



European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

THIRD EDITION



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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications.

We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policy-making in the EU Member States.

Cedefop was originally established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. This decision was repealed in 2019 by Regulation (EU) 2019/128 establishing Cedefop as a Union Agency with a renewed mandate.

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Foreword

Validation of skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning is increasingly an accepted key element in skills policies in Europe: the [European Skills Agenda](#), the [European Area of Education](#), the [reinforced Youth Guarantee](#) and the [European Social Pillar Action Plan](#) all refer to validation as a facilitator for lifelong and life-wide learning, allowing individuals to transfer and accumulate learning across institutions, sectors and countries. Upskilling and reskilling, coupled with much-needed investment in skill development, is becoming ever more important. European Union Member States agreed on a target of 60% of adults participating in learning by 2030 in the Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights. Against this backdrop, strategies for upskilling and reskilling must increasingly consider all prior learning, irrespective of when and where skills were acquired. Validation can facilitate matching people's skills to employers' needs and ease job-to-job transitions.

However, despite EU and national policy efforts, concrete use and availability of opportunities for validation of non-formal and informal learning are currently still lacking. For validation to become a consistent feature of national skills policies and practices, there is a need for intensified cooperation and coordination between all relevant stakeholders and services, giving individuals easy access to reliable and credible validation arrangements.

The purpose of the European guidelines, as stated in the 2012 Recommendation for validating non-formal and informal learning, is to share experiences and to support mutual learning between those involved in the development and implementation of validation arrangements in Europe. The guidelines seek to clarify the conditions for developing and implementing validation that relies on several interconnected elements which, when combined, can strengthen the role of validation at national and European levels. The guidelines put the individual at the centre and provide insights into provision and methodologies and how the process can be coordinated and carried out. This third update of the European guidelines is the result of a long-standing collaboration of Cedefop with the European Commission. The 2023 version addresses new and emerging issues, such as cost and financing, standards and reference points, outreach strategies, digital certification and microcredentials. We hope these guidelines provide a valuable tool for reflection and advancement in the field, contributing to making up- and reskilling a reality for everyone.

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- (a) the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group have discussed elements of the guidelines in plenary meetings and provided valuable comments;
- (b) a project group on validation including EQF AG members and selected experts provided support over different activities;
- (c) results of a flash survey answered by around 200 people involved with validation provided useful input;
- (d) discussions and input from more than 100 participants of an online workshop in November 2021 provided valuable insights into specific themes;
- (e) consultation and participation in events connected with Erasmus+ and other European projects has also informed the drafting.

The European Commission, DG Employment and Social affairs, in line with the 2012 Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning, coordinated the work. Cedefop, represented by Ernesto Villalba-Garcia and Jens Bjornavold provided technical and conceptual support and drafted the guidelines. We would particularly like to thank the validation project group that have provided invaluable input on several occasions and have helped to improve the document.

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Purpose of the European guidelines

The definition of validation used for the guidelines in this publication is that of the *2012 Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning* ⁽¹⁾:

‘Validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification.’

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is based on two fundamental principles. First, that all learning, irrespective of when or where acquired, is potentially valuable. Second, informal, non-formal and formal learning complement each other ⁽²⁾. These simple principles need to be shared between all relevant stakeholders for validation to be implemented successfully and used and to reach its full potential.

Validation makes it possible to tailor training provision to individual needs, while empowering individuals by building on what they already know, are able to do and understand. By increasing the flexibility of education and training, for example by awarding credits and by easing access to programmes, up- and reskilling can be improved. In the labour market, validation can influence job mobility, notably by facilitating transfer of knowledge, skills and competences ⁽³⁾ across institutional, sectoral and national borders. Employers and trade unions can use validation to improve the career opportunities of employees and match skills better to work tasks. Civil society and volunteering and youth organisations might rely on validation processes to identify and document competences developed by participants in their activities.

These guidelines are written for everybody involved in the initiation, development and

⁽¹⁾ [Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.](#)

⁽²⁾ Formal learning ‘occurs in an organised and structured environment in terms of learning objectives, time or resources (e.g. an education or training institution). Non-formal learning ‘occurs in the framework of planned activities – in terms of learning objectives, time or resources – where some form of learning support is present (e.g. student-teacher/trainer relationships)’.

Informal learning ‘occurs in the framework of daily activities – work, family or leisure – which are not explicitly designated as learning activities in terms of objectives, time or learning support. The delimitation between these forms of learning might be a matter of interpretation and differ from country to country’.

For more information on definitions see Cedefop (2023).

⁽³⁾ These guidelines acknowledge the complexity and wide-ranging scope of learning outcomes: they may not consist only of theoretical and practical knowledge; they can also include practical and analytical skills, as well as wider competences. Such competences can be distinguished by an individuals’ ability to apply knowledge and skills in a self-directed and autonomous way. We are aware of the occasional inclusion of attitudes and aptitudes as additional conceptual elements in capturing learning but, for reasons of simplicity, these elements have not been included in the guidelines.

implementation of validation and are meant as a source for inspiration and reflection, addressing common issues and challenges confronted across levels and contexts. They seek to clarify the conditions for developing and implementing validation, highlighting critical choices to be made by stakeholders at different stages of the process. The aim is not to promote a single ‘correct solution’ but rather to identify alternatives and their implications. This reflects that validation arrangements must be fit for purpose and designed according to different target groups and needs.

The guidelines should be read together with the [European inventory](#) on validation. By presenting examples of how different countries and institutions are developing and implementing validation, the European Inventory adds to and complements the guidelines. Together they facilitate peer learning ⁽⁴⁾.

The themes presented in these guidelines should be treated as interconnected building blocks which, when combined, can strengthen the role of validation at national and European levels, creating a coherent approach. A first overview of themes – and the questions they generate – is presented in Box 1 and illustrates the range of interconnected issues which need to be addressed by stakeholders in this area.

⁽⁴⁾ The intention is to create an interactive tool that allows users to explore the guidelines together with the European inventory: it will be made available on Cedefop’s web portal. Links to Cedefop’s handbook on the definition and description of learning outcomes – a topic underpinning and supporting validation – will also be provided where relevant. This will allow the guidelines to be enriched and act as an integrated tool directly supporting the work of policy-makers and practitioners.

Box 1. Key questions on validation

- Is the individual perspective considered in all elements of validation?
- Have the objective, purpose and expected outcomes of validation been defined and clearly communicated?
- Is the purpose of validation reflected in the organisation and emphasis of its different phases?
- Do possibilities for validation exist in different contexts and what is their role:
 - in education and training?
 - in the labour market?
 - in the third sector?
- Does validation work with other policies and services?
 - Are roles and responsibilities of stakeholders clarified?
 - What steps are taken to avoid fragmentation and ensure a coherent approach?
- Can individuals transfer and accumulate validation outcomes across different contexts?
- Has sustainable financing been provided, and cost-sharing mechanisms agreed?
- Have the professional roles of validation practitioners been clarified, developed and supported?
- Is information on validation being provided in ways which ensure awareness, outreach and access?
- Is there provision of guidance and counselling before, during and after a validation process?
- Are learning outcomes used to define reference points for validation?
 - Are reference points and standards agreed among stakeholders?
 - How does validation relate to different credentials?
 - Are there clear links to NQFs?
- Has the potential of ICT been considered for improving validation?
- How has quality been assured in the validation process?
- Which validation methodologies are available and how can they be used and potentially combined for specific policies and practices?
 - Are validation methods fit for purpose?
 - Are tools reliable, valid and scalable?

The guidelines are organised in the following way. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of putting the individual at the centre of any validation arrangement, emphasising the need to respond to their needs and objectives. Chapter 3 discusses how validation is implemented in different contexts and connected to different policies in a sustainable, professional manner. These two first chapters are primarily directed to policy-makers and decision-makers, reflecting the strategic nature of validating policies. Chapter 4 presents aspects focused on validation provision and how the process can be coordinated and

carried out. Chapter 5 discusses validation methodologies and tools ⁽⁵⁾. A concluding Chapter 6 aims at briefly bringing all the sections together. At the end of each section a list of key questions provides a tool for reflection, the questions are repeated in the annex 1 to facilitate discussion.

⁽⁵⁾ Chapter 5 addresses technical and conceptual issues not relevant to everybody involved in validation, but crucial for those working on developing tools and methodologies, as well as those involved in the definition and use of reference points and standards.

A strategic vision: the individual at the centre

2.1. Centrality of the individual

The individual and their specific requirements and circumstances need to be considered in all elements of a validation arrangement. While this is connected to and dependent on the political, institutional, financial, technical, and legal context, it is important that any validation arrangement specifically serves the individual. Only by adequately capturing the knowledge, skills and competence acquired by the individual can validation serve the broader objectives set for the education and training system, the labour market and society in general.

There is no one-size-fits all approach to validation: it must serve a wide variety of individual conditions and needs. Ideally, individuals should be able to access validation processes at different stages of their life, ensuring that relevant learning experiences are appropriately identified and valued. Validation should make individuals aware of their existing knowledge, skills and competences, making them visible to others so that the individual is able to take the next step in their lifelong and life-wide learning and employment careers. Validation is not only about avoiding unnecessary repetitions of already acquired learning but is also about acknowledging own strengths and weaknesses and can be a useful tool for personal development. The following points are crucial to safeguarding the centrality of the individual in validation.

First, individuals participating in validation must be aware of and have a full understanding of what it entails. This requires guidance before, during and after a validation process and for validation to be embedded in a wider learning and career development approach: it works better if connected to all relevant services and support structures, not only including career guidance, but also financing and adequate and quality training provision. This requires outreach measures, promotional activities, and adequate information easily accessible and available to the individual where they live and work.

Second, individuals participating in validation should be able to take control of the process and decide on the use of the results. At any point the individual should be able to stop the process without prejudice. It is also crucial that the candidate is aware of possibilities for appeal and that the mechanisms set up for this purpose are transparent and credible. To avoid conflict of interests and assure fairness, a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities is necessary. Those who manage the validation process must reflect on and pay respect to privacy and personal vulnerabilities. Compliance with standards for individual data protection and privacy rights, ensuring strict confidentiality and fair treatment, is also a must.

Third, it is important to manage expectations. The individual must be informed about

and aware of the value-added of validation. From the outset there needs to be an understanding of the exchange value (currency) of the validation outcome and how this can be used to access further learning and/or employment or personal development opportunities for the individual. Individuals should not enter the process based on false assumptions.

Thus, the individual needs and circumstances cut across all elements presented in the current guidelines and should be considered when developing, implementing and improving validation arrangements.

Box 2: **Key questions on the centrality of the individual**

- To what extent are individuals aware of, and have access to, validation?
- Are validation arrangements designed to capture diverse (and unexpected) learning experiences or do they address a limited (and predefined) set of experiences?
- To what extent does validation serve diverse individuals at different stages of their life? To what extent does it address lifelong and life-wide learning, employment careers and volunteering?
- Is the privacy and personal integrity of the candidates protected throughout the validation process?
- Have explicit procedures been put in place to guarantee confidentiality?
- What arrangements have been put in place to guarantee fair and equal treatment?
- Are there possibilities for appeal?
- Have ethical standards been developed and applied?
- Are the outcomes of the process the exclusive property of the candidate?
- Can the individual, if the opportunity arises, transfer and accumulate results of validation?
- Are individuals supported before, during and after the process?

2.2. Four phases of validation

The wide orientation of validation, which is a prerequisite for capturing the complexity of individual learning, directly leads to the four-phase (stage) model introduced by the 2009 validation guidelines and the 2012 validation Recommendation. These four phases of validation – identification, documentation, assessment and certification – adapt the concept of validation to different contexts and different purposes. Depending on the objective of the validation process, certain phases will be more emphasised than others (see Section 2.3).

2.2.1. Identification

Validation starts with the identification of learning acquired and is where the individual becomes increasingly aware of prior achievements. This stage is crucial as learning outcomes differ from person to person and will have been acquired in various contexts: at home, in education, during work or through volunteering activities. For many, the discovery and increased awareness of own capabilities is, in itself, a valuable outcome of the process. In some countries, identification comes together with a pre-involvement/recruitment phase that determines if the individual is eligible for entering validation. Such identification might start comparing individual learning outcomes with a predefined template or exploring individual experiences. In this initial phase the individual must be made aware of the costs and benefits of validation. This phase is also sometimes connected to profiling or screening in a career guidance process (Cedefop, 2020).

Methods and approaches to identification must be open to the unexpected and not be designed in ways which narrow down the range of learning outcomes to be considered (see Section 4.1.2 on reference points and standards). This stage will frequently require active involvement of advisers and counsellors able to enter into dialogue with the candidate and direct them to appropriate options and tools as well as manage expectations. While ICT-based approaches are increasingly used at this stage, reflecting their high scalability and reduced cost, their standardised character may reduce the ability to identify and value complex combinations of knowledge, skills and competences held by individuals. Using interviews and dialogue-based approaches can be more costly but provides potentially a greater value to the candidate (see also Chapter 5).

