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# Funding validation

A thematic report for the 2016 update  
to the European inventory on validation  
of non-formal and informal learning



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# Foreword

There is an overwhelming consensus on the importance of making visible the knowledge, skills and competences gained through life and work experience. To value what they have learned, people should be able to demonstrate what they have learned in all settings in life and to use this in their career and for further education and training.

This is why validation of non-formal and informal learning can make an essential contribution to the EU ambition of achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, as set by the Europe 2020 strategy. Its impact can be significant in better matching of skills and labour demand, promoting transferability of skills between companies and sectors and supporting mobility across the European labour market. It can also contribute to fighting social exclusion by providing a way for early school leavers, unemployed individuals and other groups at risk, particularly low-skilled adults, to improve their employability.

This is one of a series of four thematic reports prepared within the framework of the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning. The inventory, together with the European guidelines, is a major tool supporting the implementation of the 2012 recommendation on validation that calls on Member States to establish, by 2018, validation arrangements allowing individuals to identify, document, assess and certify their competences to obtain a qualification (or parts of it).

The thematic reports take a closer look at specific aspects that are particularly relevant for the development of validation arrangements in Europe. They have contributed to the development of the country report updates, which will be available at Cedefop's webpage at the end of 2016. The reports treat the following themes:

- validation in the care and youth work sectors: this looks into how validation arrangements link to specific sectors of care and youth work;
- monitoring validation: this provides an overview of the way the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning is recorded across Europe;
- funding validation: this presents an overview of funding sources for validation of non-formal and informal learning and discusses associated issues such as sustainability and accessibility of validation arrangements;
- validation and open educational resources (OER): this focuses on validation of learning acquired through OER, for instance through participation in massive open online courses.

The thematic reports are a source of information to support dialogue between the different stakeholders in developing and implementing validation in Europe. Our key objective is to assist Member States in thinking European but acting locally, so that more learners and workers provide new skills to support competitiveness.

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# Introduction

This is one of a series of four thematic reports prepared for the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (the inventory). It presents an overview of funding sources for validation (Chapter 2) and discusses associated issues such as sustainability and accessibility. Some country examples are highlighted in boxes and four larger case studies are also presented. These examples offer interesting lessons for others: they are not necessarily put forward as examples of good practice but to show how financing has been implemented. Chapter 3 of the report presents a brief overview of changes in funding identified during 2007-14. The report concludes with a list of key points.

Data on validation funding are limited. To compile a data resource for this thematic report, inventory country experts were asked to respond to five questions on funding:

- (a) what are (were) the different sources of funding for validation and what is (was) the balance between different sources in your country;
- (b) what are the consequences of different structures of public funding for validation at national/regional level;
- (c) what main types of use of (European Union) project-based funding are being made;
- (d) do there seem to be any links between the costs of validation/funding arrangements and the types of approaches used in the implementation of validation;
- (e) what have been the most important developments in validation funding since 2014 in your country?

The main focus of responses provided by the country experts was sources of funding (including project funding), and, where information was available, on the amount of funding allocated to validation. Few country experts were able to put forward responses to the analytical questions on if, or how, the funding structures in place affect approaches chosen to deliver validation and the way in which it is delivered. This is mainly due to the lack of reporting on this issue at national (and international) level.

Responses to the above questions were based on the information provided in previous versions of the inventory (2007, 2010 and 2014), country experts' wider knowledge of validation in their country, and relevant literature. A small number of telephone interviews were also carried out by the author of this report, to prepare the detailed country examples.

The report identifies five different funding sources used by countries across Europe: dedicated public funding from national sources; public funding but not specifically allocated to validation; EU and project funding; mix of public and private sector funding; and fees charged to individual learners. Validation is often specific to different sectors of education within countries so, where possible (where it is clear from the country data), we have tried to reflect this in the report by stating which sector is referred to when mentioning a country (validation outside education is not covered in this report, as examples were not identified in the country data). Future reviews of funding by sector within each country could lead to more precise typology of sources and more in-depth discussion of associated issues.

# Funding sources

We have identified five different funding sources for validation of non-formal and informal learning. These do not necessarily apply to countries as a whole, but to sectors of education within countries. For example, often the higher education (HE) sector has a specific funding source, due to the autonomous nature of HE institutions. Drivers and challenges associated with funding vary by sector in question. There is also some overlap across the funding sources; they are not mutually exclusive. For instance, countries which provide (dedicated) national funding may also rely on European funding as a significant funding source, for example if European and national funding are combined as is the case for the European Social Fund (ESF).

The funding sources identified are:

- (a) dedicated public funding from national sources;
- (b) public funding but not specifically allocated to validation;
- (c) EU and project funding;
- (d) mix of public and private sector funding;
- (e) fees charged to individual learners.

We provide country examples to illustrate how each type of source is used in practice. This includes small country examples in boxes, based on the data provided by inventory country experts, and four detailed country case study examples. The latter are prepared from data provided by the country experts plus telephone interviews and email correspondence with one to two contacts per country. The four detailed examples are:

- (a) Iceland, where national earmarked funding is allocated to validation providers on a project basis;
- (b) Estonia, where ESF funding was used to support the development phase of validation activities in the HE and vocational education and training (VET) sectors, but has now come to an end, raising questions about the sustainability of the activities in the longer term;
- (c) Portugal, where ESF funding is used to pay for the delivery of validation relating to general education and initial VET <sup>(1)</sup> but a nationally funded

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<sup>(1)</sup> ESF funding is not used for validation relating to higher education as students pay for the validation processes in these institutions.

- institution undertakes central direction and monitoring activities;
- (d) the Netherlands, where validation is seen as a commercial activity and is funded through fees paid by individuals or private sector entities.

The thematic report raises issues of sustainability of the sources and whether the funding approaches act as a (dis)incentive to providers or learners. These discussion points are summarised in the conclusions, which point to areas for further research. The annex has an overview of funding schemes in the different countries.

## 2.1. Countries with dedicated public funding for validation from national sources

Dedicated public funding for validation in one or more sectors of education (notably in VET) can be found in around a third of the countries covered by the inventory, including the Czech Republic, Denmark, England (initial vocational education and training, IVET), Iceland, Latvia, Liechtenstein (VET), Luxembourg (IVET), Norway (lower and upper secondary education) Portugal (general education and VET), Sweden, Switzerland (upper secondary VET) and Wales (HE). This funding comes from national sources (sometimes combined with EU sources). A few countries (Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland) referred to the use of regional public funding as well, for instance Germany, concerning access to HE, where universities are funded predominantly by the Länder. In Belgium, there is no national funding for validation; it always comes from the regions. The focus of this section is national funding, because the country data referred mainly to national sources.

### 2.1.1. Funding distribution

#### 2.1.1.1. *Funding distributed proportionally*

In Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia), regional public funding for validation is distributed to individual providers based on the number of validation sessions carried out/the number of individuals undergoing validation. In Belgium-

Wallonia, the 'consortium for validation' manages government funding dedicated to validation of competences sessions <sup>(2)</sup> (in the continuing vocational education and training (CVET) sector). Each year the consortium receives a subsidy from the government, which it then distributes to validation centres based on the number of validation sessions carried out. Similarly, in Belgium-Flanders, assessment centres offering the certificate for vocational experience are given a one-off start-up reimbursement of EUR 15 000 and then receive EUR 5 000 for each additional certificate that they issue.

Other countries which allocate funding according to the number of validations carried out include Denmark and England. In England, the Skills Funding Agency sets out rules on when providers can/cannot claim funding for learners who have benefited from validation (recognition of prior learning <sup>(3)</sup>). The rules were found to be confusing for learning providers, highlighting the importance of making providers aware of such rules and providing clear information on how they work, as described in Box 1.

### Box 1. The importance of providing clear information on funding for validation

In England, the Skills Funding Agency provides funding for learners who undertake qualifications and credit framework qualifications as a result of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in England. The agency funding rules state that providers can receive funding for learners who enter a course via a process of RPL, either the same amount as for learners who have not undergone RPL, or a reduced amount if the RPL assessment has accounted for more than 50% of the learning outcomes of the course. Yet if learners can meet all of the learning outcomes for a unit or qualification via RPL, and therefore do not need to undertake any further learning, providers do



<sup>(2)</sup> Validation centres organise testing sessions which, when successfully carried out, lead to the issuing of a *titre de competences* (skill certificate). All candidates benefit from an identical assessment procedure, using a single set of skills assessment indicators, no matter who is being assessed, where, when or how an assessment takes place. Candidates are asked to demonstrate their skill or ability in a given occupation in a situation that is typical for the given occupation, in an approved training centre.

<sup>(3)</sup> RPL is defined as 'a method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning' (European Commission et al., 2014c, p. 5). In this definition of RPL, it is understood that the prior learning of the individual is not already recognised by a certificate.

not receive any funding at all (although in practice it is rare for an individual to be able to acquire a full qualification via RPL).

According to a study into RPL within the qualifications and credit framework prepared by the Learning and Work Institute (former NIACE – National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education) and published in 2013 (NIACE, 2013), there was lack of awareness of, and also confusion over, the Skills Funding Agency rules regarding funding for RPL. Most survey respondents (learning providers) reported that they did not know what the current funding rules were in relation to RPL. Even where providers were aware of the rules, confusion over the definition of RPL (in contrast to credit transfer/exemption) led to a misunderstanding about how RPL could be financially supported. The Learning and Work Institute recommended that the Skills Funding Agency clarify the funding rule in relation to RPL. In particular, the Learning and Work Institute called for careful explanation of the 50% rule, since within the rule itself it is still necessary to identify how 50% is to be measured, especially in relation to the new funding rates matrix (NIACE, 2013). In the 2014-15 funding rules, this text was updated to improve clarity.

#### 2.1.1.2. *Funding for specific target groups*

Dedicated public funding is available for validation relating to specific target groups in the Czech Republic, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. It depends either on employment status or level of education of the individual, though the focus tends to be on the low-qualified and unemployed.

In the Czech Republic, aside from supporting coordination and technical assistance, public funding is only allocated for validation undertaken by the unemployed. In Iceland, the focus is on the low-qualified (case study 1: Iceland in Section 2.1.2). Similarly in Switzerland, public funding is made available for people who do not have a first VET qualification. A recent development in Sweden is that, in 2015, further funding (SEK 50 million) has been made available from the government to develop validation for people who are newly arrived immigrants (Employment Agency, 2014).

In Norway, recognition of informal and non-formal learning related to lower and upper secondary education is free for the following groups:

- (a) people with a right to complete their education from primary school to upper secondary school (costs are borne by county councils);
- (b) people who are unable to work due to disability (costs are borne by the Labour and Welfare Service);
- (c) people having signed a jobseekers' agreement with the Labour and

Welfare Service can, under some circumstances, have their prior learning experiences assessed for free. One precondition is that the employment office considers the assessment to be necessary for getting the job seekers back to work.

#### 2.1.1.3. *Vouchers/grants to cover fees*

Individuals may be able to access financial support in the form of grants or vouchers (public funding) to cover their fees, in countries where validation providers charge a fee for the validation process, or where such validation leads to further learning (which must be paid for). Examples include Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia and Finland. In Belgium-Flanders, for example, as part of the government 'training vouchers' measure, an employee can request annually a training voucher to the value of EUR 250, of which the government contributes half. These vouchers can also be used for validation procedures relating to the certificate of vocational experience. In Belgium-Wallonia, validation candidates have access to eight hours of training leave per year, paid for by the State (royal decree of 10 November 2006), which includes validation of competences. In Finland, individuals undergoing validation for competence-based qualifications (CBQs) can also access an allowance which covers their subsistence costs while studying to complete qualifications which have been partially validated (the adult education allowance) and a scholarship awarded on completion of their qualification (the scholarship for qualified employees).

