

# European Inventory

on validation of informal and  
non-formal learning



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

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## 1.0 Introduction

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This update to the 2005 Inventory on non-formal and informal learning has been based on a review of relevant literature, including the recent OECD country background report on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning<sup>1</sup>. References are given as footnotes to other specific documents which have been reviewed.

There is a long history of recognising non-formal and informal learning in Norway. The 1952 Vocational Training Act allowed citizens to take a crafts examination, provided they could demonstrate sufficient work experience. Later, the Adult Education Act of 1976 outlined the need to create opportunities for adults to have their knowledge and skills documented at all levels and areas within the education system, regardless of where these competencies were acquired. In terms of establishing actual technical and institutional arrangements to support this act, little progress was made at first and as a result, the 1999 Competence Reform was introduced in order to establish legal and procedural frameworks to ensure implementation.

Throughout, there has been strong support from stakeholders in the field of adult education, including trade unions and associations providing liberal adult education.

This strong focus on validation of informal and non-formal learning in Norway can be seen as a response to national changes in demography, as well as to national and international policy visions of lifelong learning. Norway currently faces an ageing population, together with an inflow of migrant workers. In addition, Statistics Norway has estimated possible future supply-demand imbalances in the labour market. For example, the estimates show that there will be a shortage of nursing aids and engineers between 2006 and 2010.

Moreover, in working life, there is an increasing focus on documenting individual competencies within firms. And within the Third Sector, organisations now focus on reaching their own standards of recognition.

Validation of informal and non-formal learning helps to address these issues, by improving flexibility within the labour market and facilitating access and mobility, both into and within education and employment.

After five years of experience with a validation system, there have been significant achievements in Norway in terms of validation of informal and non-formal learning but there are also some reasons for concern. The OECD country report highlights a challenge

<sup>1</sup> New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, (RNFIL), Country background report 2006, Norway

for the national recognition system to maintain, evaluate and develop its legitimacy within the educational and work-place sectors. Moreover, it appears that there is a need for enhanced cooperation between the educational sector and the labour market.

## 2.0 Public Sector

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### 2.1 Policy Background

In **1952**, the **Law on vocational training** allowed individuals to pass a crafts examination, provided they had sufficient practical work experience. Normally, two years of theoretical training and two years of practical apprenticeship are required to take a crafts examination. Interest in this flexible arrangement soared from the mid-1990s and onwards. At its peak in the period 1997-99, close to 14,000 candidates annually made use of this opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

The **1976 Adult Education Act** opened up the right for adults to have their knowledge and skills documented at all levels and areas within the public education system, independently of how these competencies were acquired. However, little progress was made in terms of procedures and institutional arrangements. One of the objectives of the 1999 Competence Reform (see below) was therefore to establish improved legal frameworks as well as the practical procedures that would fulfil the intentions of the 1976 act. At the same time, the 1999 reform widened the concept of validation, by including competences acquired outside of the regular education system, with a view to strengthening the job prospects of low-skilled individuals.

Thus, the main objective of the **Competence Reform** launched in **1999** was to help meet the needs of individuals, society and the workplace in terms of skills and knowledge and to give adults more opportunity to acquire education and training to improve their qualifications. The reform aimed to put non-formal and informal competences on a more equal footing with formal competences. This ambition was supported by stakeholders in the field of adult education, such as the trade unions and associations favouring liberal adult education.

The Competence Reform was both a workplace reform and an educational reform and was targeted at all adults, both employed and unemployed. One of its principal objectives was *“to establish a national system for documenting and validating the non-formal and informal learning of adults, with legitimacy both in the workplace and in the education system”*. This includes learning attained through paid and unpaid employment, organisational involvement and organised training.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Norway, [www.ssb.no](http://www.ssb.no)

A national **Validation Project** (*Realkompetanseprosjektet*) was set up with the objective to form the foundations for a national system for validation of non-formal and informal learning during the period **1999-2002**. The priority areas for development were:

- Documentation of non-formal and informal learning in the workplace
- Documentation of non-formal and informal learning in the voluntary sector
- Methods for the assessment of non-formal and informal learning
- Validation and formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning in respect of upper secondary education criteria
- Adjustments and possible amendments of existing laws, regulations and agreements on the basis of experiences drawn from the project
- Admission of students to universities and colleges, on the basis of non-formal and informal learning

The Ministry of Education and Research was responsible for the project, which was conducted by Vox (the National Institute for adult Learning), in close cooperation with the social partners, the educational sector and the third sector

Many development projects were initiated both in the education sector as well as in working life and the third sector during the experimentation period. The result was a final report from the Ministry of Education and Research with information on the implementation and further development of a national system for documentation and recognition of competence and skills. Based on the conclusions from the Validation Project, it was proposed that the national system should include a shared set of principles, anchored in custom-made legislation as well as a varied set of methods and tools for documentation and validation of competence and skills.

