

**BRIEFING NOTE**

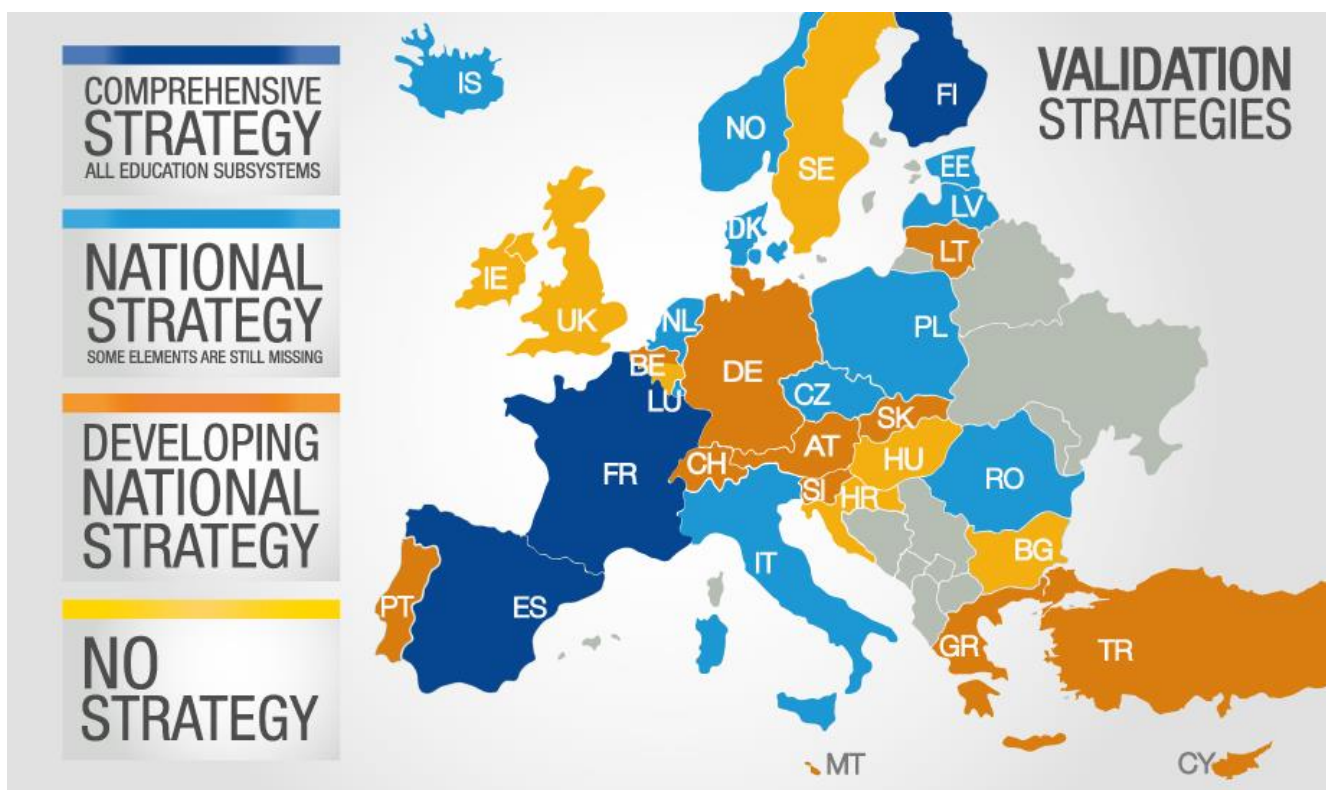
# The validation challenge: how close is Europe to recognising all learning?

The European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning provides an unrivalled source of information detailing how validation of prior learning is developing across Europe <sup>(1)</sup>. It shows that validation strategies and legislation, despite complexity of the task before them, have been developing slowly but steadily. However, there is room for improvement, especially concerning reliability of information on take-up and use of validation arrangements.

This fifth update of the inventory comprises a portfolio of more than 1 000 pages, providing an overview of validation across 33 European countries <sup>(2)</sup>. It includes examples of good practice and a thematic analysis of issues relating to further development and implementation of validation.

## Findings of the inventory

The 2012 Council recommendation, which sets 2018 as the target date for establishment of national validation arrangements and refers explicitly to the European inventory, signals EU Member States' political will to go forward with validation and is expected strongly to influence the way in which national systems are structured and used. In the recommendation, Member States agree to establish arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning enabling citizens to validate their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside the formal system; and to obtain a qualification or parts of a qualification based on validated non-formal and informal learning.



<sup>(1)</sup> Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on validation of non-formal and informal learning, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C 398, p. 1.

<sup>(2)</sup> 28 EU Member States, EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, and one candidate country, Turkey).

Evidence from the inventory suggests that political commitment in creating comprehensive national validation strategies is increasing, with the number of countries so engaged rising from five to 13 since 2010. Of these, only Finland, France and Spain have put in place a comprehensive strategy involving all education subsystems (vocational, general and higher education).