Box 3. Key questions on identification

- Are there templates and systematic ways of identifying learning outcomes?
- Is the identification phase limited to predefined areas of prior learning? What is the starting point for the identification of skills?
- How are standardised (for example ICT-based) and open (for example dialogue-based) identification methods mixed and balanced?
- How is guidance and counselling supporting and interconnected with the identification phase?
- How is the identification process supported by professionals?

2.2.2. Documentation

The documentation stage complements the identification stage by adding evidence and proof of acquired learning. This can be accomplished through the building of a portfolio that tends to include a CV and career-overview supported by various evidence types, ranging from written documents to work samples and demonstrations of practice (Chapter 5). This evidence must allow (future) external readers and users to judge and eventually trust the learning outcomes acquired by the individual: simply listing job-titles or positions is not enough.

Ensuring this trust, and thus the portability of evidence, is crucial and requires coordination at regional, national and European level. A situation where every validation provider – at local, regional, sectoral, national and European level – operates with different (and potentially competing) document and evidence formats will hinder the individual in transferring and accumulating learning throughout life and across education and work. Common formats for the presentation of learning experiences, as demonstrated by [Europass](#), can aid this transfer and promote better understanding of these outcomes. Use of a common terminology, such as *European skills, competences, qualifications and occupations (ESCO)*, can help create better and easier-to-use documentation. ICT is also become increasingly important for the documentation of learning outcomes, enabling the creation and storing of online portfolios.

Box 4. Key questions on documentation

- Is there agreement on which evidence to accept for validation?
- Have end-users, notably individuals, been made aware of what is accepted as evidence?
- Are the formats used for documenting non-formal and informal learning generally known and/or accepted?
- To what extent do existing documentation formats support the transfer and portability of evidence gathered in the context of validation?

2.2.3. Assessment

Assessment is normally referred to as the stage in which an individual's learning outcomes are compared against specific reference points and/or standards. It needs to be designed to capture and assess the learning specific to each individual, so various tools need to be considered. In some cases, written tests will be sufficient; in other cases demonstrations, practical tests and evaluation of other forms of evidence will be required.

The assessment phase depends on the standard or reference point used. The shift to learning-outcomes-based standards is generally considered critical for validation to be possible. Focusing on what a learner knows, understands and is able to do, a learning-outcomes-based assessment is not limited to particular input factors. This makes it easier to reflect and respect individual variation in learning careers, accepting differences in how, where and when learning took place. Input elements (i.e. 'where' and 'for how long') might be relevant for building evidence and proof of learning. Some evidence might have greater weight than other depending on these factors.

Many of the tools and methods used for assessing non-formal and informal learning will be based on, or similar to, those used in formal education and training. To capture the complex range of learning involved, a combination of tools and methodologies may be required.

The assessment stage is crucial to the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In some cases, certificates based on validation are perceived as inferior

to those awarded by traditional courses and programmes; to counter such perceptions, tools and processes must be presented in as transparent a way as possible and must be linked to clear standards. Building mutual trust is closely linked to the existence of robust quality assurance arrangements, ensuring that all phases of validation, including assessment, are open to critical scrutiny. Involvement of relevant stakeholders will also help in building trust.

Box 5. Key questions on assessment

- Are assessment tools adapted to the individual's needs and characteristics?
- Are validity, reliability, accessibility and fairness assured?
- Can assessment results be contested?
- Have the conditions for assessment been clearly defined and communicated in terms of procedure, tools and evaluation/assessment standards:
 - to candidates?
 - to employers and education institutions?
- Is feedback regularly collected and analysed?

2.2.4. Certification

The final phase of validation is about the certification – and the final valuing – of the learning which has been identified, documented, and assessed. This can take different forms but is commonly the award of a formal qualification ⁽⁶⁾ (or a partial-qualification or a smaller stand-alone part of a qualification). In certain areas (economic sectors and industries), certification may also involve issuing a licence allowing the individual to carry out specific tasks. In recent years we have observed a proliferation of different credentials ⁽⁷⁾ – for example in the form of digital labels, microcredentials, vendor certificates and international qualifications. This emergence of alternative credentials may have important implications for validation in the years to come (Section 4.1).

The value – or the currency – of qualifications, certificates and credentials varies considerably and largely reflects the legitimacy of the awarding body or authority that certifies the learning outcomes. It is important for individual candidates to be aware of these differences as they can influence the value of the entire validation process.

In many EU countries, validation is linked to – and to some extent integrated with – national qualifications systems and is designed as an alternative path to well-known and established qualifications (Cedefop, 2020). As requirements to candidates following different learning routes will be similar, a qualification awarded on the basis of validation

⁽⁶⁾ Formal qualification is defined as ‘the formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practise a trade’ (Cedefop, 2023).

⁽⁷⁾ Statement issued by a competent authority (education or training provider, awarding body, professional organisation) describing a learning action (based on Cedefop, 2023).

will be, in principle, of the same value as a qualification awarded on the basis of formal education.

It can be argued that validation can increasingly play a role in improving the flexibility of national qualification systems and frameworks. While NQFs provide an overview of qualifications in a country, and how they are linked, validation can support learners in crossing institutional, sectoral and national borderlines.

Box 6. **Key questions on certification**

- Is the awarding body known?
- Is the process leading to the award transparent?
- To what extent can the outcomes of validation (qualifications, certificates, credentials, etc.) be exchanged into further education, job opportunities?
- Are certifications obtained through validation linked to NQFs?

2.3. Different purposes and benefits of validation

The diverse needs of individuals require validation to be able to serve different purposes. Different phases will be emphasised, depending on the specific needs of the individual. When working towards a formal qualification, the robustness and credibility of the assessment and certification phases are crucial. In other cases, for example in relation to volunteering, more emphasis is given to identification and documentation, less to formal assessment and certification.

The emphasis on identification and documentation will normally be associated with validation arrangements that are more formative in nature, while emphasis on assessment and certification will have a more summative nature. Summative validation arrangements have as main goal the certification of competences; formative approaches are more focused on increasing self-awareness and personal development. Both approaches can coexist, summative approaches will sometimes, for example, include formative elements.

Validation arrangements need to be presented in a way that clarifies their main purpose and allows individuals to choose the form best suited to their needs. A person not interested in acquiring a formal qualification should be able to opt for a solution giving more emphasis to identification and documentation phases.

Validation will normally assess prior learning to give access to an educational programme or for awarding a part or full qualification. In this way, time spent in education and training can be significantly reduced and programmes be adapted and tailored to the individual to fill gaps. It can contribute to reducing social inequality as access to education and training becomes wider, allowing access for people with no formal credentials.

Validation can play a major role in recruitment processes, companies' internal skills development and in human resource management overall. Often addressed as competence or skills mapping and/or measurement, such validation in companies is extensive and plays an important, although not always visible, role in our societies

(Cedefop, 2014). Validation results can be used to predict suitability of a candidate for a position. Internal training needs and skills mismatches can be determined as a result of validation processes.

Validation results might also be used to document learning outcomes acquired during voluntary experience in the context of civil society organisation or youth associations. The purpose in these cases is predominantly to make visible the outcomes of these experiences, not to formalise them in the sense of awarding qualifications.

Validation can also have important self-realisation effects and help individuals to redirect their careers or move between jobs and sectors based on previous learning.

Box 7. **Key questions on objectives and benefits**

- Has the purpose of validation been defined and clearly communicated?
- Have the phases of the validation process been clearly defined to address the purpose of validation?
- Is the purpose of validation reflected in the structure and emphasis of the different phases of validation?
- Are benefits of validation clearly communicated to the individual?

CHAPTER 3

Validation as a facilitator of individual, lifelong and life-wide learning

3.1. Validation contexts and transferability

Validation processes differ according to the needs and characteristics of the candidates involved and the context. For validation to support individual learning and employment careers, the issue of transferability of outcomes needs to be addressed. The European inventory shows that validation is organised in different ways in different contexts and settings. Validation in an education and training context differs considerably from validation processes carried out in enterprises or in civil society organisations. A strategic approach to validation implies a cross-cutting approach that breaks silos, allowing labour market actors, civil society organisations and education and training institutions and services to focus on individuals, their potential and needs. Validation arrangements should ideally support individual transitions between education, employment and civil society from a wider perspective of up- and reskilling and personal development.

The challenge of these transitions can be illustrated by the differences between validation in education and training and validation processes (competence mapping) in companies: when validating an individual for the award of a part or full qualification, formal curricula or standards will normally provide the reference point. These will mostly be well known and have a clear exchange value (for further learning or employment). When mapping competences in enterprises, internal (in some cases sectoral) reference points will be used. These will be less known to the wider public and not designed to play a role outside the company or sector in question. While these two processes will look for similar outcomes, i.e. to capture prior learning, they will normally operate separately; an individual will rarely be able to combine the two. The same will be the case for validation of voluntary activities where only limited attention is paid to transferability to other contexts and sectors.

This indicates the need to improve dialogue between providers of validation, particularly between education and training and the labour market; for example, competence mapping in companies and sectors should inform and facilitate validation aiming at formal qualifications and certificates. This does not mean that validation activities in different sectors and contexts should be similar, rather that they must be able to communicate using a shared competence or learning outcomes language. However, it is relevant to illustrate in more detail the specific features of different validation contexts.

3.1.1. Validation in education and training

In most European countries, strategies on validation emerged (from the 1980s) as part of education, training and qualifications policies. These have significantly influenced the current understanding and design of validation arrangements. Education and training are still the key promoters of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe and ministries of education usually play a key promotion and coordinating role.

Validation facilitates more flexible access to education and training, providing a crucial aspect of upskilling and reskilling policies. Learners with no formal credentials can be recruited to educational programmes based on the validation of their prior learning. Validation facilitates exemption from part(s) of an education and training programme, shortening the time spent in education and training. This is commonly illustrated in VET where prior work experiences are frequently counted as equivalent to parts of the programme, module or qualification. In higher education, credits (normally as ECTS) might be awarded from previous experience. In many instances validation also provides a basis for awarding full qualifications. This implies that qualifications can be acquired through a variety of learning forms and pathways, challenging provision of education and training as a monopoly of formal educational institutions. What matters are the learning outcomes, i.e. what the candidate knows, understands and is able to do as required by the qualification.

This approach to validation is about opening up education and training institutions and their qualifications to skills and competences acquired outside formal settings. The purpose of these arrangements is mainly to ascertain whether a candidate meets the specific requirements set by the institution or education sector in question. These arrangements are critically important for opening education and training to a wider range of learners, including a wider set of skills and competences, and creating more flexible educational pathways.

In some cases, validation is seen as exclusively linked to education and training, potentially limiting its role in, for example, enterprises or the voluntary sector. Validation arrangements in education might be (narrowly) focused on a programme or qualification and/or institution. This narrow focus limits the possibility of validating skills that could be very valuable for the individual and that remain un-tapped. In addition, the outcomes of validation might be locked into a single institution and education sector and are not transferable beyond the programme or qualification in question. This limits the transferability of validation outcomes.

When education and training institutions are given the role of validating the learning outcomes acquired outside formal education institutions, education institutions become gate-keepers, determining whether non-formal and informal learning at work and in life is up to the standards of learning in formal education and training. This has been connected to the power of epistemologies and to an increasing risk of exclusion of certain knowledge and some disadvantage groups.

Box 8. Key questions on education and training

- Has the purpose of validation within education and training been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Is validation offered in all parts of education and training systems?
- Does validation offered in different parts of the education and training system build on similar or different principles? Is there coherence on validation across different parts of education and training?
- Can validation arrangements in different parts of education and training aid progress across types and levels of education? To what extent can validation results be used across different parts of education and training?
- How is validation linked to credit transfer and accumulation?

3.1.2. Validation in the labour market

The identification and documentation of skills is an important and common feature of human resource practices in companies (Cedefop, 2014) and can be connected to skills audit practices in public and private employment services. While normally not referred to as validation, methodologies are frequently similar to those found in validation. Interviews, tests and other forms of skills assessments are used in recruitment processes to identify the suitability of a candidate for a post or career path. In addition to formal qualifications, learning experiences are considered.

Validation can support training and staff development strategies for employers, recognising the expertise of staff and allowing employers to plan their skills needs. Validation increases staff retention and motivation and supports career progression. It allows individuals to redirect their careers and supports up- and reskilling by reducing training time and opening new employment and career opportunities. Through identification and documentation, it is also possible to develop a training map and a tailored training offer that can adapt to the specific needs of the individual, thus supporting his/her career progression.