The principles are based on the understanding that starting the process of recognition of competence and skills is *voluntary* and has to be perceived by the individual as beneficial. The report stated that the documentation of *realkompetanse* (formal, non-formal and informal learning) must benefit both the individual and society and that documentation tools must be flexible, easy to use and transparent. The Validation Project recommended that the right of an individual to document his or her *realkompetanse* must be secured by law. These principles are now anchored in legislation that comprises the Education Act, the acts on vocational training and vocational assessment, and the University and College Act.

As part of the Competence Reform adults were given rights by law to primary and secondary education from 2000. Adults have a statutory right to primary and lower secondary education, which must be adapted to their needs and situation. Employees also have the right to study leave.

The **2002** amendment to the **Education Act** determined that adults born prior to 1978<sup>1</sup> have a statutory right to be accepted to upper secondary education, based on an assessment of their informal and non-formal learning. The education must then be adapted to the individual's needs and life situation.

The **Act concerning Vocational Training, §3.5**, allows adults with more than five years of work experience, who wish to obtain a trade and journeyman's certificate, to obtain formal recognition of knowledge and skills acquired over time in the context of a job. The candidate is not required to go through a formal education and training process but must take the same final examination as apprentices, including both theoretical and practical elements.

The **New Act on Vocational Assessment 4A-3** (enacted on March 14, **2003**) gave adults with the right to further education a right to have their *realkompetanse* documented, including when not seeking further education. It also gave immigrants who have recently arrived in Norway and registered jobseekers not entitled to upper secondary education the opportunity to undertake an assessment of their non-formal and informal learning, including vocational testing.

According to the **Working Environment Act § 68**, employees who leave their positions after giving legitimate notice to do so have a legal right to receive a written reference from their employers. The written testimony shall contain the employee's name, date of birth, the content of the job and the length of employment. This Act also laid down in 2001 the right of employees to study leave. All employees who have worked for at least three years and at least two years with the same employer have the right to three years of full or part time study leave, to participate in organised education and training leading to documented competence. The training has to be related to their professional situation. (These rules only apply to the right of study leave and not to the right of salary during the study leave.)

Since 2001, applicants without sufficient formal entrance qualifications can be admitted to Higher Education on the basis of age (25 years or more), and a combination of formal, informal and non-formal learning. It should also be noted that since 1992, adults aged 23 and over can be admitted to higher education on the basis of five years of education and/or work experience and prescribed minimum levels in six core subjects from upper secondary school.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Government will propose a change in this legal right from "born prior to" to "25 years or more" in spring 2008

<sup>2</sup> 2007 National Report on the Implementation of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, Norway

The **Act relating to Universities and University Colleges No. 15 of 1 April 2005** thus contains two sections concerning the validation of non-formal and informal learning, relating to admission and exemption:

#### Section 3-6: Educational qualifications for entrance to higher education

The general basis for admission as a student is successful completion of the Norwegian upper secondary school and fulfilment of the requirements regarding subject combinations and hours of study laid down by the Ministry. The Ministry may stipulate that other suitable education or combinations of education and work experience shall constitute a general basis for admission.

The institutions may grant applicants aged 25 years of age or older (in the admission year) admission to specific courses if they hold the necessary qualifications for the course concerned, on the basis of their prior learning (formal and non-formal).

#### Section 3-5: Exemption from an examination or test

Exemption from an examination or test shall be granted when it has been shown that a corresponding examination or test has been taken at the same or another institution. Such exemption may also be granted on the basis of another suitable examination or test. Documentation of prior learning (formal and non-formal) may also provide a basis for exemption.

Currently, the national **Strategy for Lifelong Learning** recognises the validation of informal and non-formal learning as one of its overarching priorities. The strategy aims to follow up on lessons learned from experience to date, and thus major policy measures now include:

- Strengthening information and guidance services
- New methods of cooperation between education, working life and the NGO sector
- New measures for uniform practice
- New reporting and data collection routines.<sup>1</sup>

The **benefits** of validation have also been recognised in a wide range of policy documents:

- Many immigrants to Norway have high educational qualifications and a goal in the implementation of a national recognition system in Norway was to enable competence identification and validation for adult immigrants. The government **action plan against**

<sup>1</sup> 2007 Report on the Implementation of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, Norway

**racism and discrimination for the period 2002-2006** recognised the importance of validation for the inclusion of refugees and immigrants.

- The recent government **white paper on senior policies** (St.meld.nr. 6 2006-2007) endorsed the validation of non-formal and informal learning to enhance the careers of older workers, who sometimes have long-term work experience but lack formal qualifications
- Validation is recognised as an important tool to combat skills shortages in the Directorate for health and social affairs' **national plan to recruit personnel to the health and social services sector for the period 2003-2006** and in the recent government **white paper on the future challenges in the health and social services**.

## 2.2 Practical Framework

The Norwegian approach to validation of informal and non-formal learning has been based on the idea that the documentation and validation methods must have value for users in different areas. As such, the documentation and validation process is carried out in relation to three main learning areas:

- The Education Sector – to visualise competences and skills in relation to the objectives in the national curricula (upper secondary education) or specific curricula (higher education)
- The Labour Market – to visualise and document competences and skills in relation to organisational requirements, sector requirements and international standards
- The voluntary sector – to visualise competences and skills in all forms.

