the labour market, there is a link with formal education in 12 countries. In eight of these countries, validation can be used to acquire at least part of a qualification included in the NQF (Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, UK-England and Ireland, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales). Norway, Malta, Ireland and Sweden were also reported to have validation initiatives in place that enable an individual to acquire part of a qualification that is not on the NQF. In the Belgium-Flemish Community, Belgium-French Community, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Poland validation allows exemptions from part of a programme.

##### 4.5.2.2. *Link between validation in the third sector and formal education*

The data show that of the 22 countries with validation initiatives in the third sector, 20 were reported to have no link with the formal education sector. This is not surprising given the emphasis of the third sector on identification and documentation rather than assessment and certification (Cedefop, 2015), and some reluctance in the sector towards formalising the results of the education experiences that it provides (Souto-Otero et al., 2005). It may also reflect variations in the existence or use of commonly defined standards in both sectors.

There is evidence in three countries (Finland, Italy and the Netherlands) of links between validation in the third sector and formal education <sup>(45)</sup>. In the Netherlands, validation initiatives in the third sector are linked to the formal education sector and allow access, exemptions from part of a programme, and award of (part of a) qualification on the NQF. In Italy, learning recognised through validation may allow access and exemptions from part of a course. In Finland, validation initiatives in this sector also can allow exemption from part of a course and the award of (part of) a qualification which is not on the NQF.

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<sup>(45)</sup> In the Netherlands and in Finland, responses were given which showed links with the formal education system, as well as the response 'not linked to formal education sector'. It is assumed this is because of the project-based nature of validation in the third sector, i.e. some projects have a link to the formal education sector and some do not.

Linkages between validation and formal education in the third sector are weak. While such links may not be considered by some stakeholders as central to the purpose of third sector activities, they help to provide wide recognition to the learning that takes place in that sector.

#### 4.5.3. Standards and certificates

**Main progress since 2014:** it is not possible to present progress since 2014.

**Key message 1:** three quarters of countries use exactly the same standards for validation, in at least one education subsector, as those used in formal education. In a third of countries, the standards used for validation in at least one education subsector are equivalent in nature and level but are not the same as those used in formal education.

**Key message 2:** in all education subsectors apart from IVET, there is a higher share of countries where there are no differences between the certificates obtained through validation and those obtained via formal education than of countries where there is such a difference.

Standards for defining learning outcomes are frequently considered key in VNFIL. It has been argued that ‘If they are poorly defined and not widely accepted, it is unlikely that the qualification awarded will be useful to its holder, because it is not socially recognised. Standards may also have been defined by interests with no social or technical legitimacy and this would deprive the qualification of any social value’ (OECD, 2010, p.37). While not all forms of validation aim to result in a recognised qualification or certification – for instance in the third sector – the definition of standards is a central element for the legitimacy, trustworthiness and reliability of validation processes (Cedefop, 2015). Standards ‘have first and foremost to be (re)defined and described in the form of learning outcomes or competences’ (Cedefop, 2007). The Council recommendation defines validation as ‘a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard’ (Council of the European Union, 2012, p.5).

This section looks at the relationship between standards used for validation and those used in the formal education system <sup>(46)</sup>. Data available from the 2016 inventory show that three quarters of countries analysed (26 of 35 countries) use exactly the same standards for VNFIL, in at least one

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<sup>(46)</sup> Data on the labour market or third sector were not collected for this question.

subsector of education, as the ones used in formal education. In 12 of these countries <sup>(47)</sup> the standards used for validation are the same as those used in formal education in all subsectors. In IVET, 21 countries use the same standards for validation as in formal education: this demonstrates the advanced stage of IVET in the alignment of standards for validation and formal education, which could be expected given the extensive use of competence-based and occupational standards in that subsector (Cedefop, 2015). The subsectors that are further away from this alignment are adult education and, to a much lesser extent, CVET.

In 12 countries, the standards used for validation, in at least one education subsector, are equivalent in nature and level but are not the same as those used in formal education <sup>(48)</sup>.

#### 4.5.3.1. *Extent to which certificates obtained through validation are different*

A total of 23 countries have at least one subsector where the certificates obtained through validation cannot be differentiated from those acquired through formal education. In nine countries this is true for all subsectors where validation arrangements are in place <sup>(49)</sup>. However, in 22 of the 35 countries where validation arrangements are in place, it is possible, at least in one education subsector, to know if a certificate was obtained through VNFIL. The ways in which it is possible to know that a certificate was obtained through VNFIL are mainly differences in the way grades are presented or in the way time for completion is presented.

Looking at the data from the perspective of the subsectors helps to clarify this. In all education sectors, with the exception of IVET, there is a higher share of countries where there are no differences between the certificates obtained through validation and those obtained via formal education. In higher education, the share of countries where certificates acquired through validation cannot be differentiated from those acquired in formal education is considerably higher (70%). Conversely, in IVET, there is a higher share of countries (48%, representing 13 countries) where it is possible to know that the certificate was obtained through validation due to some existing differences. Often the same standards are used for VNFIL as for formal learning and the same certificates awarded, although these are still far from being universal practices.

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<sup>(47)</sup> Belgium-French Community, Bulgaria, France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and UK-Scotland.

<sup>(48)</sup> Belgium-Flemish Community, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey.

<sup>(49)</sup> Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Malta, Switzerland and UK-Scotland.

## 4.6. Quality assurance

**Main progress since 2014:** there is increasing recognition that validation arrangements require some specific form of quality assurance, either as a compulsory framework or as non-compulsory guidelines specifically designed for VNFIL.

**Key message 1:** quality assurance for validation is often addressed through guidelines/codes, or is covered through an existing QA framework.

**Key message 2:** an important strength of QA arrangements is consistency: quality procedures are similar across institutions.

The 2014 inventory looked into the situation of quality assurance for validation and used similar categories to those in the 2016 inventory. The number of countries reported to have quality assurance frameworks (QAFs) specific to validation has doubled between 2014 and 2016. This would suggest that some of the countries that in 2014 reported to have general QAFs applicable to validation – or no QAF for validation – had adopted specific QAFs for validation by 2016. Further, more countries have introduced guidelines for validation over the past two years, with the number of countries increasing from 11 in 2014 to 17 in 2016. There are fewer countries in 2016 than in 2014 devolving quality assurance to the authority in charge of awarding qualifications.

The main trend that can be observed from the 2016 inventory is a shift from general QAFs towards adopting QAFs specific to validation in some countries. Validation arrangements are increasingly moving towards some specific form of quality assurance, either as a compulsory framework or as non-compulsory guidelines specifically designed for VNFIL.