#### 2.1.1.4. *Funding for specific stages of validation*

In Denmark and Latvia, public funding only includes certain stages of the validation process. In Denmark, financial support for validation is provided by the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education (for tertiary level validation). This public funding covers the costs of assessment at education institutions but does not cover the information or guidance elements of validation. Organisations involved in validation of prior learning must absorb the costs of provision of information and guidance within their existing budgets.

For VET in Latvia it is the guidance stage of validation which is funded through national sources. The institutions or examination centres that have been delegated the task of validation (a vocational qualification examination) provide guidance free of charge, making this one of the functions that can be referred to as being publicly funded, while others are covered by fees paid by individuals (Box 3 in Section 2.5.1). The quality assurance procedures of the

process (as part of the annual self-evaluation reports of the education institutions) are also funded nationally.

Case study 1 (Section 2.1.2), describing the validation funding model in Iceland, shows that it is important to ensure that the information/guidance element of validation is given funding, particularly with regard to learners who may have previously dropped out of education and have negative experiences of formal education environments; without adequate guidance, these learners will face major difficulties in achieving validation of learning outcomes.

In Liechtenstein, similar to Latvia, the costs of validation relating to VET are split between the candidate and the national institution which delivers validation, the Office for Vocational Education and Vocational Counselling (ABB). The ABB covers the costs of creating the dossier, evaluating it and any required catch-up classes, while the candidate covers the cost of the (optional) coaching/skills audit seminar. This is also the case in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, for upper secondary VET.

In Wales, RPL is funded in the HE sector but not in others. The funding is dependent on the purpose of the RPL <sup>(4)</sup> process. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) provides credit-based funding for part-time and postgraduate provision, which could include RPL modules <sup>(5)</sup>. If an RPL module is provided within a full-time undergraduate course, it is covered in the funding for the student place, which is made up of a mixture of HEFCW funding (which may be a very small proportion for full-time undergraduate students) and funding from tuition fees <sup>(6)</sup> (although it is possible that fees may be discounted for RPL modules). This will not necessarily reflect what it costs to deliver the modules taken, or how much the institution allocates internally to their delivery (the institution is free to spend HEFCW funding how it wishes and is not restricted by the way in which it was calculated). Eligible RPL modules are not treated differently to other modules in calculating HEFCW funding. Funding is not provided for RPL for entry or admissions purposes, for experiential learning which has previously been accredited elsewhere, or for credits from which students are exempted <sup>(7)</sup>.

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<sup>(4)</sup> Here RPL is understood to include both prior certificated and experiential learning.

<sup>(5)</sup> According to the HEFCW circular, these modules are 'normally taken within a programme of study, subject to the institution's policies on the credit contribution limits of APEL to programmes. (...) these policies differ greatly between, and sometimes within, institutions. The learning outcomes of such modules focus on the students' experiential learning and are typically examined by portfolio. These modules need to be subject to similar rigorous quality and standards procedures as applied to taught provision' (HEFCW, 2010).

<sup>(6)</sup> Tuition grants are also available for some students to cover their fees.

<sup>(7)</sup> Based on information provided by a representative of HEFCW and on HEFCW (2010).

#### 2.1.1.5. *Public employment services*

The public employment services (PES) play a role in providing or distributing funding for validation in around a quarter of inventory countries. This is the case in Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden. In Sweden for example, development of validation of non-formal and informal learning was mainly funded by the national government through the Ministries of Education and Research, and Employment. Today funding has been reduced and is mainly channelled through the PES. In Malta, by 2014 the national system of validation had only been made operational in the childcare sector; here there is no cost for the unemployed, as the government funds validation through the Employment Training Corporation. In Poland, sectoral exams are usually financed by applicants, who can request reimbursement of the examination fee at labour offices, provided they are registered as unemployed or as a jobseeker.

In Norway collaboration has recently been established between the PES (NAV) and educational authorities. There are now career guidance centres in around 15 of the 19 counties. These centres use various methods and tools to support career dialogues with their customers. NAV and the county education authorities have county agreements to ensure targeted cooperation both at county level (planning) and in practical collaboration at local level, addressing low-skilled individuals in need of assistance from both sectors to increase job opportunities and, eventually, complete training.

#### 2.1.2. **Level of funding**

Where public funding is allocated to validation, a key issue is whether sufficient funding is available to meet (increases in) demand. In Belgium-Wallonia, although there is funding dedicated to validation of competences, this has been maintained at a stable level and has not increased in proportion to the number of potential and actual candidates seeking to have their competences validated. The number of candidates undergoing validation continues to increase and the related increase in administrative work is creating difficulties in financing validation sessions. Currently, validation centres partly compensate for the discrepancy between government subsidies and the real costs associated with validation, using their own funds.

The Iceland case study outlines the importance of providing funding to cover all stages of validation; it also presents interesting approaches to funding issues. There is a dedicated national centre which coordinates validation activities, which can be monitored over time and the funding model altered accordingly. Further, a decision was made at the outset to give

responsibility (and funding) for validation to lifelong learning (guidance) centres rather than education and training providers, which it is felt had significant benefits in terms of the take-up of the measure and the way it was delivered. Iceland is a small country and the numbers of validation applicants are relatively small-scale, which may have some consequences in terms of the transferability of this model.

### Case study 1. **Iceland**

Validation in Iceland is overseen by the national education and training service centre (ETSC), established in December 2002 by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (SA). Since 2010, the ETSC has also been jointly owned by the Federation of State and Municipal Employees, the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland, and the Ministry of Finance.

Validation was initially developed by the ETSC based on learning from other countries and the experience gained through pilot projects carried out between 2004 and 2006 in cooperation with stakeholders. Today, validation is delivered by lifelong learning centres, on a project basis. Each lifelong learning centre applies for project funding from the Education and Training Fund to undertake validation activities. The ETF is financed by the State budget via the Ministry of Education. The ETSC is responsible for the Education and Training Fund.

Since validation financing started (2007), it has been dedicated specifically to those with little formal education (without completed upper secondary education). Individuals do not pay for any part of the process, which includes career counselling (delivered by professionals with a diploma or masters in career counselling/ educational and vocational counselling) before, during and after validation. However, individuals pay to attend courses to complete their studies, the same as anyone else entering the formal school system.

In addition to the project funding, the ETSC is also funded by the Ministry of Education to carry out central activities relating to validation. This includes holding meetings of the project coordinators and counsellors several times a year, providing training, and acting as a coordination point to review progress. The ETSC suggests that these opportunities to share experiences and ideas are important because validation is a relatively new concept in Iceland, which requires a certain 'shift' in thinking to understand that learning which takes place outside of the formal sphere can also be recognised towards the achievement of a qualification.



There is, however, a limited possibility for individuals outside of the target group (those who have already completed upper secondary education, in particular the unemployed) to access validation free of charge. Validation is delivered to groups rather than on a one-to-one basis (apart from the assessment interview, which is individual), so if, within a group, there are individuals who already have upper secondary level education (in a different subject area) it is still possible to receive funding to take the process forward. The overall aim of the ETSC is to ensure that those who could benefit from validation are able to access it. Those who already have upper secondary level qualifications but who are unemployed and wish to access validation to support a career shift, would be able to do so under the current model. In general, the aim is to ensure that a ratio of at least 80/20 is maintained (with at least 80% of beneficiaries having little formal education).

Funding is allocated annually. Although this may have led to some uncertainty for the lifelong learning centres at first, it is now believed by representatives of the ETSC that the centres have confidence in the stability of the funding, because validation is now more established in Iceland, having been offered for around eight years. Prior to applying for funding, the lifelong learning centres must, in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, identify demand for validation in a certain sector within their locality. Their application must then make clear how many individuals will be involved in the process, what the outcomes will be for these individuals, and how much it will cost to fund. The ETSC assesses each application based on the opportunities for the individuals concerned to move on to further education after the validation process, and the presence of education/training providers in the locality to provide the remaining education required.

The national funding allocation for validation has increased over time. In 2012 the total budget of the Education and Training Fund was EUR 4.5 million, of which funding for validation amounted to almost EUR 450 000. The total initial budget for 2013 was EUR 4.3 million, of which funding for validation was around EUR 440 000 but an extra EUR 390 000 was added due to demand for more projects. To date, almost 3 000 learners have gone through a validation process since 2007 under this scheme, with an annual cohort of 350 to 400. There are currently no signs that demand for validation will 'plateau' and the ETSC believes that, if more funding were available, there would be demand for more places (although it is also recognised that after a certain time in certain sectors, such as dental clinicians, the market will have been exhausted).

Validation has presented a successful way of supporting people who have dropped out, and/or who have previous negative experiences of formal education,



to gain an understanding of their own abilities and to have these recognised through a formal certificate. There is also evidence that it is less costly than taking the equivalent formal training course: around a third of the cost for manual trades and around half of the cost for academic subjects. The average cost of validation in 2013 was EUR 66.63 per credit/unit, including career counselling throughout the process. The average number of credits/units validated per learner in 2013 was 26, making the cost for an average participant EUR 1 732.38. The average cost for one school year, which comprises 35 credits/units, per upper secondary level student, is EUR 4 522.55. It has been estimated that the savings generated through offering validation equate to approximately EUR 2 190.48 (based on the calculation that 35 units validated would cost EUR 2 332.07): validation costs just over half (52%) of the costs to be covered if the individual were to study the same number of units at school (on average) (ETSC, 2014).

Alongside existing projects, new pilots are being carried out looking at validation against specific job standards. These are funded jointly by the ETF and labour market partners, with the latter, as a minimum, matching the contribution from the European and training fund (often exceeding it). Participation is also free of charge for the individual in these instances. It is hoped by the ETSC that it will be possible to expand on this area in the future.

According to the ETSC, one of the reasons that the funding model in Iceland works well is that the country has a clear definition of the validation process itself; this is set out in a national regulation. It is considered easier to allocate funding to a defined process. The rationale for giving responsibility (and funding) for the delivery of validation to the lifelong learning centres, rather than formal education and training providers, is based on the following:

- individuals (often those who have dropped out of formal education in the past) find it easier to go to a lifelong learning centre than to a formal education and training provider such as an upper secondary school. It is probable that they would be less willing to access validation if it was delivered by a formal education and training provider, because, in many cases, they have negative perceptions due to their previous experiences. Given the nature of the target group, a key success factor is that career counselling is embedded in the model (and funding is provided for this);
- validation represents a shift in paradigm and for formal education and training providers to deliver validation it may be difficult for them to change mindset. In terms of funding, their focus is likely to be on ensuring they have enough people to fill places on their training courses, rather than on ensuring people can gain



credit for the skills they already have. But schools which receive former validation candidates to complete their studies are positive about these learners, who they say are highly motivated students with a strong self-esteem.

(Nevertheless, case study 4, which looks at funding sources for validation in the Netherlands, shows that there can be some issues with keeping validation separate from formal education. A problem encountered with this approach in the Netherlands was that there were many difficulties in transferring the results of the 'recognition of acquired competences' (EVC) to the formal education arena. This is discussed in case study 4 in Section 2.4.3).

Statistics are gathered for each project so that allocation of funding to activities can be reviewed. It is also important for the ETSC to maintain an overview of the cost-effectiveness of the process, to ensure continued support from its stakeholders.