As part of the national Validation Project, every county authority received funding to establish a system of recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Most regional authorities set up one or more 'assessment centres', which are usually located at upper secondary schools. These centres provide information, guidance and help with the validation process in relation to secondary education. They are also responsible for quality assurance of the assessment procedure, including the training of assessors.

In addition, extra funding was provided to 12 counties to develop assessment methods and tools. Today, different methods and tools for mapping and assessment of competences and skills exist.

The National Institute for Adult Learning (Vox) has a number of responsibilities in the sphere of validation of informal and non-formal learning, as outlined in the box below.

## Vox, the National Institute for Adult Learning<sup>1</sup>

Vox carries out a number of activities in the area of validation of informal and non-formal learning. These include: national surveys, networking, training, information campaigns and national projects.

The Institute has the main responsibility for providing information about the Norwegian approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning. Information is provided on the web site [www.vox.no](http://www.vox.no), at national and international conferences and seminars and through other publicity materials.

Vox also runs a national network which supports the system of validation in the upper secondary education system.

In terms of training, over the years 2004/2005 a national tour was organised, delivering two-day training sessions for assessors in upper secondary education. 788 participants were involved.

During 2006, Vox undertook various projects relating to specific issues and target groups in relation to validation, such as a project to improve the cooperation between employment offices and education centres, projects working with the public sector and higher education, a review of good practice in upper secondary education and various projects relating to documentation in working life.

In addition, Vox has developed a standard format for a competence card to describe learning at work. The Competence Card helps an individual to map and describe their professional competence such as branch knowledge, work responsibilities, working methods and personal skills. The tool can be downloaded at [www.vox.no](http://www.vox.no). The tool is accompanied by a guide on how to successfully carry out the procedure, some good practice examples and a database tool for Human Resource Managers. Today, Vox is promoting more widespread use of this tool as a common documentation of informal and non-formal learning in the workplace.

Information about validation of non-formal and informal learning is also available on the web sites of the Ministry of Education and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Organisation. Many other stakeholders also provide web based information, including the county authorities and higher educational institutions.

### 2.3 Upper Secondary Education

Recognition of informal and non-formal learning related to upper secondary education is free, provided that the applicant meets one of the following criteria:

- He/she was born before 1978 and does not have a general or vocational certificate from upper secondary level (costs are borne by county councils)
- He/she is unable to work due to disability (costs are borne by social security offices)

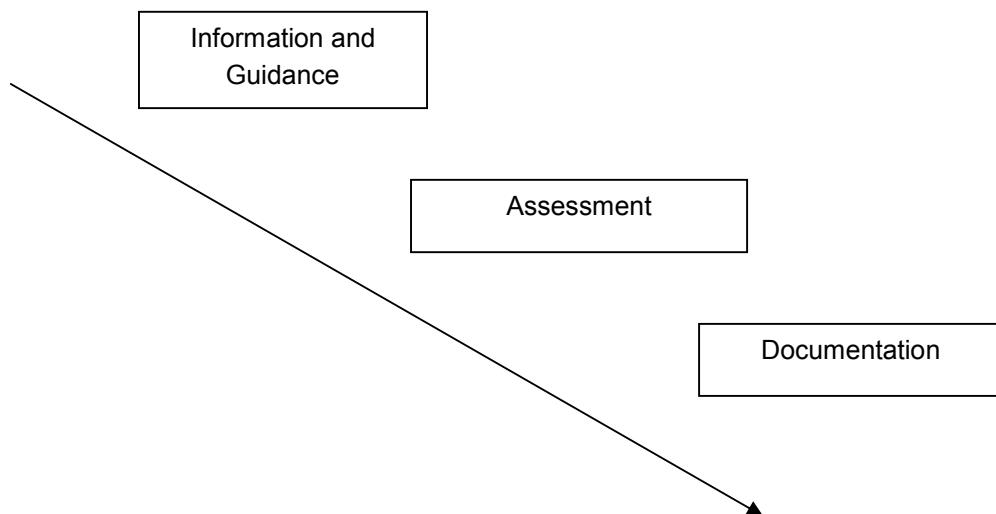
<sup>1</sup> Information taken from: Nilsen Mohn, T. , 2006, The Norwegian approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning; benefits for individuals, enterprises and society, A presentation given to the Sixth ERDI expert seminar, 12 May 2006, the 2006 OECD Norway Country Background Report on Activity in Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning and the Final report from the Norwegian sub-project of REFINE: Recognising Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education and Vox - Annual Status Report on Norwegian Adult Learning 2006: Basics!

- He/she is unemployed (costs are borne by the employment office).

The purposes of recognising non-formal and informal learning in upper secondary education are:

- To match the learning to formal qualifications set in the national curricula and shorten the study period
- To give possibilities for a more streamlined and tailor-made study programme for each individual
- To provide the individual with an accredited certificate or diploma (Competence Certificate) to gain promotion or career improvement, find a new job or increase mobility in the working life

The validation process within the educational system is based on three stages which are illustrated in the diagram below:



Source: Nilsen Mohn, T., 2006, Visualisation and Documentation, Methods and Tools, a presentation given at the sixth ERDI expert seminar, 12 May 2006.