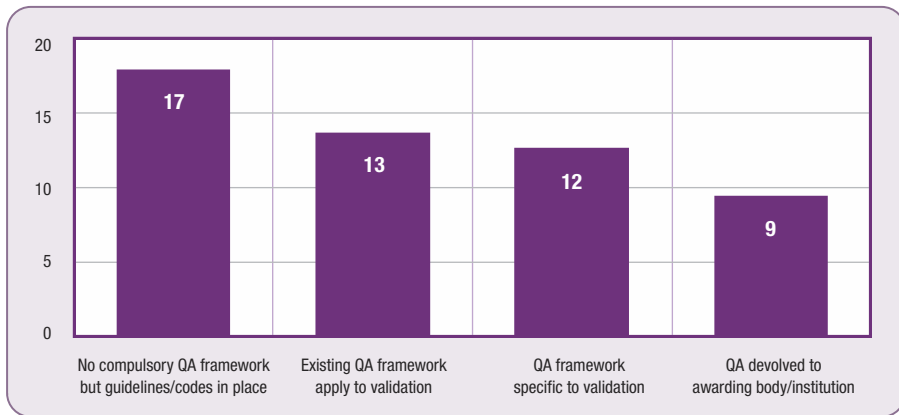
Figure 15 shows that in 12 countries there are QAFs in place specific to validation in one or more education subsectors where validation arrangements are in place. In 13 countries, existing general quality assurance frameworks in the education subsector also apply to validation; 17 countries were reported as having no compulsory quality assurance frameworks applicable to validation, but quality codes and/or guidelines are in place in one or more of the subsectors. This is the case for all subsectors, where validation arrangements are in place, in Estonia, Malta, Norway, Sweden and UK-Scotland. There are nine countries<sup>(50)</sup> that do not have centralised QAF but,

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<sup>(50)</sup> Belgium-Wallonia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherland, Slovakia.



Figure 15. **Countries with quality assurance framework in place, in one or more education subsectors where there are validation arrangements**



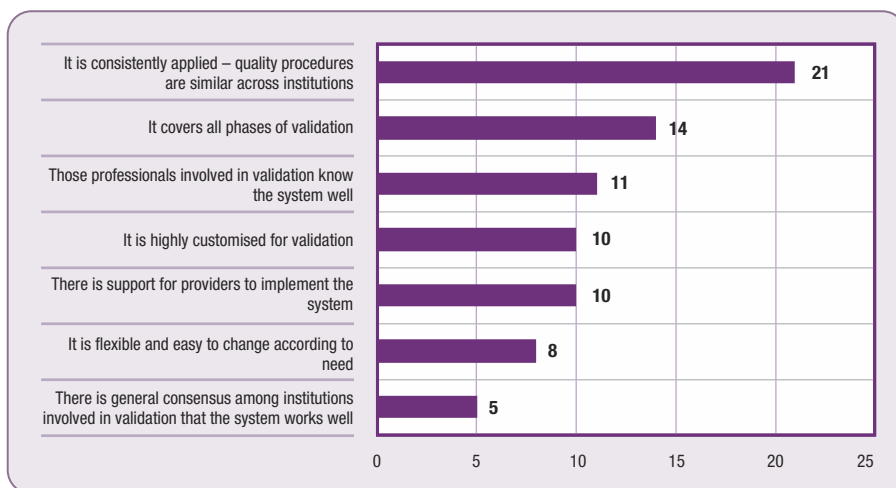
NB: Single response. Not applicable: DE (HE), ES (HE), CY (CVET), LT (AE, CVET, IVET, GE), HU (AE), AT (GE, HE, AE, CVET, IVET). Information not available/do not know/no answer: BE-NL (CVET, GE), BG (GE), EL (AE), ES (AE), IT (IVET, CVET), CY (IVET), HU (HE), SI (GE), FI (GE).  
Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

in some subsectors, quality assurance is devolved to the body awarding the qualification. In Slovakia, this applies to all subsectors where validation arrangements are in place.

The country fiche asked the experts to evaluate the main strengths of the QA system for validation across countries. Figure 16 shows that the aspect most frequently reported – in 21 of 35 countries – is that the procedures are similar across institutions, which enables the quality assurance for validation to be consistently applied. Other strengths reported are that quality assurance covers all phases of validation, that the professionals involved know the system well, that there is support for providers to implement the system and that the quality assurance is highly customised for validation.

Figure 16 reveals a range of areas where progress is required. Less than a quarter of countries find that quality assurance is flexible and easy to change according to need or that there is general consensus among institutions involved in validation that the system works well.

Figure 16. **Countries reporting strengths of quality assurance systems in one or more education subsectors where there are validation arrangements**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Not applicable: SK (CVET, AE). Information not available/do not know: AT (IVET, AE), BE-fl (AE, HE), BE-fr (CVET), BG (GE), CY (CVET), DE (GE, IVET, CVET, HE), EE (GE), ES (AE, HE), FI (GE, AE), FR (IVET, HE), HU (AE, HE), IS (CVET, AE, HE), IT (HE), LT (GE), SI (GE, IVET), SE (IVET), PT (HE), UK-E&NI (IVET, HE), UK-W (IVET, CVET, AE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

## 4.7. Practitioner professional competences

**Main progress since 2014:** the 2016 inventory paints a similar picture to 2014 with regard to practitioner competences; many countries report that there are no mandatory (imposed) requirements for staff involved in validation.

**Key message 1:** many countries were reported to having no mandatory (imposed) requirements for staff involved in validation. This was most common in higher education.

**Key message 2:** where there are requirements, these are more common for staff involved in assessment than in IAG.

**Key message 3:** the most common requirements reported in 2016 are qualifications which are not specific to the performance of validation, and relevant professional training.

In this section, we discuss the competences of staff involved in the provision and delivery of validation <sup>(51)</sup>.

The 2014 report referred to the qualifications and competences of staff involved in validation, particularly assessors, as a major challenge. The 2014 update found that the requirements for validation professionals in terms of qualifications, experience and training vary. Mandatory requirements in terms of experience were found to be more common but few countries were reported to have established requirements for training and none requiring specific qualifications.

The data provided for the 2016 update reinforce those findings, with many countries reported to have no mandatory (imposed) requirements for staff involved in validation. The most common requirements are qualifications that are not specific to validation performance and relevant professional training. In contrast to 2014, the 2016 data report that experience is a less common requirement than these.

Figure 17 shows the staff requirements data for 2016. It presents the number of countries with validation arrangements in place in at least one subsector of education, which impose requirements on IAG and assessment staff in one or more of these subsectors.