Currently, funding is allocated in relation to the number of credits awarded through each validation project. Although this model has worked well, the ETSC has recently carried out research to try to find out how to improve the existing funding model. The reasons for working on improvements are that projects which result in few credits have been difficult financially; and the apprenticeship part has increasingly been included in the validation process and raised the amounts of credits, which has made the projects too costly.

The difference often relates to the share of practical elements in the curriculum.

The ETSC's research, based on consultation with the lifelong learning centres, found that there are two factors which are difficult to assess before validation begins (insecure variables):

- (a) how difficult it can be to engage people in validation, such as in larger rural areas, which brings in lower numbers for the group process and can raise costs;
- (b) how complicated is the process of validation in each education sector, such as the number of assessors needed to conduct the assessment and the scope of the curriculum.

The ETSC is developing a new model, in collaboration with the lifelong learning centres, to take the outcomes of the research into account. It is planned that core funding from the Education and Training Fund will be allocated per individual, with top-up funding, also from the Education and Training Fund, depending on the number of credits the individual achieves through validation. In relation to validation against specific job standards in working life, there is, and will be, a basic payment for each participant completing validation. The amounts are decided by the Education and Training Fund. A decision on payment amounts has not been taken yet, but is on the agenda.



The ETSC stresses that it is important to ensure that there is buy-in from the lifelong learning centres to the proposed change to the funding system; for this reason, they have been consulted throughout the process. This is a benefit for small countries: it is easier to ensure a collaborative process and to reach a consensus on any changes.

Feedback to date from the lifelong learning centres is that the new proposal will make it easier for them to plan their activities: it is currently hard to do so because funding is allocated on a credit basis only. Further, they have indicated that they will be able to work with smaller groups, which will be of benefit, for example, in rural areas, where individuals sometimes have to wait to undertake validation until a large enough cohort can be formed.

Messages from the Icelandic experience include:

- it can be beneficial to have a (funded) central coordinating body (the ETSC) to oversee validation, review progress, allocate funding. For example, the central coordinating body can provide opportunities for validation providers to share experiences and ideas. If this central body also provides training, it helps to ensure that the implementation of validation is consistent across providers;
- to cover all aspects of validation (in particular guidance/counselling) the process should be clearly defined and funding allocated accordingly;
- progress should be monitored over time: this includes monitoring take-up statistics so that funding can be allocated, monitoring cost-effectiveness, and also monitoring the funding model so that adjustments can be made if necessary;
- it is important to work collaboratively with the validation providers to ensure that the funding model is working well;
- giving the responsibility for delivering validation to organisations outside of formal education and training (in this case to lifelong learning centres) can have advantages, in particular if validation is targeted at individuals who may have previous negative experiences of education;
- two key factors that affect the cost of validation are how difficult it is to engage people and how complicated the process is in each sector;
- delivering validation to groups, rather than one to one, can mean that there is a delay in access, as applicants have to wait until a sufficient number of candidates can be brought together. This can be an issue, for instance, in rural areas.

### 2.1.3. Strengths and weaknesses

Table 1 presents strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of dedicated public funding for validation, from national sources.

Table 1. **Strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of dedicated public funding for validation, from national sources**

Strengths and enablers	Weaknesses and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dedicated funding is an incentive for providers and learners to offer and take up validation</li> <li>• distributing funding in proportion to activity levels can be an efficient and fair way of allocating the dedicated budget</li> <li>• funding for specific target groups can mean that validation can be used as a tool to address wider issues, such as helping the unemployed</li> <li>• to ensure this is working well, the way the funding is distributed should be regularly reviewed</li> <li>• may mean that validation can be offered free of charge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• where providers need to claim funding per learner, guidance around eligibility should be clear, or this can lead to confusion</li> <li>• if funding only covers certain stages of the process, this may lead providers to avoid offering the unfunded stages (e.g. guidance/counselling), which may affect participation levels and outcomes</li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## 2.2. Countries with public funding not specifically for validation

In almost a third of countries, although validation is financed – at least partly – through public funds, there is no budget earmarked for this activity. This is notable in the HE sector. Countries where this is the case are: Austria, Belgium-Flanders (HE), England (HE), Estonia (HE and VET, see case study in Section 2.3.4), Finland (VET: CBQs and HE), France, Germany (external examination, HE), Hungary (adult learning and HE), Norway (upper secondary education (for adults), IVET, CVET and HE), Poland (VET and HE), Scotland, Sweden (general education, IVET, adult education and HE), Switzerland (all

sectors except for upper secondary VET) and Wales (IVET). Where funding is embedded in this sense, it is very difficult to assess total resources used for validation. Providers deliver validation within their existing budgets.

In most of these countries, where validation arrangements are available, education and training providers deliver these using their existing budgets. For instance in Sweden, much of the validation taking place today is performed within the funding framework of formal education and training. This makes it difficult to assess the total amount of resources used for validation. In Germany, (summative) validation (the external examination) remains integrated into regular formal education structures and is also funded in the framework of those structures. In Austria, public funding is available for measures such as second chance education or for preparing for external exams for obtaining qualifications which might also include validation procedures.

In Finland, there is no money earmarked for validation, but it is an integral part of the education system, especially in relation to competence-based qualifications (CBQs). Validation is also not charged for in HE institutes but is an integral part of the guidance and counselling after enrolment and so is (almost) free to individuals in Finland; this applies to students at all levels of education from general to vocational and HE. However, all participants in the CBQ system are required to pay a small fee of EUR 58 per qualification, whether they study all courses or only take part in competence tests to have their prior learning validated. The EUR 58 fee includes competence tests for all parts of the qualification. The fee is seen as low, with all other costs are paid by the public authorities so this is the only fee for students. It is not seen as a barrier to learning or validation in Finland.

### **2.2.1. Possible issues resulting from lack of earmarked funding**

There are several issues with using funding from providers' existing budgets to cover the validation costs. First, validation presents a significant shift in paradigm for education and training providers, as in the Iceland case study. Without funding to act as a driver to incentivise validation delivery, this shift in attitudes and perceptions may be slower or may not take place at all. Second, in some countries there is a perception among providers that validation is an expensive, time-consuming process, due to the individualised nature of the procedures. This may also act as a barrier to wider delivery of validation by education and training institutions, if they are not given dedicated funding.

The 2009 peer learning activity (PLA) on the costs and benefits of validation reported anecdotal evidence from institutions and employers

suggesting that validation is a resource-intensive activity, yet most are hidden costs (such as time invested, human resources costs). High costs to organisations were suggested to be among the main obstacles to greater take-up. It seems that, in some countries, this continues to be the case, either in perceptions or in reality. Where costs are high, it may be that even where public funding (dedicated or not) is available for validation, it is insufficient to cover these costs and/or the efforts required for adapting to the needs of those requiring validation. Some examples of countries without dedicated funding, where the high costs of validation are perceived to be an issue, are presented below.

In Norwegian HE, for instance, institutions are allocated funding based on study points achieved by the individual learners. If learners are granted an exemption on the basis of validation, the institution may receive less funding for that particular learner. Overall, this loss is not substantial because the number of study points is only one component of a financial model amounting to 30% of the subsidy from the Ministry of Education, while 70% is the 'basic component' that can be used for many purposes, including validation. Institutional loss of funds may also be at least partly compensated through higher admission numbers. Nevertheless, in the 2010 Norway country update it was noted that HE institutions report that additional resources – up to 10 times more – are needed to assess an applicant using validation of prior learning, compared to an applicant with standard formal qualifications. This is because they must assess the supporting documentation (such as statements from employers) which serves as proof of competences along with the standard application form.

In England, providers and awarding organisations interviewed for the Learning and Work Institute study (NIACE, 2013) considered RPL to be a costly procedure due to its individualised nature. This was reiterated in interviews carried out for the country update. Nevertheless, the Learning and Work Institute report also recognises that RPL can be cost-effective: it is seen as an efficient means of recognising achievement in the construction sector, for example, because most of the training in construction is done on site.

In the 2014 country update for Scotland, it is also suggested that one of the barriers to take-up is a perception among providers that RPL is expensive and time-consuming. There is no dedicated public funding for RPL and so it can seem easier and cheaper to include a person in the cohort for a course, rather than to carry out a one-to-one process of RPL: for example, a one-to-one RPL process uses considerably more staff time than adding an extra learner to a course that would be run anyway. It is perhaps for this reason that

in Scottish HE there is generally no charge for RPL which takes place as part of the admissions process, while RPL claims for credit tend to be subject to a fee, which varies across institutions. In the college sector, another issue is the funding model for college provision. For instance, if a learner uses RPL to reduce the learning he/she needs to undertake to acquire a qualification, this can affect their status and the funding to which they are entitled. A learner undertaking fewer modules than a full course is deemed to be a part-time learner, since funding is calculated by attendance hours. This can have a knock-on effect on their funding status: part-time students are required to pay their own fees, while full time students can be eligible for funding from government.

Another possible issue in devolving responsibility for financing validation to education and training providers is that provision may vary in terms of the approaches and methods used. Without funding for a national organisation/entity to coordinate practice, for example by providing training to practitioners, there is a risk that both the level and standard of provision will vary from one provider to another. This variation may lead to issues of access and quality for individuals wishing to undergo validation. The Estonia case study discusses this in more detail.

### 2.2.2. Additional costs to providers wishing to offer validation

In some countries, providers wishing to carry out validation will incur costs before they can do so. This is the case in the Czech Republic and Romania. In the Czech Republic, 'authorised persons' (entities who have been authorised to carry out assessment of prior non-formal and informal learning in relation to vocational qualifications <sup>(e)</sup>) face several initial costs. They have to be able to provide the technical and material conditions necessary for carrying out the assessment. For example, authorised persons must possess any required equipment: this condition can be satisfied by both education and training institutions, which have the necessary equipment for teaching, but also enterprises which have the equipment for purposes of service/product delivery. Entities wishing to become authorising bodies have to pay a fee covering the authorisation process; in 2014, this was CZK 1 500 (around EUR 60) for each authorisation. In Romania, each assessment centre is expected to pay a fee for their authorisation to assess specific qualification skills.

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<sup>(e)</sup> These can be schools, private institutions, companies as well as persons (e.g. a craftsman can become an authorised person).

### 2.2.3. Strengths and weaknesses

Table 2 presents some strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of public funding not specifically allocated to validation.

**Table 2. Strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of public funding not specifically allocated to validation**

Strengths and enablers	Weaknesses and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>validation is integrated into formal education and training structures, which in turn may mean that it is more easily accepted/ understood by education and training providers, as well as other stakeholders</li> <li>providers have autonomy to decide how funding for their institution should be spent, to meet the needs of their learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>difficult to assess the resources used for (money spent on) validation and for this reason may also make it difficult to monitor the level of validation provision</li> <li>providers may be slow to offer validation or may not do so at all, especially if there is a perception that validation is a costly process</li> <li>if there is no funding for coordination activities, the quality of provision may vary</li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## 2.3. EU and project funding

Several countries rely on EU sources of funding to develop or maintain their validation systems, as well as to fund specific projects. This section looks at the use of EU funding to support ‘mainstream’ validation, as well as discussing the use of project funding to support the establishment of validation systems or piloting of smaller-scale initiatives.

The main source of EU funding for more ‘mainstream’ validation seems to be the ESF. EU funding is often used alongside national public sources, due to the requirement for match funding: for this reason countries mentioned in this section may also be mentioned in Section 2.1 and/or 2.2. The use of ESF funding to support validation is mentioned in the country data for Belgium-Flanders (certificate of vocational experience), Belgium-Wallonia (HE), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia (where HE and VET were previously funded by the ESF, as discussed in case study 3 in Section 2.3.4),

France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Cyprus (VET), Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Spain. However, the country data cover the period from 2007 to early 2015 and so may not cover recent developments in the new ESF funding period of 2014-20.

