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

Introduction

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Project background and project aims

This section provides information on the context and rationale of the Inventory project. It firstly locates validation of non-formal and informal learning within the wider framework of "lifelong-learning". Secondly, it summarises part of the results from previous research on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. It is against this background that the Inventory project was undertaken. Finally, the section provides information about the specific mandate for, and aims of, the Inventory project. The chapter then goes on to present the methodology used for the production of the Inventory, provides an overview of the key issues affecting the study. Following this chapter the remainder of this report is structured as follows: chapter two gives an overview of the research findings. Chapters three to thirty-two describe the current situation and existing initiatives on validation of non-formal and informal learning in the 30 countries covered by the Inventory. Chapter thirty-three illustrates good practice in validation by means of eight case-studies. Chapter thirty-four presents our conclusions, and chapter thirty-five discusses the future of the European Inventory initiative. Further information on the project's study tools, existing initiatives and methodologies employed for the collection of information on validation of non-formal and informal learning, further information on selected case-studies, a list of interviewees for the project and its Terms of Reference can be found in the Annexes.

1.1.1 Project background: Lifelong learning and validation of competences

The notion of lifelong learning is based on the idea that people learn throughout all stages of their life and that formal systems of education and training, as well as informal and non-formal activities organised around these systems, all have a crucial part to play.

Lifelong learning reflects the necessity of building a 'learning and knowledge society'. It is about employability and adaptability, as well as about personal development and fulfilment, and it recognises the existence of a variety of learning needs and learning forms that cannot be standardised but should rather be combined. In other words, lifelong learning emphasises that there is a need for a broader knowledge base, a need to reconcile the qualities of specialised teaching in education and training institutions and the qualities of experienced-based learning from practical working as well as life situations.

By definition, the concept of lifelong learning enlarges the scope of learning to include a wide range of organisational structures, processes and methods outside formal education and training institutions, as long as they contribute to enhancing the possibilities of self-development and skill formation of the individual. From this point of view, the implementation of this concept also challenges the traditional forms of work organisation, requiring the development of more learning-friendly work environments. This is necessary to meet the individual's need for continuous and varied renewal of knowledge and the enterprise's need for a broad array of knowledge and competencies.

There is a certain convergence in the way European Union member states understand lifelong learning and in terms of common trends. At the same time, there is a need to develop a coherent policy framework and strategy. The establishment of a system for learning throughout life requires a stronger focus on the connections between different forms of learning in different learning domains at different stages of life. This implies that a lifelong learning system has to face the challenge of linking a variety of formal as well as informal and non-formal learning processes together.

This often refers back to questions on standards and qualifications. Several countries have recently attempted to establish these connections between different learning settings through National Qualification Frameworks –e.g. Scotland, England, Ireland, amongst others. Currently the new European Qualifications Framework is also being discussed. These frameworks make use of learning outcomes and "competences" as two of their key elements. Using learning outcomes as a key element in qualification frameworks implies a lesser need to be prescriptive in relation to the inputs to the learning process. It is the level of competence achieved at the end of the process that is looked at. In this way, a broader set of learning pathways are legitimised.

What emerges from these discussions and developments is a need for greater visibility, validation and mutual recognition of the learning outcomes achieved in all learning settings (formal, informal, and non-formal). The redesign of education and training systems towards the direction of outcome-based and lifelong learning oriented systems, and of more flexible, inclusive and open structures and processes calls for the development of ad hoc methodologies and systems for measuring competences. Therefore, in this context, the question of identification, assessment and recognition of competences is crucial. Competences have to be made visible and comparable if they are to be fully integrated into such a broader strategy for knowledge reproduction and renewal.

It is therefore reasonable to argue that the question of recognition of informal and non-formal learning is located at the centre of the debate on lifelong learning. In particular, methodologies and institutions for the assessment of informal and non-formal learning can be used to establish connections between various forms and processes of learning.

1.1.2   *Project background: Overview validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe*

Across Europe there is a concentrated but highly diversified emphasis towards the introduction of methodologies and systems for identification, assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Although in many cases still at an experimental stage, there has been a wave of activity at European, national, sectoral and enterprise level to move in this direction.

The task of validation of informal and non-formal learning is complex given the fact that the rate of change and innovation in terms of methodologies, institutions and policies is high. The diversity and complexity of informal and non-formal learning has to be appropriately reflected by the methodology used to validate them.