For both IAG and assessment staff, where there are mandatory (imposed) requirements, the most common is qualifications which are not specific to the validation performance. The second most common requirement is relevant professional training.

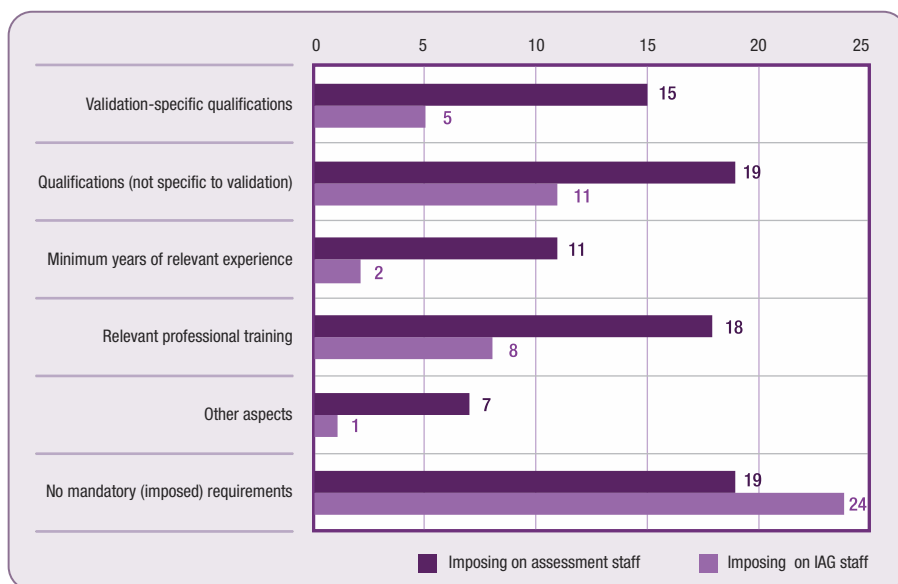
The data show that it is more common to impose requirements on assessment staff than IAG. It may be that assessment training is more commonly required as it is a common element of teacher training, or that greater priority is given to that task than to IAG. IAG personnel tend to be more diverse, ranging from PES to higher education counsellors, to human resource functions in companies. For IAG staff there tends to be no mandatory (imposed) requirements (24 countries). The same is the case for assessment staff (19 countries).

The subsector where it is most common not to impose requirements on staff is higher education. Professional training is notable in IVET and CVET, in comparison to the other subsectors. This may be because experience in the professional context (the sector specific context) is often seen as necessary in these two education subsectors.

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<sup>(51)</sup> This section discusses the education subsectors only, as there were no questions in the country fiche sections relating to the labour market and third sector.

Figure 17. **Countries imposing requirements on IAG and assessment staff in one or more subsectors of education where there are validation arrangements**



NB: Multiple responses possible.

- Assessment staff: not applicable for DE (AE), EL (CVET), CY (CVET), LT (GE), AT (CVET, AE), SK (CVET, AE), UK-Wales (CVET, AE). Information not available/do not know/no answer responses: BE-fl (AE, CVET), BG (GE), CY (IVET), EL (IVET), IS (CVET, AE, HE), SI (GE).
- IAG staff: not applicable for AT (CVET, HE), EL (IVET, AE), SK (CVET, AE), TR (AE), UK Wales (CVET, AE), SE (AE, HE). Information not available/do not know/no answer responses: BE-fl (GE, IVET, CVET), BE-fr (CVET, AE), BG (GE), CY (IVET, CVET), ES (HE), IS (CVET, AE, HE), IT (HE), MT (CVET), NL (HE), SI (GE), UK-ENI (AE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

#### 4.7.1.1. *Training for validation practitioners*

The 2014 inventory identified education and training opportunities to support the professional development of validation staff in several countries. However, in 2014 few countries had a requirement for staff involved in validation to undertake development activities or an individual right to the professional development. The 2016 inventory has found that most countries have no right to training for validation staff (23 countries).

If training is defined as a right, it is most commonly so for both types of staff (IAG and assessment): this is the case in nine countries. In five countries only assessment staff has a right to training; there are no instances where training is a right for IAG staff only. This further underlines the greater importance placed on training in relation to assessment, compared to IAG in European countries.

It is important to bear in mind the formulation of the question, which refers to a 'right' to training. The low response rate does not necessarily mean that training does not exist, rather that it may not be a 'right' for staff involved in validation. Training relating to validation can be optional or delivered on a needs-basis, rather than a right for all IAG/assessment staff.

From a subsector perspective, it is more common for validation staff to have a right to training in CVET, GE and IVET, than in AE and HE. It is HE where it is most often reported that there is no right to training for staff (18 countries) and this is the most frequently reported option across all subsectors except GE.

# Skills audit

**Main progress since 2014:** there has been a significant increase since 2014 in the opportunity for unemployed people or those at risk of unemployment to undergo a skills audit.

**Key message 1:** 20 countries integrate skills audits within existing arrangements for validation.

**Key message 2:** 14 countries make it standard practice to offer a skills audit to the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment.

The 2012 Council recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012) refers to provision of opportunities for the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment to undertake a 'skills audit' aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences. This should happen within a reasonable period of time, ideally within six months of an identified need.

Skill audits can be used to help a range of different target groups. While they can be important for people with lower qualifications, the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment, they are also important for jobseekers and those who want to change or redefine their career path. With the current migrant crisis in Europe, policy measures to understand the skills, qualifications and professional experiences of third country nationals can support their integration into society and the labour market. The role of skills audits and early skills profiling for third country nationals, as emphasised in the skills agenda <sup>(52)</sup> is particularly importance.

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<sup>(52)</sup> The European Commission's agenda for new skills and jobs:  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=958> [accessed 3.2.2017].

## 5.1. Integrating skills audits into existing validation approaches

With high unemployment rates across Europe, skills audits could be a useful tool to help increase the labour market opportunities of citizens. The upskilling pathways <sup>(53)</sup> proposed in the skills agenda is intended to improve the employment opportunities of low-qualified adults in Europe. The upskilling pathway offers skills assessment and learning responding to the needs of the individual and opportunities to have their skills validated and recognised. This builds on the idea outlined in the 2012 Council recommendation on validation to offer individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment the opportunity to undergo a skills audit aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences.

Of the 36 countries included in the 2016 European inventory, 20 integrate skills audits within their existing validation arrangements. Although the data are not strictly comparable <sup>(54)</sup>, this suggests a slight increase in activity from 2014, when there was an opportunity to undergo a skills audit in 17 countries.