Project funding (including from the EU) has been an important source of support for validation activities since 2007 for many countries. Projects can be an important starting point for validation initiatives, such as setting up common practices. They can also be a means to try out new methods or to work with new target groups. However, there are also limitations to the use of project-based funding. It can lead to a focus on short-term results and there can be issues around sustainability. Further, projects may have to work towards targets set by the funding body, which can mean that validation is driven by these targets, rather than being user-centred. In most countries, public/EU funding is used to support validation projects, rather than, or alongside, 'mainstream' validation systems. This is the case, according to the data collected, in Austria, Belgium-Wallonia (HE), Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland (VET, adult education and HE), Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland <sup>(9)</sup>. While many of these projects are pilot initiatives (e.g. Austria), in some countries project-based funding is the approach taken to supporting providers to deliver mainstream validation opportunities (e.g. Cyprus).

### 2.3.1. EU funding for the provision of (mainstream) validation

In Belgium-Flanders, Cyprus, Greece, Iceland, Portugal and Spain, funding for mainstream validation is allocated on a project basis. Iceland is discussed in greater detail in case study 1 (Section 2.1.2). In Belgium-Flanders, assessment centres wishing to deliver the certificate for vocational experience are also required to apply for project-based funding. Organisations wishing to assess applicants are recognised centrally by the Minister for Work after they have fulfilled the accreditation procedure by responding to a call for proposals by the ESF. A yearly budget of EUR 800 000 is available, provided as 55% joint financing, with 45% coming from the ESF. This enables the centres to provide a validation service, including guidance and counselling, and assessment of competences, for free.

In Cyprus, the vocational qualifications system has been jointly funded

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<sup>(9)</sup> Most countries are likely to have project-based activities of some sort. The countries listed specifically referred to projects in the data provided for this report.

since 2007 by the ESF (85%) and the Human Resource Development Authority (HRDA) (15%). In Greece, the National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (Eoppep), the leading institution in validation, is part funded by the operational programme 'development of human resources'. This shared funding covers certification of teaching competence of adult trainers for non-formal education and the development of a coherent system for certification of outputs; the development/amendment of other national certification systems is also jointly funded by the ESF. In Spain, the main source of validation financing since 2007 has been the ESF. All calls for accreditation of competences have been jointly funded between the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Employment and the ESF.

To help reduce the high numbers of people without formal qualifications in Portugal, ESF funding is being used to support the delivery of validation (certification of competences, RVCC) opportunities. There is also a national institution (the National Agency for Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training, ANQEP) with responsibility for overseeing RVCC, which is not funded by the ESF. This is in contrast to the Estonian example in case study 3 (Section 2.3.4), where ESF funding supported the coordination efforts and these are no longer sustained now that the ESF funding has ended.

## Case study 2. **Portugal**

Portugal has a validation system for general education and VET, known as RVCC (*Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências*; recognition, validation and certification of competences). There are two types of RVCC. Academic RVCC relates to lower and upper secondary levels of education and is based on key competence standards from the national qualifications catalogue. This type of RVCC may result in the award of qualifications at levels 1, 2 or 3 of the national qualifications framework. Professional RVCC is based on professional RVCC standards available in the national qualifications catalogue for different qualifications. These processes are related to qualification levels 2 and 4 of the national qualifications framework. For example, a candidate with professional experience as a cook may undertake a professional RVCC within the standard available for this qualification in the national qualifications catalogue and be awarded a relevant certificate.

RVCC is delivered by both public and private providers: these are subject to



different funding arrangements. At the time of writing, the centres for qualification and VET (CQEP) that belong to the national public system (schools or training centres) receive financial support from the State budget, while private centres (private schools or training providers) have to use their own resources to deliver validation, without support from the State (or fees from the beneficiaries, as the law on RVCC states that fees cannot be charged for RVCC procedures).

Funding for public RVCC centres covers the cost of the staff involved in delivering RVCC. These may be teachers/trainers who carry out RVCC as part of their existing role, or practitioners who work solely on RVCC. The funding is given to the institutions and covers their work in delivering RVCC but also in developing the RVCC processes.

ANQEP, the national agency for qualifications and VET, has a coordinating role. ANQEP's responsibilities include managing the RVCC centres, including provision of training and monitoring activities. The aim is to provide centrally developed tools to promote some consistency, while allowing some autonomy for the centres delivering RVCC at local level. ANQEP's activities (creation of standards and guidelines for the implementation of RVCC, monitoring of the network) in relation to RVCC are funded through the State budget, not the ESF; this is because they fall under the competences of the agency, which is required to meet the demands of the national qualifications system.

Between June and September 2015 there was a national call for proposals in which CQEP (both public and private) in eligible regions could apply for ESF funding to deliver RVCC (bids were being assessed at the time of writing this report). A benefit of ESF funding is thought to be that it has led to a focus on results. The centres had to outline in their bids how many individuals they would support and their estimated success rate in terms of outcomes (e.g. achievement of a (partial) certificate). The funding will be allocated according to proposals and paid based on outcomes achieved. Funding will be allocated for a period of just over a year, from September 2015 through to December 2016. It is anticipated that during this time, thanks to the ESF funding, there will be an increase in the volume of RVCC activity. The ESF budget for RVCC is around EUR 73 million for a period of five years.

RVCC has been identified as an activity for support from the ESF because there are still high numbers of people in Portugal who do not have formal qualifications. The RVCC model is considered to be very effective in tackling this issue because it allows people to return to education and training and have recognition of the skills they have acquired throughout life. Although there is no formal evidence of its cost-effectiveness, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is cheaper to achieve a (partial)



qualification through RVCC than it is to take part in formal training. Further, it is often the case that people who return to education and training via RVCC go on to undertake further studies. Although there was a large predecessor programme to RVCC (the new opportunities initiative) it is considered that there is still a considerable need for RVCC to help address the issue of the high number of people with low levels of qualifications. Changes made between the new opportunities initiative and RVCC initiatives relate to procedures (the new approach has restructured the evaluation in the certification stage) and focus (there is also a greater investment in professional RVCC processes).

Source: Interview with representative of ANQEP.

### 2.3.2. EU funding for related developments

The ESF can also be used to fund developments which will support validation, such as qualifications registers and standards. In Slovenia, for example, the establishment of both the national vocational qualifications framework and Slovenian qualifications framework was funded and jointly funded by European sources. In the Czech Republic, EU funding was used to initiate, develop, maintain and coordinate the national qualifications register, which is the basis of the validation system. The costs were covered by 85% from the operational programme education for competitiveness, implemented in the programme period 2007-13.

### 2.3.3. EU funding for (pilot) projects

A significant number of smaller-scale EU-funded projects supporting validation activities can also be identified across Europe. The funding programmes include Leonardo da Vinci, lifelong learning and Erasmus+. A database of descriptions of over 120 projects was created for the 2014 inventory, many of which are described in more depth in the individual country updates <sup>(10)</sup>.

EU funding is (and has been over the course of the three inventories covered by this thematic report) used for several aims: to support the development of new methods through pilot projects and research; to promote validation as a tool to support the inclusion of disadvantaged groups; and to

<sup>(10)</sup> The compendium of projects can be found at: Cedefop: *Validation of non-formal and informal learning*: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/compendium-of-projects> [accessed 1.3.2016].

develop validation for workers in specific sectors/professions. It also supports exchange of good practice as a precursor to developing processes with the aid of the ESF. In January 2016 the European Commission launched a call for proposals for policy experimentation in which one of the priorities is validation of informal and non-formal learning in education and training <sup>(11)</sup>.

#### 2.3.4. EU and project funding time limitations

It is evident from some countries that the ESF or other EU funding can provide an important starting-point for the development of validation. In Italy, for example, the 2007 country report notes that the first pioneer validation experiences were all supported by the ESF. By 2010, the ESF and Leonardo da Vinci programmes were the main sources of funding for validation. Today, the institutional intention is to make the validation and certification services independent from European funds and financially autonomous, by exploring different approaches to cooperation between public and private sectors. The first step will be to come to an agreement on the standards of costs and on quality and reliability assurance for private actors in the system. Two examples of public and private cooperation can be found in Emilia Romagna and Lombardia. Emilia Romagna offers the companies the possibility to ask to use the public validation system to validate competences and qualifications for their employees. In this case the public provides the methodology and supervision while the company bears the costs. Another example is Lombardia, where the validation service is free and public but the final beneficiary is asked to make a contribution to the production of the dossier/portfolio of evidence. It has also been suggested that the funds for continuous training, paid for by employers, could be used to set up validation services.

In Finland, ESF funding has been used at development stage and then sustained through national funding. There has been extensive nationwide training for validation practitioners in HE, coordinated by the University of Turku and University of Eastern Finland. The training programme was initially developed as an ESF project (ISOK), but national training activities were later financed by the National Board of Education. Over 1 000 validation practitioners have studied one or more modules of the training programme in

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<sup>(11)</sup> European Commission, EACEA Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency: *Key action 3, initiatives for policy innovation: European policy experimentation, EACEA 34/2015*. [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/key-action-3-initiatives-for-policy-innovation-european-policy-experimentation-eacea-342015\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/key-action-3-initiatives-for-policy-innovation-european-policy-experimentation-eacea-342015_en) [accessed 1.3.2016].

Finland and abroad; in 2013 the training programme received a European validation prize in the category 'new VNIL profession'.

As highlighted in the Estonian case study below, EU funding (whether on a small- or larger-scale) can bring significant benefits in supporting development of validation systems, where sufficient national funding is not available. However, sustainability is a key question for activities funded from EU sources.

### Case study 3. **Estonia**

In Estonia, ESF funding was used over two periods between 2005 and 2013 to support the introduction of validation (referred to as recognition of prior learning, RPL, and including prior formal, non-formal and informal learning) to HE and, later, VET. This generated significant benefits in terms of bringing providers together to develop practices and processes. The challenge now is to sustain the activities that were supported via the ESF.

Over 2005-08, the ESF programme LÜKKA was the first initiative to support implementation of RPL in HE. This was a time of development for the HE sector in several areas: other developments included moving towards the use of learning outcomes and changing teaching practices. RPL was identified as one of the areas for development; ESF funding was allocated to support it. Several study trips (including France, the Netherlands and the UK) took place and the best practices observed abroad had an influence on developments locally. For example, the STARR method (situation, task, action, result, reflection) was adopted from the Netherlands and has been used as a tool to support applicant self-analysis. This first phase focused on introducing the concept of RPL and getting to know its potential benefits – the focus was on theory rather than practical implementation. At the time, RPL was a new concept to HE institutions and this preliminary phase was important in increasing awareness and establishing the motivation to take part.

Over 2008-13 most of the funding for RPL development in HE was through the ESF project Primus. The budget for RPL activities during this time was EEK 27.9 million (EUR 1.8 million). ESF funding covered 95% of project costs and the remaining 5% was covered from project partners' and HE institutions' own funding. By this point the aim was to unify different practices that had started to form in the sector. Much attention was given to training validation counsellors and assessors, and setting up common principles and procedures. Funding was provided to develop



information materials on validation, and information weeks were organised to create awareness of validation among the general public. Universities that had a longer validation tradition (e.g. Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn University and Tartu University) were leading developments at this time. As well as these development activities, ESF funding also covered the costs of RPL applications. Thanks to the dedicated funding and targeting of certain students, RPL applications increased during this timeframe: in 2012, there were 9 168 applications for RPL in HE, compared to 6 986 in 2009.