Within this process, the following methods and tools have been developed for the implementation of the assessment stage. Each one is implemented in relation to the requirements set out in the national curricula:

- Dialogue-based method: based on discussions between an assessor/specialist and the individual. The assessor/specialist can use a computerised or manual tool based on the curriculum in question. This method requires individual preparation and a one-to-one meeting. The method can be combined with portfolio assessment, self-assessment and testing. It has been tested out on a large number of candidates.
- Portfolio assessment: based on written documentation, photos etc. The candidate sends a 'charting' form to a 'service centre' together with certificates and reports. After admission to secondary education, a discussion takes place in order to arrange the course according to the individual's actual knowledge and skills.
- Vocational 'testing': based on an interview, where the background, training, work experience, language skills and objectives of the adult are charted. This interview is followed by a second one by a professional specialist, after which the individual shows the abilities in practice, so that both the theoretical and the practical side of the trade is assessed. Vocational 'testing' provides adults with every opportunity to show what they can actually do in their own fields. On the other hand, it also requires inter-departmental cooperation between the education system, the employment service and possibly also the insurance office and social security office.

Quality assurance is provided through the school system itself.

## **2.4 Higher Education (HE)**

In HE, individual universities or university colleges assess applications for admission or exemption based on non-formal or informal learning. Applicants' qualifications are assessed in relation to the subjects or the programmes they wish to study. The institutions are free to decide what constitutes the necessary qualifications for admittance and the admittance procedures are decided locally. As a result, there are variations with regard to practice between the institutions.

Recognition related to higher education is free for the individual applicant. The costs must be covered by the university or university college. Informal and non-formal learning is assessed mostly through self-declarations and portfolios - interviews and tests are seldom used. Foreign qualifications and documented work experience are assessed and accredited centrally by NOKUT, the Norwegian Agency of Quality Assurance in Education. Each HE institution is responsible for its own quality assurance. The Norwegian Agency

for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) oversees quality assurance on a national level.

During the 1999-2002 Validation Project, sixteen state university colleges and one university tested a variety of different entrance requirements, allowing admission for adults who lacked the general academic exams normally required for admission to higher education. The trials received a favourable evaluation, showing that in most subjects adult students admitted on the basis of non-formal and informal competencies progressed as fast as younger students admitted on the basis of a general upper secondary education. Apart from in mathematics and the natural sciences, they also received results which were on a level with the traditional students' results. The teachers also appreciated that work experience was brought into the classroom by the adult learners, and stated that they added positively to the learning environment at the institutions.<sup>1</sup>

NIFU STEP<sup>2</sup> has surveyed the effects of the legal right to seek admission to HE on the basis of non-formal and informal learning. Before the reform was implemented, there was scepticism among higher education institutions towards validation but experience has led to a positive attitude to the reform in most institutions. Small university colleges particularly value students admitted in this way, who are found to be motivated and hard working. The centrally located university colleges, which have too many applicants, find it hard to provide enough resources to deal with these application schemes.

The Norwegian sub-project of the European REFINE project studied the assessment of a number of candidates with non-formal and informal learning who applied for exemption in higher education. The report shows that the six institutions selected for the study lacked procedures for the assessment of exemption candidates and consequently dealt with the candidates in an 'ad hoc manner'. Although a proposal for an exemption form was provided by the committee investigating *realkompetanse* in higher education, the form has not gained wide acceptance and is not felt to be adequate – a documentation tool is required which documents skills and competences that are specifically related to the field of study the candidate is applying for exemption from. However, although the project revealed that exemption is not a priority in Norwegian higher education and that existing procedures are inadequate, it also found that without exception, the institutions involved were positive about the right to exemption.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. Brandt: Høgskolenes erfaringer med realkompetansestudenter fra forsøksordningene i 1999 og 2000, NIFU Skriftserie 11/2002, Oslo:NIFU. In Skule, S. and Ure, O B, Lifelong Learning – Norwegian Experiences, Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Paper 2004:21

<sup>2</sup> Norwegian research institute for studies in innovation, research, and education.

<sup>3</sup> Haugoy, G., Moe, F., 2005, REFINE: Recognising Formal, Informal and Non-formal Education, Final report from the Norwegian sub-project, Vox and the University of Bergen, January 2005

## 2.5 National Qualifications Framework

The development of a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning is still under discussion in Norway. In May 2006, a working group was appointed by the Ministry of Education, to consider the development of a comprehensive national qualifications framework. This working group had participation from relevant stakeholders: one member from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, one from Vox and five from the Ministry. The working group gave a final report for consultation in October, 2006.

It has been decided to start working on a proposal for a national qualifications framework for vocational education and training, and to start a pilot project for testing the EQF in certain sectors. This work will be undertaken in close collaboration with the social partners. In addition, Norway is participating in two projects on EQF funded through the Leonardo da Vinci programme.<sup>1</sup>

A framework of qualifications may provide an important link between standardisation in assessment arrangements and procedures of quality assurance, enhancing the legitimacy of the recognition system.