Table 11. **Skills audits (2014) and skills audits within validation arrangements (2016)**

2014 Countries with a possibility to undergo a skills audit	2016 Countries that integrate skills audits into existing arrangements for validation
BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, EL, FI, FR, HU, HR, IT, LU, LV, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI, TR	BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, CZ, DE, DK, ES, FI, HR, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LU, LV, NL, PT, RO, UK-S
17 countries	20 countries

Source: 2014 and 2016 European inventory country fiches.

<sup>(53)</sup> Council recommendation of 19 December 2016 on *Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults*. OJ C 484, 24.12.2016, pp. 1-6. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:JOC_2016_484_R_0001) [accessed 3.2.2017].

<sup>(54)</sup> The 2016 country fiche asked: are skills audits, as defined in the Council recommendation, integrated within the approach to validation arrangements?

## 5.2. Skills audits for the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment

The 2016 inventory collected data on availability of skills audits for the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment. In 2014, no country offered a right to undertake a skills audit within six months of becoming unemployed. The 2016 inventory shows a considerable degree of subsequent activity in this area as demonstrated in Table 12.

Table 12. **Skills audits for the unemployed/at risk of unemployment**

Standard practice to offer a skills audit to those unemployed or at risk of unemployment	Countries	Number of countries
Yes, within three months	DK, IT, FI	3
Yes, within six months	CZ, HR, IS	3
Yes, but no timeframe specified	BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, EL, IE, LU, MT, PL	8
No, but there is a proposal to introduce it	RO, SK	2
No, and there is no proposal to introduce it	LI, SI, UK-E&NI	3
There are no skills audits as such, but career orientation/professional plan initiatives are available from public employment services	AT, BG, CY, DE, EE, ES, HU, LT, LV, NL, NO, PT, SE, TR, UK-S, UK-W	16

NB: Information not available: France.

Source: 2014 and 2016 European inventory country fiches.

The 2016 inventory shows it is standard practice in 14 countries to offer a skills audit to those who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment. In three of these countries, the skills audit is offered within six months (Croatia, Czech Republic and Iceland). In three it is offered within three months (Denmark, Italy and Finland) and in eight a timeframe is not specified (Belgium-Flemish Community, Belgium-French Community, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland and Switzerland). It is reported for two countries (Romania and Slovakia) that, while it is currently not the case to offer the unemployed or those at risk of unemployment the opportunity to undertake a skills audit, there is a proposal to introduce it. A total of 16 countries reported that there are no skills audits as such, but career orientation/professional plan initiatives are available from public employment services. It was reported for three countries that the offer of skills audits to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment



is not standard practice and there are no proposals to introduce it. There has generally been a considerable degree of activity on this principle.

### 5.3. Nature of the skills audit

The concept, understanding, approach and supporting arrangements for skills audits continue to vary significantly among the countries covered by the 2016 inventory. Of the 14 countries of Table 13 where skills audits are offered to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment, different approaches to what a skills audit entails can be observed. Table 13 shows that in some countries individuals undertake a skills profile (11 countries); in others, individuals attend an in-depth interview (10 countries) as part of an audit. Individuals may also receive support from an adviser in combination with a skills profile and in-depth interview: this is the case for Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg and Poland.

Table 13. **Elements of skills audit offered to the unemployed/ at risk of unemployment**

	Initial skills profiling	Support of an advisor	In-depth interviews
Belgium-Flemish Community			
Belgium-French Community	✓		
Croatia	✓	✓	✓
Czech Republic			✓
Denmark	✓	✓	✓
Finland	✓	✓	✓
Greece			
Iceland	✓	✓	✓
Ireland	✓		✓
Italy	✓	✓	✓
Luxembourg	✓	✓	✓
Malta	✓		
Poland	✓	✓	✓
Switzerland	✓		✓

NB: Multiple responses possible. Information not available for Belgium-Flemish Community and Greece.  
Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

As in 2014, the 2016 inventory shows that skills audit usually result in a document/portfolio that states the competences, skills and aptitudes of the individual. In many cases this includes a 'next steps' plan for training and sometimes providing information on the types of vacancies a person could apply for.

# Validation tools and methods

**Main progress since 2014:** in 2014 the use of traditional assessment methods (tests and examinations) was observed as common for validation; for the documentation stage, portfolios and declarative methods were the most common. The 2016 data suggest that portfolios and a combination of methods are the most commonly used methods, alongside tests and examinations.

**Key message 1:** commonly used methods are portfolios; a combination of methods; and tests and examinations.

**Key message 2:** where standardised tools are used, these tend to be developed at national, rather than at regional level.

## 6.1. Tools for extracting evidence

Validation tools are central to the legitimacy and acceptance of the validation process. The synthesis report for the 2014 inventory discussed the methods used to carry out validation. It suggested that the methodologies employed for assessment employed for the VNFIL were not generally dissimilar from those employed in the formal education sector, although the relative popularity of different methods varied between the two. For the documentation stage, portfolios were identified as by far the most frequently accepted methodology, followed by declarative methods, and simulations/evidence extracted from work.

The 2016 inventory data show that the methods most commonly used to obtain evidence of the skills and competences of the candidate are portfolios, a combination of methods, and tests and examinations.

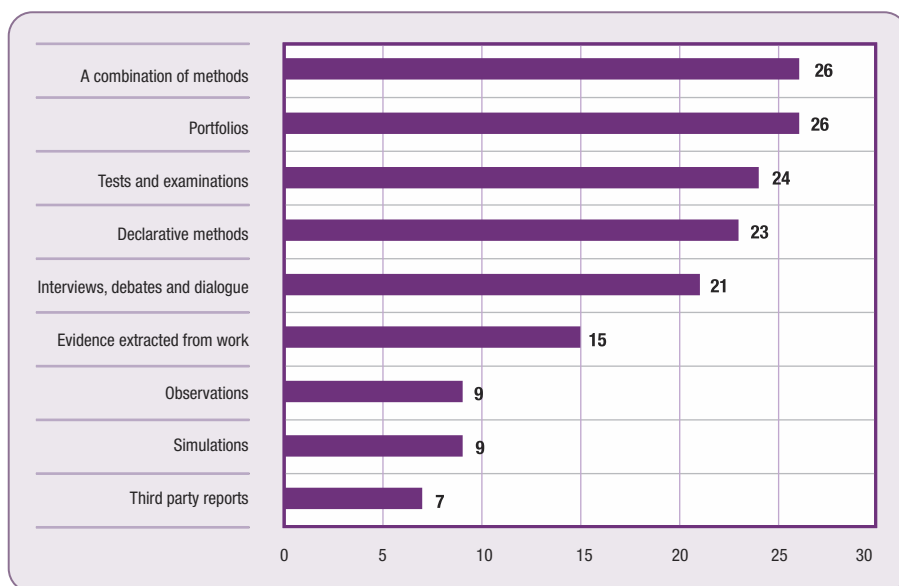
Figure 18 focuses on a range of methods that have been identified as being 'frequently used' <sup>(55)</sup> to obtain evidence of learning. Portfolios are the