ESF funding has now ended and there is no funding in the State budget for validation. Universities can charge a fee for RPL but, currently, most do RPL free of charge. The cost of RPL counselling and assessment is seen as part of staff daily work and duties. Where fees are charged, these vary. Certain institutions charge a fee based on the amount of credit points applied for: as example, at the Tallinn University of Technology costs for processing an application range from EUR 10 to EUR 575). For others there is a simple application fee with no additional credit point charge. There is no overall system and, to date, there has been no analysis of the distribution of costs for RPL in HE.

It is too early to tell if this is having an impact on the number of applications to those institutions which charge a fee. However, it is likely that it will put some learners off undertaking an RPL procedure: HE is free in Estonia so it is likely to be a strong disincentive to have to pay a fee for an RPL procedure, if the candidate could simply take part in the HE course free of charge.

Experience of the delivery of RPL to date in Estonia is that, although individuals who underwent RPL did not save money (because HE is free), they saved time. This, in turn, enabled them to do paid work alongside their studies; earning money was effectively a financial saving.

A benefit of the ESF funding was that it brought Estonia's HE institutions together to develop policies and materials, as well as training for practitioners. This helped to promote consistency in the way RPL is applied in universities across the country. Through the training for practitioners, it also helped to ensure that there were staff with dedicated responsibility for RPL, who saw themselves as RPL practitioners. However, now that the ESF funding has come to an end and validation is left to individual institutions, there is a risk that, without the coordination of RPL at national level, the focus and momentum generated by ESF projects will be lost.

An example, is the ESF funding supporting development and delivery of training for practitioners, which was felt to be particularly beneficial. Originally trainees were



given RPL as an additional task on top of their existing roles and, on starting the training course, had little understanding of what RPL is and how it works. With support from the ESF, they were given additional remuneration to carry out RPL as part of their job. By the end of the training, the staff saw themselves as RPL counsellors and saw RPL as a key part of their job. Now, many of these staff have moved on to different posts; where new people replace them, they do not have access to the same level of training and support, which will affect the extent to which they are able (and willing) to carry out RPL as part of their roles. Further, the RPL aspect of their role no longer has the same recognition from universities. This will affect the motivation of the staff involved and, in turn, the level of service they provide to individual applicants.

Another benefit of ESF funding was the opportunity to run seminars to discuss RPL, including to look at more complicated cases and prepare case studies. It is not clear how much this kind of activity will be continued without funding.

Since ESF funding ended, there have also been some structural changes within universities that will affect the way that RPL is dealt with. For instance, in Tallinn University, there was previously a dedicated assessment board to deal with RPL applications and maintain consistency in the way these were assessed. This dedicated assessment board no longer exists, which means that each institute within the university is responsible for its own RPL assessments. As a result, there is no overall oversight to ensure consistency. Monitoring of RPL is also no longer carried out centrally at the university, which means that it is not possible to maintain an overview of RPL applications. Training for RPL practitioners will now be the responsibility of the institutes within the university, so may not be carried out by all of them.

General funding for HE institutions is also undergoing a change from an input-based model (relating to the number of students attending an institution) to an output-based model (relating to the number of students graduating from an institution). This change is likely to make a significant (positive) difference to the universities' approaches to RPL. When funding is paid for the learners' outcomes, it does not matter whether these outcomes were achieved through formal learning or RPL.

Funding for developing RPL in VET was, similar to HE, sourced from the ESF programme, through the projects:

- substantive development of vocational education 2008-13;
- KUTSE programme (continuing education programme in VET for early school leavers).



Over 2012-14 the development of RPL in VET was funded at approximately EUR 30 000 for development and implementing RPL principles in VET and around EUR 1.8 million for learning places and supporting validation of non-formal and informal learning in VET institutions. The money was used for training, meetings and seminars and for developing information materials on RPL. In the ESF programme 'Development of a professional qualification system for the period 2008-13' approximately EUR 200 000 was allocated to the development of RPL-based assessment criteria for professional examinations and for training evaluators (but this was not limited to VET).

Without ESF support, it is unlikely that these developments would have taken place, since there was no funding available from the national State budget to pay for them. Now that the ESF funding has come to an end, institutions can charge fees to individuals wishing to undergo RPL but, in practice, none of them currently do so, which means that RPL counselling and assessment is free of charge for applicants. Vocational education in Estonia is State-commissioned, so expenses related to provision of teaching and education (including RPL) are covered from the State budget based on student training places. RPL counselling and assessment is seen as a school requirement in performing their main functions and ensuring the quality of education. The fact that VET providers do not charge fees to their learners may be because they consider it to be more beneficial to use RPL as a means of attracting future students.

There are no national guidelines on the fees that can be charged: it is up to the schools to determine fees. There have been discussions on limiting free-of-charge RPL for students who have already been admitted to the school but, so far, such limitations have not been applied: the discussions were in response to instances where people applied at the same time for RPL from different VET schools – trying to choose the one which agreed to accept highest amount of credits.

There has been no analysis of how well the current RPL funding model is working, but, as dropout rate VET institutions has been quite high for years and adult learners are increasingly studying in VET institutions (almost 30% of students are adult learners), the schools benefit financially. Further, in adult education, motivation to study is higher if non-formal and informal learning is recognised.

As RPL funding in vocational education is covered through State-commissioned study costs, it is considered by the Ministry of Education and Research to be sustainable. ESF funding helped to train assessors and counsellors and made it possible to set up common principles and procedures. However, similar to HE, there



is a risk that without central RPL coordination (something that was possible thanks to the ESF funding) the competences of counsellors and assessors will not be maintained up to date, the procedures in institutions may not retain the same quality or standards, and the network of RPL assessors and counsellors will not remain viable. Further discussion is required on the need for central coordination of RPL, as well as the availability of appropriate training for staff new to this area. Also, ways of sharing best practice among providers should be discussed with them.

The Estonia case shows that ESF funding can be used to set up the foundations of a validation system and to promote consistency in the approach developed (e.g. when used for training for practitioners, or to develop standardised tools). It also shows that it is important to try to establish a sustainable funding model to support validation delivery after a system has been set up via project funding. Without funding for a coordination point at national level to undertake activities such as training, monitoring and information provision, the commitment to validation at the level of each institution and the extent of relevant activities may vary once the start-up funding has gone.

*Source:* Interview (covering HE) with inventory country expert, based at Tallinn University and information (covering VET) provided by a representative of the Ministry of Education and Research.

Sustainability issues can also be observed in other countries. In the Czech Republic, it is not yet clear how continuous updating of the aforementioned assessment standards will be funded. In Lithuania, most, if not all, pilot projects on validation are funded from EU sources (ESF, Erasmus+ and its predecessors). However, no further national or regional funding arrangements for validation are available or are made available for newly developed initiatives once the project comes to an end.

In Belgium-Wallonia, one of the main challenges identified for validation of acquired experience (VAE) in HE is lack of sustainable, long-term funding. The VAE-university project (an inter-university coordination project) received a total budget of EUR 5.6 million for 2008-13. The budget is jointly funded by Wallonia-Brussels Federation, universities themselves, and the ESF. The end of the project was planned for December 2013, however the project was funded for one more year (2014). At the time of writing the 2014 country update for Belgium, future funding remained uncertain. According to VAE actors, funding received by the ESF and Wallonia-Brussels Federation is not sufficient to develop VAE fully in universities, considering the number of staff involved and the level of involvement required from the institutions. Without

ESF and regional funding, the sustainability of VAE in universities could be undermined. An issue identified by experts interviewed for the 2014 country update for Greece is that although the results of (EU-funded) projects have the potential to add significant value to validation, they have not been adopted or used by public bodies. Therefore, relevant initiatives are not disseminated and implemented in the domestic labour market. Without activities to maintain/sustain and scale up development projects, the risk is that the learning and outputs they generate will be lost.

### 2.3.5. Strengths and weaknesses

Table 3 presents strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of EU and project funding.

Table 3. **Strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of EU and project funding**

Strengths and enablers	Weaknesses and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• projects can be an important starting point for validation initiatives: without the EU or project-funding it is likely that the validation opportunities would not be provided</li> <li>• may mean that it is possible to offer validation free of charge</li> <li>• can support innovation, e.g. new methods, tools, work with new target groups</li> <li>• transnational projects can support transfer of good practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can lead to a focus on short-term results</li> <li>• there can be issues around sustainability of the projects/activities</li> <li>• projects may have to work towards targets set by the funding body, which can mean that the validation process is driven by these targets, rather than being user-centred</li> <li>• without activities to maintain/sustain and scale up developmental projects, the risk is that the learning and outputs they generate will be lost</li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## 2.4. Countries mixing public and private sector funding

A quarter of inventory countries combine funding for validation from both public and private sources. These include Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. In Denmark, France and Italy, private funding is sourced from private sector funds (such as training funds), which tend to be administered by social partners. In Germany, the social partners take responsibility for a specific aspect of the process (providing advice and guidance). In some countries individual employers cover the fees which are charged to employees wishing to undertake validation (Croatia (for sectoral validation practices), the Czech Republic, Germany (for the external students' examination), Latvia, Romania and Slovenia (for validation carried out by professional/craftsman associations).

### 2.4.1. Use of funds financed through employer contributions

In France, the funding streams for validation of experience (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE, which covers VET and HE, as well as sectoral qualifications recognised by social partners) are complex due to the variety of stakeholders. Public funding comes from the overall budget for lifelong learning, including State funding within each ministry (ministries in charge of national education, HE, agriculture, labour, culture, sports and youth, social affairs, health, defence) and regional funding. Regional authorities can allocate funding with a view to supporting the development of VAE; they are also responsible for the information and guidance centres that support validation and finance them. The public employment services (*Pôle emploi*) contribute to the funding of VAE and information and guidance centres can also receive funding from the ESF. Private sources include bipartite bodies with funds for individual training leave (*Fonds de gestion des congés individuels de formation*, Fongecif or *Organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés*, OPCA). These are sectoral bodies managed by social partners, collecting taxes from employers and employees to finance and develop training. Additional contributions come from employers and candidates' own funding.

Within the Danish AMU-programmes (AMU refers to vocational training), RPL participants are entitled to a fixed VEU-allowance (VEU refers to adult education and training) financed by the State (*VEU-godtgørelse*). This corresponds to 80% of the maximum unemployment insurance benefit rate. As most participants are employed and receive full salary during the validation

period, this allowance is primarily paid to employers as partial wage reimbursement. As with education and training within AMU, expenditure for the allowances is covered by State financing and by the employers' reimbursement scheme (*Arbejdsgivernes Uddannelsesbidrag, AUB*) to which all enterprises contribute a fixed amount regardless of levels of participation in adult education and continuing training activities.

While in the other countries discussed here employer funding is mainly used for more 'mainstream' validation opportunities, in Italy, employers' training funds (*fondi interprofessionali*) have been used to finance validation projects and models. Emilia Romagna has experience of funding cooperation between public bodies and specific enterprises interested in validation for their employers.

#### **2.4.2. Private sector stakeholders with some validation responsibility**

In Germany, chambers are responsible for information, counselling and validation in respect of the external students' examination. They are funded by contributions from their member companies. Also, the ProfilPASS-system is an example of an initiative sustained through a public-private-partnership.

In Spain, in 2013, some private initiatives were developed for large companies, such as Mercadona (food sector), Ambuiberica (sanitary sector), or associations of companies, such as Confemadera (furniture sector) who invested money for accreditation of their own workers. These initiatives were developed in agreement with the public administration.

