

# European Inventory

on validation of informal and  
non-formal learning



Education and Culture DG



# **European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning**

## **ICELAND**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

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In Iceland, the current qualification framework does not recognise non-formal or informal learning. However, the European policy agenda has influenced the country and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is now looking at developing a new framework, which is compatible with the European Qualification Framework (EQF). It will take an estimated three years before the new ‘National Qualifications Framework’ is launched but eventually Iceland should have a system in place that is capable of recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning nationally<sup>1</sup>.

Most of the work that has been undertaken on validation in Iceland since the last ECOTEC report was written in 2004 has been carried out by the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC). This organisation was launched in December 2002 and has a specific remit to develop methods of validating non-formal and informal learning. Their work is however currently restricted to learners that have not completed upper secondary education and is mostly industry-based. It does not therefore include large sections of the learning population such as schools, upper secondary schools and universities. For these areas of learning, there is currently no common approach to validation.

<sup>1</sup> Education and Training 2010: The Development of Education Policy in Iceland in the Context of Europe (2007)

## **2.0 PUBLIC SECTOR**

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With respect to public sector initiatives, it is currently the work of the Education and Training Service Centre that is the most significant with respect to validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture are overseeing the emerging National Qualifications Framework and this has the potential to provide an overriding framework for formal, non-formal and informal learning.

### **2.1 The National Qualifications Framework**

The Ministry has recently written a new policy document “Education and Training 2010: The Development of Education Policy in Iceland in the Context of Europe” (2007), which details Iceland’s position on the development of a new qualification framework.

*“On completion of its deliberations, the discussion group agrees that Iceland should consider the benefits of introducing a corresponding system in this country, while at the same time designing a system that builds on a shift of emphasis where personal skills are accredited with a standardised methodology”<sup>1</sup>.*

A board has now been appointed and the Ministry plans to commence work on designing, promoting and finally introducing the new system. This work will include developing a reference model for the National Qualifications Framework (which will parallel the EQF), write descriptions of references for skills, knowledge and competencies and identify work methods, evaluation methods and quality references in non-formal learning. With respect to the latter, the Ministry will be working closely with the Education and Training Service Centre.

*“A period of three years must be allowed for the preparation phase. At the end of that period it should be possible to formally introduce the system and to provide the legislation, regulations/rules that will govern the work processes. At the same time the introduction of informal work rules and communication practices on which such systems are based should have been completed. The system shall cover all learning, non-formal and formal and shall be adapted to corresponding systems in other countries. Continued development of the system shall be in co-operation with the university sector”<sup>2</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> “Education and Training 2010: The Development of Education Policy in Iceland in the Context of Europe” (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Education and Training 2010: The Development of Education Policy in Iceland in the Context of Europe” (2007)

## 2.2

### Developing New National Methods for Validation

The Education and Training Service Centre (*Fræðslumiðstöð Atvinnulífsins*) has a service agreement with the Ministry, “... to aid the Ministry in developing methods to validate education and educational progress, including validation and accreditation of non-formal learning and training in co-operation with work life and educational providers. Also, to assist in developing personal portfolios for individuals within the target group [i.e. unskilled workers].”

The target group for the ETSC is currently people with little formal education, but will also later include qualified workers on the labour market.

As such The Education and Training Service Centre undertakes most of the work with industry on validating non-formal and informal learning. Since its launch in 2003, the centre has established itself as a pivotal actor in the development of methods and procedures for validating non-formal and informal learning in Iceland. They have been able to achieve this due to their strong ties with industry, the education system (both formal and non-formal) and the Ministry of Education. The procedures developed will be widely acknowledged in Iceland because of the ETSC’s credibility nationally.

### New Processes and Procedures to Validate Prior Learning

In 2007, the ETSC published a brochure documenting a common approach to validating non-formal and informal learning. This can be downloaded from their web site<sup>1</sup> and used in a range of educational settings, both formal and non-formal. The processes and procedures followed parallel the common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and are split into five phases<sup>2</sup>, as described below.