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<sup>(55)</sup> There were many blank responses for at least some of the methods in some education subsectors. We assume this is because experts only responded for the methods that were used, rather than marking them as 'not used' or 'rarely used'.

single most used method of obtaining evidence for validation, featuring in 26 countries where there are validation arrangements in place in at least one education subsector. As the inventory’s 2014 thematic report on validation methods showed, portfolios are widely used in different stages of validation (identification, assessment and documentation) (European Commission et al., 2014b). A combination of methods is equally popular in terms of the number of countries. Tests and examinations, declarative methods, and interviews, debates and dialogue are also prevalent in many countries. Tests and examinations, declarative methods, and interviews, debates and dialogue are also prevalent in many countries.

Figure 18. **Countries reporting methods of validation in one or more education subsectors of where there are validation arrangements**



Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches (Multiple responses possible).

Figure 18 confirms that the range of methods used for validation is similar to those used in formal education, although the popularity of the individual methods used varies between validation and formal education. Portfolios are more prominent in validation than in formal education. The popularity of ‘a combination of methods’ suggests that the ‘gold standard’ in assessment, based on the triangulation of results from different assessment methods, is frequently used in validation. Different methods have different advantages and

disadvantages (European Commission et al., 2014a). A combination of methods can build on the complementarities between them. It is also important to ensure that the methods chosen are fit for purpose, as in taking into account the breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed (Cedefop, 2015).

Analysis of the data by education subsector shows interesting nuances. The 2014 inventory synthesis report observed greater experimentation in some countries in the methods for VNFIL at higher education levels. In 2016, in higher education, a high proportion (63%) of countries with validation arrangements use portfolios, whereas only a small proportion (26%) use tests and examinations; this is much lower than in for any other subsector.

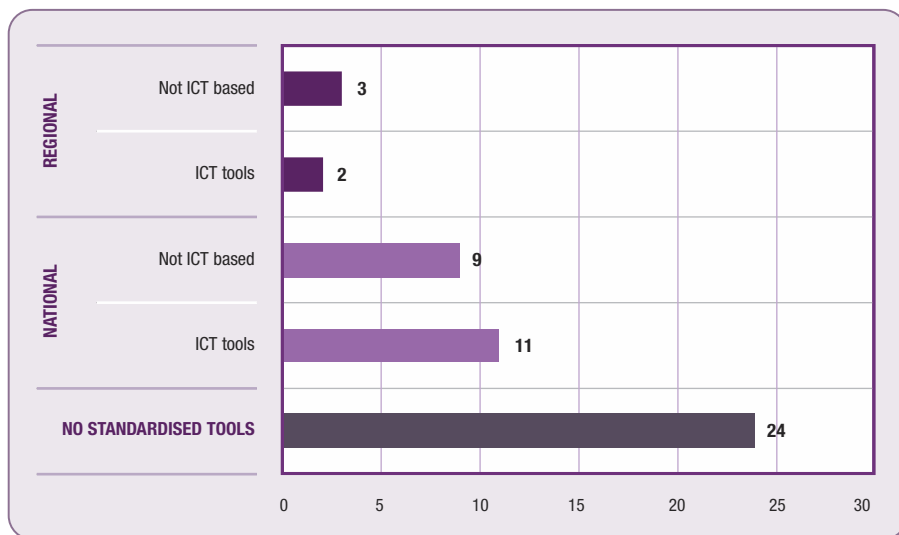
Only 25% of countries were reported as using a combination of methods in general education, around half the figure for any other subsector. The low use of evidence from work in general and adult education reflects the character of both subsectors, which are further away from labour market experiences than the other subsectors. Third party reports, simulations, and observations are used only in a small proportion of countries in all subsectors except IVET and CVET, where up to a quarter of countries where it was reported that these methods were frequently used. The reasons for the above patterns require further research, as it would seem, for example, that there is greater scope for the use of simulations and observations in validation.

## 6.2. Use of standardised tools

This section looks at the use of ICT and non-ICT based national and/or regional standardised tools for validation in European countries within the education sector. Data were not collected for the labour market and third sector for this question.

Standardised tools can mainstream processes and increase awareness of validation. The 2016 inventory data show, however, that use of standardised tools is not widespread. As Figure 19 shows, 24 countries reported that there are no standardised tools/templates used in one or more education subsectors. The use of standardised tools in some form was reported for a total of 18 countries, in at least one sector. These are mostly nationally standardised ICT tools, reflecting that the development of standardised tools is most frequently a national responsibility.

Figure 19. **Countries with nationally/regionally standardised tools/templates used in validation procedures in one or more education subsectors where there are validation arrangements**



NB: Multiple responses possible. Not applicable: NL (GE), AT (GE), PT (HE), SK (CVET, AE), UK-W (CVET).

Information not available/do not know/no answer' responses: BE-fl (CVET), CY (CVET), LT (IVET, CVET, AE, HE), LU (GE, AE), SI (GE, IVET, CVET), SE (IVET, HE, AE), UK E&NI (AE).

Source: 2016 European inventory country fiches.

The data on education subsectors show that standardised tools/templates are seldom used in higher education: they are not used in 70% of countries with validation arrangements in higher education, which may reflect the high degree of independence of education institutions in this sector. They are also not used in half of the countries with validation arrangements in general education (eight countries).

The most commonly used standardised tools in each subsector are nationally standardised ICT-based tools in adult education and higher education, and non-ICT based tools in general education, IVET and CVET. Given this diversity of approaches it is important to assess the advantages and disadvantages of ICT and non-ICT based solutions, and of their combination. For example, the lack of non-ICT based national tools in adult education may be a cause of concern given possibilities of digital exclusion.

# Conclusions

## 7.1. Validation arrangements, strategies and priorities

**Areas for development:** setting up coordination mechanisms; ensuring comprehensive and coordinated arrangements are in place; adoption and implementation of national strategies.

The 2016 inventory shows that validation arrangements are planned or in place in all 36 countries it covers. Most national approaches to validation consist of the creation of national arrangements that encompass all sectors. However, in some countries (around a third) validation arrangements are sectoral. In some cases these cover only some sectors (education, labour market, third sector) or certain subsectors of education. Coordination is an important aspect, particularly when sectoral or regional arrangements are in place. However, coordinating mechanisms are only in place in 20 countries covered by the 2016 inventory; this is an aspect for development.

