European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014

Executive summary

Education
and Culture

Acknowledgments

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1 Introduction

In May 2013 the European Commission (DG Education and Culture) commissioned ICF International to produce the 2014 edition of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (the 'Inventory'), a key European-level tool to support Member States to further monitor and develop validation within their countries.

The 2014 update of the Inventory aims to provide an overview of the state-of-play across 33 European countries[1], to monitor developments in this field, provide examples of good practices and thematic analysis of key issues relating to the design and implementation of validation initiatives. The Inventory provides a unique record on how validation is being used at national, regional and local level in Europe. It is based on the work of a large network of national experts, extensive review of documents and interviews with key stakeholders. The evidence contained in the Inventory includes 'hard evidence' – for instance laws or quantitative data collected at the international, national, regional or project level- as well as stakeholders' and experts' views of the state of validation in the countries covered. The Inventory undergoes robust quality assurance checks by external experts and members of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQF AG). All outcomes of the project are, however, the sole responsibility of their authors. The outcomes of the 2014 Inventory are:

- A synthesis report;
- 36 country reports, covering 33 European countries, and corresponding country fiches, - two fiches were produced for each country, one mapping the situation in 2010 and one in 2014[2]. In this executive summary we treat each country report as a 'country' in the presentation of the narrative and tables;
- Two case studies providing examples of validation 'in practice';
- Eight thematic reports[3].

2 Policy context

Since the last version of the Inventory was produced in 2010, the most important development concerning the European context has been the adoption of the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in December 2012. The Recommendation calls for Member States to put in place, by no later than 2018, arrangements to enable individuals to have their knowledge, skills and competences acquired via non-formal and informal learning validated, and to be able to obtain 'a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences'[4]. It thus provides a renewed impetus for validation in Europe. The Recommendation asks the Commission to support Member States and stakeholders, including by regularly reviewing the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, in cooperation with the Member States.

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[1] The 28 EU Member States, the EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and one candidate countries (Turkey).

[2] There are 36 country updates in total, as two reports have been prepared for Belgium and three for the UK, in order to take account of the devolved responsibility for education and training policy in these countries.

[3] Skills audits in the public sector, competence assessment, early school leaving, guidance and counselling, awareness raising, multi-level governance, validation methods and research themes.

[4] Council of the European Union, 2013:C398/3.

3   The current state of play

3.1   Are national broader policies on validation in line with the goals of the Council Recommendation? - Some highlights

This section reflects on the situation regarding three factors that are instrumental for the success of validation systems, and are linked to topics covered by the European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning: the existence of validation strategies and legal frameworks for validation, stakeholder involvement in validation, and the methods used for validation. This is followed, in section 3.2 by a review of progress on key principles in arrangements for validation, as outlined in the Council Recommendation of 2012.

On the whole, evidence collected as part of 2014 country updates suggests that there is an increasing trend towards the creation of national validation strategies since 2010, but most countries need to further develop their practical validation arrangements. The allocation of responsibilities in relation to validation is clear in most countries, and stakeholder involvement has increased over the past four years, partly as a result of the work on national strategies and policies. Finally, greater dialogue between the formal and non-formal/informal in the area of assessment methods would be beneficial for education and training systems in Europe. It should be noted that the methods most often used for validation in the education system are different from those most often used for validation in the labour market.

3.1.1   Do countries have validation strategies and legal frameworks in place?

Since the 2010 Inventory was undertaken, advances have been made in the introduction of national validation policies or strategies to support validation policy and practice.

Table 3.1   National (or where relevant regional) strategy for validation

Comprehensive strategy in place	Strategy in place but some elements missing
FI, FR, ES	CZ, DK, EE, IT, IS, LU, LV, NO, NL, PL, RO
AT, BE-Flanders, CH, CY, DE, EL, LI, LT, MT, PT, SI, SK,TR	BE-Wallonia, BG, HR, HU, IE, SE, UK- E&NI, UK-Scotland, UK-Wales
Strategy is in development	**No strategy in place**

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

Having a strategy does not necessarily mean that it is enacted – subsequent sections deal with implementation of validation measures more closely. However, having a comprehensive national strategy can help to direct efforts and enhance clarity for users and accountability regarding progress. It shows a political will for validation and gives this visibility, which is an important message to providers and other stakeholders.

The majority of European countries have multiple legal frameworks covering validation. This shows that validation is penetrating different education sectors.

Table 3.2   Existence of legal frameworks for validation

Single legal framework for validation	Multiple frameworks in place covering different sectors
FR, MT, TR	AT, BE (Flanders & Wallonia), BG, CH, CZ, DK, FI, ES, EE, DE, IT, LT, LV, LU, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI
IS (Adult education), IE, HU (HE, Adult education), PT (HE and non-HE), RO, SK	CY, EL, HR, LI, UK (E&NI, Wales, Scotland)
Legal framework for other initiatives also covers validation	**No legal framework covering validation**

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation.