However, the validation of informal and non-formal learning cannot be reduced to a question of methodological quality. There is also a political and institutional aspect that is likely to play a fundamental role. In other words, a number of political and institutional preconditions have to be met to make sure that the validation is attributed value and relevance. To be effective, validation procedures should be 'owned' by all stakeholders involved. As a result, the questions of participation and information become increasingly important. The transparency of the structures and procedures of validation are also important if acceptance and legitimacy are to be achieved.

Validation methodologies are developed to make informal and non-formal competences more visible and make it easier to transfer them between different contexts. However, the development of a high number of sectoral and enterprise-based methodologies tailored to specific and limited needs may contradict the general objective of increased transparency and transferability. Also, when considering the national level it is possible to argue that no common approach currently exists. The fact that initiatives have been taken at different points in time and within the context of different systems of education and training means that there is a heterogeneous mix of national approaches.

The bulk of methodologies developed at national level during the last decade have been closely integrated into formal education and training systems, making it possible to earn full or partial credit through the recognition of informal and non-formal learning. While this is often presented as a more flexible approach to education and training, the main emphasis is still directed towards established formal qualifications, and only those parts of the informal and non-formal learning defined as relevant within this setting are recognised.

In contrast to this are methodologies defined within a labour market or enterprise setting. In these cases the process may not be oriented towards formal qualifications, but rather seek identification of competences relevant to individual careers or in the context of human resource management. Less constrained by what is defined as relevant by the formal education and training system, these approaches may potentially be better positioned to identify those competences that are not developed within formal education and training and thus transcend formal qualifications. In some instances a balance between education and training and the labour market is sought through the introduction of qualification standards developed through co-operation between educational authorities and representatives of employers and employees. While systems linked to formal education have been dominant so far, the number of approaches linked to the labour market or enterprises seems to be growing.

The increasing activity at sector and enterprise level has pushed competence measurements to a great extent outside the control of public authorities, and in particular outside the control of formal education and training. It might be argued that wider national or European approaches only 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.

At national level it is possible to identify clusters of countries that have learned lessons from each other and to show how the existence of a methodological instrument in one country may attract attention from across the border. For example, the Irish approach to accreditation of prior learning is very closely related to UK efforts in this area, without apparently acknowledging the considerable problems that occurred in practice. Similarly, the Finnish system for competence based assessment has, during a period of 3-4 years, attracted considerable attention in the other Nordic countries. These experiences show that mutual learning is possible and positive. Although a substantial transfer or copying of methodologies and approaches has taken place, the degree of local adaptation and change is also considerable.

The existing literature tends to describe national initiatives in the field of validation of informal and non-formal learning by reference to clusters of EU member states. This approach is certainly valuable as it puts emphasis on common trends and similarities as well as differences within and between groups of countries characterised by similar experiences. There is also clear scope for deepening the knowledge of the existing initiatives implemented by EU member states and, in particular, to explore methods and systems for validation adopted by central and eastern European countries. This is a key component of the methodology suggested for the study, and we present our results below in this report.

1.1.3   Project aims

Against this background, in January 2004 ECOTEC Research and Consulting was commissioned by the Directorate General of Education and Culture of the European Commission to produce a European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The 2001 European Commission Communication "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" (COM (2001) 678 final, Brussels, 21.11.01) emphasised the importance of systematic exchange of experiences and the creation of an Inventory of methodologies for the validation of informal and non-formal learning[1]. The Communication, moreover, established as a priority for action that the Commission established an Inventory of methodologies, systems and standards for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which should target the international, national, and sectoral levels, as well as enterprises.

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[1] Previously, of course, the European Commission's White Paper *Teaching and Learning* (1995) helped to define and emphasise the relevance of informal and non-formal learning and it presented the idea of a common European approach in the area of identification, assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning. The resulting programmes (e.g. Leonardo da Vinci, ADAPT) initiated a number of experimental activities in this area.

As envisaged in the Communication, the main task for the Inventory to fulfill would be to support and stimulate the development of high quality assessment methodologies and standards at European, national and sectoral levels. Given the increasing political profile of non-formal and informal learning within a lifelong-learning framework, in charging the Inventory with this task the Communication established the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning as a key tool for realising lifelong learning in Europe.