## 2.6 Progress

Between 2000 and 2005 approximately 60,000 persons went through a recognition procedure in relation to upper secondary level, of which approximately 80% were in vocational subjects.<sup>2</sup>

At higher education level, the number of applicants 25 years and older seeking recognition of their formal, non-formal and informal learning for admission to a study programme was 6,000 in 2001 (the first year this was possible). The number of applicants decreased in the following years, to 2,700 in 2006.<sup>3</sup> (It was expected that the number of applicants would be high when the opportunity was first made available and that this would decrease somewhat over time.) The majority of the applicants were women (70% of students admitted on the basis of non-formal and informal learning).<sup>4</sup> Approximately half of the

<sup>1</sup> 2007 National Report on the Implementation of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, Norway

<sup>2</sup> New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Nilsen Mohn, T. , 2006, The Norwegian approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning; benefits for individuals, enterprises and society, A presentation given to the Sixth ERDI expert seminar, 12 May 2006

applicants were for health and social studies and one fifth were for educational studies, mostly bachelor studies at university colleges.<sup>1</sup>

Adult students admitted on the basis of recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning constitute approximately 5 % of all new HE students annually, relatively more in health and social studies (12 %) and in educational studies (10 %). The number of these new students annually has decreased somewhat, from 2,100 to 1,300 in the period 2001-2006. However, these figures show that it is still an important scheme for adults lacking formal study to gain access to higher education.<sup>2</sup>

However, there were only 123 applications for exemption in higher education during the period 2001-2004.<sup>3</sup>

In an evaluation of the Validation Project<sup>4</sup>, supervisors and assessors/specialists found that the documentation of non-formal and informal learning has a positive effect on candidates, as it gives the candidates more self-respect for example. Candidates themselves found that the assessment of non-formal and informal learning was a positive experience – around 80% found the experience useful or very useful.

The surveys however identified a major need for training – around 96% of supervisors and 85% of the assessors/specialists felt that they needed training in the future, particularly in relation to a quality assurance arrangement which may lead to a national standard in the future.

It also appears that there is a need for greater publicity of the initiative. A comprehensive survey by Vox, “Awareness of legal rights to upper secondary education”<sup>5</sup> conducted between 2003 and 2005 showed that of the 21,000 adults participating in upper secondary education, 85% did not know where to go for recognition of their informal or non-formal learning.

<sup>1</sup> New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Brandt, E. (2005): *Avkorting av studier på grunnlag av realkompetanse*. Oslo: NIFU STEP

<sup>4</sup> Agenda (2003a): *Evaluering av Realkompetanseprosjektet. Sluttrapport*. Sandvika: Agenda Utredning & Utvikling AS. In New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

<sup>5</sup> Haugerud,.V., Røstad, S (2004) *Kunnskapsgrunnlaget, sluttrapport*. Oslo: Vox

## 2.7 Further developments

As we have seen, Norway has been at the forefront of the development of formal recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, there remain a number of challenges which must be addressed, in order to realize the full potential of the national validation system:

- Opportunities for validation are not widely known, particularly amongst people with low formal education. The services that exist are not sufficiently marketed towards relevant target groups.
- The system for documentation is insufficiently developed, and the reporting routines are not adequate, particularly at the upper secondary level.
- Currently, adults born after 1978 do not have the same statutory right to have their learning validated at the upper secondary level as adults born before 1978
- There is too much variation between the counties in the way they practice recognition of informal and non-formal learning
- Vocational testing, a method which particularly suits the needs of immigrants, is not widely used
- Higher education institutions have a large degree of freedom in the way they practice access and exemptions. There will always be variations in practice between the institutions – experiences to date may suggest there is room for closer cooperation.
- There is a need for further cooperation between sectors.
- The cooperation between the employment and welfare offices and the county offices responsible for the recognition of learning at the upper secondary level is underdeveloped – relatively few unemployed people use the opportunities offered to have their learning validated
- The use of documentation tools such as the Competence Card has not been widely spread in working life

Projects and initiatives have thus been set up in response to these challenges. For example, in 2005, the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion and the Ministry of Education and Research initiated three projects to promote better coordination of the employment policy and the education policy. One of the projects is aimed to increase the number of unemployed persons who go through recognition of non-formal and informal learning at upper secondary level. Three county municipalities have been given funding to carry out pilot projects to develop systems for building bridges between these two public services.

In addition, pilot projects are now being implemented to use validation of informal and non-formal learning to the benefit of groups with specific needs, for example immigrants and refugees, the unemployed and older workers.

Finally, the 2006 OECD country report on recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Norway identified a significant lack of baseline data on issues related to quality assurance, which presents challenges to evaluations of efficient, beneficial and equitable recognition systems. In order to develop informed responses to the challenges which have been identified above, it is clear that comprehensive monitoring and evaluation procedures must be implemented alongside these new pilot initiatives and projects.