Validation thus increases the prospects for inclusion and participation in the labour market, while making labour markets more efficient by making skills supply more transparent. In this context, validation can be valuable for individuals, who can be recruited or progress in their career, and for employers, who can retain staff and plan for future skills need.

While only exceptionally resulting in certification, the identification and documentation parts of these practices are important and extensively used in many countries and sectors. The mix of private businesses and public policies means that validation practices in the labour market remain limited and unstructured. They tend to lack documentation of the identified skills or the absence of common standards. The outcomes of company-internal skills and competence assessments can only be used outside the company in exceptional cases. Given the increasing rate of job changes in societies, individuals will increasingly need to make use of these outcomes. Further, existing validation in the labour market is not usually connected to other employment policies or labour market initiatives.

There is a need to clarify further the potential role of labour market validation in supporting not only lifelong learning but also employment progression, including how to link this progress with further education and training. Increased involvement of labour market stakeholders in validation is crucial for taking forward national strategies in this area.

Box 9. Key questions on labour market

- Are there systematic validation possibilities in the labour market?
- Is there a coherent approach to validation in the labour market across different labour market actors?
- Has the purpose of validation within the labour market initiatives been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Are there possibilities of connecting certificates obtained through validation in the labour market to formal education programmes?
- What is the value of labour market certificates and can they be acquired through validation?
- Is validation used and connected to up- and reskilling initiatives?
- Can results of a validation process in the labour market be used in other contexts, for example to access formal education programmes?

3.1.3. Validation in the third sector

As in the case of the labour market, identification and documentation of skills occurs in civil society actions, volunteering, youth or social policies. Validation supports youth and volunteering activities and is used to provide value to the experiences that individuals acquire in the context of these activities. Validation can also support wider social policies such as the integration of migrants or refugees by making visible their competences and given them an exchange value. The third sector also plays an important role in promoting validation of non- formal and informal learning and can contribute to outreach measures. NGOs, civil society and youth organisations may be closer, and have better access, to those more in need of validation. Their activities can be a stepping-stone into identification and documentation of learning that can facilitate entrance in the labour market or into formal education. Non-governmental organisations involved in adult and lifelong learning consider non-formal and informal learning important outcomes of their activities that need to be made more visible.

However, there is a lack of connection between validation arrangements initiated or developed by civil society and youth organisations and education and training or labour market initiatives. In some cases, reference points developed for formal education and training do not fit some of the learning outcomes acquired during voluntary or youth work. Own certification might be awarded with a different degree of value associated. Some third sector organisations are training providers who have their own certificates, diplomas and other internal forms of validating learning outcomes. Some of these might

be recognised by public authorities and could be connected to NQF levels.

Validation processes in the third sector tend to have a formative perspective in which self-reflection and increasing self-awareness becomes the main objective. Empowering individuals and increasing their self-esteem is usually reported as outcomes of these processes.

Such outcomes might also be highly relevant for progressing in formal education and training, as well as in employment. Using common reference points that allow the output of a validation process in civil society or youth organisations to be used as input for more formalised and summative forms of learning will increase the take up of validation and make the system more efficient and valuable. As in the other cases, the credibility of validation carried out by the voluntary sector requires transparent standards and assessment mechanism and consideration of the different elements described in these guidelines.

Box 10. Key questions on third sector

- Are there systematic validation possibilities in the third sector?
- Have the objectives of validation within third sector initiatives been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Are there possibilities of connecting certificates obtained through validation in the third sector to formal education programmes?
- Can results of a validation process in the third sector be used in other contexts, for example to access formal education programmes?

3.2. Validation in skills and lifelong learning strategies

Validation can play a role in a wide range of policy areas, including education and training, labour market, social inclusion, migration and youth policies. However, these policy areas are only rarely connected to each other and do not necessarily form part of a coherent national skills strategy. Having different purposes focusing on the diverse needs of individuals requires a coordinated, coherent approach across policy areas and services for validation to release its full potential. A common vision on the role of validation in education and training, employment and social policies, as well as a clear agreement of the roles and contributions of different stakeholders, is fundamental. For validation to support individuals throughout their lives, it must work across geographic, institutional and sectoral borders.

Validation needs to be seen as part of a wider support system of incentives for individuals. Frameworks (more or less formalised) that govern the relationship between different policies and services will aid coherence and increase efficiency. Validation activities need to be coordinated and work together with outreach and lifelong career guidance services, education and training provision, financial incentives, as well as employment, social inclusion and migration services.

This can only be achieved by considering contextual factors, traditions and objectives, while making sure that essential elements presented in these guidelines are considered and agreed among stakeholders across contexts. Given the complex nature of validation, countries need to reflect on their own institutional framework, and the overall division of roles and tasks, to allow synergies. Working towards better coordination of validation arrangements requires focus on several aspects:

- (a) the legal framework matters. The existence of different, possibly competing, legal systems may hinder developments. Any introduction of centralised solutions, however, must be balanced with the need to develop arrangements for specific target groups, contexts and stakeholders;
- (b) attention must be paid to national coordination. Most countries have no single coordinating organisation for validation; instead, responsibility is shared across several ministries, or other national authorities, making validation a transversal issue. Countries need to consider whether a coordinating organisation should be identified and appointed;
- (c) increased attention should be paid to networking within and across sectors where validation is currently developed and implemented. National strategies on validation must address these networking issues explicitly, aiming for visible, well-known, reliable and cost-efficient validation services close to where people live, learn and work;
- (d) it is important to reflect on the overall balance of validation arrangements. The dominance of education and training in validation should not overshadow the potentially important role to be played by validation for other purposes, for example supporting career development and employability. Some countries tend to define (and limit) validation systems with reference to the needs of particular groups, for example the unemployed, low-qualified and migrants. While important and relevant, this (limited) focus needs to be balanced with the broader potential of validation, to make visible and value non-formal and informal learning in general.

Box 11. Key questions on skill and lifelong learning strategies

- Have the role and purposes of validation within education and training, labour market and social policies been clarified?
- Are there guidelines or frameworks that govern the relationship of validation with other services, for example career guidance and public employment services?
- Are there forums in which diverse actors governing different policy fields can come together to discuss validation issues?

3.3. Stakeholder involvement and coordination

A strategic approach to validation requires the involvement of many different actors with different responsibilities and functions. The 2012 Recommendation invites Member States to ‘promote the involvement in the development and implementation of the elements and principles of validation to all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations’ (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. 4, point 4). To achieve this complex coordination, different stakeholders need to agree on common principles applying across the different contexts, providing a validation landscape but at the same time allowing for contextual and individual adaptation.

Frameworks can improve coordination and improve coherence across contexts by institutionalising agreed principles and ways of providing feedback and information. The frameworks can have different levels of formalisation. They can be defined or driven by national/regional legislation, a strategy, or a network of regional/sectoral partnerships between different stakeholders (including employers and employee organisations, as well as civil society organisations). They can set clear principles, rules or procedures and systematically help transitions within and across different contexts of validation. Common guidelines, ideally developed together with relevant stakeholders, might provide similar functions, although they tend to be less prescriptive. Potential users and individuals should also be given a voice in designing and contributing to validation.

While the situation varies between countries, main stakeholders can be identified quite easily. Figure 1 provides a starting point for such an analysis, eventually to be carried out at national, regional, sectoral and local levels.

Figure 1. Possible stakeholders in validation and their functions

Example of main functions	Stakeholder Group	Examples of who is involved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide feedback • promotion 	Individuals and users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential users of validation • successful candidates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raise awareness and recruitment/outreach measures • provide information and guidance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carry out identification and documentation of competences • carry out assessment and certification 	Civic society, volunteering and youth organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-governmental organisations • volunteer-involving organisations projects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide information • carry out assessment and certification • carry out identification and documentation of competences 	Business sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enterprises • sector or branch associations • trade unions • employer organisations • chambers of commerce and industry projects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carry out assessment and certification • provide support for identification and documentation, including information and guidance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support individuals 	Education and training institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • general and vocational schools • universities • adult education providers • private education institutions • assessment centres and specialist recognition centres • alliances/consortiums/platforms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide support to institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish procedures • adapt guidelines to local environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coordinate among regional actors • provide information and support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carry out identification, documentation, assessment and certification 	Regional and local stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regional public authorities in education and training • labour and social services, etc. • local public authorities in education • employment and social services • regional and local projects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide adequate legislation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish frameworks and strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish procedures • determine role and responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coordinate institutional actors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide national guidelines • establish quality assurance mechanisms 	National stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ministries (of education, labour, etc.) and national governmental agencies • education, training and qualification authorities • national projects • public employment services • social services • social partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide common guidelines • provide common EU tools for validation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support transparency and portability • support policy learning and best practices transfer 	European stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Commission and Council • EU agencies, Cedefop and ETF • European programmes • European social funds • European social partner organisations • European employers • European projects • European non-governmental organisations • European youth organisations

Box 12. Key questions on stakeholder involvement

- Are different stakeholders aware and do they accept the validation outcomes?
- Are different stakeholders involved in the design, implementation and execution of validation arrangements?
- Is there dialogue between social partners, education and training institutions and civic society organisations on the role of validation practices?
- Have single or multiple legal framework(s) been put in place that govern the relationship between actors in relation to validation?
- What administrative processes are in place (contact and information procedures, recording and monitoring of results, shared quality assurance arrangements)?
- What networking possibilities are there for stakeholders? What are the forums in which validation can be discussed and agreed upon?
- Who is responsible for coordination at national, regional and local levels? How is consistency and coherence across levels assured?
- What mechanisms exist for the direct experience of validation system users to contribute to, inform and review national policy and procedures for validation?

3.4. Financing and cost

Validation arrangements must be sufficiently and sustainably funded. In the context of an overall strategic approach to validation, costs and resource allocation need to be discussed and agreed among stakeholders. Distribution of cost between European, national, regional and local authorities, along with other stakeholders that might be involved in validation, needs to be considered. Charging individual fees need to be evaluated in relation to the individual circumstances, the overall validation strategy and the potential benefits of validation.

Different mechanisms and financial instruments might be considered and combined. Traditions and existing contexts need to be taken into account, but also the purpose and aim of the validation process. The funding model might consider existing finance structures, but in many cases existing funding structures might need to be revised to allow enough incentives for carrying out validation. Introducing new instruments, for example in the form of individual learning accounts (ILA) might provide new opportunities for financing validation.

The way money is allocated to validation differs; in most cases, it is embedded in the overall budget of education and training provision and there is no money earmarked for validation. Criteria for supply-side financing, in which money is allocated to providers, need to be considered in relation to their implications for incentivising validation. Such providers, in many instances education and training institutions, will be financed depending on the number of students per year. Individuals that go through validation

might not be considered students or might spend less time in a programme, causing the provider to lose money. It is important that these elements are considered when building a financial model for validation.

Demand-side funding instruments, in which financing is provided to individuals (or companies) for them to access validation, is less common. Training funds, tax incentives, grants, training leave, vouchers or individual learning accounts (ILA) are examples of these types of instruments (see Cedefop, 2022a). They all might help in promoting validation, but they need to be accompanied by other measures such as promotion, awareness raising campaigns and guidance services.

Funding models for validation need to find a balance between demand-side and supply side that permit providers and individuals gain the most from the validation process. European funding is, in many instances, used as a springboard for pilot projects and for complementing national, local and individual funds. It might also be used as seed funding. Earmarked funding for validation and monitoring of its use will make it easier to understand the contribution to the overall functioning of the system.

The fragmented nature of validation services, across different institutions and complex financing arrangements involving European, national, regional, local and individual funding, makes the tracing of the funding allocated to validation and its cost not easy. Information on cost and financing validation is scarce and there is a lack of evidence that hinders the possibility of carrying out cost-benefit analysis. It is possible to understand validation funding in specific arrangements that are delimited and well defined, but the overall picture of the cost at national, regional or local level tends to be more complicated. A detailed understanding of the cost involved could provide useful insights into efficiency gains through validation as well as valuable material for advocacy.

Validation is normally regarded as an expensive process. It involves several practitioners. It takes time to identify, document, assess and certify individual learning. As it is an individualised process, economies of scale are more complicated to apply, and complex individual needs might increase cost. Elaboration of adequate methodologies for validation might also be costly to ensure their reliability and validity, especially as they need to be adaptative to diverse needs and learning experiences and the combination of methods might prove challenging. However, validation provision might not be more expensive than running certain programmes. Collective or cohort-based validation processes, in which several people are involved in a validation process for specific period of time, can reduce costs by being more efficient in the provision of information, guidance, and mapping of standards. Once an infrastructure is in place, adaptability is less expensive to apply in other similar contexts.