**1) Information and feedback.** Before the validation is carried out, the individual is informed about the goals of the validation, the role of the assessors, possible outcomes and the rights of the individual in the process.

**2) Documentation.** The individual looks back on his/her life and documents the competences that he/she has acquired. The individual gathers appropriate documents, such as recommendations from employers, job descriptions, diplomas, certificates, samples and projects. The individual is given access to a counsellor who can provide guidance and support through the whole process.

<sup>1</sup> [www.frae.is](http://www.frae.is)

<sup>2</sup> ETSC, Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland. Available at: [http://www.frae.is/files/{c575619e-c414-411d-be8b-8db0b708d781}\\_validation.pdf](http://www.frae.is/files/{c575619e-c414-411d-be8b-8db0b708d781}_validation.pdf)

**3) Analyses.** An interview between the individual and an assessor to decide how the individual's competence measures up to certain qualification requirements. The counsellor that took part in the documentation stage can also take part in the interview.

In some cases it is at this point that the individual fulfils the qualification requirements for a certain part or module and subsequently receives validation and recognition for his/her competence (thus moving straight to stage five of the process). If it is unclear whether the competence is sufficient, a confirmation process is carried out (stage four).

**4) Confirmation.** The confirmation of competence is carried out according to a confirmation plan, accepted by the assessor and counsellor. The needs of the individual should be taken into account, for example by offering more time, using visual examples, technical confirmations, in order for the individual to be able to show his/her competence. It is important to look for other means than the conventional tests to confirm validation and to give the individual the possibility to choose appropriate methods.

**5) Validation and acceptance of competence.** A module is considered validated when it has been documented officially in the name of the individual as finished or passed. It is important that the validation is accepted by the stakeholders and that they are well informed of the procedure of the validation of competence.

The ETSC therefore has now a common approach to validation, which it is able to apply to a number of projects.

The organisation has been involved in numerous pilot projects in different sectors and has considerable experience now of practically applying methods of validating informal and non-formal learning. These pilot projects are discussed further in the chapter for the private sector (3.0). The following section deals with legal frameworks for validation and examples of practices from other public agencies.

## 2.3

### Examples of existing initiatives

Since the development of a national approach to validation is in its early stages, there are still examples of validation that occur in Iceland that have not yet been co-ordinated under one framework or one approach. The following are some examples of such initiatives.

### 2.3.1 Unemployment Agencies

Unemployment agencies maintain a national database of job seekers. Information in the database includes information about an individual's formal education, work experience, skills and other competencies, such as language skills, management experience, driver's licence, computer skills, artistic talent and practical experience in industrial trades. The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Directorate of Labour are responsible for labour issues in Iceland. Local unemployment agencies operated by the Department of Labour are charged with the task of providing information on available jobs and education to those seeking employment.

### 2.3.2 Enrolment in Upper Secondary Schools

No comprehensive legislation applies to adult education in Iceland. The Upper Secondary School Act of 1996 however covers several aspects of adult education. Municipal education centres, union study centres and lifelong learning centres work together to prepare adults for re-entry in the educational system and further education. Adults are evaluated according to the requirements stated in the National Curriculum Guidelines. The guidelines state that<sup>1</sup>: “*Schoolmasters at upper secondary level are responsible for assessing and validating the student's previous education – both formal or non-formal. Non-formal education, in this context refers to the knowledge or skills that the individual has acquired through means other than formal education, such as privately run courses or experience gathered on the job market.*”

In reviewing previous studies, schools are expected to ascertain whether students have met the criteria for exemption into new courses or for completing studies at upper secondary level. If there is any doubt as to whether previous studies can be validated, the student has a right to undergo examination in order to demonstrate his actual skills and knowledge.

It has been shown that schools at upper secondary level have had difficulties in measuring or validating adults' work experience and informal and non-formal learning. This prompted the Ministry of Education to encourage schools to go further in validating learning and to try to gain new experiences when assessing individual learning in order to reach an appropriate and fair conclusion as to the proper starting point for each individual's new studies. Thus the schools have been asked to focus on the goals of the study programme in question and the actual skills and competencies of each individual seeking admission or assessment. It has been underlined that individuals have a right to special assessment examinations where there is doubt as to the correct starting point for studies in upper

<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: National Curriculum Guidelines 2004

secondary school. The Ministry's policy is that repetition of previous paths of learning should be avoided at all costs.