## 3.0 Private Sector

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### 3.1 Social Partner Involvement

The mandate of the national Validation Project (*Realkompetanseprosjektet*) was first geared towards the validation of non-formal and informal learning for individuals wanting to enter into education. The social partners moved to extend the mandate to the development of validation tools for working life as well. Nine experimental projects targeting the labour market or working life were thus carried out during the period 1999-2002. The projects were carried out by the social partners in different sectors, study associations and county administrations which cooperated with enterprises. Some projects were directed at specific sectors or industries, other projects were focused on a geographical area.

The social partners have also recognised the importance of validation of informal and non-formal learning through the 'Basic Agreement'. The Basic Agreement is an agreement between the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry (NHO) and the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions. The **Basic Agreement for 2006-2009**, Chapter VI on Development of competence has a new part: 16-4, Documentation of formal, non-formal and informal competence (*realkompetanse*) where it is stated that *"The enterprise is requested to have a system for documentation of the individual employees' experience, courses and practice related to the conditions of work"*.

The social-partner based projects carried out under the Validation Project explicitly decided that wage increases should not be a goal. One of the projects was a direct follow-up and an attempt to strengthen the implementation of the new chapter on the 'development of competences' set out in the Basic Agreement. Other projects also tried to develop tools that could describe and account for non-formal and informal competencies in a way that would be useful to the enterprises in allocating and developing their human resources. At the same time, these validation schemes aimed to be useful for the individual when applying for a new job in the labour market or when applying for admission to an educational institution.<sup>1</sup>

Social partners have also been involved in the delivery of specific projects relating to validation in certain sectors, such as the AKS project, funded through the Leonardo da Vinci programme:

<sup>1</sup> Skule, S. and Ure, O B, Lifelong Learning – Norwegian Experiences, Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Paper 2004:21

## Accumulation of Knowledge and Skills (AKS), a Leonardo da Vinci transnational project<sup>1</sup>

The AKS project took place over the period 2003-2004 and was funded by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme. It was a follow-up to a project carried out by ELBUS during the national Validation Project. The project's scope of work was to develop the validation, assessment and transferability of formal, non formal and informal learning in the electro-technical industry throughout Europe. The lead partners were the two Norwegian organisations OREE (advisory council for vocational training in the electro technical centre) and ELBUS (national centre for electro technical vocational education). The other partner countries were Denmark, Greece, Sweden and the UK.

The project group developed a pan-European methodology to enable electro-technical or other enterprises to document and assess accumulated knowledge and skills of an employee or potential employee. This methodology is explained in a handbook, and is supported by a web/electronic-based tool to aid the process. All five partner country languages are present in both the methodology and the tool and the tool was piloted in several different European electro-technical pilot companies.

The 'assessment' stage of the methodology involves a conversation with the employer, based on what the individual has recorded about him/herself. This conversation should follow clearly defined guidelines and will be strictly confidential between the individual and the employer. To aid this development dialogue the project partners developed an 'Ability to take action' questionnaire. The main objective of this assessment is to develop the basis of a personal development plan involving measures that the employer is able to initiate or support.

100 individuals were involved in the project from Norway, five from Sweden, 20 from England, 15 from Denmark and 20 from Greece.

The mapping tool is web-based whilst the CV and the 'Ability to take action' forms are available electronically through the AKS web site.<sup>2</sup>

The AKS project was one of three to receive the first ever Leonardo da Vinci award launched by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission.

### 3.2 Validation in practice in the private sector

One of the main reasons for the Competence Reform was to encourage awareness and recognition of the amount of learning which takes place at work. A survey<sup>3</sup> concluded that:

- employees regard their workplace as the most important venue for learning
- employers believe practice is the best way of learning

Many organisations have their own systems and procedures for documenting competences, either as part of their HR management system or ISO requirements.

<sup>1</sup> [www.aks-international.com](http://www.aks-international.com)

<sup>2</sup> The main page of the web-based tool is: <http://komptest.prodok.no> A password is required to be able to use the tool.

<sup>3</sup> [www.fafu.no/pub/rapp/501/501.pdf](http://www.fafu.no/pub/rapp/501/501.pdf). In New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

During the Validation Project, internet-based tools were developed for the validation of non-formal and informal competencies. Most of these digital tools start with self-assessment of the kind of work tasks the employee has performed and responsibilities he/she has held in the enterprise. This self-assessment is then subject to discussion, evaluation and ultimately validation and signed by the employer as a **Competence Passport**, to be combined with a CV. While some of the tools developed in working life received favourable evaluations from human resource managers as well as from employees who took part in these projects, the diffusion of Competence Passport tools across working environments has so far been limited. One reason for this is that employees may be sceptical about how the documentation might be used by the employers in times of downsizing.

Moreover, employers' confederations also showed some scepticism about the use of validation tools in the work place – they feared that employees who had undergone a validation process would demand a salary increase.<sup>1</sup>

The different Competence Passport tools developed during the Validation Project were free for enterprises to use, unlike existing commercial tools for charting which work tasks an employee can do. For example, Vox has made a Competence Card available on their website [www.vox.no](http://www.vox.no). The existing commercial tools for charting competence in work tasks are for use *within* an enterprise. The Competence Card tools have this use too, but aim also to be useful for the employee when applying for a new job or when applying for admission to an educational institution on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning.