Recent years have seen an increased emphasis on the relevance of learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions and on the systems and strategies to validate such learning processes. Broadly speaking, informal learning can be defined as unplanned learning in work situations and elsewhere. Non-formal learning can be defined as planned and explicit approaches to learning introduced in work organisations and elsewhere, and which are not recognised within the formal education and training system. Informal and non-formal learning are more difficult to identify, measure and recognise than formal learning. This constitutes a problem affecting competence development at all levels and as such needs to be appropriately addressed.

Many European countries are also paying increasing attention to the development of assessment methodologies trying to measure and judge the informal and non-formal learning taking place at work, in leisure time activities and at home. For example, the introduction of the 'Bilan de competence' in France and the development of a variety of approaches to accreditation of prior learning and prior experiential learning in the UK from the late 1980s can be regarded as forerunners of this tendency.

Validation issues concern both formal and informal/non-formal learning. However, it is important to point out that the challenges for assessment methodologies and systems related to informal and non-formal learning are very different from those faced within formal education. Instead of operating within a specified institutional context where learning goals have been (more or less) predefined, assessments of informal and non-formal learning have to take into consideration a variety of learning forms and outcomes. To a certain extent this is because activities previously defined as work, hobbies and family life are being redefined as part of each individual's 'lifelong learning'.

Indeed, learning taking place outside formal education and training bodies is crucially important for individuals, companies and society at large. However, and in spite of numerous valuable contributions, existing information about validation of non-formal and informal learning is still rather limited in scope in many countries, and too widely spread in academic publications, policy papers, or in the developments of the working life of civil servants, company managers and other stakeholders, without any record being maintained of achievements. Making informal and non-formal learning visible and validated is an intrinsically challenging methodological and political task. The European Inventory will help to accomplish this task by collecting updated information on current practices in a wide range of countries and making this information, including best practice examples, available within a single volume to a wide range of audiences.

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More specifically, the Inventory, as required in the Terms of Reference for the project, provides:

- a methodology for the collection and updating of qualitative and quantitative information on validation of non-formal and informal learning;

- an updated overview of European methodologies and systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning; and

- the Inventory has been developed in an electronically accessible format for presentation and dissemination of the information collected.

The methodological approach used in the project to fulfil these objectives is described in the next section.

1.2   *Methodological approach*

A summary of the methodology employed by ECOTEC to meet the objectives of the project is provided in Table 1. ECOTEC participated in and supervised all phases of the project. Overall, our emphasis was on:

- a participatory methodology which engages all stakeholders in the project and makes its results available to a wide range of actors;

- a comprehensive methodology, which covers individually all 30 countries of the EU/EEA and candidate countries; and

- a multidimensional methodology which makes use of both primary and secondary data and both qualitative and quantitative data.

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Table 1.1: Key Stages in the Methodology for the Prodcution of the European Inventory

1. Inception
2. Review of available material
3. Initial methodology for the collection and updating of information
4. Meeting with the EC and information to stakeholders in Brussels
5. Write-up of national chapters by national correspondents (ECOTEC and external subcontractors)
6. Setting up of the project web-site
7. Posting of the draft national chapters on the Inventory web-site
8. Feedback collected from Virtual Community members and other users of the project's website
9. 25 interviews with public stakeholders
10. 20 interviews with private sector companies/ representatives and voluntary sector organisations
11. Interim report
12. Second draft of national chapters
13. Language editing
14. Ten case studies
15. Analysis of primary and secondary data
16. Dissemination
17. Final report

The project started with an inception meeting in Brussels which served to clarify relevant operational issues and helped in the agreement of the overall approach for subsequent methodological phases in the research. Following the inception report, ECOTEC produced a methodology for the collection and updating of information by national correspondents – composed of ECOTEC staff and external sub-contractors – and started the review of available material on validation of non formal and informal learning. National correspondents produced 30 national chapters (EU-25 plus European Economic Areas (EEA) countries, Bulgaria and Romania), for which they collected information through literature reviews, websearches and telephone and face to face interviews.

These draft chapters were made available to the public through a dedicated website[2], launched through the "Virtual Community for validation of non formal and informal learning" and feedback from visitors to the website on the draft chapters was collected for a month. Comments were sent to national correspondents when applicable, to enable them to produce a second version of their chapters, which was later sent to public sector bodies in the relevant country for further review and comments. For this project, ECOTEC's project team has also collected additional primary data to complement the information gathered through secondary

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[2] http://www.ecotec.com/europeanInventory2004/

review of the literature and the work of national experts, through interviews with public bodies, private companies and voluntary sector organisations. A series of ten case studies were also undertaken, gathering primary in-depth data on validation initiatives by eight organisations in the private and third sector. This strategy based in the use of complementary data collection techniques was aimed at making the best use of available resources and therefore build on available secondary data, but also at preserving the opportunity to add a layer of information where gaps exist. This has not always been easy; particular difficulties were encountered in gathering data on private sector activities.