#### 2.3.3 Access to universities through recognition of competencies

It is stated in art. 6 of the Law on Universities no. 136/1997 that universities can themselves decide who is admitted for studies at the university in question. Generally speaking, it is required that students have passed matriculation examination or its equivalent. In some cases applicants with substantial work experience who have not completed their matriculation examination may be admitted, but there is little evidence to suggest that any significant number of students are enrolled at universities in Iceland on this basis.

#### 2.3.4 The Educational Gateway

The Educational Gateway is a web-based environment for responding to the needs of students, teachers, schools, parents and others connected with education. The Educational Gateway includes a sub-site which deals with the validation and assessment of prior learning, where it is possible to find guidelines for self assessing prior vocational education. To begin with the guidelines will primarily benefit those seeking either to certify foreign vocational education and training or certify the vocational education obtained in Iceland for use abroad.

## **3.0 PRIVATE SECTOR**

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Due to the work of the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC), there have been a number of industry projects carried out using methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. The following provides examples of this work between 2004 and 2007. These examples were provided by the ETSC.<sup>1</sup>

- The Car Mechanics and Carpentry Industries

In these industries there are considerable numbers of workers who have acquired a high level of practical skills but have dropped out of recognised training for various reasons, often because they do not feel that subjects such as Maths, Icelandic etc are relevant to their work. The validation process helps them to obtain the upper secondary qualifications they need by allowing their experience and knowledge to be used towards formal qualifications. In these latest projects as many as 30 carpenters and 20 car mechanics will become trained in their professions by validating their non-formal and informal learning.

- The Social Work Sector

This was a joint project between Efling Trade Union and the Education and Training Service Centre. It aimed to validate the competencies of unskilled employees at the Psychiatric Ward at Landspitali University Hospital to shorten the formal study path as social service workers.

- The Telecomms Industry

This was a joint development project between Iceland Telecom, Efling Trade Union, Starfsafl (fund for the educational support of low-qualified workers in the greater Reykjavik area), Reykjavik Technical School and the Education and Training Service Centre. The project aimed to develop methods of assessing and validating the competence of individuals with little formal education, who were employees at Iceland Telecom for them to shorten the formal telecommunication technician study path at the Reykjavik Technical School. As a part of this project, special focus was on developing methods for the employer to verify the workers job related skills.

- The Construction Industry

<sup>1</sup> (May 2006) Larusdottir F “A Summary from the Education and Training Service Centre for the NVL Expert-net on Validation”

This was a joint development project between Sudurnes Comprehensive College and Sudurnes Centre for Lifelong Learning. The Education and Training Service Centre assisted with methodology and provided tools for the project. The project focused on validating the competencies of construction workers with little formal education for the purpose of shortening their formal construction study path at the Sudurnes Comprehensive College. As a part of this project, special focus was on developing methods for the teachers to verify the workers job related skills.

- The Engineering Industry

This was a joint development project between Mímir-símennun Life Long Learning Centre, The Educational Centre of Metal Workers, Borgarholtskóli Comprehensive College, and The Education and Training Service Centre. The project aimed to validate the competencies of experienced metal workers with little formal education in the purpose of shortening their formal metal study path at the Borgarholtskóli Comprehensive College. As a part of this project, special focus was on developing methods for the teachers to verify the workers job related skills.

- The Finance Sector

Leonardo project led by the Education and Training Service Centre. The Education and Training Service Centre received a grant from the Leonardo Da Vinci vocational training programme of the European Commission for a pilot project entitled “The Value of Work”. The project aims to develop methods to validate the actual skills of individuals in the labour market. Partner countries are Denmark, England, Cyprus, Slovenia and Sweden. In Iceland, Denmark, and Cyprus the pilot project will be applied to bank employees. Standards of competencies will be developed for the validation of skills among bank employees. A handbook will be available containing a description of the various elements of skills, and methods and instruments to assess employees’ skills will be developed. Emphasis will be put on the general applicability of the project to other areas, whereas the methodology will be transferred to other sector in Slovenia and Sweden.