An evaluation of the Competence Passports developed in technological enterprises had views from employers and employees on possible important areas of application. Individual wage stipulation was considered important by 40 % of both employers and employees. Job-seeking outside the enterprise was considered important by 60 % of employers and 80 % of employees.<sup>2</sup>

The following two examples demonstrate how validation has been used in two sectors. The first describes a pilot project in the agriculture sector and the second gives an overview of the use of validation in the metal sector

<sup>1</sup> Skule, S., in Skule, S. and Ure, O B, Lifelong Learning – Norwegian Experiences, Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Paper 2004:21

<sup>2</sup> Skule, S. & Andersen, B. (2000): *Dokumentasjon av realkompetanse i teknologiindustrien. Evaluering av TBL og Fellesforbundets dokumentasjonsordning for arbeidslivet*. Oslo: Fafo. Fafo-rapport 363 (pp. 42-44). In New OECD Activity on Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning(RNFIL), Country Background Report 2006, Norway

## Validation in the agriculture sector – a pilot project

The State Agricultural Administration supported a pilot project between 2004 and 2006 on voluntary documentation in the agriculture sector. The national associations of farmers and small farmers cooperated with partners in Nordland county (the County Governor, the county agricultural administration, the Agricultural Guidance Service). For farmers, to document their non-formal and informal learning may be useful for further development as a farmer, planning future new production (i.e. in niche markets), demands for quality assurance and documentation in relation to the markets. The national associations developed a course in how to document their total competence, to be used in study groups of 6-8 farmers. Schemes for CV and Competence Passport (professional competence including economy and ICT, personal/social competence, managerial competence) were part of the course material. In four meetings, the farmers discussed their varied work tasks and learned how to assess their competence and document it, how to find partners to validate and sign the Competence Passport (i.e. Agriculture Guidance Service staff) and discussed possible needs for more education.

## Validation in the metal sector<sup>1</sup>

By 2006, 10% of organisations in the metal and electro-technical sector were already working with validation of informal and non-formal learning. Validation procedures are mostly used for up-skilling staff but are also used for recruitment purposes. Validation of prior learning is included in the collective labour agreements in this sector.

Examples of valuation and validation procedures used by firms in the sector can mostly be given for the low-skilled. Validation is also used for university-level competences for different functions, from fitters to engineers. New validation procedures are also being developed, e.g. a validation procedure is being developed for the mechatronic sector.

At most big companies, validation has become a part of the human resource management policy, to up-skill their staff, like Philips, Corus and DAF. SMEs have less structured human resource management policies and therefore less active in terms of validation, although in fact they could benefit from it greatly.

In the main, organisations in the sector aim to get a good view of the competences they have in their organisation. To stimulate development and use of competences, a quarter of the metal and electro-technical sector makes use of a form of competence-based management. This is one of the reasons why the importance of the recognition of competences has been recognised.

An experiment in using a work-based competence passport as a starting point for validation in the education system showed that differences persist between how prior learning is valued in working life and how it is valued in the school environment. One important difference was that enterprises are primarily interested in recording what the individual can actually accomplish in relation to the strategies and tasks in the enterprise, while the point of departure for education providers are to map the lack of competencies

<sup>1</sup> VPL, Norway National Review, March 2006

compared with a given curriculum or plan of study. It was therefore necessary to translate the competence passport issued in working life into the scheme used within upper secondary education. In spite of this need for a 'translation process', the conclusion of the experiment was that the authorities would still save time and money if individuals or groups of employees brought a competence passport with them when entering a validation process in the education system.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Skule, S. in Skule, S. and Ure, O B, Lifelong Learning – Norwegian Experiences, Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Paper 2004:21

## 4.0 Third Sector

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During the national Validation Project, experimental projects were also carried out in the third sector, which encompasses study associations, distance learning institutions, folk high schools and various nongovernmental organisations.

Adult education associations are run by voluntary organisations, such as the *Folkeuniversitetet Adult Education Association* and the Workers' Educational Association of Norway, which are primarily concerned with adult education. Courses are offered in a wide variety of subjects, ranging from recreational to vocational courses and courses at university and college level. Twenty-two adult education associations receive state support to hold such courses.

700,000 adults participate annually in courses held by adult education associations. 24,000 adults participate in courses at the upper secondary level and 48,000 adults attend courses at university and college level.

Voluntary organisations in Norway carry out various types of voluntary activity where individuals help out by providing labour. The documentation of non-formal learning in the voluntary sector must therefore be adapted to suit the various needs of the many parties in the sector. It has been suggested that this multitude of different learning environments has prevented the development of a coherent approach to the validation of learning through third sector activities.

Eight projects were carried out in the third sector under the national Validation Project and a draft personal competence passport was devised to validate experiences from activities in the third sector.