The 2016 inventory indicates that validation is still very much an education issue and that more needs to be done to open validation up to labour market and third sector initiatives. Within education, it is those subsectors that have closer connections to the labour market (CVET, IVET and HE) that more often have validation arrangements in place. This is consistent with the fact that reducing unemployment and improving the matching of skills and jobs are the two most common reasons reported in the 2016 inventory in terms of the rationale for prioritisation of certain sectors in validation. The challenge for the years to come is to ensure more comprehensive and coordinated validation arrangements are in place, covering the plurality of sectors and contexts where learning takes place.

Progress in devising national strategies for validation has been significant. However, around 25% of the countries covered by the inventory still do not have a national strategy in place. While these countries are working in the development of such strategies, this is an area where strong progress could be expected in the next two years.

## 7.2. Access, priority groups and data monitoring

**Areas for development:** improving data collection; attracting target groups that are currently under-represented and disadvantaged groups; increasing the provision of IAG and involvement of IAG providers; increasing funding from private sources.

Available data seem to indicate an increase in take-up of validation in the past two years. However, data remain limited and not fully representative of validation initiatives in the countries covered by the inventory. This is an area where progress is needed, as it impedes cost-benefit analysis or impact assessments.

Adult learners, workers and low-qualified individuals are the main users of validation in education, while volunteers and young people are important target groups in the third sector. Older workers, people with disabilities, volunteers, migrants/refugees, young people and early school leavers were reported to receive less attention. The introduction of early skills profiling for third country nationals announced in the skills agenda is likely to lead to an increase in the targeting of this group and future take-up of validation by third country nationals. Given the political priority currently placed on some of these groups and the potential of validation to benefit them, greater momentum and exchange of good practices in attracting them to validation would seem necessary.

This is particularly important since validation as a tool for social inclusion was reported as an important aspect for prioritisation of target groups in many countries. Further awareness raising and a localised and integrated approach to recruiting and attracting disadvantaged groups into validation are necessary. Greater involvement in validation by youth and civil society organisations, private employment services, and IAG providers would have the potential to contribute to achieving this aim by making provision closer to the local level and the needs of their specific target group. IAG is often not a requirement (although it may be available) in many validation initiatives/arrangements in Europe. This suggests that some learners may not have the chance to access the information they need to undergo validation. There would also seem to be scope to increase the funding provided by private organisations, and to some extent individuals, to validation activities. Given that validation has the potential to generate positive outcomes from a labour market perspective – supporting people to utilise their existing skills



better for employability and career progression – there may be greater scope to engage private sector stakeholders in providing funding to support validation.

### 7.3. Stakeholders

**Areas for development:** comparisons of stakeholder involvement could be used to explore how stakeholder coordination can be developed to improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of validation initiatives.

There are variations in the way stakeholders take part in validation activities across the different (sub)sectors. Government and national organisations are normally the main bodies responsible for validation, covering a wide range of functions but mainly acting as coordinators. Training providers are in charge of carrying out the process, providing the four stages of validation. Employers, trade unions and chambers of commerce need to be encouraged to take part in validation, especially to coordinate with education and training initiatives.

The data collected for this inventory update could support fruitful comparisons of how stakeholder involvement in education subsectors, validation sectors and countries plays out with a varying degree of coordination. These comparisons could spark discussions on the modalities of the 2012 Council recommendation, which calls for coordination between stakeholders. Data and reflections on how stakeholder coordination plays out can be used to explore the degree to which stakeholders are willing and positioned to build sustainable alliances, looser communities of interest or, more specifically, communities of practice for validation professionals.

### 7.4. Processes and outcomes

**Areas for development:** progress is expected towards linking validation and NQFs; there is work to be done to link third sector and labour market validation to qualifications and qualification frameworks; quality assurance arrangements need to guarantee a minimum set of quality conditions.

Since 2010, Member States have been gradually creating greater links between validation and NQFs. Around 78% of countries now have such links; in the remaining countries, their establishment is under discussion. Based on this considerable progress, work will continue in the next two years.

The four stages of validation are being used in the education, labour market and third sectors. In the education sector, while all four stages of validation are being used in one or more subsectors in most countries, in some countries, stages are used on their own or in combination with one or more other stages. The most commonly used stages in general education, IVET and CVET are assessment and certification. While all four stages are used in the third sector, there is less focus on certification, whereas the labour market is characterised by a balance between the four stages.

However, in terms of outcomes, validation in the third sector and the labour market seldom leads to the award of qualifications. Given the emphasis placed in the Council recommendation on the link between validation and the award of qualifications, this continues to be a key area for development.

The 2012 Council recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2012) asked Member States to ensure that (part-) qualifications awarded through validation comply with the same or equivalent standards as qualifications obtained through formal education. Evidence provided in the 2016 inventory suggests this is already the reality in most countries and sectors/subsectors for which validation arrangements are in place.

However, in many countries where validation arrangements are in place, it is possible to know, at least in one education subsector, that a given certificate was obtained through VNFIL. While often the same standards used for VNIL are used for formal learning and the same certificates are awarded, these are still far from being universal practices.

The range of methodologies for assessment employed for VNFIL are broadly shared with those employed in formal education, although there are also variations in the popularity of specific methods between validation and formal education' for example, portfolios are more popular in validation than in formal education. Similarly, there is a lack of standardised tools and more can be done in the use of ICT to aid validation processes.

There has been a shift towards the use of specific quality assurance frameworks for validation and increasing use of guidelines, as opposed to compulsory frameworks. This seems to recognise, on the one hand, the specific characteristics of validation compared to other forms of recognition of educational outcomes, and, on the other hand, a tendency in many countries to avoid insisting on standardised rules for quality assurance in validation.

While the use of guidelines has many advantages, it is important to ensure that quality assurance measures that guarantee a minimum set of quality conditions are in place across validation institutions. This is important from the perspective of individual users and their rights, and also for the credibility of validation practices.

## 7.5. Practitioner professional competences

**Areas for development:** there is much scope to step up progress in relation to requirements and training support for practitioners involved in validation.

Little development was found in this area. Many countries do not prescribe mandatory requirements for staff involved in validation. This is particularly the case for staff involved in validation IAG. Validation practitioners do not have a right in many countries to undertake professional development. These are areas where there is scope for stepping up progress in the next two years.