Systems without validation laws may be more agile in reacting to changes. However, having a legal framework has some clear advantages for users. One is the legal security regarding entitlements and responsibility that a law should offer to those to whom it concerns, and the certainty that laws should provide – for instance regarding procedures, appeals, proportion of credits that could be claimed through validation.

3.1.2   Is stakeholder involvement in validation increasing?

The level of engagement of social partners and stakeholders from the private sector, voluntary sector organisations and public employment services is increasing, as a result of the recent activity in the design of new legislation and strategies – see section 3.1.1 above. For the majority of countries covered in the 2014 Inventory national experts reported that there is a clear allocation of responsibilities with regard to validation, which is a positive trait.

3.1.3   What methods are used more frequently in validation?

Traditional assessment is often employed for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, because many of the procedures and initiatives for validating belong to the formal education system and/or aim to culminate in the award of a formal education and training qualification. However, methods are often combined in validation processes, to enhance the reliability and robustness of the assessment. Portfolios are by far the most frequently accepted methodology in the *documentation,* followed by declarative methods, and simulations/evidence extracted from work. But when it comes down to *assessment and recognition,* tests and examinations become the most accepted methodology, which may disadvantage less favoured groups of learners.

Regarding the private sector, 'classic' methods for validation are certificates, qualifications, the use of references and CV (to attest competences), and interviews and talks (to demonstrate that certain knowledge, skills and competences have been acquired and present a credible narrative that links acquired skills and competences with specific job openings or career progression paths). However, validation practices are only loosely structured or developed in a significant proportion of private companies.

To summarise, the methods least frequently used in the labour market (assessments/exams) are those most frequently used in public validation initiatives that lead to the award of a qualification. Whether this is because both systems complement each other or because there is a mismatch between for sectors is an area for further research.

3.2   What progress has been made on key principles in arrangements for validation?

Table 3.3 provides information on a number of indicators on specific areas of interest for the implementation of the key principles outlined in the 2012 Council Recommendation[5]. The level of development, as reflected in the indicators available from the Inventory country fiches produced by country experts, is expressed by the number of countries in each category as determined by the experts reporting on each country. It should be noted that the 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 of development on the principles outlined in the Recommendation, based on available information. Validation systems are complex and often, within each country, several arrangements coexist, which makes it difficult to generalise at the country level. Nevertheless, the discussion aims to provide information for illustrative purposes and to facilitate exchanges and the identification of potential areas for action. It should not be read as a final assessment of the current state of development in the achievement of the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation.

In Table 3.3, the difference between the number of countries in each category in 2014 and 2010 is provided in brackets[6] (a positive number means that more countries are in that category in 2014). An estimation of the degree of development in the achievement of that principle is provided in the table columns. Regarding countries' individual performance, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Slovakia and Turkey are amongst the countries where urgent action was needed in a greater number of principles according to national experts. Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland and Portugal were amongst those countries where a high number of principles were reported as having achieved good development. Countries like Norway, Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), Estonia, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK (Wales) also reported a high degree of development in relation to the indicators used.

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[5] Details on the specific indicators used to construct the table are provided in Annex 1 to the Synthesis report.

[6] The numbers in brackets add up to +2, given that in 2010 no information was collected for UK-Wales and CH (thus information from 24 rather than 36 reports was available for 2010).

Table 3.3 Progress towards key principles in arrangements for validation (2010-2014)

	Trends –number of countries			
	Good development	**Efforts need to be stepped up**	**Urgent action is needed**	**No information**
Information, advice and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures	**12** (+7)	**14** (=)	**5** (-6)	**5** (+1)
Guidance and counselling is readily accessible	**19** (=)	**9** (+4)	**4** (-3)	**4** (+1)
Links to NQFs and in line with EQF	**19** (+7)	**17** (-1)	**0** (-4)	**0** (=)
Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	**20** (+6)	**13** (-4)	**2** (+1)	**1** (-1)
Transparent QA measures are in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment	**15** (+4)	**13** (+2)	**8** (-3)	**0** (-1)
Provision is made for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors	**7** (+1)	**2** (=)	**26** (+3)	**1** (-2)
Synergies between validation and credit systems (ECTS and ECVET)	**27** (+6)	**5** (-1)	**4** (-3)	**0** (=)
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	**8** (+3)	**12** (+2)	**12** (-4)	**4** (+1)
Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit' within 6 months of an identified need	**0** (n.a.)	**17** (n.a.)	**19** (n.a.)	**0** (n.a.)
The use of EU transparency tools is promoted: ■ Europass Framework ■ Youthpass	**7** **3**	**10** **8**	**13** **17**	**6** **8**

Source:2014 European Inventory for validation. Key= (n.a.) information not available. Data on performance comes from the country fiches and country reports (see Annex 1, Synthesis Report).

