



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

Executive Summary

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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* ⁽¹⁾ 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 ⁽²⁾ 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.

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

(2) 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 ⁽³⁾ 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 ⁽⁴⁾ and four thematic reports ⁽⁵⁾. 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

⁽³⁾ 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.

⁽⁴⁾ EU-28, EEA EFTA countries, Switzerland and Turkey.

⁽⁵⁾ 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

Recommendation principle	Level of development
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 ⁽⁶⁾

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 ⁽⁷⁾ 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

⁽⁶⁾ 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.

⁽⁷⁾ 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 ⁽⁸⁾.

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 ⁽⁹⁾, 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

⁽⁸⁾ 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.

⁽⁹⁾ 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**

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

Stakeholder involvement	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.
Funding	Countries tend to have a number of sources of funding for validation. National public funding is the most common source.
Information, advice and guidance (IAG)	IAG is available in most countries but is not always a requirement.
Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks	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.
Standards and certificates	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.
Quality assurance	There is increasing recognition that validation arrangements require specific forms of quality assurance.
Professional competences of practitioners	Professionalisation of validation practitioners through specific professional qualifications and/or competence development remains a challenge in 2016.
Skills audits	There has been a significant increase in the number of countries which offer skills audits.
Validation tools	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.

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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.

The 2016 update of the European inventory consist of a synthesis report that this executive summary summarises, 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.

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