## 7.6. Skills audits

**Areas for development:** there has been considerable progress in this area but more is required to make it standard practice to offer a skills audit to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment, and to develop a common understanding of the nature of skills audits.

There has been considerable progress in this area since the 2012 Council recommendation, with further scope for improvement given the importance of this principle. In three countries it has become standard practice to offer a skills audit within three months to those who become unemployed; in three further countries this is within six months and in another eight it is standard practice to offer an audit without a specified timeframe. Nevertheless, the concept, understanding, approach and supporting arrangements for skills audits continue to vary significantly among the inventory countries. Though the 14 countries making it standard practice to offer a skills audit to people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment represent significant advances since 2014, progress is required in this area in the next two years to meet the timeframe specified in the Council recommendation.

## 7.7. Evolving validation challenges for the next two years

Key challenges are professional competences for practitioners, prioritisation of disadvantaged groups, transparency of quality assurance, and synergies with credit transfer systems.

Progress can be identified in a number of areas, but has been mixed. While in some areas it has been vigorous, areas such as professional competences for validation professionals and prioritisation of disadvantaged groups require much more decisive action in most countries. Attention is also required in relation to the transparency of quality assurance and synergies with credit transfer systems.

Most countries provide opportunities for individuals to go through validation arrangements but progress is required in terms of having a broader base of evidence on use and impact of validation arrangements, and in developing links with related policies, especially active labour market policies.

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# List of abbreviations

<b>AE</b>	adult education
<b>CR</b>	Council recommendation
<b>CROQF</b>	Croatian qualification framework
<b>CVET</b>	continuing vocational education and training
<b>ACTS</b>	European credit transfer and accumulation system
<b>ECVET</b>	European credit system for vocational education and training
<b>EQF</b>	European qualification framework
<b>GE</b>	general education
<b>HE</b>	higher education
<b>IAG</b>	information, advice and guidance
<b>IVET</b>	initial vocational education and training
<b>NQF</b>	national qualifications framework
<b>PES</b>	public employment services
<b>VNFIL</b>	validation of non-formal and informal learning



# How to read this report

In addition to writing the 2016 country reports <sup>(56)</sup>, the inventory country experts were also required to complete a 'country fiche database', which was intended to summarise the information presented in the country report according to a standardised set of indicators. This aims to facilitate rapid country overview, cross-country comparisons and a review of progress.

This database included:

- (a) an introductory 'general' section, which contained a small number of questions aiming to capture the overall validation situation in the country concerned;
- (b) one section for each education and training subsector:
  - (i) general education;
  - (ii) initial vocational education and training (IVET);
  - (iii) continuing vocational education and training (CVET);
  - (iv) higher education (HE);
  - (v) adult learning;
- (c) one section characterising the labour market approach to validation: data relating to the labour market relate to the number of country updates reported to either have systematic validation arrangements in place for the labour market; for some sectors/occupations or where validation arrangements are in development;
- (d) one section characterising validation initiatives in the third sector: by 'third sector', we refer to validation to support youth work or volunteers, to validate non-formal learning opportunities offered by third sector organisations, or validation arrangements developed by third sector organisations such as charities or NGOs, to support a variety of target groups (such as refugees/migrants, the unemployed, young people facing exclusion, people with a disability). In recognition that in this sector, there may be a number of project-based initiatives, data on the third sector relate to the number of countries which were reported to have few or more validation initiatives in the third sector (22 countries).

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<sup>(56)</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory> [accessed 3.2.2017].

Questions within the country fiche database were a mix of multiple choice and single response options, with some allowing for free-text entries. The questionnaire for the education subsectors was the same across all five subsectors, while different questionnaires were used for the labour market and third sector parts.

The 2016 database was developed using learning from 2014, when only one country fiche was completed for each country. The approach adopted in the 2016 version of the inventory aims for better recognising variations from sector to sector within countries.

Validation is a complex issue, approached in very different ways across the countries of Europe. It is hard to apply standardised indicators to such a complex topic. Nevertheless, the outcome of the analysis work gives us a good idea of the landscape of validation across Europe in 2016 and how this has changed since the previous inventories in 2014 and 2010.

The analysis is presented by country 'count' and so it is important to explain how to interpret the numbers and charts presented in this report. First, the responses to the questions included within the 'general', labour market and third sector parts of the country fiche database are answered once only for each country. Where the 'number of countries' is presented, this is simply the number of countries which gave each answer to the question. The commentary relating to these parts of the database has been embedded within the relevant sections of the report.

Presentation of data resulting from the questionnaires relating to the education subsectors is more complex. Within each section, the results are first presented in terms of the 'count of countries'. This figure represents the number of countries where the indicator applies in at least one subsector of education where there are validation arrangements (but may not apply to all subsectors in that country). Each country is counted once, regardless of the number of subsectors where the category applies. For multiple choice questions, this means that the totals come to more than the total number of countries with validation arrangements in place.

In certain sections of the report, to enable the reader to have a more nuanced view of the situation, the data are then presented by subsector. Figures here are presented as percentages, which represent the share of countries with validation arrangements in that subsector, which responded with the indicator concerned.

This report represents a synthesis based, primarily, on the country fiches; the charts presented throughout this report are based on the indicator provided in the country fiches unless otherwise stated. Certain caveats should be highlighted:

- (a) first, the country experts completed the country fiche based on their knowledge of the situation in the country they covered. Interpretation of the question and selection of indicator(s) required a degree of personal judgement;
- (b) second, it is difficult to apply the definitions of the sectors and subsectors to individual country contexts. For instance, in some countries adult learners returning to education and undertaking secondary education is understood as adult learning, while in other countries this is understood as general education;
- (c) finally, for some items there is a high 'not applicable/information not available/do not know' response rate. This is particularly notable for general education, which limits some extent conclusions on use of validation in that subsector.

The strength of the inventory is that, alongside this synthesis report, there are 36 detailed country reports which describe the situation in each country in full. This means that alongside this 'snapshot' of Europe, a detailed picture of validation in each country can be found by referring to the country reports.

Data collection and information gathering was carried out up to June 2016.

ANNEX 2

# Construction of overview tables

## Steps to table construction

There are three steps to the construction of overview tables presented in Chapter 2:

Figure A1. **Steps to the construction of the table**



Source: Cedefop.

Below we provide more information on each of these steps.

## Selection of indicators

We take the 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning as place of departure, as in the 2014 synthesis report. The recommendation presents eight main elements. These can be mapped against the 2016 country fiche questions as follows:

Table A1. Council recommendation principles and fiche questions

Recommendation principle	2016 country fiche question
Validation arrangements in place	1.2
IAG on benefits, opportunities and procedures	2.11
Guidance and counselling is readily accessible	2.10
Links to NQF and in line with EQF	2.3 (3.6 and 4.3 for LM and TS)
Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	2.5
Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment	2.23-2.24
Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors	2.14
Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)	2.4D
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	2.20
Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within six months of an identified need	3.10

Source: Cedefop.

