CEDEFOP | European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

Executive SUMMARY

European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update

Final synthesis report

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT ([1])

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is defined as 'a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard'. It aims to make non-formal and informal learning visible socially, in the labour market and in the education and training system, based on the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of such learning. Validation has the potential to contribute to achieving the goals set by the Europe 2020 strategy, as it can contribute to matching skills supply and demand, supporting mobility across sectors and countries and fighting social exclusion.

This stand-alone executive summary presents the main findings of the 2018 edition of the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The European inventory is a regularly updated overview of validation arrangements across Europe. The year 2018 has special significance in this update, because the 2012 Council recommendation on validation ([2]) called on Member States to establish, by 2018, validation arrangements allowing individuals to identify, document, assess and certify their competences. The inventory is the result of a three-year process based on the work of a large network of national experts, extensive review of documents, and interviews with key stakeholders ([3]).

([1]) This publication contains UK data and analysis based on research conducted before the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union on 31 January 2020.

([2]) Council of the European Union (2012). Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 398, 22.12.2012, pp.1-5. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32012H1222%2801%29

([3]) All information is available at: www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

The 2018 update contains the state of play and an overview of developments for 35 countries (EU-27, EFTA countries, UK, Turkey, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia), illustrated by good practice examples. It consists of a synthesis report, a separate synthesis report for Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, five thematic reports, country reports and three international case studies. This report focuses on data from the EU-27, EFTA, UK and Turkey.

METHOD ([4])

This synthesis is primarily based on an analysis of data collected by country experts between March and June 2018, using a set of standardised indicators. Two country reports were produced for Belgium and three for the United Kingdom to take account of the devolved responsibility for education and training policy in these countries; graphs show a total of 36 country counts and these regions are referred to and counted as 'countries' in the report. The information collected covers three broad areas: education and training (including the subsectors general education, IVET, CVET, higher education, and adult education), the labour market and the third sector.

PROGRESS TOWARDS THE COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

The analysis examines the degree of development experienced in relation to the 11 principles set out in the Council recommendation on validation. It is important to note that the Council recommendation is not prescriptive regarding how progress or achievement should be measured in relation to the principles it outlines. Table 1 provides a possible interpretation of the level of comprehensiveness on each recommendation principle, based on the available information and on the information collected across the different areas and subsectors.

All Member States have taken up the challenge set in 2012 and have been putting in place, each in its own context, national arrangements for validation. The analysis shows that a large majority of the countries have introduced measures in line with the principles outlined in the Council recommendation.

Table 1. **Degree of comprehensiveness in relation to the Council recommendation principles ([5])**

Recommendation principle	Level of comprehensiveness
Validation arrangements in place	High
Guidance and counselling is readily available	High
Information and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures is available and accessible	High
Validation arrangements are linked to NQFs and in line with the EQF	High
Transparent quality assurance measures support reliable, valid and credible assessment methods and tools for validation	Medium-high
Qualifications or parts of qualifications obtained through validation comply with agreed standards that are the same or equivalent to those for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes	Medium
Synergies exist between validation and credit systems	Medium
Disadvantaged groups are particularly likely to benefit from validation	Medium
EU/national transparency tools are promoted to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes	Medium

([4]) Detailed information on the methodology used for the 2018 update is presented in Annex 1 of the main synthesis report: Cedefop; European Commission; ICF (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning - 2018 update: synthesis report*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf

([5]) The level of comprehensiveness in the table is calculated through the creation of a scoring method based on the data collected. The scoring is based on the degree that the different principles are applied across all the areas (education and training, labour market and third sector) equally weighted. This means that if a principle is applied in all areas, the principle will be rated as having a high level of comprehensiveness. We applied predefined thresholds for country classification: high level of comprehensiveness (if the percentage obtained was between 70% and 100%); medium level of comprehensiveness (30-70%) and low level of comprehensiveness (less than 30%). A detailed note on the scoring method is provided in Annex 1 and in the main synthesis report Cedefop et al. (2019) (see footnote 3).

