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

## Conclusions: validation approaches in Europe

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## **1.0 CONCLUSIONS: VALIDATION APPROACHES IN EUROPE**

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An examination of the national chapters presented in this report shows that national or European approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning to some extent still operate on the periphery of the huge reservoir of competences developed through informal and non-formal learning. This is because a substantial reorientation of vocationally oriented education and training is currently taking place, often initiated at the public level with a move from input-oriented to output-oriented systems. This is also because a large number of validation initiatives are still at a relatively early stage of development and it is important not to underestimate the potential of these initiatives.

As has been mentioned in several instances in the overview chapter, European countries have developed and applied a number of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning, for different functions and purposes. A great rate of progress has been achieved in recent years in this area. To shed some light on these approaches, this chapter presents an attempt at categorising these.

While there are a large variety of validation initiatives have been established in Europe., a closer look shows that their underlying methods, principles and purpose is often similar. Based on these criteria, the sections below give five main categories of validation approaches:

- Tests and examinations
- Declarative methods
- The portfolio method
- Observation

These approaches differ not only by the process or end-result they achieve but also by complexity. A closer description of each of these methods is presented below, as well as examples of methods from the countries covered in the Inventory.

It is important to highlight that there is scope for further break down of the categories presented below into more specific validation methodologies within each of them. The categories we describe, nevertheless, present existing approaches in a comprehensive and parsimonious way. The categories presented below mostly overlap with the categories developed by Danielle Colardyn and Jens Bjornavold in their work on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.<sup>1</sup> However, due to the nature of the evidence presented in the national chapters of this report, we have not entirely followed Colardyn's and Bjornvold's

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<sup>1</sup>By progressing in this manner we choose a similar approach to that taken in the forthcoming Inventory publication by Danielle Colardyn and Jens Bjornavold. (Colardyn, D. and Bjornavold, J. (forthcoming) *National policies and practices in validation of non-formal and informal learning*, European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal Learning. Report 1)

approach. The main variation we have in relation to Colardyn and Bjornvold is that two of their validation categories - simulation and evidences extracted from work - have been included in one single categorisation in order to make the reader aware of their existence and have, due to a lack of evidence presented in the national chapters, not been given much emphasis.

The section concludes with a summary highlighting the main points of the discussion. A table at the end of the chapter gives a wider set of examples for each category than is mentioned in the text.

### **1.1 Test and examinations**

This category comprises methodologies that identify and validate non-formal and informal learning through or with the help of examinations in the formal system. Thus, an individual enters examinations of the formal education system and by passing them, his or her competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning are validated. This process also formalises an individual's skills as the end-result is a formal and usually generally recognised diploma or certificate.

This type of methodology exists in a variety of European countries, for example Germany, Austria, Norway, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, France, Sweden, Finland and Malta. Validation with the help of examinations of the initial vocational training system is the most frequently applied approach.

In Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Lithuania, for instance, proof of several years' work experience in a particular occupation normally grants access to the final examination of the relevant occupation even if the individual has not been formally enrolled in the relevant training programme. The type of examination can be a mix of written and practical tests. This method can be characterised as being the most important (in terms of acceptability and take-up) of the validation methods in these countries. These countries have in common a training and employment system which places great emphasis on state-recognised qualifications as proof of competence.

However, there are variations on this system practiced in other European countries. In Norway, for instance, adults have by law the right to have their knowledge and skills documented *at all levels* within the public education system independently of how these competencies were acquired. This is in addition to the right to access to vocational training examinations based on work experience. In the Czech Republic it is access not to final examinations in vocational training but to the preceding exams that validate non-formal and informal learning that has taken place at the workplace. The new school act allows for the recognition of alternative ways to study if an individual is looking to transfer from one programme to another.

Examples of validating non-formal and informal learning with the help of formal exams outside initial vocational training are much more rarely found in the Inventory. Finland is

among the few European countries that allows access to the secondary school leaving examination (Matriculation Examination) to pupils who have not completed the necessary course of study in the formal education system.

Approaches are top-down<sup>2</sup> as they are necessarily government-initiated and summative in nature and are regarded as valid and reliable.

### **1.2 Declarative methods**

As the title of the category suggests, declarative methods are based on individuals' own identification and recording of their competences. Normally a third party counter-signs the declaration, which may take the form of a so-called "competence handbook", in order to verify the self-assessment. Declarative methods may involve a self-assessment against given criteria or none at all. This validation process is simple because it involves the use of only one instrument. It is a recording process because the purpose of validation is purely the *identification* of skills gained through non-formal and informal learning. Many examples of this type of method can be found in the third sector.