3.2.1 Information, advice and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures

The provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) on the benefits, opportunities and procedures of validation is an important arrangement to ensure the success of validation. National experts reported on the extent to which information, advice and guidance on the benefits, opportunities and procedures of validation is available to individuals and organisations, national experts reported on the extent to which guidance practitioners are aware of validation. In around a third of the countries covered by the Inventory it was reported that most guidance practitioners are aware of validation, a significant improvement over the situation in 2010. However, in 19 countries awareness was reported as medium or low. In this area (as well as in the links between validation and the NQF; the focus on disadvantaged groups and the use of transparency tools) the number of countries for which no data was provided was relatively high, by comparison to other areas.

3.2.2 Guidance and counselling is readily accessible

Guidance and counselling are also necessary along the whole process when undergoing validation, in order to provide support to the individual in every step of the way. This is an area in relation to which there has not been a significant improvement over the situation in 2010. In 19 countries information and counselling

was reported to be available for all aspects of validation, and this is publicly available and financed, the same number as in 2010. In 9 countries publicly financed information and counselling was reported to be available for certain aspects of validation only, whereas in four no publicly financed counselling was reported to be available.

3.2.3 Links to NQF and in line with EQF

Nineteen country reports documented that learning acquired through non-formal or informal learning can be used to acquire a qualification on the NQF and/or can be used to access formal education covered in the NQF. These links may have been established in a more or less systematic way in different countries. As such, in some countries they will only apply in relation to some qualifications - meaning that there is greater scope for development of the link between NQF and validation, whereas in a smaller proportion of countries the link is more developed – for instance, the NQF is populated with qualifications at all levels, and these qualifications can by and large be obtained through validation. In all countries (17) in which such links had not yet been put in place, their establishment was under discussion. Some of these countries do not yet have an operational NQF in place.

3.2.4 Compliance with agreed standards equivalent to those of qualifications obtained through formal education programmes

Twenty country reports noted that at least in some sectors qualifications and part qualifications acquired through validation comply with agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to those obtained through formal education programmes. This means that the qualifications awarded through validation can be identical to those obtained through formal education programmes or be different qualifications of an equivalent standard – at least in some sectors. As such, in these twenty countries, qualifications obtained through validation may still be different and not of the same standard as qualifications obtained through formal education programmes, in some sectors. A more stringent interpretation of the Council Recommendation principle on equivalence of standards, that could be used in the future to measure progress, is that in order for a country to be ranked as showing a good level of development, equivalence should be the norm in all its education sectors.

Thirteen countries reported that equivalence had been achieved either in the case of qualifications or part qualifications (but not both) in some sectors. Two countries reported that qualifications or part qualifications of the same or equivalent standard to those obtained through formal education programmes cannot be achieved through validation. The reports noted a good degree of progress in this respect in relation to 2010.

3.2.5 Transparent QA measures in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment

Less than half of the countries covered (15) were reported to have transparent QA measures in line with existing QA frameworks to support reliable, valid and credible assessment. These could be specific frameworks for validation or a framework for the education sector which also comprised validation. Thirteen additional countries were reported to have a QA framework in place which did not meet one of the above conditions, and eight countries were reported not to have a QA framework.

3.2.6 Provision for the development of professional competences of staff across all sectors

The development of professional competences of staff is an area that requires strong development in most countries. Only 7 countries were reported to have requirements specified for the development of those competences for staff involved

in validation. In two countries it was reported that the development of professional competences was not a requirement, but it was an individual right of those involved in validation. In 26 countries development was not a right or there was no provision for it. In this area there has been little progress since 2010.

3.2.7 Synergies between validation and credit systems

Twenty seven countries (a marked increase compared to 2010) were reported to have developed links between validation and credit systems (for instance, the acquisition of credits towards a qualification is possible through validation) in all or some sectors. This suggests a good degree of progress in this respect in relation to 2010. A maximum threshold for the number of credits that can be obtained via validation is set in some countries and sectors, either centrally or by institutions. Five countries were reported to be discussing such links, and four were reported not to have a link under discussion.

3.2.8 Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation

While there has been some progress since 2010 in this area, still in only a minority of countries (8) disadvantaged groups are given priority in national/regional strategies or policies in validation. In twelve countries specific projects or initiatives were reported to have a particular focus on disadvantaged group, whereas in a further twelve countries no specific targeting was reported.