Box 13. Key questions on financing and cost

- Is there a sustainable model of financing validation?
- Are the criteria for the provision of funds incentivising the use of validation processes?
- Are there shared costing mechanisms in place for validation? Is it possible to reach an agreement on cost distribution among relevant stakeholders?
- What funding instruments are in place to incentivise and support individuals' uptake and institutional offers?
- Is information on the costs and benefits of validation clear and delivered to the individual in a timely manner?
- Have the elements that contribute to the cost of validation been defined?
- Are there elements in place to collect the information needed in terms of cost?
- Is it possible to carry out cost-benefit analysis of validation?

3.5. Validation professionals and their competences

Trust in validation very much depends on the front-line practitioners and professionals directly involved with candidates. These practitioners cover all aspects of validation and include those that offer information, provide guidance, carry out assessment, and/or manage assessment centres/procedures.

Validation practitioners will only rarely work exclusively on validation: in most cases they will combine validation duties with other functions, for example in guidance, teaching and training and/or work-management. This combination of roles is beneficial as it underlines the role of validation as facilitator of learning in a wide range of areas. Validation professionals should be equipped with competences relevant for the different stages. The skills and competences required for the initial identification and documentation stages will, in many cases, be closer to those held by guidance professionals, enabling the candidate to understand and articulate own strengths and weaknesses. The skills required for the assessment and certification stages will require more in-depth and specialised knowledge of the particular standards and knowledge areas addressed.

Overall, it is important to ensure continuous professional development addressing these functions. Given the diverse character of these development needs, systematic exchange of experiences, for example through networking, provides a starting point.

3.5.1. Counsellor/advisor

The work of a counsellor may start with the process of reaching out to engage potential candidates for validation, then supporting the candidate in his or her preparation for assessment; it continues by guiding the candidate after the assessment decision.

In many instances, the counsellor is an expert practitioner on career guidance. The specific roles/functions of guidance and validation practitioners, both in respect of

technical and transversal skills, should be subject to specialised training. Common training for both functions can generate shared understanding of the process and its outputs and improve the coherence and overall quality of services.

An important part of the role is to work with the candidate to appraise the breadth and depth of evidence of learning (helping to develop self-awareness). Some would refer to this as competence mapping, pointing to the critical role of counsellors in skills audits and enterprise internal competence mapping. To fulfil this role, the counsellor must have a clear understanding of the validation context. If the candidate aims for a formal qualification, the counsellor should be aware of the relevant reference points and should be able to advise on whether existing evidence is sufficient. The counsellor helps to prepare the candidate for the assessment, by informing him/her about the procedure for presenting the evidence of learning and on possible outcomes of the process. The counsellor will respond to questions and manage the expectations of the candidate. This also requires the counsellor to have a thorough knowledge of the assessment process. A distinctive part of his/her role is to be independent from the assessment process and able to offer impartial advice.

The counsellor has an important role to play once the validation process has been concluded. S/he can be a resource for the individual to understand how to use the results, any possibilities for accessing further education and training, work placement, apprenticeship, etc. For this, knowledge of the local labour market and job opportunities might be important. The connection to lifelong guidance career services increases the potential of validation.

Box 14. Key knowledge and skills of counsellors

- Thorough knowledge of the validation process
- Thorough knowledge of the education system
- Capacity to rephrase learning experience into learning outcomes that can be matched with existing reference points
- Understanding of the labour market
- A list of contacts (experts) to answer specific technical questions (social partners and other sector experts)

3.5.2. Validation assessor

The job of an assessor ⁽⁶⁾ is to seek, review and check evidence of an individual's learning and assess to what extent the person meets specific standards. Assessors must be familiar with standards and potentially useful assessment methods for referencing evidence against standards. They should be acknowledged as professionals in their sector, leading to trust and credibility in the assessment process itself. Assessors should not be linked to the candidate or their work or social life in any way to assure impartiality. The credibility of the validation process depends on the credibility – and neutrality – of the assessor.

⁽⁶⁾ For a detailed discussion on challenges involved in assessment, see Cedefop (2022b).

Assessors are generally required to have a fixed number of years of experience in the respective field. They could be senior managers, expert representatives of the third sector, or social partners or teachers in the specific sector, with direct experience. Training specifically on the validation procedure will increase professionalism and quality. Networks of assessors should be set up – where and when possible – to assure professional development and coherent practices.

Using more than one assessor for each candidate will increase reliability and trust, although it will also increase the cost of validation arrangements.

Box 15. **Key knowledge and skills of assessors**

- Be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability)
- Have experience in the specific field of work
- Have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest)
- Be familiar with different assessment methodologies
- Be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates
- Be committed to providing feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems)
- Be trained in assessment and validation processes and knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms
- Operate according to an appropriate code of conduct

3.5.3. Validation managers, administrators and external observers

The third key group of practitioners are the managers of the validation process. They manage the process, the people and possibly a physical or virtual centre where candidates, counsellors and assessors come together. Process managers can have responsibilities for the public profile of the validation centre, for ensuring equality of access to validation, managing appeal processes and ensuring external review. One key role is financial management. Whether privately or publicly funded, minimising costs and creating a sustainable operation is challenging.

External observers provide a quality check on validation procedures, training of practitioners and outcomes for candidates. The counsellors and the assessors have distinct roles when engaged with the candidate; the external observer oversees separation of these roles. In some settings the external observer is an advisor to counsellors and assessors and helps them to learn from their experience and that of others. The external observer may have a role in reviewing the efficiency of the process and checking that resource use is optimised. S/he might not necessarily be an expert in the given profession/activity but needs to be trained in quality assurance procedures. The observer can be considered a source for advice and operate as an external auditor, who does not have a regular presence in the process.

Box 16. Key questions on validation professionals and their competences

- What requirements, if any, have been set for:
 - counsellors and guidance personnel?
 - assessors?
 - other practitioners involved in validation?
- Is there a strategy in place for the professional development of these practitioners?
- Is the professional development of validation professionals coordinated between different sectors and arrangements?
- Can a community of practice for validation professionals be developed, supporting networking and professional development?

Validation provision elements

4.1. From learning outcomes to certification

4.1.1. Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are used in qualifications standards and programme curricula as statements of intentions and expectations and to define and describe education, training and learning targets. In a validation process, the knowledge, skills, and competences de facto achieved by an individual, inside, and outside of formal education and training, are assessed against these predefined intentions and expectations.

The shift towards learning-outcomes-based qualifications in most European education and training systems is critical for the implementation of validation. The learning outcome approach draws attention to what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a learning sequence. The focus is on the knowledge, skills and competences to be held by the individual, less on how, where and when the learning took place. This signals that a qualification can be achieved in different ways: not only through formal education and training but also through learning at work, in leisure time activities and at home. Without this flexibility, validation would be significantly restricted.

The way learning outcomes are formulated in qualifications influences the validation process, determining the choice of knowledge, skills and competences to be addressed and the judgement of them. While some learning-outcomes traditions focus exclusively on what can be readily observed and directly measured, others will be more open-ended and ready to accept and acknowledge ambiguity (Cedefop, 2016; 2017; 2022c). Choosing one or the other approach will largely decide the scope of learning to be considered by the validation process. A similar choice is involved when addressing different types or domains of learning. It will matter significantly if the focus is (for example) on occupational skills and functions or whether an effort has been made to include (for example) general subject-knowledge and transversal skills and competences. While learning outcomes can be seen as a condition for successful implementation of validation, the application of the approach requires careful reflection. If written too narrowly, important facets of the individual learning experience may be lost; if written too generally, validation may lose orientation, consistency and reliability. This draws attention to the fact that learning-outcomes-based reference points are the result of negotiations and compromises between stakeholders. A (continuous) dialogue between stakeholders on how to set targets and express learning-outcome expectations will usually be a necessary condition for relevance and credibility.

Box 17. Key questions on learning outcomes and validation

- Is the validation process using a reference point (standard, curricula, programme description) based on input or outcome expectation?
- What is the focus of the expected learning outcomes in terms of breadth (knowledge, skills and/or competences) and depth (levels and complexity)?
- Is the scope of the reference point sufficiently widely defined to capture the learning taking place outside formal education and training?

4.1.2. Learning experiences, reference points and standards

Any validation process requires a reference point. This might be official and formalised or informal or even tacitly shared. Some of the scepticism toward validation can be linked to the unclear role played by reference points in the process. A lack of visible standards, lack of clarity regarding how standards are applied, or the lack of involvement of stakeholders in the definition of those standards, can negatively influence trust in validation. Similarly, using different standards for formal education and training and for validation is sometimes interpreted as a confirmation that the learning taking place outside classrooms is not treated rigorously. This can result in the creation of A and B certificates, weakening the value of validation.

Reference points matter directly to each individual candidate and can directly influence what is considered as relevant learning experiences and outcomes, thus deciding what is attributed value through the validation process. At each stage of the process, from the early identification to the final certification, individuals must be aware of this reference point or standard.

For the initial phases, identification and documentation, the choices made regarding focus (depth and breadth of the learning addressed) are of crucial importance. If a too narrow conception is applied (by the professional as well as the candidate), this may influence the professional advice given and thus restrict candidate self-assessment. There is a need for validation practitioners to clarify and reflect on their own (p)references. The validation practitioner is there to support the candidate in identifying and documenting relevant learning and must therefore operate from a (conceptual) map sufficiently broad and detailed to capture and note the individual learning experiences in question. The questions in Box 18 points to issues to be considered when reflecting on the overall scope, also in the initial identification stage, of an individual learning experience.

Box 18. Key questions on learning experiences

- What kind of knowledge has been acquired?
 - basic knowledge (literacy, numeracy, etc.)
 - technical and specialised knowledge
- Which skills are covered?
 - practical skills (related to tasks, functions and/or occupations)
 - analytical skills
- Which wider, transversal skills and competences have been acquired?
 - self-management skills and competences (time-management, learning to learn, etc.)
 - communication skills and competences (oral and written presentations, etc.)
 - social skills and competences (teamwork, management of others, etc.)
- At what level of complexity (depth) has the individual acquired learning?
Can the depth and complexity of learning be specified by referring to formal levels and/or with action verbs?

When validation is used for the formal award of a qualification or certificate, mainly in the third and fourth phase, the role of the reference point (the qualification standard, the curricula or programme description) is direct and of crucial importance. The standard will influence what the assessors are looking for and include when judging a candidate. Somewhat simplified, standards used for formal assessment and certification are rooted either in the education sector or the labour market. Educational and occupational standards may both be described and defined in terms of learning outcomes but will emphasise different aspects of learning. Education standards normally address a broader scope of expected learning than occupational standards, signalling the broad responsibilities and mandates of initial education and training. The task and function orientation of occupational standards may, on the other hand, focus on narrower sets of skills and competences and may therefore not be suited to capturing some complex individual learning experiences.

Box 19. Education versus occupational standards

Education/training standards: following the logic of education and training, these standards, normally used in programmes leading to a formal qualification, focus on what people are expected to learn, how they learn it, and how the quality and content of learning are assessed. Traditionally these standards have been formulated in terms of input (subject, syllabus, teaching methods, process and assessment) but the continuing shift to learning outcomes in most European countries means that educational standards increasingly focus on expected, individual outcomes, leaving how these are reached more open. In many countries the term curriculum is used instead of standard, but the function is the same.

Occupational standards: following the logic of employment, these standards focus on what people need to do, how they do it, and how well they do it in a (broad or narrow) occupational context. They exist in all European countries, but each nation and sector has its own style of structure and presentation. Occupational standards may form a bridge between the labour market and education because educational standards can be developed from them. In many cases, occupational standards will operate in isolation from the education and training sectors.

Source: Cedefop.

The 2015 European guidelines warn against operating with separate standards for formal learning and for validation. This underlines that qualifications should be open to a diversity of learning forms and pathways, but that the expected outcomes should be the same. This is seen as key to avoiding A and B certificates and ensuring parity of esteem between formal, non-formal and informal learning. This principle is still valid, but requires further clarification.

Existing standards developed for one specific purpose, even when using learning outcomes, are not necessarily well suited to identifying some complex learning experiences of individuals. For example, standards developed for assessment and certification of school-based education and training are normally focused on the how, when and where of learning (inputs). These reference points are not well suited to capturing the diverse and sometimes unexpected learning taking place in non-formal and informal settings. While working for unified qualifications and certification standards, it is essential to reflect on whether reference points chosen are biased towards learning in formal settings and how they can better capture individual learning experiences outside formal education.

Having been developed for defined purposes, standards run the risk of reinforcing borderlines between education and training, the labour market and the third sector, as well as within the education and training sector itself. One of the key challenges in the years to come is to strengthen cooperation between stakeholders across different areas and sectors to see how standards in the labour market, third and the education and training sectors, and other areas, may better communicate with each other. Departing from a

systematic use of learning outcomes emphasising the need for a common language to be used across sectors and areas, this will help to release the potential of validation for lifelong and life-wide learning.