In Sweden, responsibility for adapting validation methods to the needs of a specific industry has been allocated to the business sector organisations themselves. Development of the methods has been funded partly by the government, but many business sector organisations have also contributed resources to developing methods and procedures for validation.

#### **2.4.3. Validation as a commercial activity**

In the Netherlands, validation is carried out as a commercial activity and cannot be supported by public funds. The Dutch funding model is described in more detail in the case study 4.

## Case study 4. The Netherlands

A national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning was introduced in the Netherlands in 1998. Under the umbrella term EVC, which stands for *erkenning van verworven competenties* (validation of prior learning, where prior learning referring to prior formal, non-formal and informal learning), the system encompasses both formalised validation (leading to the award of a validated profile or to the accreditation of learning outcomes) and more open, informal use of EVC as an instrument for a diversity of lifelong learning perspectives.

Between 2006 and 2010 government subsidies were distributed for the development of infrastructure to stimulate the provision of EVC. The funding was given to partnerships of educational institutes, regional government and employers. The subsidies were used to develop EVC procedures and promote its use. It was also possible to subsidise the costs of undertaking an EVC procedure.

During this time, a project directorate was established to promote collaboration between the Ministries of Employment and Education. There was also a significant investment in the promotion of EVC, leading to greater public attention for EVC than there is today.

In 2009-10 there were specific projects to provide EVC for the unemployed or people at risk of becoming unemployed. These were very successful in terms of the numbers of participants engaged, which significantly exceeded the targets.

The subsidies ended in 2010 when it was deemed that provision was sufficient and that there were too many EVC providers. By this time there were 120 providers, many of whom stopped providing these procedures because it was no longer cost-effective enough for them: there were not enough participants to make it worthwhile for the partnerships to provide the service. The number of providers today is about 60 to 70 and this figure is considered more appropriate.

During the period when the subsidies were provided, the number of participants in EVC procedures increased considerably: by 2010 the annual figure was around 22 000 (Leushuis, 2014). After the subsidies ended, it is estimated that the annual figure dropped to around 17 000 participants a year (data were no longer collected on the number of EVC participants from 2011 onwards). It is likely that the removal of the public funding – and with it the promotion of EVC – is part of the cause of the drop in participation but another reason is that an initial peak in figures when the initiative was introduced has now dropped to a more steady number on an annual basis. Another factor which may have contributed to this drop in numbers is the



financial and economic situation (Leushuis, 2014), mainly because employers responded to the economic situation by cutting costs of training and education/learning and development, including EVC.

A study was published in 2011 looking at the effects of EVC (Stoel and Wenzel, 2011). While it was anticipated that the EVC certificate of experience, or the report on the results of the EVC procedure, would help beneficiaries to find new/change jobs, this study shows that people were actually only able to move on to another job or benefit from other positive outcomes (such as mobility or income) once they had succeeded in obtaining a formal qualification after undertaking EVC. This suggests that employers continue to have greater trust in formal qualifications than in the EVC certificates of experience.

Today, EVC is financed in different ways, by different stakeholders, depending on the context in which it is applied. The quality code prescribes that EVC should be a commercial activity: public organisations cannot use their government funding for EVC. The costs should be market-driven, transparent and not-subsidised. Further, no national limits are imposed on the costs which are set by the EVC providers.

Compensation for EVC (procedure, assessment) is possible through:

- subsidies for employers based on legal arrangements;
- fiscal facilities (such as income tax relief on costs for education) for employees and the unemployed looking for jobs;
- many collective labour agreements (CLAs) in the sectors include a paragraph on compensation for employers and/or employees, using EVC.

The CLAs vary considerably across the sectors in the way they refer to validation. For instance, a CLA might state that all employees have a right to an EVC procedure, paid for by the employer. Others make use of collective funds which employers/employees pay into, and these pay for such procedures. There are also different limits on how often/many times an individual can take up an EVC procedure. Some CLAs set a limit of one EVC procedure every few years, while others do not set a limit. In addition to the CLAs, the employer/employee organisations also often carry out promotional campaigns to try to encourage people to take up EVC.

Some larger companies (with more than 500 employees) which have incorporated EVC into their human resource management self-finance its use. Many SMEs are supported in the application of EVC by sectoral training funds; a good example is offered the A+O Fonds Gemeenten (training fund for local authority/local government employees). The costs for EVC in the sector vary from EUR 700 to EUR 1 500. Part of the cost is tax-deductible for the employer; the fund covers an



additional amount up to EUR 1 000 per employee when EVC is part of a career-guided trajectory, provided that the employee has not been involved in a similar trajectory in the past three years.

The only case in which public funding is allocated to EVC is for the unemployed or those on a low income. It is up to the local authorities and unemployment organisations to allocate funding to support these specific target groups to undertake EVC. If the public employment service (PES) counsellor recommends an EVC procedure to improve the individual's chances of getting a job, or their insights into how to take their career forward, then it is possible to use public funds to pay the EVC fee. But it is relatively rare for this to happen: the focus of the PES is on getting people back to work as quickly as possible.

EVC is currently undergoing a transition phase in the Netherlands. To date, providers have had to be independent of educational institutions, meaning that people could have access to these procedures without having to enrol in an education programme, or with the institution. It was thought that this would improve accessibility, especially for adults who are reluctant to return to formal schooling and that it would encourage greater provision of EVC (based on the concern that educational institutes have an interest in selling their programmes and so would steer individuals towards formal education rather than EVC). However, a problem encountered with this approach in the Netherlands was that there were many difficulties in transferring EVC results to the formal education arena. For instance, exam committees with responsibility for giving credits/making decisions based on RPL were reluctant to do so and would ask to see the individual's portfolio again or to carry out another assessment. Further, it was found that the certificates of experiences awarded through EVC often were not produced to national quality standards.

Due to these problems, a new system is being developed which will have two routes:

- EVC for labour market purposes, i.e. for applying for a job or career development. This is the existing system but there will also be more promotion of the use of different types of standards other than educational standards;
- EVC procedures to obtain formal education qualifications. These will take place within educational institutions. It is hoped that this will help to create a greater focus within the institutions on providing tailor-made learning paths.

In the second route, education and training institutions will be able to use the public funding they receive to provide educational activities to carry out EVC



procedures. It is not mandatory for the institutions to provide EVC but efforts are being made to stimulate provision, especially in the HE sector. The aim is to encourage education and training institutions to become lifelong learning institutes and focus more on adult learners than previously. To receive funding for lifelong learning activities, the institutions have to offer EVC and provide flexible tailor-made learning paths for adult learners.

*Source:* Interview with a representative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

#### 2.4.4. Private sector projects

Validation projects also take place in the private sector. Some examples are identified across the 2007, 2010 and 2014 inventories and in the Cedefop report *Use of validation by enterprises for human resource and career development purposes* (Cedefop, 2014), which looks at competence assessment practices in European companies and includes 20 case study examples.

#### 2.4.5. Employer funding of employees

Where a fee is charged to the individual validation applicant, employers may provide support for some or all of the costs. This can lead to a requirement on the part of the individual to show some level of commitment to the employer, such as remaining in employment with them for a certain time. Countries where employers (sometimes) contribute to the costs incurred by the individual include Croatia (for sectoral validation practices), the Czech Republic, Germany (for the external students' examination), Latvia, Romania and Slovenia (for validation carried out by professional/craftsman associations).

In Croatia, the costs for existing sectoral validation are covered by the individual. This can be in full, by a one-off payment, or as a loan-payment over several months. Sometimes, if the employer is willing to cover the costs of the validation (partially or in full), the employee might be asked to sign a binding contract which specifies the time the employee is obliged to spend in the company (or craft) as a compensation for the 'investment'. If the employee decides to leave the company (or craft) before the time-frame has ended, he/she has to return a certain portion of the costs to the employer.

The example below describes an employer in the Netherlands who has found that it is more cost-effective to support individuals to undergo validation than undertake formal training on its own.

## Box 2. Rockwool, Netherlands

An example of the cost-effectiveness of EVC can be found in the case of Rockwool, a company based in the Netherlands which provides insulation solutions. It introduced a validation process in 2001. After the initial set-up costs, the cost of an individual procedure has now been calculated at EUR 1 350 per person. As a result of this procedure, the individual can acquire a validation certificate, which is recognised by employers but is not a formal qualification. Rockwool also supports its employees to undergo training. The cost to the company of an individual undertaking training to achieve a formal qualification, equivalent to the level of the validation certificate, has been calculated to be EUR 55 000 (this includes the cost of working hours lost (Rockwool employees are still paid when they attend education) and out-of-pocket costs. An individual wishing to achieve this qualification, who undertakes validation first, can significantly reduce the study load s/he is required to complete, thanks to the validation certificate. The company believes that it is more cost-effective to support individuals to undergo validation (followed by formal training if necessary, to achieve a formal education qualification) than it is to undertake formal training alone.

Source: Geven (2014). Presentation given to a PLA in Ireland, on Rockwool and interview with J. Geven, Training and education partner, Rockwool.

### 2.4.6. Strengths and weaknesses

Table 4 presents strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of the mix of public and private sector funding.

Table 4. **Strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of a mix of public and private sector funding**

Strengths and enablers	Weaknesses and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may be a more sustainable approach, due to the contributions from the private sector</li> <li>• may encourage buy-in from the private sector to validation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• if validation is delivered outside of the formal education and training sector, there may be issues around acceptance/transferability</li> <li>• over-reliance on private funding may mean that certain target groups, e.g. the unemployed or people in low-skilled jobs, are not able to access validation</li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## 2.5. Fees charged to individual learners

In over two thirds of inventory countries, individuals are required to pay fees to cover some or all of the costs associated with their validation procedure. Fees were reported in Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Croatia, the Czech Republic (CVET), Denmark (educational institutions can charge a fee for the assessment of prior learning with regard to the RPL programmes covering HE), England (HE), Finland (CBQs), France, Germany (external students' examination and HE), Hungary (a pilot in HE), Italy (Lombardia region), Latvia, Liechtenstein (vocational education), Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Greece (VET), Norway, Portugal (HE), Romania, Scotland (HE and vocational qualifications), Slovakia (planned), Slovenia and Switzerland.

Charges to individuals may be the sole source of funding for the validation or may be used alongside public or other private funding. Fees charged vary considerably, which is a consequence of the non-homogeneous nature of validation: the costs incurred can vary greatly, depending on what is involved. Further, the fees charged to the individual will vary depending on the overarching funding framework; fees may only be required to cover administrative costs, while the remaining costs are covered by public funding, as is the case in Finland, while in other instances the fees paid by the individual may be higher because there is no, or limited, public funding in place for any elements of validation.

Nominal fees to cover, for example, administrative costs, are required from candidates in Belgium-Flanders (HE), France, Finland (CBQs), Latvia (VET and HE), Luxembourg (secondary education, Lifelong Learning Centre) and Malta (childcare sector). Some examples are:

- (a) in France, although no consolidated data on the financial contribution of candidates are available, it is assumed that they bear only a small or relatively small part of the costs. The costs depend on the type of qualification and institution;
- (b) in Finland all students are required to pay EUR 58 per CBQ, whether they study all courses or only take part in competence tests and thereby have their prior learning validated;
- (c) in Luxembourg, an administrative fee (stamp duty) of EUR 25 is required when the application for eligibility is submitted by the candidate as part of the procedure managed by the Ministry of National Education (secondary-level education);
- (d) in Malta, there is no cost for a validation procedure for the unemployed. For those who are employed, a nominal fee is charged.