No indicator was included in the inventory fiche for the use of EU transparency tools. The only data source that could be used is Eurobarometer data on awareness of European tools.

## Scoring on indicators

Below we outline the procedures to score on individual indicators. We also offer an initial assessment of the soundness of the indicator in the heading:

Table A2. **Assessment of the match between the indicators and Council recommendation**

High level of correspondence with the recommendation
Indicator is more stringent than the recommendation
Indicator is less stringent than the recommendation
The level of correspondence is relatively loose

We established a binary distinction between meeting/not meeting the criteria for each question. If country experts could not find information on an indicator this suggests that the principle outlined in the recommendation is not being achieved and is not visible to a sufficient extent. This has been the way in which data have been coded; in some indicators performance could be slightly more advanced than suggested in relation to the table.

### Questions used

The list of questions is presented below. A full country fiche questionnaire can be requested from Cedefop; it will also be published as part of the database linking the inventory to the European guidelines on validation. It is currently only possible to see the 2014 fiche at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-visualisations/european-database-on-validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning> [accessed 3.2.2017].

<b>1</b>	<b>Validation arrangements in place</b> (Q2.2, Q3.1, Q4.1)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Education) If there are no validation arrangements in this sector, please click 'no arrangements' here. You can then move on to the next part of the country fiche.</li> <li>• (Labour market) Are there systematic validation arrangements covering parts or the whole of the labour market?</li> <li>• (Third sector) Are there validation initiatives in the third sector?</li> </ul>

<b>2</b>	<b>IAG on benefits, opportunities and procedures (Q2.11)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes to Q10 and Q2.11: (A) There is IAG about the process, (C) There is IAG about the outcomes and benefits</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<b>Guidance and counselling is readily accessible (Q2.10)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there provision for information and guidance to candidates in this sector?</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<b>Links to NQF and in line with EQF (Q2.3, Q3.6, Q4.3)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Education) How is validation in this sector linked to the national qualifications framework (NQF)?</li> <li>• (Labour market) Is this validation arrangement linked to the formal education sector, e.g. can people access formal learning as a result of the validation, can they receive exemptions from parts of a course or can they acquire a formal qualification?</li> <li>• (Third sector) In general, are these initiatives linked to the formal education sector, e.g. can people access formal learning as a result of the validation, can they receive exemptions from part of a course, or can they acquire a formal qualification?</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	<b>Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes (Q2.5)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do the standards (e.g. occupational standards or educational standards) used for validation of non-formal and informal learning relate to those used in the formal education system?</li> </ul>
<b>6</b>	<b>Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment (Q2.23-Q2.24)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a quality assurance framework (QAF) in place in this sector? Either exclusive for this sector or as a result of the sector being covered by a more general QAF.</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	<b>Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors (Q2.14)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a right to training for staff involved in the provision of IAG or assessment for validation?</li> </ul>
<b>8</b>	<b>Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET) (Q2.4D)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please specify what can be achieved through validation of non-formal and informal learning in this sector?</li> </ul>
<b>9</b>	<b>Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation (Q2.20)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on the data available, what groups make greater use of validation initiatives in this sector?</li> </ul>
<b>10</b>	<b>Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within six months of an identified need (Q3.10)</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it standard practice to offer people who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment the opportunity to undertake a skills audit?</li> </ul>

## Classification of countries into predefined categories

After following the above steps, different approaches could be adopted to construct the summary table to outline progress in relation to the Council recommendation. The approaches are not necessarily exclusive: more than one approach could be presented.

The fiche collects information on the recommendation principles in relation to five education sectors <sup>(57)</sup>. It also collects information on the principle on linkages with the NQF for the labour market and third sector <sup>(58)</sup>.

We suggest that two or three groups of performance are defined in the classification.

### Focus on existence of activity (in at least one sector)

A country would be classified as meeting the criteria ‘in line with the recommendation’ as long as one education sector meets the criteria. Those without any sector meeting the criteria would be classified as ‘efforts need to be stepped up’.

### Focus on degree of comprehensiveness (taking into account all sectors for which data are available)

Under this approach, each sector for which information is available weights equally (one point if the criterion is met) for each recommendation principle. Categorisation of countries in relation to each principle follows the categories in Table A3.

Table A3. **Scoring table**

	0-1	2-3	4-5
Category	Urgent action required	Efforts need to be stepped up	In line with Council recommendation

Source: Cedefop.

<sup>(57)</sup> General education, IVET, CVET, higher education, adult education.

<sup>(58)</sup> There are other common topics for the education, labour market and third sector (such as stakeholders, stages of validation, funding and take-up), but these are not so closely linked to the principles included in the recommendation.



For the principle on links to NQF, the scoring is based on five (education sectors) plus labour market (weighted 5 or 1 – or another weight deemed appropriate) and third sector (weighted 5 or 1 – or another weight deemed appropriate). The scores for the different sectors are added up, divided by three (if a weight of 5 is applied) and the table thresholds applied.

For example, if one country meets the criteria in relation to the NQF indicator in three education sectors it scores three. Assuming the labour market and the third sector are weighted '1', if the country meets the criteria in the labour market and third sector it scores  $10/3 = 3.3$ ; the country is located in the 'in line with the recommendation' category. A country meeting the criteria in IVET and CVET would score two and be placed in the category 'efforts need to be stepped up'.

If a weight of 1 is applied to the labour market and third sector in the NQF indicator this needs to be taken into account. An example is obtaining the percentage of sectors in which the criteria are met for one country, and comparing those to the percentage of sectors in Table 2.1: 0-1 (up to 20% of the sectors); 2-3 (up to 60% of the sectors); 4-5 (more than 60% of the sectors).





# European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning – 2016 update

## Synthesis report

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for such validation by 2018. These will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This synthesis report forms part of the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. It is accompanied by 36 country reports and four thematic reports. The inventory provides a regularly updated overview of validation practices and arrangements in all Member States, EFTA countries and Turkey. The 2016 update is the sixth update (2004, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2014).

Alongside the revised European guidelines on validation, the 2016 inventory serves as a tool to assist Member States in developing and implementing validation arrangements as well as identifying areas which need further attention in the coming years. This report summarises the current situation with regard to validation in all countries under study, and reports on progress towards the aims set out in the 2012 Council recommendation.



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