Box 20. **Key questions on standards and reference points**

- Are the reference points for validation clearly identified?
- Is there stakeholder involvement in the development of the reference points? Are standards built on consensus and dialogue?
- Is the reference point for validation communicated with the candidate?
- Is the reference point opening up to the diversity of the individual's learning experiences, or does it require narrowing down?
- Is the reference point embedded in a limited education, training and/or occupation sector, and are the experiences gained outside this addressed?
- Are there feedback mechanisms in place for the development of the reference points?

4.1.3. **Validation in the context of changing qualifications and certificates**

Much of the discussion on validation has been linked to the opening of (initial) qualifications to non-formal and informal learning. In these cases, the issue is whether the standards and reference points underpinning these qualifications can be redefined in ways which allow the diverse experiences of individual learners to be considered. Over recent decades, however, qualifications systems have gradually evolved by allowing for the introduction of part-qualifications and modules (in public education and training systems) and by the increasing role played by task- and technology-related certificates offered by the labour market at national (and increasingly) at international level. These developments may directly influence validation. Developing modularised systems can potentially make it easier for the candidate to move in a stepwise fashion according to own needs and strengths. The increasing importance of smaller certificates operating (partly) outside ordinary qualifications systems raises new questions which need to be answered in the coming period.

4.1.3.1. *Credentials and validation*

Content and structure of qualifications evolve constantly. Short training courses and learning experiences are developing rapidly across Europe, delivered by a wide variety of public and private stakeholders, in response to the need for more flexible, learner-centred forms of education and training. These shorter forms of learning are certified in different ways, sometimes linked to formal qualifications systems and frameworks, more frequently outside these. While much attention has been paid in recent years to the role of microcredentials (Cedefop, 2022d), the role played by sector, vendor and task certificates and credentials in the labour market (and beyond) is not a new one. Smaller

and specialised certificates and credentials have for a long time been used to document upskilling and reskilling and, in many cases, to signal whether an individual is authorised to carry out a task or a function. These diverse and highly specialised certificates and credentials play key roles in relation to continuing education and training, as well in facilitating the functioning of labour markets.

So far, the link between validation and this complex area of certification has been only vaguely addressed. The discussion on the potential accumulation and stackability of credentials and certificates may, however, point towards a more active role to be played in the future by validation. For this to happen, the standards and reference points underpinning these certificates and credentials must use a learning outcomes language, clearly stating what kind of knowledge, skills and competences are held by the individual. This makes it possible to specify what kind of learning outcomes have been achieved and, in a validation process, to judge whether it is possible to grant diverse certificates and credentials that can be combined and add to each other. The potential for connecting and accumulating different certificates thus depends on introducing and applying a common language, making it possible to judge whether different elements fit together and add up to a larger totality.

Digitalisation of credentials can facilitate this process (see Section 4.4 on ICT) holding large amounts of information and providing opportunities to increase transparency. Digitally issued credentials (such as through the Europass digital credentials infrastructure) give the possibility of certifying a wide range of activities and experiences by any issuer, which can be easily identified, categorised and connected to other information, such as how the certificate was awarded. Digital badges have emerged as a flexible format to document experiences. They are used in many ways to signal that an individual has carried out a certain experience or accomplishment. They have broad coverage, from the gamification of online learning to certification of assessed skills and competences. Platform workers, for example, obtain some type of certification based on client feedback and work accomplished.

The combination and accumulation of certificates and credentials into a larger totality, relevant for labour market or lifelong learning purposes, requires greater focus on the content of these same credentials. It is the content, not the length or size, of the credential which defines whether it can fit into a wider learning career. Validation can directly support this judgement on stackability but requires transparent descriptions of the profile and content of these certificates and credentials. The work on developing short learning outcomes-based descriptions for qualifications (in the context of the EQF AG and Europass) points towards an approach which can be used for full qualifications but, increasingly, also for smaller size certificates and credentials.

Box 21. Key questions addressing the validation link to credentials

- Can the content and profile of a credential or certificate be presented in terms of learning outcomes?
- To what extent can the content and profile of credentials and certificates be compared?
- How can the content and profile of credentials and certificates be more systematically captured and compared? Is digitalisation playing a role?
- How can the content and profile of certificates and credentials be included (reliably and validly) in validation?

4.1.3.2. *Validation and the link to qualifications frameworks and systems*

Development of validation of non-formal and informal learning and of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) share a common objective: enabling individuals to make progress in their learning careers based on learning outcomes achieved, not on duration and location of a particular learning programme.

The concept of a national qualifications system is now widely understood as all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning in Europe. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policies on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society. Arrangements for validation are an important and (usually) integrated part of these qualifications systems. By integrating, politically and legally, the validation of non-formal or informal learning with the national qualifications system, the validation aspect becomes more transparent through a clearer legal status, governance and financing.

Most important, validation gives practical support to progression between different levels and types of education and training. Integration of validation into the national qualification system requires that qualifications are opened up to a broader set of learning pathways and that validation arrangements are established as an accepted and normal route to a certificate or qualification. This requires a shift to learning outcomes.

An objective shared by most NQFs is a better relationship between different qualifications, aiding progression. This can be accomplished by reducing barriers to transfer and accumulation of learning achievements. Methods and systems for validating non-formal and informal learning, focusing on what has been achieved, contribute directly to this objective. If introduced systematically, validation will not only open up qualifications to a broader set of learning experiences but also make it easier for individuals to progress across institutional, sectoral and national borders.

Ensuring the integration of validation and NQFs may promote overall flexibility of education and training. This is particularly the case if validation supports exemption from parts of a programme to avoid repeating learning already achieved: this could aid progression and signal that non-formal and informal learning is taken seriously by education and training institutions. The savings in money and time will be significant if

vertical (between levels) and horizontal (between subjects and areas) progression is made possible.

Box 22. Key questions on links to qualification frameworks

- Are stakeholders aware of, and do they understand, NQFs, their levels and descriptors?
- Are validation arrangements (all/only some) seen as an integrated part of the national qualifications system and as a normal route to qualifications?
- What is the relationship between validation and the NQF?
- To what extent can validation be used to support progression between all types and levels of qualification in the NQF?
- Is there a link between validation and (possible) credit transfer and accumulation arrangements?

4.2. Information, awareness raising and outreach

The European inventory on validation and the evaluation of the 2012 Recommendation have shown that individuals are still largely unaware of the possibilities for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation fundamentally builds on the understanding that all learning, independent of where, when and how it takes place, is potentially valuable. Reflecting the traditionally strong trust in formal learning, this understanding cannot be taken for granted. Promoting validation, therefore, requires a systematic effort to demonstrate the relevance of all forms of learning, notably at work, at home or through civic engagement, and how validation directly and legitimately can make these outcomes visible and relevant for further learning and employment. The value of validation is not always obvious to individual users: the processes leading to validation may be perceived as scattered, fragmented, and often tackled case-by-case. For validation to be used on a broader basis, and for it to support lifelong and life-wide learning, potential users need to see and trust the (exchange) value of validation.

Society must accept validation as a valid route to certifying skills, qualifications or to accessing education and training and work. Individuals should be made aware of what validation is, what the process entails and what undertaking this process implies, both in terms of personal engagement and of possible outcomes. It is crucial for individuals to receive clear information on both costs and benefits of validation. Potential candidates for validation need to know what is required in terms of time, money and personal commitment. The information on benefits needs to reflect the exchange value of validation; clarifying whether outcomes are recognised by education and training institutions and employers. Box 23 provides a list of main information needs for the individuals.

Box 23. **Main areas in which information is needed**

- Existing alternative validation forms available (formative as well as summative)
- Timelines for validation
- Costs
- Procedure
- Forms of evidence of learning outcomes
- Presentation of evidence
- Requirements for evidence
- Reference points to be applied
- Assessment and how best to approach the process
- Support available, both financial and non-financial
- Appeal procedures
- Results and outcomes of the validation process

For validation to reach a broad group of potential users, addressing the widest possible variety of needs, information must be systematically disseminated within and across institutions and sectors. Designing information flows in a way which benefits individual users of validation requires working across sectors (education, employment, social services, etc.) and cooperation between institutions and stakeholders at different levels (local, regional, national and European). Information should not be distributed in silos, only reflecting the needs of provider institutions. Instead, it should be structured in a way which enables individuals at the cross-roads of education/training and employment – and having reached different stages of their learning and employment careers – to judge the relevance of validation. For outreach measures, civil society and youth organisations play a major role, as their activities tend to be close to where people work and live, building on participatory communities.

Giving voice to successful users of the validation process might serve as good promotion and as a motivator for potential users, bringing information and outreach measures. Potential users might find it easier to relate to previous user experience and explore validation possibilities.

Box 24. Key questions on awareness raising, information and outreach

- What measures are in place to increase awareness?
- Is information on cost, benefits and the process available and easily accessible?
- How is the information made easily available?
- Do the different actors involved provide coherent, complementary information?
- How can public and private stakeholders cooperate to offer better information on validation?
- Are past users given a voice to promote validation initiatives?

4.3. Guidance and counselling

Career guidance is commonly seen as a continuous process enabling citizens at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences, and interests. According to the *Guidelines for policies and systems development for lifelong guidance* (ELGPN, 2015), one aim of career guidance is the development of career management skills and competences, to manage learning and life paths. These skills are essential for making use of available resources and services, such as validation. Career guidance thus helps individuals to make decisions relevant to their future learning and employment, making better use of their (sometimes invisible) inherent capacities and potential. National experience underlines the importance of providing impartial and comprehensive guidance and counselling throughout the entire validation process, as well as before and after. Since guidance can originate from a range of services and stakeholders (education and training, employment services, local administration, volunteering sector organisations) cross-sector coordination becomes fundamental. Linking guidance and validation services requires communication and cooperation between sectors and institutions, especially between career guidance by employment (and social) services and lifelong learning guidance from education and training institutions. This implies the importance of coordinating validation and existing career guidance services. It also sits well with a systemic approach to lifelong guidance that promotes horizontal and vertical linkages across services, through referrals, for example, and also from public policy level to client-facing services.

Evidence from the 2019 Cedefop study on validation and guidance shows many commonalities between the 'identification' and 'documentation' phases of validation and some counselling and career guidance activities. Early stages of career guidance provision could be directly embedded in a validation process or vice-versa, connecting skills identification and validation with a wider career guidance developmental perspective (Cedefop, 2020).

The relationship between the two services depends on the institutional arrangements and the strategic place each has in an overall skills formation system (Section 3.2). The are three main factors ensuring coordination between guidance and validation:

comprehensiveness, providing adequate information and guidance before the decision to undergo validation, through the entire validation process and also after it; coherence, using common qualifications or competence standards, occupational standards or other reference frameworks through all the stages of the practice to identify, document and assess skills; and ensuring quality of staff resources and competences, as well as tools used.

Guidance and counselling are also important for reaching disadvantaged groups and releasing their inherent potential. Existing guidance methods and tools, devised to respond to the identified needs of specific target groups based on age, employment situation, socioeconomic background, disability status at a point in time or migrant status, can be used in validation initiatives to assist in defining validation purpose.

Linking validation and guidance facilitates better use of resources. Coordination and communication between the bodies involved in validation and guidance can reduce procedural costs and add value to service provision. More coordinated guidance and validation can also contribute to changing mind-sets and reducing/removing prejudices over the added value of validation.

Box 25. **Key questions on guidance and counselling**

- Is there integration of career guidance with validation services and policies at a systemic level?
- To what extent are existing career guidance and counselling services (for example, in education and training, labour market and social services) connected and coordinated with existing validation services in different settings?
- To what extent is career guidance provided before, during and after validation processes?
- How can existing career guidance and counselling service networking be improved to address all potential target groups for validation?
- What kind of coordination mechanism is used to ensure that candidates are served where they live, study and work?
- Do guidance services provide information on the possibilities, costs and benefits of validation?
- Are guidance practitioners aware of, and trained on, existing validation possibilities?

4.4. **ICT and validation**

The use of ICT in validation might be a game changer for possible approaches to identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying competences. The spread of ICT systems allows for easier establishment of database repositories of learners and their knowledge and competences achieved. Centralised registries can collect information from an individual in all their learning experiences and learning achieved. This information

might be more transferable through inter-operability options that allow ICT systems to speak to each other.

Digital formats for certificates can hold a large amount of information, which can be more detailed and exhaustive, making the certificate more transparent and providing more information to the reader of the certificate. Use of artificial intelligence might provide an opportunity to match an individual's skills profile better with learning, work or volunteer opportunities.

Box 26 shows the minimum requirements based on the [EQF Recommendation](#), as the main elements that should appear in any qualification/certificate. These have been the bases for developing Europass digital credentials and its learning model, which includes 487 properties to describe the certificate in terms of issuer, owner, achievements, activities and entitlements ⁽⁹⁾.