3.2.9 Individuals who are unemployed have the opportunity to undergo a 'skills audit'

Much progress is required in relation to the opportunity to undergo a complete 'skills audit' according to the country experts. In no country it was reported that there is a right to undertake a skills audit within six months from becoming unemployed. In 17 countries the opportunity to undergo such an audit exists, but only after 6 months, or the timeframe is not specified. In 19 countries it was reported that a skills audit system is not in place. No information was gathered in relation to this area in 2010.

3.2.10 The use of EU transparency tools is promoted

The information provided by national experts suggests that greater efforts are needed in the promotion of EU transparency tools. The table reports on the extent to which Europass and Youthpass are accepted by employers and educational institutions as tools to document non-formal and informal learning. Only in a minority of countries these tools are accepted to a high degree by both types of stakeholders. The number of countries in which acceptance was low for both tools is significant. No information was gathered in relation to this area in 2010.

3.2.11 Has the take-up of validation increased?

What is the result of the previous developments in policies and practice in terms of the take-up of validation? To the extent that available data permits to observe, there has been a moderate increase in the take-up of validation linked to formal qualifications, although the scale of such increase cannot be systematically measured due to data limitations. In 16 reports an increase in the number of applications for validation was reported, five reports noted that it has stayed the same, three that there had been contrasting trends across sectors or types of validation whereas no country reported a decrease in the number of applications. The stability of take-up in some countries could be expected, given that they are mature systems (for instance France, the Netherlands or Denmark).

Table 3.4 Trends in number of applications for validation initiatives linked to formal qualifications

Increased	Stayed the same
BE-Wallonia, BG, CH, CY, CZ, EE, EL, ES, FI, IS, IT (some regions), LU, LV, RO, SK, TR	DK, FR, LI, NL, SI
NO, BE-Flanders, DE	No country
Contrasting trends across sectors/ types of validation	**Decreased**

Source: 2014 European Inventory for validation, based on experts' judgement. Note: Not possible to assess or data not available for the following countries: AT, HR, HU, IE, LT, MT, PL, PT, SE, UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales). The PT system was in transition at the time of writing.

The Inventory also reveals evidence of high use of validation in companies and for unemployed people, through skills audits. Gaps in data collection systems at national level, however, significantly hamper the evidence base regarding access to validation.

4   Challenges

The Inventory reports point towards the following challenges that need addressing:

- *Access, awareness and social recognition.* In most countries there is limited evidence on the level of awareness of the potential value of a validation system especially amongst the general public, and lack of understanding by learners – which underlines the need for stronger IAG - and staff working within formal education institutions. Some countries need to work in the provision of access to skills audits in line with the Council Recommendation on validation, as well as enhance data collection on access – see also the final point on 'data collection'. Regarding recognition, it is important to ensure that the results of validation are recognised by education systems, the labour market and society. The 2012 Council Recommendation thus states that validation arrangements should enable individuals to acquire full or part qualifications and that the standards should be the same or equivalent to those of formal qualifications. The Inventory has documented how in some countries validation candidates obtain the same qualifications as participants in formal education and training programmes, in some cases after taking the same assessment and in some cases after taking an assessment that is specific for those undergoing validation. Yet in other countries the types of qualifications awarded to validation users differ from those awarded by education and training authorities. This may result in a perception of 'type A' and 'type B' qualifications, even when standards may be shared, or reflect the fact that standards are not shared;

- *Fragmentation*: Few countries have comprehensive systems in place. Most systems are collections of initiatives, projects and procedures. An aspect of this is the frequent reliance of validation on project-based work has positive aspects in order to reduce entry-costs and stimulate innovation. However, it also creates challenges regarding scalability, and the possibility to adopt long-terms and holistic views of validation. Embedding these in project-based work is a challenge for the future;

- *Financial sustainability:* The costs and corresponding level of bureaucracy involved in validation are significant barriers. Countries have made little progress in the discussion of sustainability of validation arrangements, and cost-sharing;

■ *Coherence:* Whilst procedures for recognition can be simple, they are also likely to be diverse and bringing varied practice into a single system is a challenge, especially in terms of QA. In this context, the coordination of diversity into a single model that is recognisable by the general public is a major challenge;

■ *Professionalisation of staff:* A major challenge, related to the previously identified challenge regarding provisions for staff development, refers to the qualifications and competences of staff involved in validation, in particular assessors. Mandatory requirements in terms of experience are more common, but there few countries have established requirements regarding training and none requiring specific qualifications. 'Assessor' qualifications would not only be relevant for validation practitioners, but also for those in formal education;

■ *Data collection:* As already mentioned, gaps in data collection systems at national level hamper evidence base regarding access to validation significantly and this should be a priority aspect for the future. There is thus no systematic feedback loop to show the education and labour market outcomes of validation. There is, then, little way of showing a learning institution that providing an alternative route to access and progression is positive in a cost-benefit analysis.