Legal frameworks offer advantages to users, such as secure arrangements on entitlements and responsibilities, greater clarity on procedures and appeals, and rules governing proportions of credits to be claimed through validation. Three countries (France, Malta and Turkey) have opted for a single legal framework. Others cover validation through legal frameworks related to other initiatives. Iceland, for example, covers validation in the legal framework governing adult education; Ireland and Hungary cover it through legislation on higher education and adult education. Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and Slovenia are among the countries with multiple legal frameworks covering different sectors.

In some cases, systems lacking validation laws may react better to changes in the labour market, as the UK has long argued, especially compared to countries with multiple frameworks. However, only seven national systems covered by the inventory entirely lack a legal framework governing validation (Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, UK-England, Wales and Scotland) – and some of these (including Croatia and Greece) are working on establishing one.

Fragmentation of validation practices is partly why take-up and use of validation mechanisms within each country are still not well understood. To update the inventory, Cedefop sought information on the annual number of validation candidates and outcomes. From the data available, it is possible to surmise that, in most countries, demand for validation is growing. Exceptions are countries with long-standing validation systems, such as France and the Netherlands, where demand seems to have stabilised. However, available data are generally not up to the task. For several countries – Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Sweden and all four UK systems – it is not possible to reach a safe estimate of the number of candidates. Most other countries (France is an exception) do not publish data on qualifications issued through validation of non-formal or informal learning, or the proportion of total qualifications these represent.

Validation arrangements continue to be concentrated in vocational education and training, with other

subsectors lagging behind. Nevertheless, the inventory reveals that many more people are also now benefiting from validation in higher education and the voluntary sector. Thanks to validation arrangements, higher education institutions across Europe are increasingly allowing exemptions of credits – that is, waiving formal requirements. They should be encouraged to do even more to open their programmes to all learners.

The relevant link is with credit systems and modularised qualifications. These, however, are not well established in all countries and sectors. ECVET, the European credit transfer and accumulation system for VET, is not yet in place. Norway's national credit system was only introduced in August 2013; to date there is little information on the link between validation and credits. Absence of a credit system does not necessarily make it impossible to use validation to shorten programmes, as Austria and the Czech Republic show. In the higher education sector, about half the countries reviewed in the inventory have established a link between validation and ECTS (European credit transfer and accumulation system) credits. Some countries set a ceiling for the number of credits that can be obtained via validation (up to 15 % of total ECTS credit points in Spain, up to one sixth in Liechtenstein and up to 30 % in Latvia), while Finland sets no such limits. In Estonia, the only limitation is that the final thesis or exam cannot be awarded through validation. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the specification and guidance document for the framework for higher education qualifications in HE (FHEQ) allows institutions to set limits to the proportion of credits that can be gained via assessed prior learning.

The 2010 inventory found that low-qualified individuals were the main target of validation initiatives across the EU. This finding was confirmed by the 2014 update. In some countries, such as France and Norway, validation of non-formal and informal learning is promoted mainly as an individual right. In France, validation is open to anyone who meets application criteria (three years of relevant experience), but the unemployed and low-qualified are considered priority groups. Main users of the procedure are low-qualified individuals (52% in 2012), while unemployed individuals only account for 30%. In contrast, in countries including Belgium-Flanders and Latvia, the validation system as a whole focuses on individuals identified as most in need. In other countries, including Ireland, a shift can be observed: validation initiatives are increasingly targeted towards the low-qualified and the unemployed.

In a time of high unemployment and contracting public sector budgets, it makes sense to target validation initiatives to those most in need. Countries now need to focus more on how those targeted actually use the opportunities provided.

## Challenges

Political will to establish validation arrangements is undeniable, and much has already been achieved. As Member States move towards the 2018 deadline, this year's inventory also highlights the challenges that countries need to address.

**Coordination between subsystems and sectors:** most validation arrangements in place today are collections of initiatives, projects and procedures. But having different arrangements for different educational subsystems, sectors of activity or regions complicates the task of achieving an integrated national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning, as the 2012 recommendation explicitly states (countries 'must promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between other relevant policy areas').

To achieve this, countries should clearly allocate responsibilities and involve all stakeholders at the appropriate stages. Most countries covered in the 2014 inventory did in fact report that responsibilities for validation arrangements were clearly allocated. They normally fall under education or employment ministries, though several other ministries may also be involved. The inventory also shows that stakeholder interest is growing: social partners, private or voluntary organisations and public employment services are increasingly involved at various stages of the process. In some countries, including Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland, social partners are involved in validation procedures (for example, in assessment committees); in others, such as Austria, Turkey, Ireland and Slovakia, social partners are involved in designing the national validation strategies<sup>(3)</sup>. In some countries, the private sector and social partners have a key role to play in both the development of standards and assessment procedures for validation. In others, the private sector is also involved in shaping sectoral approaches to validation. In Sweden, for example, business sector organisations can also perform a full validation

process in cooperation with private education institutions, provided they follow national quality criteria and guidelines. In Switzerland, some validation projects have been developed by professional associations, such as a diploma in Leadership and Management awarded by the Swiss Managers Association. However, some countries report a lack of interest on the part of the private sector (Ireland, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Hungary).