Box 26. List of fields to be included in qualifications (including digital certificates)

- Identification of the learner
- Title of the credential or qualification and field
- Awarding body or competent authority
- Date of issue and expiry date (if relevant)
- Learning outcomes
- Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (e.g. in ECTS)
- Level of the credential or qualification within the NQF/EQF
- Type of assessment
- Type of quality assurance used to underpin the credential or qualification
- Ways of acquiring the qualification

Source: Cedefop, based on EQF Recommendation.

Digital certification can be checked much more quickly for authenticity and its information can be compared across sectors more easily; this makes recognition faster and easier. Blockchain technology also can increase the security and make it harder for people to falsify certificates.

ICT also provides opportunities for new ways of identifying, documenting and assessing skills. Self-assessment tools and use of bots that assist individuals in identifying their interest, skills and prospects are now common in many validation processes as a first step. Skills passports or e-portfolios might be used to collect information on learning achieved in different contexts, enabling a full repository of individual trajectories. New forms of assessment, such as 365 evaluation techniques and peer evaluation, might open up interesting ways to document and assess skills. New technology also allows for demonstration of skills using virtual reality and computing adaptive tests allow for more efficient test delivery in a shorter time.

However, ICT promises need to be paired with elements of quality assurance (see 4.5) and control. Personal data protection needs to be assured and individual ownership,

⁽⁹⁾ [European learning model](#).

with choices on what information to share, is necessary. All these elements connected to ICT need to be considered against cost and objectives of the validation process, but a strategic approach to validation, considering them from a starting point and in relation to other services, will increase efficiency gains and reduce cost.

Box 27. **Key questions on ICT and validation**

- Are there existing ICT systems that can be connected to validation?
- Are digital technologies used to register and keep track of the learning achievements of individuals?
- Is there consensus on what fields the digital certification should provide?
- Are the costs and benefits of developing ICT systems considered?
- Are there mechanisms to control the quality and legitimacy of digital certificates?

4.5. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is fundamental in ensuring trust in the results of the validation arrangements. The quality assurance process must be systematic, take place continuously and be an integrated part of the validation arrangement. This requires an explicit and agreed quality strategy within the parameters dictated in the strategic vision of validation. The quality plan/strategy must be known to the public, including candidates, to manage expectations. A quality/plan strategy both can include internal quality mechanisms and prepare the ground for external quality assessment and review. A system for feedback from users/customers should be considered to make sure that user's voices are included.

Working on quality assurance through the development of a specific framework for validation, or the creation of manuals or guidelines, will have more impact if all stakeholders are involved and considered. A framework that can operate at different levels and in different contexts will increase the efficiency of the validation system, help in developing synergies and cut across barriers between contexts.

The overall quality of validation depends on a range of factors reflecting the character and complexity of the process. While the specific form of the quality assurance process will vary between countries and contexts, to assure quality it will be necessary to consider all aspects presented in these European guidelines. Each of the aspects described influences the adequacy of the outputs of validation and so governs quality. It is, thus in the interplay of the different aspects presented in these guidelines that a quality framework can be developed.

In order to maintain and increase quality, the principles of the quality circle need to be applied: plan, do, check and change. In this respect, it is important that validation is accompanied, as much as possible, by systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, touching upon the different aspects described in these guidelines.

One of the major gaps of validation in Europe is the lack of adequate systematic data

collection to permit monitoring and evaluation of validation systems and processes. Data collection, when available, tends to be limited to a specific arrangement without a systemic perspective. Data collection at different levels and contexts needs to be considered and coordinated. This permits carrying out studies and evaluations and is crucial for the identification of challenges and finding areas of improvement. It can also support research and practical and theoretical development of validation in Europe.

Box 28. Key questions on quality assurance

- Have explicit and integrated quality assurance measures been put in place for validation? If so:
 - do these measures reflect an explicit and agreed quality strategy?
 - how does the quality strategy address key objectives like reliability, validity and credibility of the process?
- Who are the actors involved, at different levels, in implementing this quality strategy?
- How are quality assurance arrangements divided between internal and external assurance and control?
- Are processes and outcomes being monitored and has a system for feedback from users/customers been put in place?
- To what extent is research and evaluation of validation systems and processes supported?

Validation methodologies and tools

5.1. Balancing conflicting requirements

Validation methodologies, and the techniques and tools accompanying them, should make visible the outcomes of individual learning experiences, irrespective of where or when they took place. Methodologies must address the challenges of validity, reliability, scalability and cost:

- (a) to achieve validity, methodologies need to capture the uniqueness of individual learning experiences. They should consider everyone's specific accomplishments. This implies making invisible and taken-for-granted experiences into visible outcomes;
- (b) to be reliable, validation methodologies must produce consistent and trustworthy results. While the knowledge, skills and competences mapped will differ according to individual experiences, the methodology itself must be predictable, transparent and repeatable. Reliability is also about fairness and a candidate's right to predictable and fair treatment;
- (c) to be scalable, validation methodologies must be possible to multiply and to use for a diversity of users in different contexts, while maintaining validity and reliability.

To be cost-efficient, validation methodologies must balance validity, reliability and scalability as well as staying objective. Considerations regarding proportionality, time and money, for the candidates and the validation providers, need to be evaluated. For every validation approach developed and implemented there will be a need to find a balance across these elements. Instruments offering a high degree of validity can be costly and not scalable. Other instruments can be scalable but be lacking in validity and ability to capture individual learning experiences. The following sections indicate the challenges involved in developing and implementing methodologies and tools for validation. An overview over the most commonly used tools and instruments is provided at the end of the chapter.

5.2. Validation methodologies and tools: fit for purpose?

Making progress in validation requires that the distinction between formative and summative approaches is clarified. In these guidelines they are defined as follows:

- (a) formative approaches to assessment and validation aim to provide feedback to the individual, indicating strengths and weaknesses and providing a basis for personal improvement;
- (b) summative approaches to assessment and validation aim explicitly at formalising and certifying learning outcomes achieved by an individual. They are linked to, and

integrated into, institutions and bodies authorised to award qualifications.

The boundaries between formative and summative approaches, however, are not always clear-cut; in some cases, tools can be used for both purposes. The way validity, reliability, scalability and cost are balanced for formative and summative approaches will vary and must be considered in each separate case (see also Section 5.4 and the detailed presentation of tools) depending on the needs of the individual and the objectives of validation.

5.3. Outcome and competence-oriented standards

Validation requires qualifications and learning programmes to be described in terms of learning outcomes, focusing on what an individual knows, can do and understand following a sequence of learning. The following two sections point to issues of equal importance to those writing learning outcomes and those using them as reference points.

5.3.1. How to identify learning: the borderlines of learning domains

The quality of the standard or reference point very much depends on a clear definition of the domain of knowledge, skills and competence addressed. Irrespective of where a standard or reference is to be used, the boundaries of an area must be identified, defined and agreed. Definitions of domains can be supported in various ways, such as referring to occupational or educational classifications and standards. More generic reference points are also used (for example *Blooms taxonomy*) as are a wide range of classifications of transversal skills and competences. Terminological tools and initiatives alike *O*NET* and *ESCO* also point in this direction, providing a basis for delimitating and identifying domains. As stated for learning outcomes and criterion referencing, the definition of domain will directly influence the validity of the validation exercise and will depend on the purpose of the validation.

5.3.2. How to identify outcomes of learning: criteria and constructs

Validation practitioners need to take account of the difference between norm and criterion referenced assessment. The latter dominates validation practices. Criterion referencing means that assessment relates to a given performance measured against a criterion, for example articulated in the form of an expected learning outcome. Criterion referenced assessment and validation points to the important distinction between content and construct validity. While content validity refers to a phenomenon (for example tasks or skills) which can be directly and unambiguously observed, construct validity measures performance indirectly and in relation to a theoretically constructed reference. A good example of this is transversal skills like communication, cooperation, creativity and learning to learn (Box 29). The issues involved in relation to construct validity may appear as technical but will directly influence the ability of validation methodologies to capture complex individual learning experiences. Overlooking this distinction may create a bias towards the easily observable tasks and skills, and away from the more complex (and

sometimes more important) underpinning competences.

Box 29. The case of transversal skills and competences

Many of the experiences and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be identified under the headline of transversal skills and competences (TSCs), for example linked to self-organisation or reflection, to team-work and cooperation, to problem solving and planning and to a variety of life skills of high value in modern societies. Defining TSCs can serve as an illustration of challenges facing those defining standards but also the challenges facing assessors in this area. The quality of validation in relation to validity, reliability, scalability and cost depends on a solid conceptual foundation clarifying what is implicitly meant by knowledge, skills and competences.

TSCs have increasingly become a centre of interest. A large amount of research and approaches have been developed in the past 20 years. The working group on transversal skills from ESCO refined a proposal for a terminology used for TSCs. Making use of a wide variety of sources, including international research and policy documents, the result is a terminological map clarifying the scope of, and relationship between, transversal skills and competences. The framework clarifies how different initiatives related to TSCs (EU key competence framework, other competence frameworks such as [DigiComp](#), [EntreComp](#) or [LifeComp](#)) are placed in a wider terminological context.

While referring to more than 1 200 terms identified in the initial phase of the work, the final model is limited to six categories, 24 clusters and (approximately) 75 single concepts. For any model of competences to be useful, it is necessary to limit the necessary concepts to a manageable amount. Final report: [Towards a structured and consistent terminology on transversal skills and competences](#).

5.4. Validation tools and techniques

Validation tools and techniques refer to, and are closely dependent on, the definition and interpretation of the reference points discussed above. The following table provides an overview of the main forms of validation tools, to be used independently or in combination. Indications regarding the four main quality requirements (reliability, validity, scalability and cost) are included in the table and further discussed below. The different types will have a different degree of the four quality requirements depending on how and by whom they are applied. A mix of tools will better capture the complexities, both breadth and depth, of individual learning experiences. Any tool selected will always need to be appropriate to the context and purpose it applies to. More research on tools and instruments and how these are adapted to validation is required.

Table 1. **Tools and instruments used for validation**

Types	Reliability, validity and related issues	Scalability and cost	Main relevance to stages of validation
Self-assessment (self-declarative)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • validity and reliability can be questioned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high scalability • low cost 	identification
Fixed response/ multiple choice (close-ended forms)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support standardisation and reliability • if not properly worded prompt to bias and limited individual and contextual adaptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high scalability • low cost (initial development might be expensive) 	assessment, certification
Written tests (open-ended forms), including essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reliability might be limited due to different interpretations from evaluators • limited validity for certain assessment • some standardisation is possible • room for contextual adaptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited scalability • low cost • evaluators need to be well trained 	assessment, certification
Dialogue based/ interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • validity depends on level of structure and competence of the interviewer • can capture contextually dependent and tacit skills • reliability a possibility but not a given 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited scalability • cost intensive (time and money) • evaluators need to be well trained 	identification, assessment

Types	Reliability, validity and related issues	Scalability and cost	Main relevance to stages of validation
Simulation and controlled job practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supports validity • potentially strong reliability • captures contextually dependent and tacit skills and competences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potentially scalable • cost intense 	assessment, certification
Portfolio of evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • might include different things (performance outputs, performance achievements, productivity measures, quality performance measures, etc) • flexible • combinations of evidence strengthen both validity and reliability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scalable but flexible • cost depends on the level of support provided 	identification, documentation, assessment, certification
Reports from others (colleagues, supervisors, clients, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reliability might increase with many observations • validity might depend on the number of reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scalable • low cost 	identification, documentation, assessment, certification

5.4.1. Self-assessment and self-declarative methods

In recent years, and with the increasing possibilities of ICT, several self-assessment tools have been developed. They are based on individuals' independent identification and recording of competences (sometimes against given criteria and sometimes not). In some instances, the self-declaration might be verified by a third party. The assessment results are then recorded, for instance in a skills passport or in a CV or a similar document. Self-assessment methods are often well suited for formative assessments and are usually used for identification as a first step or as a screening tool, to decide on next steps. Guidance platforms sometimes have self-assessment tools that are carried out with counsellors.

This approach is flexible, enabling individuals to reflect on their knowledge, skills and competences at their own pace. However, these processes will normally suffer from lack of validity and reliability, due to the absence of external objective assessment and a tendency for individuals not to be fully aware of their level of skills. In practice, the validity and reliability of these methods depends on the existence of clear guidelines or standards for the individual to use, on the provision of support during the preparation phase, and on the individual's ability to provide a realistic assessment of their own competences. Help from counsellors can increase the fairness of this method, particularly as individuals from different backgrounds may have different ways of presenting their skills and competences. Counsellors can help to moderate the importance of such biases in the reporting of individuals' own learning.

One of the main weaknesses of the declarative method is that, on its own, it can rarely lead to a clear linking to existing qualifications or standard frameworks, particularly in the absence of guidance, and rarely leads to the award of a qualification. It also tends to be trusted less by others.