Recommendation principle	Level of comprehensiveness
Provision is made for the development of the professional competences hof validation practitioners	Low
Skills audits are available for individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment	Low

Source: Cedefop; European Commission; ICF (2019).

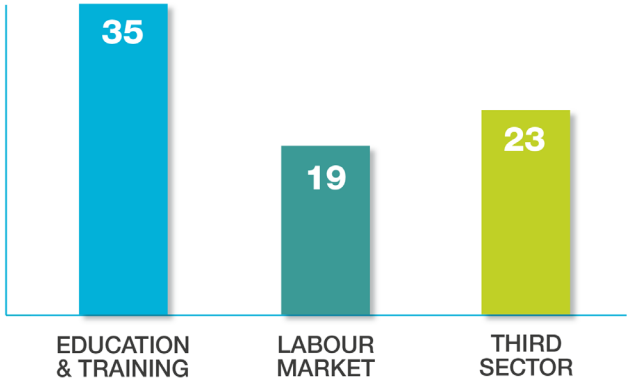
KEY FINDINGS

This section outlines the key findings emerging from the country research, in relation to the principles outlined in the Council recommendation and broader aspects of the implementation of validation. Further details and an in-depth overview of each principle can be found in the synthesis report of the inventory ([6]).

Validation arrangements in place

In 2018, validation arrangements are available in all countries under study in at least one of the three broad areas: education and training, labour market, and third sector. It should be noted, however, that in a few countries, validation opportunities remain limited and it may be questioned whether they represent a systematic validation arrangement. Arrangements are most commonly in place across education and training, while there has been good progress in creating labour market opportunities for validation since 2016. The third sector remains a significant area for validation in several countries, although connectivity to education and training or labour market initiatives remains limited and countries do not necessarily see it as an area of priority. The data show that, while countries are developing general strategies for the creation of validation arrangements, they continue to progress at different speeds towards (comprehensive validation arrangements, providing different emphasis according to national circumstances.

Figure 1. **Validation arrangements in place by area**



Source: European inventory 2018.
www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

Validation outputs and outcomes

One of the crucial principles of validation is the importance of focusing on the individual's needs ([7]). People entering a validation process will have different objectives, met through the different outputs of the process: obtaining a (full or partial) qualification, providing credits or exemptions, allowing access to formal programmes or creating a training map based on prior learning experiences.

In the education and training area, validation is mostly used for gaining credit towards qualifications, accessing education programmes and to gain exemptions from parts of courses. However, in most countries, it is also possible to obtain at least some type of full or partial qualification through validation. The data show that, while validation is increasingly becoming a route to access formal programmes and achieve a certification or some type of qualification, it is not yet a fully established and accepted route throughout Europe. Vocational training tends to permit the acquisition of qualifications through validation; in higher education this is not possible, but exemptions or awarding credits are more common. Adult education and general education have still limited validation possibilities.

Obtaining a formal qualification through validation in a labour market context is possible in a significant number of countries. Third sector initiatives tend to be more formative than summative, so outcomes are not always connected to formal qualifications.

([6]) Cedefop; European Commission; ICF (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning – 2018 update: synthesis report*. http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf

([7]) Cedefop (2015). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 104. www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073_en.pdf

Stages of validation

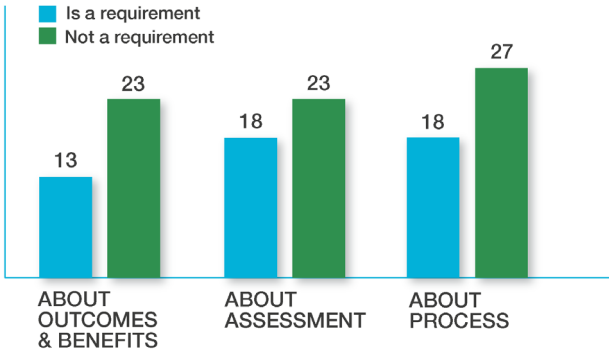
The 2012 Council recommendation specified four stages in the validation process: identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning outcomes. These four stages permit the articulation of the concept and make it easier to adapt it to different realities and individual needs. The terminology to describe the activities under the four stages defined by the Council recommendation on validation is not consistently used across the Member States, but existing validation initiatives broadly cover the same elements of the four stages proposed at EU level.