- The Education Sector

Joint project between the Occupational Council for Pedagogy and Recreation and the ETSC. Focus on the development of methods and tools for validating the skills of experienced workers with little formal education in the purpose of shortening their formal

study path of assistants in pre- and lower secondary schools, within the comprehensive school system.

- The Automobile Industry

Projects in the making: Validation of workers with little formal education within the construction industry for the purpose of shortening study paths.

- The Unemployed

A development programme was undertaken for unemployed people in the Sudurnes region. This aimed to assess and validate the skills of unemployed people in order to enter vocational education at Sudurnes Comprehensive College. This was a joint project between the regional Directorate of Labour office, Sudurnes Comprehensive College, Sudurnes Centre for Lifelong Learning and the Education and Training Service Centre. The first students were enrolled in the college fall 2004.

- Health, social work, childcare and leisure sectors<sup>1</sup>

In health, social and leisure sectors a methodology was developed to evaluate workers' skills gained in the workplace and non-formal training courses. The professional training board for the sector made a proposal to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on how individual's work experience and learning gained through non-formal courses could be assessed and then recognised as a credit towards relevant studies. The aim was to shorten the training time. The Ministry has since endorsed these rules and promoted them to upper secondary schools. Considerable interest has been shown by individuals in this method and the representatives of the Ministry feel that it has bridged the gap between formal and non-formal education.

<sup>1</sup> Education and Training 2010: The Development of Education Policy in Iceland in the Context of Europe" (2007)

## **4.0 THE THIRD SECTOR**

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The following provides examples of how validation of informal and non-formal learning has been achieved in the third sector. This aims to be indicative and not representative of the third sector as a whole.

- Basic Skills Training, The Education and Training Service Centre

The work of the Education and Training Service Centre has involved the third sector. The ETSC has written many curricula, both to describe courses of study that are offered and to create new courses. The curricula have been presented to the assessment committee which evaluates to what extent the courses can be used to shorten the duration of further education. This is considered the most effective way to use time and money, both that of the individual and that coming from the public purse. The committee has now developed 13 curricula in 10 learning centres, which account towards a certain number of units in an upper secondary course. Some of these courses are in areas such as basic skills.

- Mennt – EDUCATE Iceland

EDUCATE Iceland is a co-operation forum between the educational sector, social partners, local authorities and others interested in education and training. The main focus of the work of EDUCATE is to gather and disseminate information and to facilitate transference of knowledge and competences.

Even though it is not strictly concerned with validation of non-formal and informal learning, EDUCATE Iceland is has been linked with a project aimed at recognising educational providers outside the formal school system called “Accreditation of Lifelong Learning”. The project was a two-year pilot project funded by the European Commission’s Leonardo Da Vinci programme, which finished in the fall 2005. The project aimed to develop a new approach to meet the need for increased transparency and quality assurance in continuing and lifelong learning<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> You can find more information from [www.all-accreditation.com](http://www.all-accreditation.com)

## **5.0 CONCLUSIONS**

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In Iceland, the key agency for taking forward validation of non-formal and informal learning is the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC). They have been very active in carrying out specific projects and devising methods for validating informal and non-formal learning. The result of this work has been the publication of guidelines on how to validate informal and non-formal learning for use by providers and other interested parties. This is a significant step forward in establishing a common national approach to validation.

Currently the work of the ETSC is not supported by a qualification framework, which offers parity across formal, non-formal and informal learning. However, once the National Qualifications Framework has been implemented, the profile of non-formal and informal learning in Iceland should raise considerably. Furthermore there is currently no legislation in place but again, once Iceland does legislate, it will further support the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In the immediate future, there is likely to be further development of quality assurance procedures, more pilot projects carried out and increased lobbying for a national approach to validation of informal and non-formal learning, extending to other areas of learning such as universities and schools. There are numerous examples of validation in Iceland across all sectors but as yet efforts to create a national approach are significant but still in their infancy.