5.4.2. Fixed response/multiple choice (close-ended forms)

Most of the surveys and questionnaires, as well as competence assessment tests, tend to be close-ended forms, in which the individual has to choose one correct answer among several. Close-ended questions, if developed adequately, can offer enough room for personal expression and contextual adaptation. From a theoretical perspective, close-ended questions allow respondents to choose their answers in a continuous dimension more efficiently than if they had to elucidate the answers themselves.

Psychometric tests are based on these principles. Their development might be costly at first, given the need to elaborate the items and calibrate the tool. Development requires an adequate level of expertise, both in terms of the domain and on questionnaire development. Wording and interpretation of the questions plays a major role in creating valid and reliable tools. Once the questionnaire is developed, the unit-cost is relatively low and there are possibilities for scaling up.

These tools tend to be used for summative assessment, as they are perceived as valid and reliable. New technology and advancements in statistics are allowing for more sophisticated tools that are more efficient and reliable. Using IRT models and computer adaptive testing, for example, test length is considerably reduced.

5.4.3. Written tests (open-ended forms), including essay

This is probably the most familiar type of test. It is easy to administer and relatively easy to develop, though it might be problematic for individuals with language difficulties or negative previous experiences.

The reliability might depend on the degree of professionalisation of the assessors and their level of agreement. Different assessors might interpret answers differently. Validity might also be compromised as essay might require a different set of skills from the ones to be tested. The individual might be very knowledgeable or skilled, but might not be able to fully express it through open-ended questions; this is particularly so with migrants or others who do not speak the language. At different moments in time or situations they

might also give different results.

The scalability of the method is relatively easy, and its low cost and familiarity makes it a very common tool, normally combined with other assessment methods, although evaluation can be time consuming compared with other types of tests.

5.4.4. Dialogue or conversational methods

Conversational methods of assessment can be categorised in two main types: interviews and debates (or discussions). A presentation followed by an interview/debate is also relatively common. Interviews can be used to extract further information documented through other means and probe documented knowledge, skills and competences. There might be different levels of structure, from highly structured interviews, semi-structured to unstructured. Interviews could be considered to have a supporting function, which allows for further exploration, instead of being a primary means to elicit non-formal and informal learning.

Dialogue and interviews can have an important role in themselves at various stages of validation and can be very useful tools at the time of identification of acquired competences. When they take place early in the process they can be used as a screening tool, to check whether further mechanisms to extract evidence should be applied. Interviews can be used both for summative and formative purposes.

Interviews can have a higher degree of validity than tests and examinations as they enable dialogue – offering the chance to avoid misunderstandings in the formulation of questions – and also probing. However, they can be less reliable than tests and examinations unless appropriate protocols are implemented as different interviewers (given their experience, personal characteristics, interviewing style) may affect the interview outcome. They can also be less fair than exams, as assessors can be influenced by the personal characteristics of interviewees. Assessors' experience, communication and facilitation skills, and their thorough knowledge of the assessed learning outcomes (so that relevant and appropriate information can be extracted), are vital to the resulting validity, reliability and fairness.

Cost is relatively low and scalability possible, although they require significant amount of time, with the candidate (depending on the amount of learning that needs to be assessed) and in preparation.

5.4.5. Observations

Observation as a method means extracting evidence from candidates while they perform real-life tasks. This approach, judged by a neutral assessor, has relatively greater usage in the private sector, but is spreading to other areas as well.

The validity of observations can be high and can give access to competences difficult to capture through other means. Observations have the advantage that sets of skills can be assessed simultaneously, and measurement be valid. They are also fair, as people are not detached from their usual work environment and placed under additional stress before the assessment. Nevertheless, assessor bias may exist as personal characteristics of individuals and their workplace are revealed during the process; this may influence the assessment outcome.

Observations are not always possible due to characteristics, safety, time constraints and other factors. They may also be time-consuming, particularly if there is more than one assessor. Further, because observations are grounded in everyday practice, information obtained through them for assessment of an individual may be context-specific rather than subject to generalisations.

5.4.6. Simulation and controlled job practice

In simulation methodologies, individuals are placed in a situation close to real-life scenarios to have their competences assessed. In some cases they are used when observations are not possible. Their use, however, is constrained by several aspects, particularly costs. Some situations cannot be observed in real life, for security or other reasons: examples are reaction of aircraft pilots or bus drivers to extreme weather conditions or a motor/engine failure.

The use of simulations, in the same way as observations, scores high on validity. However, simulations can be more complex to organise and more expensive than other validation methods. Recent developments in virtual reality (VR) are making simulations cheaper. They normally require a large amount of study and job analysis to be prepared properly. The higher the level of realism of the simulation, the more effective the assessment will generally be. Simulations can solve part of the problems of observations undertaken at work as they can place individuals in various contexts, increasing assessment validity. The reliability and fairness of this method are often considered high.

5.4.7. Reports from others

Third party reports for validating non-formal and informal learning can adopt various forms. They can include reference letters (or audio/video declarations) from supervisors, employers and/or colleagues and performance appraisals by companies. The latter are quite common but are not always designed to be used outside the enterprise. The implication of this is that employees sometimes have difficulty in proving their real level of work experience, particularly where their actual performance – and thus skills and competences – exceeds that indicated by the formal job title. Employer reports can help to document the actual tasks performed.

New methodologies, like feedback 360 performance reviews, might combine input from different sources, including different people. ICT job searching platforms also use information from peers to signal competence strength.

The level of reliability and validity depends on the number of people that report and of how much it is possible to trust their judgement. The tool is scalable and not too expensive to develop, but certain categories of validation users might have difficulties in getting adequate numbers.

5.4.8. Portfolios

Portfolios are one of the most complex and frequently used methods to document evidence for validation purposes. Portfolios aim to overcome the risk of subjectivity by introducing a mix of instruments to extract evidence of individuals' competences and can

incorporate assessments by third parties. They provide the audience with comprehensive insights into the achievements and successes of the learner. There is evidence of a recent increase in the importance of portfolios and a proliferation of e-portfolios.

The portfolio method tends to be process-oriented, with much evidence that the selection process for portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses the candidate's attention on quality criteria. This makes the portfolio a useful tool for formative and summative validation practices.

Portfolios can include evidence extracted through a combination of methods. It is argued that the kind of reflection and investigation associated with portfolio methods empowers people undergoing validation, which helps them obtain jobs or to choose appropriate further education. Portfolios can be developed to help disadvantaged people out of social exclusion or into employment by considering their specific characteristics.

Building a portfolio is a time-consuming exercise from the point of view of the applicant, but is popular; candidates have the possibility to show their competences in a flexible and authentic way, allowing for a combination of evidence. Assessment is often dependent on good written documentation of the individual's skills; the method can prove difficult for some and should be supported by relevant information and guidance. The most serious risk in preparing portfolios is lack of focus that can occur when applicants prepare them alone or with little mediation from an appropriate support; counsellor aid and sufficient time for self-reflection are crucial to this method's effectiveness and fairness. In the self-assessment against curriculum standards, guidance should be available to help explain the theoretical concepts and the transfer from theory to practice.

Some countries that provide national guidelines for validation, rather than prescribing validation methods, recommend a stage in the process which involves some form of assessment of the content of the portfolio by a third party (such as a jury) to ensure greater validity. Introducing third-party assessment does not solve all problems. Quality assurance processes should be in place to ensure consistency and transparency of third-party assessment and equality and fairness in the validation process for all candidates.

Box 30. Key questions on validation tools and techniques

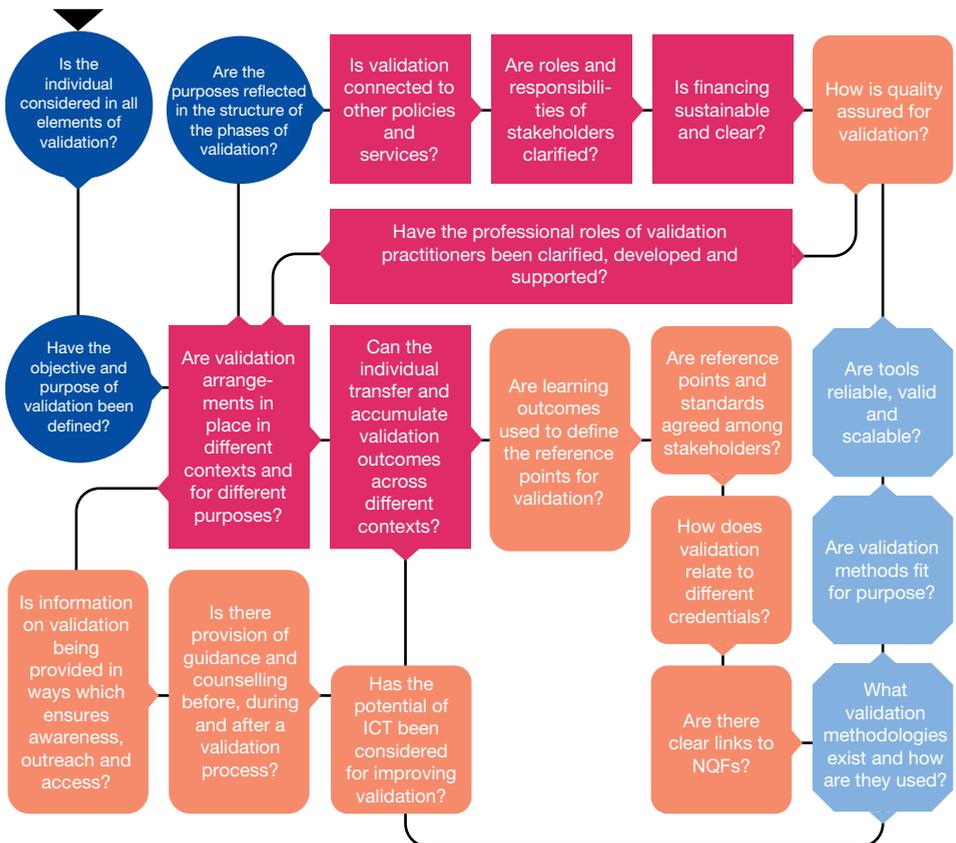
- Does the choice of methodologies consider the individual circumstances and characteristics?
- Are methodologies fit for purpose and in line with validation objectives? Is their purpose clearly informed?
- Are methodologies free from bias and how is fair treatment assured?
 - In what way do methodologies balance the criteria of reliability, validity, scalability and cost?
 - Are validation methodologies reliable, valid and scalable?
 - Do validation methodologies capture the variety of learning outcomes of individual experiences?
 - Are methodologies predictable, transparent and repeatable?
 - Can methodologies be replicated and used in different contexts while maintaining validity and reliability?
 - Has the cost of developing and maintaining methodologies been considered?
- Have technical considerations related to nature of assessment, criteria constructs and learning domains been clarified and agreed among stakeholders?
- Which validation methodologies are available and how can they be used and potentially combined for specific policies and practices, and for specific purposes?

Concluding remarks

The development and implementation of validation arrangements relies on several interconnected elements that have been presented in these guidelines. There is no one-size-fits all approach, but there are common elements to consider and areas in which reflections are needed before being able to take other decisions. The central message of these guidelines remains that validation is about:

- (a) how to make visible the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning;
- (b) how to attribute appropriate value to outcomes of non-formal and informal learning.

Figure 2. Main aspects of validation



Source: Cedefop.

For validation to facilitate lifelong and life-wide learning, its results must be trusted across institutions, sectors and countries. Validation without transparency and transferability adds little value to the individual end-user. Figure 2 illustrates key-elements required to build this transparency and transferability.

Figure 2 illustrates, in a simplified way, how the different aspects presented in these guidelines are connected and how they depend on each other. The figure signals the importance of placing the individual at the centre of the process. The purpose of the validation process must be clear and aligned to the interests and needs of these end-users, and not be dominated by the needs and interests of the validation providers. When arrangements for validation are in place in different contexts, it is important to consider in what way they connect to other services, how the different stakeholders play a role and how it will be sustained financially. There need to be decisions on how to advertise arrangements, so that users can become aware and participate with adequate support before, during and after the process. Considerations on the use of learning outcomes, the reference points and possible links to existing frameworks are also important and will influence the choice of methodologies.

It is important to note that this is a simplified representation and that the different boxes representing the themes are interconnected. While all these steps have to be considered when aiming for national validation arrangements, initiatives linked to particular sector or user groups can concentrate on a more limited selection of issues and steps. Combined with the questions/checklists developed for each of the above steps, it is our hope that the European Guidelines will prove useful for policy-makers and practitioners alike.

Acronyms

CV	curriculum vitae
ECTS	European credit transfer system
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
ELGPN	European lifelong guidance policy network
EQF	European qualifications framework
EQF AG	European qualifications framework advisory group
ESCO	European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations
ICT	information and communications technology
ILA	individual learning account
NQF	national qualifications framework
TSC	transversal skills and competences
VET	vocational education and training

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ANNEX 1.