### 2.5.1. Significant fees

In Belgium-Flanders, in the HE sector an administrative fee of EUR 55 is charged before the initial assessment is conducted. On top of this, the actual fee for the assessment varies according to level and the previous academic achievements of the candidate, as outlined in Box 3.

#### Box 3. Varying fees: Belgium-Flanders

In Belgium-Flanders, recognition of acquired competences (RAC) is defined by the decree on making HE more flexible (30 April 2004). The process of recognising non-formal and informal learning has been in place in universities and university colleges since September 2005. The system is decentralised, with each association in HE elaborating their own rules of procedure (an 'association' is an official entity regulating the cooperation of a university and one or more university colleges). The procedures result in proof of acquired competences (in Dutch, *bewijs van bekwaamheid*) which can then lead to the appropriate exemptions/shortened study duration and credit certificates and/or proof of qualification. RAC in this sector can be used to pursue education or for professional aims. For the latter, however, the institutions cannot guarantee acceptance by employers of the proof of competences.

Fees for RAC in HE depend on the level of the qualification and prior qualifications of the candidate, as outlined below with the maximum cost for assessment at each level:

- EUR 590 for a proficiency assessment at academic or professional bachelor level;
- EUR 770 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has no bachelor degree;
- EUR 230 for a proficiency assessment at master level if the individual has a bachelor degree;
- EUR 55 administrative cost for a proficiency assessment for partial elements of study costs (depending on the number of competence assessments to be undertaken).

The average price for the individual per association is as follows (without the administrative cost of EUR 55) <sup>(\*)</sup>:

- KU Leuven Association: EUR 122;
- Ghent University Association: EUR 155;
- Antwerp University Association: EUR 256;
- Brussels University Association: EUR 155.



The 2010 inventory country report for Belgium-Flanders suggested that most institutions do not see a real immediate economic return on RAC. The 2014 update suggested that this was still the case, although to a lesser extent. For example, in HE, granting exemptions to an applicant means that institutions lose money because the recognition process does not generate revised income, requires heavy investment and exemptions might result in payment of a lower admission fee. However, part of the latest developments in the HE sector are focused on increasing the cost-benefit ratio both for institutions and candidates by looking at ways in which, instead of screening a full profile, focus is placed on clusters of competences. It is hoped that this will also attract more people to participate RAC.

Procedures and practices in HE have generally improved in recent years and providers are now better at tailoring RAC to the profile of candidates, making the overall process more efficient. Guidance practitioners are also now more focused on the first steps, i.e. advising potential candidates and helping them estimate their chances of succeeding in the RAC. To this end, a 'quick scan' instrument is being used by some of the associations during the first phase. This helps the guidance practitioner, based on the CV and work experience, to determine if it is worth starting the procedure. This will lead, in time, to the system being less expensive and more tailor-made.

It is generally agreed that if RAC leads to a shortened education pathway then it is worth the investment; practice shows that this is easier to achieve for individuals who have substantial professional experience.

(\*) These figures have remained the same since 2007.

Source: European Commission et al., 2010; 2014a.

Slovenia also has varying fees for validation depending on the type of qualification. The resolution on administrative fees sets a maximum amount of EUR 50, with various different fees for the different recognition procedures. Further, full application costs for recognition may vary according to individual education institutions' price lists.

Other countries with more significant fees include the Czech Republic, Italy, Germany, Latvia and Switzerland. In Italy, Lombardia candidates are required to contribute to validation and certification services (around EUR 600), but only if they need tutorship in building up the portfolio and do not belong to a disadvantaged group. In Germany, the eligibility check for the external students' examination (checking if a candidate has sufficient (work)

experience or evidence to undertake the examination) is mostly free of charge for the applicant but some authorities charge for this process. Costs arise from examination fees, preparatory courses and travel expenses. Actual participant costs vary from EUR 1 871 to EUR 4 461 (Schreiber, et al, 2012) depending on costs for course fees, admission fees, examination fees, travelling and accommodation. In Switzerland, the cost is around CHF 1 000 (around EUR 820) per person for HE qualifications (tertiary A), while for professional education and training (PET) diplomas the cost varies depending on the qualification. For example the cost for validation of each module of the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning FSEA/SVEB delivering the (advanced) federal PET diploma for trainers in adult education (tertiary B) through validation assessment is CHF 500 (around EUR 410) <sup>(12)</sup>. This price is effective since March 2013 and does not cover the complete costs of the procedure, which are also funded through federal contributions.

Experience from the Czech Republic suggests that a fee-based system may not affect demand from individuals. Validation is funded through fees charged to the individual participant. The authorised persons/bodies which carry out assessment of non-formal and informal learning in VET (these can be schools, private institutions, companies as well as persons (a craftsman can become an authorised person)) also set the fee; this varies depending on the qualification and material needed for the assessment. The fee can go up to several hundred euros. It is suggested that the take-up figures (in just four years 87 000 assessments were carried out) show that the fees individuals are required to pay are not a major obstacle for system development.

### 2.5.2. Regulations/guidelines on fees

Several countries now have national regulations/guidelines on fees that can be charged to individuals. This includes Latvia, Slovenia and Slovakia.

In Latvia, a regulation defines the fees that can be charged for validation in the VET sector, while HE fees are defined according to the regulations of the HE institute itself (for independent institutions) or the price list of paid services set out by the Cabinet of Ministers (for State-funded institutions), as explained in Box 4.

In the Czech Republic, a nationally defined price range was introduced to ensure that there were no unreasonable differences in fees charged. However, it proved difficult to implement the system in practice, with prices ranging from

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<sup>(12)</sup> Swiss Federation for Adult Learning: Règlement tarifaire pour la procédure VA, niveaux 1-3 [tariff regulation procedure for the VA, levels 1-3]:  
<http://www.alice.ch/fr/ada/validation-des-acquis-va/reglement-tarifaire-va/> [accessed 2.3.2016].

zero to several thousand CZK (Czech crowns). Consequently, the 2011 review of the legislation abandoned the use of such scales. The Netherlands also has no limits set at national level for fees charged for EVC.

#### Box 4. Regulations setting the fees for validation: Latvia

In Latvia, according to the 2009 regulation on ‘Increasing the attractiveness of vocational education and involvement of social partners in quality assurance of vocational education’, funding allocated for the preparation and maintenance of the non-formal learning validation system is LVL 5 019 467 (EUR 7 142 098) annually, including State joint funding LVL 752 920 (EUR 1 071 315) (the rest coming from the ESF). The same regulation foresees that the procedures of validating non-formal education are payable by the candidate. The validation costs of the first 80 candidates were covered by the funds aimed at establishing more attractive vocational education.

The 2013 regulation ‘price-list of paid services of vocational education institutions and examination centres’ defines the price for conducting validation. This differs according to the thematic field of education and the group of programmes. Similar to the tuition fees for formal studies, fields of education such as health care and engineering are more expensive for validation than others. The price requested for validation also differs depending on how many pass the qualification examination. The cheapest per capita price is for a group of 12 people (this is also the amount requested as a fee where the candidate for validation passes the qualification examination together with other students at the education institution or examination centre). In 2014, the cheapest per capita price ranged from EUR 43 in ‘commercial sciences and administration’ to as much as EUR 700 in ‘engineering and technologies’.

In the HE sector, the 2012 regulation ‘procedure of validating the learning outcomes achieved through prior education or professional experience’ stipulates that a fee can be requested from the candidate for validation of prior learning. The fee is defined according to the regulations of the HE institution or college, or the price-list of paid services defined by the Cabinet of Ministers, where it is a State-funded college or HE institute.

*Source:* European Commission et al., 2014b.

As mentioned in case study 4: the Netherlands, (Section 2.4.3), without national regulations/guidelines on the fees that can be charged, there can be considerable variation across a country. This may present an advantage to

learners if they are able to 'shop around' but if this is not the case (if they are limited to providers within their locality due to travel limitations) it is more of a disadvantage.

In England, charges made by HE institutes for guidance offered as part of a validation process were found to vary considerably, even within a single organisation, as discussed in Box 5.

### Box 5. Variations in fees for individuals: England (HE sector)

In the English HE sector, institutions have the autonomy to decide how much to charge for an RPL/AP(E)L procedure. The quality code of the Quality Assurance Agency states only that there should be clear information on how much they charge. Research carried out for the 2010 country update found that the element of the validation process which is charged for can vary, as well as the amount charged. Some HE institutes set charges according to the number of credits applied for/awarded, while others charged per hours of advice and guidance received. Nevertheless, at that time the cost of AP(E)L was generally lower than taking a course in full (costs for HE tend to be rather standardised, within government-set maximum level of fees), plus the individual saves on time by not having to repeat learning already achieved, which is an indirect cost saving.

According to the SEEC AP(E)L network (SEEC AP(E)L network, 2012), charges for guidance to support individuals wishing to undertake an APEL process vary considerably, even within organisations. It seems that APEL has been used by some institutions as a 'loss leader' (no charges for guidance or assessment) for students seeking access to specific programmes, usually at postgraduate level. However, in some organisations within the SEEC AP(E)L network this was being reviewed, and several organisations anticipated that charges would be introduced for some, or all, programmes. Some institutions were reviewing their current arrangements for charges, looking at the different stages involved in an APEL process, for example advising on potential, advising on putting together a portfolio, and assessing a portfolio. SEEC provides examples of charges for different types of guidance provision relating to the RPL process. The examples demonstrate how much costs vary across institutions: while one institution did not charge at all for tutorial time associated with the RPL process (which is implemented as a 'loss leader'), another charged GBP 640 (EUR 750) regardless of the number of academic credits claimed/awarded.

HE institutions in Portugal also have the autonomy to determine their own validation procedures and fees. There are institutions where candidates pay a fixed amount plus a variable amount, depending on the number of credits awarded (such as the Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal) and others where candidates pay for the process as a whole (University of Lisbon), regardless of the number of credits claimed by the students.

### 2.5.3. Strengths and weaknesses

Table 5 presents some strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of fees charged to individual learners.

Table 5. **Strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses of fees charged to individual learners**

Strengths and enablers	Weaknesses and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may make providers more willing to offer validation, as it can be a source of income, or at least the costs are covered by the fee</li> <li>• fees can be determined in relation to the varying costs associated with different types of validation</li> <li>• without national regulations/guidelines, fees may vary across a country, enabling learners to ‘shop around’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• can be complicated to determine the fee to charge – validation is not a homogeneous process</li> <li>• fees may be a barrier to participation for low-income groups</li> <li>• fees are likely to put off learners if participation in education is free</li> <li>• without national regulations/guidelines, fees may vary across a country, which may be a problem if learners do not have the mobility to ‘shop around’</li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## Changes in funding 2007-14

It is difficult to analyse trends over 2007-14/15 due to the scarcity of information in this area, in particular in the earlier years. In 2007, validation was still in its infancy in many countries and funding was provided for development or small-scale activities. Changes in the funding situation documented by the inventory took place primarily between 2010 and 2014. These are discussed briefly below.

There was no change in the funding arrangements in Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Liechtenstein, Romania, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg and Germany. In Denmark, in 2008 it was decided that within general adult education, validation of prior learning (regardless of where it was acquired) in terms of issuing a competence certificate would not incur user fees but use taximeter funding, i.e. activity-level-determined grants which are paid to the learning institutions. There has been no change.