One example of a declarative instrument is the Recreational Activity Study Book developed by the Finnish Youth Academy. This book provides a means for young volunteers and their adult supervisors to record their activities and experiences at volunteering projects. The main purpose is to install a sense of achievement in the young person. Another example is the Hamburg Voluntary Booklet (Hamburger Freiwilligenbuch). This booklet allows the owner to describe a task and its duration. The entrance is then certified by a third person or organisation. The Dutch National Scouting Association Jamboree also has an instrument that allows its members to record the skills learned as leaders, tam leaders and group guides.

A variation of this method is the Competence Handbook of the German metal trade union IG Metall. This lists a set of between nine and 16 individual competencies in three areas: professional, methodological and social. With the help of this framework the individual can their personal profile of competencies.

These instruments have in common that an individual's recording of experiences is central in the process, though some external checks tend to be built into the methods. For this reason they are less reliable than the methods other in the other categories. It tends to be a bottom-up approach and formative in nature.

### **1.3 The portfolio method**

Competence portfolios have proved a popular methodology to validate non-formal and informal learning in Europe. Examples can be found in many countries covered by the Inventory, and competence portfolios are being developed and employed by the public,

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<sup>2</sup> The exceptions are Austria and Germany where, due to the strong involvement of the social partners in vocational training, this type of method is a mix of top-down and bottom-up.

private and voluntary sectors. The distinguishing feature of competence portfolios is that they tend to use a mix of methods and instruments employed in consecutive stages to produce a coherent set of documents showing an individual's skills in different ways. In the most general of senses, competence portfolios tend to involve a self-assessment based on a questionnaire or a set of given criteria, interview(s) with a third party and / or an assessment centre. Because the approach is very versatile, it is being employed by a variety of organisations for a large range of purposes. The portfolio method tends to be process-orientated. Often it is used as a tool to help the further academic or career development of an individual.

The best-known portfolio method is probably the French *Bilan de Compétence* which has been in place since the 1980s. This involves the analysis of an individual's expectations and skills, a document drawn up by a professional counsellor employed by an accredited centre and is followed up by careers advice. Since 1991 all employees with at least five years' work experience have the right to 24 hours paid leave to undertake the process in an accredited centre. The *Bilan de Compétence* used in Luxembourg was created by legislation in 1998, and the methodology employed is a combination of interviews, questionnaires and observation by third parties of the individual being assessed. The Bilan has been drawn up as a tool to better match the personal and professional skills of an individual (often job seekers) and the skills required by the labour market. In the UK, a recent project by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) – Recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) – consists of a five-stage process which identifies a learner's aims, their starting point in terms of knowledge and skills, learning objectives, progress and achievement during a learning programme and concludes with an assessment process leading to a portfolio containing records of the assessment (by the learner, their peers, the tutor) as well as evidence of any written and practical work undertaken.

Often, competence portfolios are developed in order to help disadvantaged people to social inclusion or into employment. For instance, the University of Rome has developed a digital portfolio to be used in particular by disadvantaged young people. In a four-stage process, competencies are analysed and identified, relevant documents digitised, the most important skills identified and a complete portfolio file, including photographs, produced. A further example is the learning portfolio developed by the Community Women's Education Initiative (CWEI) in Ireland. Targeting traveller women, the portfolio uses non-written techniques such as collages and photography as well as interviews with individual traveller women to explore the value of story telling and learning in the traveller culture.

The portfolio method addresses the questions of validity, reliability and authenticity by combining a variety of methods as well as "internal" self-assessment with external assessment. This reduces the subjectivity of the assessment. Competence portfolios are formative approaches and, as the examples above suggest, can be employed both in a top-down and a bottom-up manner.

#### **1.4 Observation**

As the title suggests, this method for validating non-formal and informal learning involves extracting evidence of competence from an individual while they are performing everyday tasks at work. Evidence extracted from work practices relies on observation by a third party for the judgement of the competence level acquired.

The national chapters do not contain many examples for the sole use of observation at work as a method to validate non-formal and informal learning. However, in several instances observation is a key element in the validation methods developed and applied in the private sector.

For instance, in the Netherlands, businesses applying the procedures to validate non-formal and informal learning agreed in sectoral bargaining processes (EVC procedures) use workplace observation as one element of competence recognition. An employee applying to have practical skills recognised, and having initially created a competence portfolio, is visited by an examination board at the workplace where they are asked to fulfil certain tasks. Upon satisfactory completion, the certificate is handed over.