Key questions for the development and implementation of validation

This annex brings together all the questions presented in the European guidelines. They form a list of topics and elements for reflection that can be used as a starting point on the discussion of the different topics.

Key questions on validation

- Is the individual perspective considered in all elements of validation?
- Have the objective, purpose and expected outcomes of validation been defined and clearly communicated?
- Is the purpose of validation reflected in the organisation and emphasis of its different phases?
- Do possibilities for validation exist in different contexts and what is their role:
 - in education and training?
 - in the labour market?
 - in the third sector?
- Does validation work with other policies and services?
 - Are roles and responsibilities of stakeholders clarified?
 - What steps are taken to avoid fragmentation and ensure a coherent approach?
- Can individuals transfer and accumulate validation outcomes across different contexts?
- Has sustainable financing been provided, and cost-sharing mechanisms agreed?
- Have the professional roles of validation practitioners been clarified, developed and supported?
- Is information on validation being provided in ways which ensure awareness, outreach and access?
- Is there provision of guidance and counselling before, during and after a validation process?
- Are learning outcomes used to define reference points for validation?
 - Are reference points and standards agreed among stakeholders?
 - How does validation relate to different credentials?
 - Are there clear links to NQFs?
- Has the potential of ICT been considered for improving validation?
- How has quality been assured in the validation process?
- Which validation methodologies are available and how can they be used and potentially combined for specific policies and practices?
 - Are validation methods fit for purpose?
 - Are tools reliable, valid and scalable?

Key questions on the centrality of the individual

- To what extent are individuals aware of, and have access to, validation?
- Are validation arrangements designed to capture diverse (and unexpected) learning experiences or do they address a limited (and predefined) set of experiences?
- To what extent does validation serve diverse individuals at different stages of their life? To what extent does it address lifelong and life-wide learning, employment careers and volunteering?
- Is the privacy and personal integrity of the candidates protected throughout the validation process?
- Have explicit procedures been put in place to guarantee confidentiality?
- What arrangements have been put in place to guarantee fair and equal treatment?
- Are there possibilities for appeal?
- Have ethical standards been developed and applied?
- Are the outcomes of the process the exclusive property of the candidate?
- Can the individual, if the opportunity arises, transfer and accumulate results of validation?
- Are individuals supported before, during and after the process?

Key questions on identification

- Are there templates and systematic ways of identifying learning outcomes?
- Is the identification phase limited to predefined areas of prior learning? What is the starting point for the identification of skills?
- How are standardised (for example ICT-based) and open (for example dialogue-based) identification methods mixed and balanced?
- How is guidance and counselling supporting and interconnected with the identification phase?
- How is the identification process supported by professionals?

Key questions on documentation

- Is there agreement on which evidence to accept for validation?
- Have end-users, notably individuals, been made aware of what is accepted as evidence?
- Are the formats used for documenting non-formal and informal learning generally known and/or accepted?
- To what extent do existing documentation formats support the transfer and portability of evidence gathered in the context of validation?

Key questions on assessment

- Are assessment tools adapted to the individual's needs and characteristics?
- Are validity, reliability, accessibility and fairness assured?
- Can assessment results be contested?
- Have the conditions for assessment been clearly defined and communicated in terms of procedure, tools and evaluation/assessment standards:
 - to candidates?
 - to employers and education institutions?
- Is feedback regularly collected and analysed?

Key questions on certification

- Is the awarding body known?
- Is the process leading to the award transparent?
- To what extent can the outcomes of validation (qualifications, certificates, credentials, etc.) be exchanged into further education, job opportunities?
- Are certifications obtained through validation linked to NQFs?

Key questions on objectives and benefits

- Has the purpose of validation been defined and clearly communicated?
- Have the phases of the validation process been clearly defined to address the purpose of validation?
- Is the purpose of validation reflected in the structure and emphasis of the different phases of validation?
- Are benefits of validation clearly communicated to the individual?

Key questions on education and training

- Has the purpose of validation within education and training been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Is validation offered in all parts of education and training systems?
- Does validation offered in different parts of the education and training system build on similar or different principles? Is there coherence on validation across different parts of education and training?
- Can validation arrangements in different parts of education and training aid progress across types and levels of education? To what extent can validation results be used across different parts of education and training?
- How is validation linked to credit transfer and accumulation?

Key questions on labour market

- Are there systematic validation possibilities in the labour market?
- Is there a coherent approach to validation in the labour market across different labour market actors?
- Has the purpose of validation within the labour market initiatives been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Are there possibilities of connecting certificates obtained through validation in the labour market to formal education programmes?
- What is the value of labour market certificates and can they be acquired through validation?
- Is validation used and connected to up- and reskilling initiatives?
- Can results of a validation process in the labour market be used in other contexts, for example to access formal education programmes?

Key questions on third sector

- Are there systematic validation possibilities in the third sector?
- Have the objectives of validation within third sector initiatives been clarified and clearly communicated to individuals?
- Are there possibilities of connecting certificates obtained through validation in the third sector to formal education programmes?
- Can results of a validation process in the third sector be used in other contexts, for example to access formal education programmes?

Key questions on skill and lifelong learning strategies

- Have the role and purposes of validation within education and training, labour market and social policies been clarified?
- Are there guidelines or frameworks that govern the relationship of validation with other services, for example career guidance and public employment services?
- Are there forums in which diverse actors governing different policy fields can come together to discuss validation issues?

Key questions on stakeholder involvement

- Are different stakeholders aware and do they accept the validation outcomes?
- Are different stakeholders involved in the design, implementation and execution of validation arrangements?
- Is there dialogue between social partners, education and training institutions and civic society organisations on the role of validation practices?
- Have single or multiple legal framework(s) been put in place that govern the relationship between actors in relation to validation?
- What administrative processes are in place (contact and information procedures, recording and monitoring of results, shared quality assurance arrangements)?
- What networking possibilities are there for stakeholders? What are the forums in which validation can be discussed and agreed upon?
- Who is responsible for coordination at national, regional and local levels? How is consistency and coherence across levels assured?
- What mechanisms exist for the direct experience of validation system users to contribute to, inform and review national policy and procedures for validation?

Key questions on financing and cost

- Is there a sustainable model of financing validation?
- Are the criteria for the provision of funds incentivising the use of validation processes?
- Are there shared costing mechanisms in place for validation? Is it possible to reach an agreement on cost distribution among relevant stakeholders?
- What funding instruments are in place to incentivise and support individuals' uptake and institutional offers?
- Is information on the costs and benefits of validation clear and delivered to the individual in a timely manner?
- Have the elements that contribute to the cost of validation been defined?
- Are there elements in place to collect the information needed in terms of cost?
- Is it possible to carry out cost-benefit analysis of validation?

Key questions on validation professionals and their competences

- What requirements, if any, have been set for:
 - counsellors and guidance personnel?
 - assessors?
 - other practitioners involved in validation?
- Is there a strategy in place for the professional development of these practitioners?
- Is the professional development of validation professionals coordinated between different sectors and arrangements?
- Can a community of practice for validation professionals be developed, supporting networking and professional development?

Key questions on learning outcomes and validation

- ❑ Is the validation process using a reference point (standard, curricula, programme description) based on input or outcome expectation?
- ❑ What is the focus of the expected learning outcomes in terms of breadth (knowledge, skills and/or competences) and depth (levels and complexity)?
- ❑ Is the scope of the reference point sufficiently widely defined to capture the learning taking place outside formal education and training?

Key questions on learning experiences

- ❑ What kind of knowledge has been acquired?
 - basic knowledge (literacy, numeracy, etc.)
 - technical and specialised knowledge
- ❑ Which skills are covered?
 - practical skills (related to tasks, functions and/or occupations)
 - analytical skills
- ❑ Which wider, transversal skills and competences have been acquired?
 - self-management skills and competences (time-management, learning to learn, etc.)
 - communication skills and competences (oral and written presentations, etc.)
 - social skills and competences (teamwork, management of others, etc.)
- ❑ At what level of complexity (depth) has the individual acquired learning? Can the depth and complexity of learning be specified by referring to formal levels and/or with action verbs?

Key questions on standards and reference points

- ❑ Are the reference points for validation clearly identified?
- ❑ Is there stakeholder involvement in the development of the reference points? Are standards built on consensus and dialogue?
- ❑ Is the reference point for validation communicated with the candidate?
- ❑ Is the reference point opening up to the diversity of the individual's learning experiences, or does it require narrowing down?
- ❑ Is the reference point embedded in a limited education, training and/or occupation sector, and are the experiences gained outside this addressed?
- ❑ Are there feedback mechanisms in place for the development of the reference points?

Key questions addressing the validation link to credentials

- Can the content and profile of a credential or certificate be presented in terms of learning outcomes?
- To what extent can the content and profile of credentials and certificates be compared?
- How can the content and profile of credentials and certificates be more systematically captured and compared? Is digitalisation playing a role?
- How can the content and profile of certificates and credentials be included (reliably and validly) in validation?

Key questions on links to qualification frameworks

- Are stakeholders aware of, and do they understand, NQFs, their levels and descriptors?
- Are validation arrangements (all/only some) seen as an integrated part of the national qualifications system and as a normal route to qualifications?
- What is the relationship between validation and the NQF?
- To what extent can validation be used to support progression between all types and levels of qualification in the NQF?
- Is there a link between validation and (possible) credit transfer and accumulation arrangements?

Key questions on awareness raising, information and outreach

- What measures are in place to increase awareness?
- Is information on cost, benefits and the process available and easily accessible?
- How is the information made easily available?
- Do the different actors involved provide coherent, complementary information?
- How can public and private stakeholders cooperate to offer better information on validation?
- Are past users given a voice to promote validation initiatives?

Key questions on guidance and counselling

- Is there integration of career guidance with validation services and policies at a systemic level?
- To what extent are existing career guidance and counselling services (for example, in education and training, labour market and social services) connected and coordinated with existing validation services in different settings?
- To what extent is career guidance provided before, during and after validation processes?
- How can existing career guidance and counselling service networking be improved to address all potential target groups for validation?
- What kind of coordination mechanism is used to ensure that candidates are served where they live, study and work?
- Do guidance services provide information on the possibilities, costs and benefits of validation?
- Are guidance practitioners aware of, and trained on, existing validation possibilities?

Key questions on ICT and validation

- Are there existing ICT systems that can be connected to validation?
- Are digital technologies used to register and keep track of the learning achievements of individuals?
- Is there consensus on what fields the digital certification should provide?
- Are the costs and benefits of developing ICT systems considered?
- Are there mechanisms to control the quality and legitimacy of digital certificates?

Key questions on quality assurance

- Have explicit and integrated quality assurance measures been put in place for validation? If so:
 - do these measures reflect an explicit and agreed quality strategy?
 - how does the quality strategy address key objectives like reliability, validity and credibility of the process?
- Who are the actors involved, at different levels, in implementing this quality strategy?
- How are quality assurance arrangements divided between internal and external assurance and control?
- Are processes and outcomes being monitored and has a system for feed-back from users/customers been put in place?
- To what extent is research and evaluation of validation systems and processes supported?

Key questions on validation tools and techniques

- ❑ Does the choice of methodologies consider the individual circumstances and characteristics?
- ❑ Are methodologies fit for purpose and in line with validation objectives? Is their purpose clearly informed?
- ❑ Are methodologies free from bias and how is fair treatment assured?
 - In what way do methodologies balance the criteria of reliability, validity, scalability and cost?
 - Are validation methodologies reliable, valid and scalable?
 - Do validation methodologies capture the variety of learning outcomes of individual experiences?
 - Are methodologies predictable, transparent and repeatable?
 - Can methodologies be replicated and used in different contexts while maintaining validity and reliability?
 - Has the cost of developing and maintaining methodologies been considered?
- ❑ Have technical consideration related to nature of assessment, criteria constructs and learning domains been clarified and agreed among stakeholders?
- ❑ Which validation methodologies are available and how can they be used and potentially combined for specific policies and practices, and for specific purposes?

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

The European guidelines for validation of non-formal and informal learning seek to clarify the conditions for developing and implementing validation. The guidelines are written for everybody involved in initiating, developing and implementing validation and are meant as a source of inspiration and reflection.

The development and implementation of validation relies on several interconnected elements that, when combined, can strengthen the role of validation at national and European levels. The guidelines put the individual at the heart of the process, responding to needs and objectives. They provide insights into validation provision and methodologies and how the process can be coordinated and carried out.

This third update of the European guidelines follows and expands the principles agreed in the 2012 Council Recommendation on validation, and considers the evaluation of the Recommendation and follow-up. The guidelines are the result of consultation with stakeholders and validation experts during the last 3 years.

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