During the project, meetings with the client have been held in Brussels and Vilnius, and liaison has been on-going with members of the Experts' Group on validation through attendance to Experts' group meetings in Brussels and telephone and e-mail contact. Liaison has also been made with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Training Foundation (ETF), who contributed to the development of the project's methodological tools.

Dissemination for the project has been ongoing through a dedicated project web-site, notes on the Virtual Community on Validation of non-formal and informal learning, attendance and presentation in international conferences[3], distribution of over 200 project bookmarks, contact with national and international organisations and other dissemination mechanisms.

This final report presents the findings of the research project and provides ideas about how the Inventory may be used and developed in the future to best satisfy its original mandate and support the work of relevant stakeholders across Europe.

1.3   *Key issues affecting the study*

Several issues affected the European Inventory project and shaped its result, by providing both constraints and opportunities during the course of the research. These are reviewed in a summative way below.

1.3.1   *General issues*

The comparative nature of the project and availability of information

The European Inventory aimed to collect information on practices on validation of non-formal and informal learning on a series of pre-defined areas. However, it is necessary to recognise that measures to validate non-formal and informal learning operate in a strongly decentralised manner which includes actions from private companies and the voluntary sector. In a few countries and for some sectors, information on validation initiatives is already collated at national or sectoral level. For most others, this is not the case. Finally, the degree of

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[3] Presentation at the European Training Foundation conference on "The Common Principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning" in Vilnius, Lithuania, February 2004 and SALTO Youth "Bridges for Recognition" conference in Leuven, Belgium, January 2005. Dissemination of the project's web-site was also undertaken during the 49th Comparative and International Education Society Conference, "Beyond Dichotomies", Stanford University, Palo Alto, USA, March 2005.

development of validation initiatives also varies hugely depending on the country analysed. Since the project team has had to rely to some extent on the amount of information available – as already highlighted in the Terms of Reference – this has had an effect on the content of national chapters. The depth of the description and the substantive findings presented in the Inventory varies from Member State to Member State. In a number of cases, this has also affected the structure of particular Inventory chapters, where one or more sections have had to be suppressed or amalgamated in the presentation of validation initiatives.

Indeed, the decentralised character of validation initiatives creates additional problems as regards the role of validation in a lifelong learning strategy. If decentralisation means fragmentation and lack of linkages (for example barriers to transfer between sectors and systems) the fundamental rationale for validation is threatened. This is the reason why Common European Principles for Validation of non-formal and informal learning have been developed: to strengthen coherence and avoid this fragmentation.

In summary, it can be argued that this expectable decentralisation and diversity of initiative is inherent to the project and does not preclude the Inventory from providing useful information for the exchange of experiences, mutual learning and for building bridges between different learning settings, experiences and geographical areas. Absence of information on practices in some areas in some countries does highlight areas where some countries may want to look in more detail to the experiences of their neighbours, either to improve their mechanisms for collation and dissemination of information about existing validation practices – when they are in place – so that national and international decision-makers at public, private or voluntary sector level can benefit from the lessons learnt through their lives, or to gather ideas for the setting up of validation practices in the future where ever these are not already in place.

The timing and resources

The European Inventory project, the results of which are presented in this report, has extended its activity for 14 months. During this period, at several points strict cut-offs have had to be agreed for the presentation of outputs from national experts, for the production of case studies, for interviews with different stakeholders, for receiving feedback from readers of national chapters, for text editing, and for a variety of other tasks. Yet validation initiatives are continuously evolving, and their evolution does not necessary conform to the time-scales of the research projects which have them as object of analysis. Therefore, although the Inventory is as up to date as it has been possible, it is necessary to acknowledge that the situation in many countries is still changing, and may in the near future be different to that outlined in the Inventory reports. Moreover, various practical factors have made it so that national chapters were received and processed at different times during the project lifespan. This means that some of the chapters presented have been produced more recently than others and are therefore more up to date. In any case, we hope the reader finds useful information in all of them.