The Finnish chapter provides the example of a wood processing company who awards nationally recognised qualifications to employees with no formal qualification on the basis of practical tests carried out at the workplace which are assessed by an external assessor, employer and employee representatives.

#### **1.5 Simulation and evidences extracted from work**

In addition to similar categories to those introduced above, Colardyn and Bjornavold introduce two additional categories for the validation of non-formal and informal learning:

- Simulation
- Evidences extracted from work (or other) practices.

According to Colardyn and Bjornavold, simulation means that competences are not tested in real life (because, for various reasons, they cannot be), but that an individual is placed in a situation that fulfils all the criteria of the real-life scenario in order to have their competencies assessed.

Validation methods falling into the category “evidences extracted from work (or other) practices” have in common that a candidate collects physical or intellectual evidence of learning outcomes. This may relate to work situations, voluntary activities, family or other settings. This evidence then forms the basis of a validation of competences by a third party.

The national chapters of this Inventory present little information on the use of these categories. Those interested in finding out more about these methodologies in practice we refer to the Colardyn and Bjornavold report, which shows that:

- AFPA in France use a simulation method in the field of “control and maintenance of enterprises local networks” where an individual’s ability is assessed with the help of two sets of questions that describe a real-life scenario; and
- A Dutch competence test requires an individual to describe the approach followed when wrapping up at least five different types of packages which serves as evidence of work practices.

## **1.6 Summary**

Above we have presented in some detail four methods to validate non-formal and informal learning in Europe:

- Tests and examinations
- Declarative methods
- The portfolio method
- Observation

These categories of methods are not specific to one particular sector. All of the methods falling into these four categories are employed by at least two of the three types of organisations involved in developing and applying methods to validate non-formal and informal learning: public sector, private sector and third sector organisations. They can be both top-down and bottom-up in approach.

One aspect that validation initiatives have in common is the importance of dialogue between the candidate and the teacher/ assessor during the learning and validation process, which is greater than in the context of formal education programmes. Such form of dialogue is particularly important in the identification phase of the validation process, but also at the examination phase. This makes the communication flow between learner/ teacher and assessor more balanced and less one-sided since it allows for inputs from the candidate in relation to different aspects of the learning process and learning outcomes. One advantage of such approach is that it can lead to greater validity of the results obtained during the validation process. However, this greater input can also raise questions in relation to the reliability and credibility of validation practices, what makes quality assurance issues of paramount importance, as already highlighted in this report.

In this respect, the least reliable category of those presented in this section, is probably the simple recording of competencies as subjectivity is least likely to be eliminated. Methods falling into the remaining three categories all tend to have a greater degree of reliability. A summary of the typology of methods presented and country examples that can be found in the Inventory is given below:

**Table 34.1: Typology of validation methods and a selection of European country examples**

<b>Type of validation method</b>	<b>Examples from European Countries</b>
<b>Tests and examinations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Germany: access to final examinations of vocational training courses</li> <li>• Austria: access to final examinations of vocational training courses</li> <li>• Liechtenstein: access to final examinations of vocational training courses</li> <li>• Poland: Award of formal qualifications by state examination commissions (national law)</li> </ul>
<b>Declarative methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finland: Recreational Activity Study Book developed (Finnish Youth Academy)</li> <li>• Germany: Hamburg Voluntary Booklet (Patriotic Society), Competence Handbook (IG Metall Trade Union), Competence record (German national research centre for the study of young people)</li> <li>• The Netherlands: Validation of scouting competencies (Jamboree - National Scout Association)</li> <li>• Luxembourg: bilan d'insertion professionnelle (BIP)</li> <li>• European record of achievement (EuroRecord): software tool for planning and recording learning achievements ((European consortium of academic institutions)</li> </ul>
<b>The portfolio method</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Italy: Digital Portfolio (University of Rome)</li> <li>• France: Bilan de Compétence (accredited assessment centres)</li> <li>• Luxemburg: de Compétence (national legislation)</li> <li>• Ireland: Learning Portfolio (Community Women's Education Initiative)</li> <li>• UK: Recording progress and achievement in non-accredited learning (RARPA) (Learning and Skills Council)</li> <li>• Slovak Republic: Individual and Group Psychological Evaluation (PriceWaterhouseCoopers)</li> <li>• Czech Republic: Balance Diagnostic Centres</li> </ul>
<b>Observation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Netherlands: workplace observation as part of the EVC procedure</li> <li>• Finland: awards of nationally recognised qualifications on the basis of practical tests carried out at the workplace and assessed by an external assessor, employer and employee representatives.</li> </ul>

Source: ECOTEC Research and Consulting