**Social and labour market acceptance:** the inventory does not explicitly address whether individuals and the labour market consider qualifications obtained through validation practices equivalent to those obtained through formal education. But it does show that some countries do not extend the same standards to validation. Types of qualifications awarded to validation users may differ from those awarded by education and training authorities. Such discrepancies do not encourage parity of esteem between qualifications obtained via validation and those obtained through formal pathways, which is in fact part of the rationale for validation.

**Financial issues:** validation arrangements are typically introduced without added resources; institutions are expected to cover their costs from existing budgets. This practice makes it difficult to know exactly how much is being allocated to validation.

Cost and level of bureaucracy involved in validation risk forming a barrier to further implementation, especially where SMEs are concerned.

Current financing models may constitute a disincentive for validation. Granting exemptions to formal requirements based on validation shortens the time spent in formal education. For educational institutions whose allocations are based on number of students at any given time, validation may therefore lead to a reduction in financing.

**Data collection:** validation can occur in the formal education sector, the labour market and the voluntary sector. Obtaining data on users of validation of non-formal and informal learning is thus notably challenging. Data collected by various organisations are rarely aggregated and published and are not analysed at national level. This paucity of data limits opportunities for evaluation and monitoring of validation activities – a concern also raised in the 2010 inventory.

Much therefore remains to be done to establish data collection systems that can reliably reflect take-up of validation initiatives. Stronger data on who needs and who uses validation would also allow authorities to

<sup>(3)</sup> For an analysis of how validation is used within companies, see Cedefop (2014). *Use of validation by enterprises for human resource and career development purposes*. [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3065\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3065_en.pdf).

demonstrate to citizens, companies and institutions that validation is in fact a cost-effective way of acquiring qualifications.

**Quality:** none of the countries covered by the current update have created a quality assurance framework exclusively for validation. In some cases, such arrangements devolve to the awarding body or institution. Alternatively, validation is covered by general quality assurance systems for formal education and training, or only for education subsectors. So far, few countries have established quality codes or guidelines on validation, and little is yet known on whether quality assurance systems and procedures are in fact able to ensure reliable, valid and credible assessments. This area is ripe for further investigation.

**Target groups and social awareness:** in most countries, the public is not adequately aware of existence of a validation system, though individuals may know of specific validation arrangements. Awareness is lowest in Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia, and highest in Finland. This may be because development of validation is still very recent (Italy, Slovakia), but also because of a lack of initiatives to inform the public (Romania, Hungary). Of key importance to engage with disadvantaged groups are outreach/raising awareness activities and guidance. Disadvantaged individuals are typically not aware of the potential benefits of validation for their personal and professional development and need to be convinced of its value. Those most likely to benefit from validation, such as migrant women, are often the least aware of the possibilities on offer and least able to access them. This points to a need for better counselling. Guidance services are needed to help people navigate the system, while national, regional and sectoral stakeholders should plan validation arrangements with needs of varied target audiences in mind.

**Staffing:** particular knowledge and skills required of staff involved in validation, especially assessors, needs to be discussed more extensively. The focus is usually on mandatory experience (Belgium-Flanders and Wallonia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey). Some countries (also) require training (BE-Flanders (labour market sector), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland) and even fewer (Malta) require specific qualifications. Yet a qualification would be useful for validation practitioners. Assessing formal education is in many ways different from assessing

knowledge and skills acquired outside the education system, by people who tend not to fit the mainstream student profile.

## What next?

Based on information collected in the inventory, Cedefop, with the European Commission and in consultation with stakeholders, is currently updating the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. Reflecting principles laid out in the recommendation, and based on insights of the inventory, the guidelines are intended to help policy-makers devise validation arrangements that best serve their citizens and labour market. In addition, a series of peer learning activities is bringing countries together to learn from one another about specific issues, such as how to write and use learning outcomes for validation purposes.

Current development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks, which Cedefop systematically maps and analyses <sup>(4)</sup>, provides an ideal opportunity to hold a wide-ranging discussion among stakeholders on the value of all learning experiences for the labour market, and on how citizens can use them to acquire formal qualifications. The link between national qualifications frameworks and validation is still not as strong as it could be. Nevertheless, by setting equal standards for all learning, irrespective of how it is acquired, adoption and development of a learning outcomes approach to qualifications is expected considerably to improve standing of non-formal and informal learning in the labour market and in society.



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<sup>(4)</sup> Annual reports: *Analysis and overview of NQF developments in European countries*.  
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