The production of the European Inventory is an extremely complex methodological and practical undertaking. This is, amongst other factors, because of the difficulty in making validation initiatives visible, and because of the spread of validation initiatives in particular in

the private and voluntary sector. In several respects, the Inventory is a task that could occupy a not so small legion of researchers. Yet, as with any other research project, boundaries had to be marked for the activity of those who wrote the bones of the Inventory – the national chapters. ECOTEC can only be grateful that many of the people who worked in this project have gone beyond the boundaries established for their work and have produced incredibly comprehensive and high-quality descriptions of validation initiatives in the countries they have covered, and we hope readers do also appreciate their "dedication beyond the call of duty".

1.3.2   *Key issues on the production of a methodology for the collection of information in the future about validation of non-formal and informal learning*

As part of their work for the Inventory project authors of national chapters were requested to provide ECOTEC with a methodology for the collection of information in the future about validation of non-formal and informal learning. Although the elements of most methodologies are common, it is also necessary to point out that for gathering relevant information about non-formal and informal learning practices a high level of context-specific knowledge is required, therefore a single methodology cannot be provided for all countries. Moreover, it is easier to present a methodology for the collection of information on top-down initiatives which includes, for example, most of the public sector initiatives. However, bottom-up initiatives on validation, usually developed by companies, branches, sectors, or third sector organisations, are equally important. This Inventory presents the sources consulted by national experts, as reported by them, in the Annex Section.

1.3.3   *Key issues on the overview of current systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning*

The key issue regarding the overviews of current situations on validation of non-formal and informal learning in the countries covered by the project is that the overviews have to inform the rationale of current initiatives, identify the key characteristics of these initiatives along with the resources invested and their outputs to draw appropriate policy implications. To respond to these needs the key questions to be addressed during the project regarding national situations were:

Rationale:

- What functions are to being fulfilled and should fulfil the methodologies and institutional systems for identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal learning?
- What competences should they validate?

Processes:

- What initiatives has the public sector put in place?
- Do they apply to "new professions" and those undergoing change where no formal qualifications are yet available for new competences or also to traditional professions?
- Is there any guidance to learners or is it an assessment of acquired competences?
- What initiatives has the private sector put in place?
- What initiatives has the voluntary sector put in place?

Partnerships:

- What partnerships are operating between the three sectors?

Resources:

- How are these initiatives and partnerships funded, managed and monitored?

Outputs:

- Does current activity contribute to progress in all the three sectors?
- What does research tell us about the success of/lessons learnt from different initiatives, especially with regards to the validity and reliability of current methodologies?

Policy implications:

- What are the key factors behind the success or otherwise of different initiatives?
- What can be done at European level to improve the current situation?

It is not possible to cover all these questions in each national chapter presented, however, they have provided the overall framework for the work of national correspondents. With regards to existing data gaps, the strongest message from those involved in the preparation of the Inventory has been the lack of comprehensive information on private sector initiatives. There are three reasons for this, not all of which apply to each country:

- lack of initiatives
- lack of studies on initiatives
- it has been difficult to obtain information as companies are reluctant to reveal their HR strategies.

The Inventory will help to address this deficit.

The other important gap is data on take-up. With the exception of a few countries, data on take up of validation initiative is generally patchy, and available only for some initiatives. One reason for a lack of data is that initiatives may be at an early stage of development (in particular in the third sector), but it is often the case too that data is simply not collected. This

is of course a major information shortcoming for policy-makers when trying to assess the importance and effectiveness of validation initiatives.

1.3.4   Key issues on the electronic format for dissemination

Finally, regarding the dissemination of the results of the project, a key issue was to agree on the best way to disseminate its results to a wide range of actors to maximise the project's impact. When thinking about the electronic format for dissemination, several aspects should be taken into consideration, including:

Mechanisms and forums for dissemination already in place

- Is information in this policy area well disseminated?
- Is information currently being properly presented: accessible for all range of interested parties, relevant and accurate?
- What instruments can best serve for dissemination purposes at European level?

How current networks can be used to disseminate the project

- What networks can be used for further dissemination of the project?

Taking these issues into consideration – in particular the existence of powerful current networks for stakeholders such as CEDEFOP's Virtual Community on validation of non-formal and informal learning, which currently has a very large membership base – ECOTEC has undertaken a number of activities for the dissemination of the project results (see above). The final report is available on Adobe Acrobat 7. Acrobat 7 has an improved search function that will enable stakeholders to retrieve information from the Inventory in an easier way than with previous versions of Acrobat.