Both the methods and the tools for charting and documenting non-formal learning in the sector are based to all intents and purposes on individuals' own efforts – a self-declaration with minimum input from assessors. Electronic tools have been developed which can be used for this work. The idea is that individual organisations will provide information to students, course participants and voluntary participants within the organisation. Individual organisations are also responsible for guidance for the people who want to make use of a documentation method, yet individuals draw up their own CV and identify and describe their own skills. It is also the individual who carries out a self-assessment of the skills identified and describes these.

Some third sector organisations have developed a tool for the description of competences and skills from participating in different activities in third sector called the 'Personal Competence Document', as outlined in the box below.

### The Personal Competence Document (PCD)<sup>1</sup>

The Personal Competence Document is a system for mapping and documenting competences, based on self-evaluation. The main objective of the PCD system is to stimulate users to map, describe and document the activities they are or have been involved in and the competences they have developed, with a focus on non-formal learning and voluntary activities. The secondary objective is to raise awareness of the multitude of competencies developed in the voluntary sector so that these can be taken into account in both the education system and in working life.

The PCD focuses on the competence development aspect of all learning activities in the member organisations. It reminds and underlines to member organisations of the fact that all learning activities may form important parts of an individual's competences that may be relevant for work or further education.

The PCD contains:

- Instructions and guidance
- Forms to document the "totality" of competencies and competencies linked to single activities
- Examples
- A dictionary of voluntary activities

The likely value and effect of undertaking the PCD process for individuals is: an improved overview of one's own competence-generating activities, increased motivation and self-esteem and increased ability to put one's competences into words. Creating an overview of an individual's competences may make it easier to see what competencies are 'missing'. The use of the PCD may therefore make it easier to decide "where to go" - what learning activities to start with/continue with, what kind of work to look for etc.

The PCD is available on the internet at: [www.vofo.no](http://www.vofo.no) (in Norwegian only).

However, although there is a tool available to the third sector for validation of prior learning, the use of the tool is sporadic. It is used only if organisations choose to do so – and if they have the capacity. The reasons for the low level of use are:

- Need for more information and training (especially at local level)
- Small number of employees
- Fear of the amount of administration involved
- Limited financial resources.

<sup>1</sup> Information provided by T. Nilsen Mohn

The following key words are often used to describe non-formal and informal learning in the third sector: independence and self-discipline, own efforts and cooperation, reflection and ability to put ideas into words, ICT skills, skills in environmental protection, language skills, social skills, managerial skills, organisation skills, skills in problem solving and stress management. The purpose of the documentation of non-formal and informal learning is to reinforce the self-confidence and inspire people to make it easier to gain access to formal educational courses. It is also believed that documentation of non-formal and informal learning in the voluntary sector will lead to self-awareness that is useful and important for development of their voluntary career, as well as for taking on additional duties in voluntary organisational life. In the long term, it is believed that this may lead to the revitalisation of voluntary work.

Finally it has been shown that in the validation procedure in the formal education system there is very little attention to learning in the voluntary sector. One of the findings in the Vox report "Validation of Prior Learning in Practice" was that local education authorities find it easier to validate competence gained from work than from the voluntary sector.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vox - Annual Status Report on Norwegian Adult Learning 2006: Basics!

## 5.0 Conclusions

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Norway has an established national system for the validation of informal and non-formal learning and is one of the countries at the forefront of development in this area. Validation of informal and non-formal learning is possible throughout the education sector, from primary to higher education. The national system has been developed with support from all relevant stakeholders and through collaboration and cooperation, thus providing individuals with opportunities which respond to their needs and circumstances.

Validation initiatives have taken place not only within the public sector, but also within the private and third sectors. Social partners and employers have been involved in the development of national initiatives as well as individual pilot projects. Today, workers can undergo a validation procedure to obtain Competence Passports which documents the skills and competences they have developed through their work experience. In the third sector too, organisations have worked together to develop validation tools, to enable individuals to recognise the skills and competences they have attained through voluntary work or other third sector activities.

However, there remain some challenges for the future. Although there is a national policy on validation of informal and non-formal learning, actual practice varies across the country. The National Association for Adult Education, Vox, recommends that a national consensus should be reached on how documentation and validation should be practiced on a local basis. Vox suggests that the documentation and validation system must be based on national principles regulated by rules, rather than on local interpretations and advocates greater, improved collaboration among relevant stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

Good practice must be shared across Norway and lessons learned must be acted upon. Further, there remains a lack of awareness among individuals of the validation opportunities available to them, thus greater publicity and dissemination efforts must take place. In the private sector, the use of Competence Passports remains limited to a certain number of enterprises – again, good practice must be shared to enable more individuals to benefit from these important tools. In the third sector, organisations face barriers to take-up of validation, such as limited resources and it is important that these barriers are not allowed to prevent individuals from maximising the opportunities available to them.

Norway is therefore a country where the benefits of validation have been widely accepted and recognised for a long period. Other countries can learn from the Norwegian experience to date and Norway itself must learn from and act on its own achievements. At

<sup>1</sup> Vox - Annual Status Report on Norwegian Adult Learning 2006: Basics!

the same time, it is important to examine and address the problems and barriers which are now being encountered, for example through learning from good practice in other countries at a similar stage of development.