New initiatives have been introduced or new developments relating to the funding of validation reported during this timeframe in Bulgaria, England, Iceland, Malta, Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland. These are listed below:

- (a) in Bulgaria, a new regulation came into force in January 2015, which states that validation procedures can be funded by natural persons, legal persons, programmes and projects financed by national and regional funds, EU structural funds or funds from the European Economic Area. Though the regulation stipulates that there may be different sources of funding, it does not regulate funding, i.e. it does not introduce any specific budget for validation;
- (b) funding for validation was increased over the period in Iceland (case study 1 in Section 2.1.2);
- (c) in Malta, a validation system had not been established at the time of writing the 2010 country report. By 2014 there was no specific funding for validation but there was funding for development work such as creating standards and government funding for validation for the unemployed;
- (d) in England, from 2009 the Learning and Skills Council introduced new

funding arrangements, explicitly aligned to the qualifications and credit framework (Box 1);

- (e) the Latvian validation system was in its development phase in 2010. In the draft *Regulation of the Cabinet of Ministers on the validation process of competence acquired through non-formal and informal learning* it was planned that candidates would have to cover the costs of validation of non-formal learning. By 2013, there was a regulation giving a price-list of paid services of vocational education institutions and examination centres;
- (f) in Portugal (case study 2 in Section 2.3.1) above, a national call for proposals was held between June and September 2015, through which centres for qualification and VET (CQEP) (both public and private) in eligible regions could apply for ESF funding to deliver RVCC;
- (g) in Slovenia, in 2010 a new act on validation and recognition of knowledge was adopted, also regulating nationally administrative costs of validation and recognition procedures;
- (h) in Spain, the government made a commitment to fund a new validation process for professional experience in 2009. The funding covered the production and updating of materials, training of guidance practitioners and assessors, and direct funding for candidates. In 2013, the government approved a budget of EUR 5 605 000 for the recognition and accreditation of skills acquired through work experience. The main source of financing is the ESF;
- (i) in Switzerland, thanks to the OPET's national 'validation project', from 2010, national validation guidelines were established in IVET. These guidelines also set directives regarding the financing of validation practices, with public funding made available for people who do not have a first VET qualification (Section 2.1.1.2).

A reduction in funding between 2010 and 2014 was identified in Sweden and Portugal, while in Estonia (case study 3 in Section 2.3.4), Ireland and the Netherlands, temporary funding measures ended during this timeframe. In Ireland, project funding provided via the strategic innovation fund and other sources to support RPL-related projects no longer seemed to be in use in 2014. In the Netherlands, a temporary measure was taken by the government because of the economic crisis (case study 4 in Section 2.4.3).

The data provided by the country experts suggest that, since 2007, more countries have experienced increase in attention, increase in funding, or new initiatives relating to funding validation, than have experienced reduction in funding.

# Conclusions

## 4.1. Main conclusions

The following key learning points can be identified:

- (a) there is limited information on the topic of validation funding, as few countries tend to have earmarked funding for it, while collecting information on its cost is complicated due to fragmented structures;
- (b) countries use various funding sources to support validation and these may vary within the country, as each sector of learning may use a different funding source;
- (c) in some countries funding is only provided for certain stages of the validation process, but this may be a disincentive to providers;
- (d) in Iceland and the Netherlands, responsibility for validation has been allocated to providers outside formal education. This offers benefits in terms of accessibility for learners and buy-in from the providers, but in the Netherlands has been found to cause problems in transferring the outcomes of validation to formal education;
- (e) (European) project funding or other time-bound funding provides an important 'start-up' source to enable new developments to be introduced. It can help to ensure that validation is focused on results and is responsive to demand but can also create uncertainty and questions around sustainability;
- (f) where funding for validation comes from providers' existing budgets, validation opportunities may be better integrated into formal education and training. However, without funding to act as a driver to incentivise providers to deliver validation, the shift in attitudes and perceptions which can be required for validation to be fully accepted in formal education may be slow to take place or may not happen at all;
- (g) in some countries there is a perception among providers that validation is an expensive, time-consuming process, which may also act as a barrier to wider delivery, if they are not given dedicated funding for it;
- (h) EU funding, notably the ESF, is used to support (mainstream) validation initiatives in some countries. ESF support can provide an opportunity to invest in the development of policies, practices and tools and can help to

promote quality and consistency. In some countries it is also used to fund validation delivery and so can help to increase the user base. However, there can be an issue around sustainability of projects and initiatives financed through the ESF and other EU funds;

- (i) individuals cover some or all of the costs of a validation procedure in many countries. While this represents a potentially sustainable model of funding and ensures that validation provision is driven by demand, it raises issues around barriers to access: in countries where access to education is free, charging a fee for validation is likely to put some learners off undertaking it.

## 4.2. Recommendations

The following recommendation can be identified:

- (a) there is scope to look into the issue of validation funding in more detail. A review of funding by sector within each country could lead to a more precise typology of models and more in-depth discussion of the associated issues;
- (b) more in-depth case studies, profiling countries' experiences, and/or more evaluative research into the impact of funding models in place on the buy-in/take-up among providers and learners, as well as the quality of provision, would be beneficial;
- (c) collection of more systematic information about validation funding is needed. More effort could be made by countries to calculate the cost associated with validation practice. This will allow for better understanding of its cost and benefits. It is important that both economic and social benefits be considered;
- (d) where funding for validation is allocated proportionally, per learner/qualification/credit, clear information about funding arrangements is needed so that providers and users understand what they are entitled to. This is especially important where validation is delivered by education and training providers, who may show some reluctance to offer validation opportunities in place of formal learning;
- (e) project-based funding can serve as a springboard, but it is important to ensure that the model's sustainability is considered from the outset;
- (f) more needs to be done to explore the link between validation funding and other active labour market policies, especially its link to guidance and public employment services;

- (g) further investigation needs to be carried out to understand better how the funding models affect the low-qualified and the unemployed as a route back into education, as these groups might be more reluctant to pay fees associated with validation services. Differentiated approaches might be needed depending on the user profile and/or the type of qualification aimed for.

# List of abbreviations

<b>APEL</b>	accreditation of prior experience and learning
<b>CBQ</b>	competence-based qualifications
<b>CHF</b>	Swiss franc
<b>CLA</b>	collective labour agreements
<b>CQEP</b>	<i>Centros para a qualificação e o ensino profissional</i> centres for qualification and vocational education
<b>CVET</b>	continuing vocational education and training
<b>CZK</b>	Czech crowns
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ETF</b>	Education and Training Fund
<b>ETSC</b>	education and training service centre
<b>Eoppep</b>	National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (Greece)
<b>EVC</b>	<i>erkenning van verworven competenties</i> validation of prior learning
<b>GBP</b>	UK pound sterling
<b>HE</b>	higher education
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>HRDA</b>	Human Resource Development Authority (Cyprus)
<b>IVET</b>	initial vocational education and training
<b>LVL</b>	Latvian lats
<b>NIACE</b>	National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales)
<b>PES</b>	public employment service
<b>RAC</b>	recognition of acquired competences
<b>RPL</b>	recognition of prior learning
<b>RVCC</b>	<i>Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências</i> recognition, validation and certification of competences
<b>SEK</b>	Swedish krona
<b>VAE</b>	validation of acquired experience
<b>VET</b>	vocational education and training

# References

This report is based on data provided by the European inventory country experts in relation to a series of questions on funding validation. Responses were based on information provided in previous versions of the inventory (2007, 2010 and 2014), their wider knowledge of validation in their country, and relevant literature they were aware of and had access to. A few telephone interviews were also carried out by the author to prepare the detailed country examples. These were with national stakeholders in Estonia, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Portugal.

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## Web links

Cedefop: *Validation of non-formal and informal learning*:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/compendium-of-projects>

European Commission, EACEA Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency: *Key action 3, initiatives for policy innovation: European policy experimentation, EACEA 34/2015*:

[https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/key-action-3-initiatives-for-policy-innovation-european-policy-experimentation-eacea-342015\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/funding/key-action-3-initiatives-for-policy-innovation-european-policy-experimentation-eacea-342015_en)

Swiss Federation for Adult Learning: *Règlement tarifaire pour la procédure VA, niveaux 1-3 [tariff regulation procedure for the VA, levels 1-3]*:

<http://www.alice.ch/fr/ada/validation-des-acquis-va/reglement-tarifaire-va/>

# Overview of funding sources

The following table gives an overview of the funding sources for validation, based on the data provided by the country experts. It is worth repeating that there is some overlap across the funding sources: they are not mutually exclusive. For instance, countries which provide (dedicated) national funding may also rely on European funding as a significant funding source, as when European and national funding are combined in the case of the ESF. Table A1 may not serve as an exhaustive list of all countries within each category: since country experts were not asked in the first instance to present their information according to these subheadings, these were developed from the data for this report.

Table A1 is followed by a summary of key learning points from the report.

Table A1. **Funding sources for validation**

Funding source	Countries (and sectors, where information given)
Countries with dedicated public funding for validation, from national/regional sources (sometimes combined with EU sources)	Czech Republic, Denmark, England (IVET), Iceland, Latvia, Liechtenstein (VET), Luxembourg (IVET), Malta, Norway (lower and upper secondary education) Portugal (general education and VET), Sweden and Switzerland (upper secondary VET), Wales (HE).  Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, France, Germany and Italy referred to using regional public funding.
Countries with public funding but not specifically allocated to validation	Austria, Belgium-Flanders (HE), England (HE), Estonia (HE and VET), Finland (VET: CBQs and HE), France, Germany (external examination, HE), Hungary (adult learning and HE), Norway (upper secondary education; for adults), IVET, CVET and HE), Poland (VET and HE), Scotland, Sweden (general education, IVET, adult education and HE), Switzerland (all sectors except for upper secondary VET) and Wales (IVET).

Funding source	Countries (and sectors, where information given)
EU funding for 'mainstream' validation	Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia (HE), Bulgaria, Cyprus (VET), the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Spain.
Project funding (from various sources)	<p>It is acknowledged that most countries are likely to have project-based activities of some sort. The countries listed below specifically referred to projects in the data provided for this report.</p> <p>Austria, Belgium-Wallonia (HE), Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland (VET, adult education and HE), Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland.</p>
Countries with a mix of public and private sector funding	Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.
Fees charged to individual learners	Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Croatia, Cyprus (ICT certificates), the Czech Republic (CVET), Denmark (educational institutions can charge a fee for the assessment of prior learning with regard to the RPL-programmes covering HE), England (HE), Finland (CBQs), France, Germany (external students' examination and HE), Greece (VET), Hungary (a pilot in HE), Italy (Lombardia region), Latvia, Liechtenstein (vocational education), Luxembourg (secondary education, Lifelong Learning Centre), Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal (HE), Romania, Scotland (HE and vocational qualifications), Slovakia (planned), Slovenia and Switzerland.
Employers cover their employees' fees	Croatia (for sectoral validation practices), the Czech Republic, Germany (for the external students' examination), Latvia, Romania and Slovenia (for validation carried out by professional/craftsman associations).

Source: ICF, on the basis of the country experts' responses to the thematic topic questions.



# Funding validation

## A thematic report for the 2016 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

This thematic report presents an overview of funding sources for validation of non-formal and informal learning and discusses associated issues such as sustainability and accessibility. It is based on data collected for the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning since 2007, and telephone interviews carried out to prepare four detailed case-study examples. The report identifies five different funding sources used by countries across Europe: dedicated public funding from national sources; public funding but not specifically allocated to validation; EU and project funding; mix of public and private sector funding; and fees charged to individual learners. For each of these, it sets out a list of strengths/enablers and barriers/weaknesses. The report concludes with a list of key learning points and suggests that there is scope to look into the issue of validation funding in more detail.

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