All four stages of validation are prevalent in education and training and the labour market. In the third sector, the first two stages are more common. In some countries, information and guidance might be included as an explicit stage.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) on benefits, opportunities, and procedures

All countries but one provide information, advice and guidance to validation candidates in at least one education and training subsector. A total of 15 countries (out of 19) provide it in the labour market area, while the figure is much lower for the third sector (eight countries out of 23).

Figure 2. **Number of countries providing information, advice and guidance by type in education and training**



NB: The number of countries is above 36 because the analysis is based on a 'count of countries'. The data in this figure represent the number of countries where the indicator applies in at least one sector of education and training where there are validation arrangements (but may not apply to all sectors in that country).

Source: 2018 European inventory.
www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

IAG is usually 'not a requirement' in validation initiatives. In most cases, IAG is most often focusedon the 'process' – the steps needed to obtain validation – rather than assessment or outcomes and benefits of validation ([8]).

Links to national qualifications frameworks and synergies with credit systems

All countries covered in the 2018 European inventory have developed a national qualification framework (NQF; with the exception of Spain, all have referenced these to the European qualifications framework (EQF)). There is a strong link between validation and the NQF. The development of NQFs has been an important driver of validation initiatives in several countries. The NQFs represent a shift towards a learning outcomes approach that is a necessary condition for facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In most cases, and across all subsectors of education and training in which validation is possible, qualifications included in the NQFs can be accessed through validation and lead to the acquisition of modules or a part of a formal qualification. It follows that standards for qualifications obtained through validation in education and training are mostly the same as standards in formal education and training.

Many countries do not yet have a link between validation and the NQF in the labour market and third sector areas; this translates into a considerable number of countries not using the same standards for validation as for formal education in validation initiatives in these two areas. In the labour market, in most cases, validation is based on occupational standards.

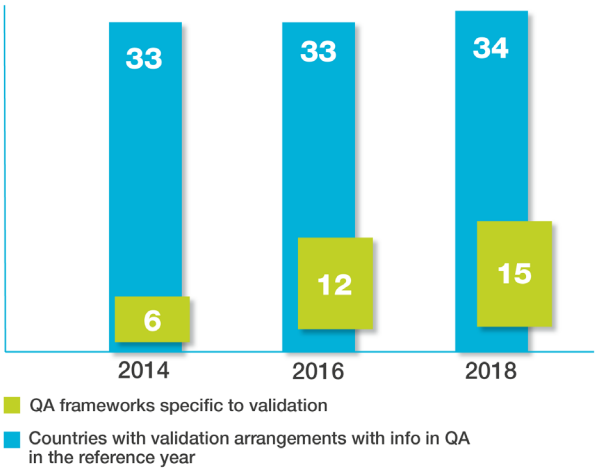
Quality assurance (QA) and professional development of practitioners

Quality assurance mechanisms are in place in nearly all counties for validation in education and training. It is relatively common but by no means universal, for countries to apply existing quality assurance frameworks to validation. However, the main trend in this area since 2016 has been a move from the application of existing general quality assurance frameworks to those specific to validation. While the 2018 inventory did not collect information on the quality assurance of validation in the labour market and third sector areas, evidence from the

([8]) For more information on validation and guidance, see: Cedefop (2019). *Coordinating guidance and validation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 75. www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5575_en.pdf

country reports suggest that quality assurance of validation initiatives outside formal education and training systems can be very diverse and not always consistent with the approaches observed in the education and training area.

