

How to make learning visible: Strategies for implementation of non-formal and informal learning

Summary of main conference outcomes

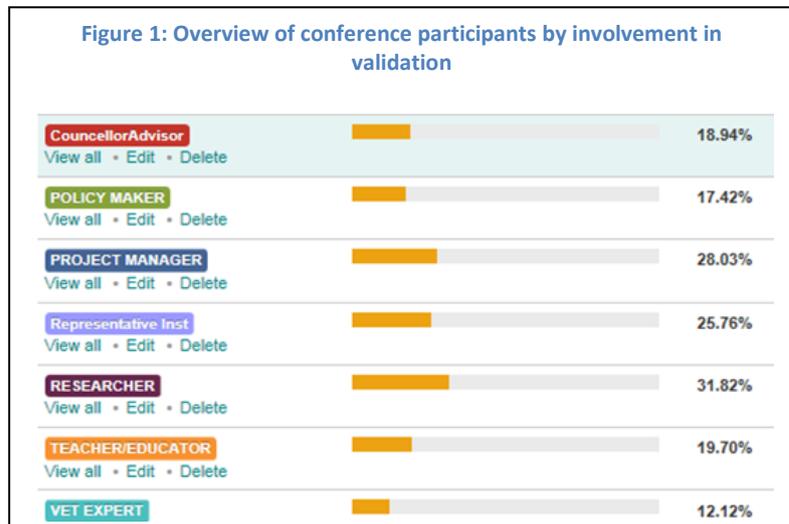


28-29 November, Thessaloniki, Greece

Introduction

This paper summarises main points discussed during the conference organised by Cedefop: *How to make learning visible: Strategies for implementation of non-formal and informal learning*, that took place in Thessaloniki, Greece, on the 28-29 of November.. The conference had more than 200 registered participants, from 32 countries. This is an indication that validation of non-formal and informal learning is a subject of interest in the current policy landscape. The participants were a mix of experts, policy makers, practitioners and social partners (see figure 1). Although it is not possible to fully capture the richness and depth of the discussions that took place, we have tried to state major lines of argument, hopefully maintaining the spirit of the main ones. The document has been elaborated by Cedefop's experts Ernesto Villalba, Jens Bjornavold and Hanne Christensen. The programme, all presentations, several video summaries and interviews can be found on the [conference webpage](#). More information on validation is available on the [validation project webpage](#), with the latest update of the European Inventory.

Figure 1: Overview of conference participants by involvement in validation



Background

Cedefop has worked systematically on validation of non-formal and informal learning since the late 1990s, when the lifelong learning policies became prominent in European educational policies. [The 2012 Council Recommendation](#) on validation of non-formal and informal learning asked Member States to have in place, no later than 2018, arrangements for validation that allow individuals to obtain a full (or parts of a) qualification and to certify their knowledge, skills and competences

acquired outside the formal system. Cedefop, together with the European Commission, supports Member States in their development and implementation of validation arrangements through the development of the [European Guidelines of validation](#) and the regular update of the [European inventory](#), as well as the organisation of peer learning activities. The 2018 deadline, established by the recommendation, is only the beginning of a journey to develop effective systems that make validation an integral part, not only of education and training, but also of labour market and social policies. Validation systems need to become part of existing structures and be adapted to local realities, as an acceptable route for certification of skills and qualifications.

Through a look at the past and the present, the conference evaluated main challenges in the near and more distant future of validation. The aim of the conference was to reflect on the past, the present and the future of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe to evaluate progress to date and engage Member State policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in a discussion on what needs to be done in the run-up to the 2018 target and beyond.

The conference was organised to maximise involvement and input from participants. The first morning was directed to setting the scene and presenting results of the European inventory of validation (2016 update). Selected countries (Sweden, France and Poland) presented their approach to validation. In the afternoon of the first day, participants were divided into four groups to discuss how validation can address the needs of specific target groups. In the morning of the next day, after discussing outcomes of the four working groups, a panel of international experts responded to questions from the audience. The closure of the conference was done by the Director of Cedefop, James Calleja. The programme is available at the [conference webpage](#).

Main questions to be addressed

The driving questions for the conference were:

- (a) what is the overall vision of validation in the different existing practices?
- (b) which stakeholders are involved to make validation a reality?
- (c) how can trust in validation be assured?
- (d) how can validation be funded?
- (e) who should benefit from validation?

Major outcomes

The conference confirmed results of the [2016 European Inventory update](#), namely, that validation needs to move from policy to implementation. There are available options for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in most of the countries; normally in the framework of educational policies that permit the acquisition of a qualification through validation, but also through bottom-up initiatives in the labour market or in the third sector. The arrangements might be well designed and comply with most necessary conditions, but there is a need to provide those initiatives with further political back-up and resources. It is not enough to have policies in place that permit individuals to get qualifications through validation, it is necessary to provide resources, both human and financial, for the application of these policies.

In order to do so, participants noted, social partners and specially employers, need to be involved in the design and implementation of validation practices. Involvement of social partners and employers is crucial for building trust and making validation an accepted route for obtaining qualifications. Civil society organisations are active in the development of validation arrangements, but they tend not to be connected to mainstream validation. In other words, more coordination among the relevant stakeholders is necessary in order to build trust and assure buy-in of validation.

One way of involving more social partners and employers is through raising awareness of the importance and benefits of validation. This refers to the way validation can benefit the employers and society at large. Learning about the benefits will help getting employers and social partners further involved. Understanding the benefits of validation requires the collection of adequate data and its analysis. Very few countries provide sufficient information to carry out impact assessment or cost-benefit analysis of validation practices. The conference echoed the call for more research and information on validation, which is needed to make it more attractive and viable.

Another important platform for the involvement of all stakeholders on validation is the strengthening and developing of NQFs. The development of NQFs in Europe has been linked to the development of mechanisms for the acquisition of qualifications through validation of non-formal and informal learning. NQFs that promote non-formal and informal learning as an acceptable route to qualifications, or that place non-formal and informal forms of learning in relation to formal qualifications, contribute to making all learning valuable, irrespective of how it has been acquired.

Further involvement of social partners, as well as a better understanding of the benefits of validation for the individual, will also facilitate the recruitment of disadvantaged groups into validation processes. The conference acknowledged the difficulties in reaching out to these groups and emphasised the importance of guidance and counselling. Information, advice and counselling need to be delivered locally, close to where people work and live. They need to be tailored to the specific groups and at the same time, work in connection to other national and international structures.

Such service requires practitioners who are well trained and who work in a coherent system, where guidance and validation practitioners are trained and prepared to address the needs of a diverse set of individuals. This will also improve and maintain quality and relevance of the validation systems. Professional development of validation practitioners was one area that the conference clearly identified as needing further work and improvement. This goes together with the provision of funding and adequate political back-up and resourcing.

In conclusion, the conference showed that much progress has been made to make validation a reality in Europe, but that there is still a long way to go to make validation an accepted and valuable route to obtaining qualifications and verifying individuals' skills. This requires further work in developing effective guidance and raising awareness, as well as providing professional development to those working on validation. Collecting adequate information to further our understanding of the efficiency and effectiveness of validation is also much in need. The conference was one more step in building up a community of practice for the exchange of challenges and solutions.