Figure 3. **Number of countries with QA specific for validation (in at least one sector of education)**



NB: Multiple responses possible.
Source: 2014, 2016, 2018 European inventories.
www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

Entitlement to training for validation practitioners is patchy across countries. The most common competence requirement in education and training is for practitioners to have some professional experience, followed by having completed qualifications which are not specific to the delivery of validation initiatives. Within the labour market and third sector areas, entitlement to some form of training for validation practitioners is in place in a small number of countries.

Take-up of validation and users of validation

Data on the uptake of validation remain limited but available data suggest an upward trend in the number of participants starting/applying for validation. However, the use of validation still appears to be limited. This is especially so for disadvantaged individuals, who are, in many countries, still not using validation initiatives. Despite this, in a growing number of countries, validation initiatives are targeting disadvantaged groups, especially those covered under the Upskilling pathway recommendation: low-skilled adults, including young adults not covered by the Youth guarantee, and the long-term unemployed. Validation arrangements targeting these groups exist or are in development in most countries, though to varying extents. Findings suggest that migrants and refugees are generally not making much use of validation opportunities across different areas. Eight countries have (systematic) validation arrangements in place for migrants and refugees. Many of these initiatives are targeted towards 'highly skilled' individuals and, in most cases, include the validation stages of identification and documentation.

Stakeholder involvement and funding

A wide range of stakeholders is involved in validation. Education and training providers are key stakeholders in identification, documentation, assessment and certification, along with public employment services. National organisations (such as national agencies and awarding bodies) are consistently involved in a large range of functions, and industry bodies/employers play a key role in setting standards. Provision of information, advice and guidance is a function undertaken by most types of stakeholder. In the third sector, there seems to be more limited stakeholder involvement.

Governmental organisations are increasingly a key player in the education and training area and the labour market but play a limited role in the third sector. There are signs of strengthened cooperation between key stakeholders across the three broad areas that have helped to create 'bridges' and ensure outcomes of validation that take place in one sector/area can be used in another.

Validation is mostly funded by national public finances. The European social funding has also been a major contributor to the development of national validation systems and processes in certain countries.

Validation tools

Most of the countries with validation arrangements in place make use of a wide range of tools for obtaining evidence on individuals' knowledge, skills and competences. 'Tests and examinations' are the single most frequently used method, followed by 'portfolios' and 'interviews, debates and dialogues'. In many countries, use is made of transparency tools to facilitate the documentation of learning outcomes. These usually include Europass and, less often, Youthpass and national tools.

Skills audits

The use of skills audit processes has increased in recent years. Skills audits are widespread and generally target unemployed people or groups at-risk of unemployment, although often not within the timeframe specified in the 2012 Council recommendation.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

The information gathered for the inventory project shows that there are some key challenges for future consideration:

(a) the main challenge remains to make validation available to all individuals in need, irrespective of their living, working or education/learning situation. This implies that the system is user focused, making validation a reality for all, that works together with other existing services and policies in a lifelong learning perspective. This will need to build on existing good practices in different areas and subsectors and scale up those initiatives to increase the degree of comprehensiveness with which the Council recommendation principles are met. This necessarily implies that the practitioners are well trained and understand their role;

(b) there are significant differences in the use of validation between the education and training area and the labour market and third sector areas. Strengthening cooperation between key stakeholders across the three broad areas can help create 'bridges' and ensure outcomes of validation that take place in one sector/area can be used in another;

(c) constrained public budgets are an obstacle to the implementation of validation. The 2018 inventory shows that validation activities have a secure and allocated budget only in a handful of countries; fees in many countries are covered by the learners themselves (at least partly), or from within learning provider existing budgets. This limits the use of validation initiatives by disadvantaged groups. A challenge for many project-based initiatives is the lack of sustainable, long-term funding;

(d) there is also a need for stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to enable better assessment and documentation of costs, benefits and impact of validation in general, and of different types of specific validation initiatives and methodologies. Today data collection on different aspects of validation remains very limited. Data on costs, participation, type of qualification or outcomes achieved, user characteristics, success rate, length of procedure are not normally collected.

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