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

## Overview of findings: needs and initiatives

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## **1.0 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS: NEEDS AND INITIATIVES**

*By Manuel Souto Otero, Andrew McCoshan, Kerstin Junge and James Winter (ECOTEC Research and Consulting)*

This section presents an overview of the key findings on national methods to validate non-formal and informal learning from a set of telephone interviews with national stakeholders and private and voluntary organisations, which were carried out by ECOTEC.

The overview looks at two main issues: the policy context and validation methodologies developed and used by the public, private and third sector in Europe. For both sections the overview seeks to establish common factors and key differences between the 30 European countries included in this study. In the final concluding section, the main results are again highlighted.

### **1.1 National motivations for endorsing validation of non-formal and informal learning**

Alongside information on the motives for endorsing initiatives for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, information about the actors involved in these programmes are crucial for understanding the national policy context in which validation initiatives are embedded. The discussion below highlights the main issues across European countries in these two areas.

Validating non-formal and informal learning is becoming an increasingly important area of activity for policy-makers and other stakeholders, and not only in the EU Member States but in other European countries, and indeed, non-European countries too<sup>1</sup>. According to the stakeholders interviewed for this project, encompassing representatives from the public, private and voluntary sector, a variety of reasons have put the issue the agenda for on countries, companies and other organisations<sup>2</sup>:

- *The needs of the knowledge economy.* The EU Member States' commitment to making Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010" (the so-called Lisbon Agenda) and growing global competition for jobs and labour is putting pressure on Europe's labour markets to become more flexible. Recognising non-formal and informal learning experiences offers an opportunity for increased labour market and geographic mobility. Indeed, in some countries the necessity to meet the needs of the knowledge economy is seen as the main driver behind the development of validation initiatives for non-formal and informal learning.
- *Meeting business needs for a qualified workforce.* In a knowledge-based and globalised economy, European businesses need a well-trained workforce that is ready to learn

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Chloe Dyson and Jack Keating (2004) "The recognition of prior Learning: Practices in the workplace" Report to the ILO.

<sup>2</sup> Stakeholder interviews, February and March 2005

continuously to meet changing demands. Validation of non-formal and informal learning crucially allows employers to identify employees' training needs as well as their skills and job requirements more accurately.

- *Improving access to the formal education system.* In many European countries access to further and higher education is traditionally only possible if a certain level of qualification, gained in the formal system and certified with officially recognised diplomas, has been achieved. This excludes those people who, for whatever reason, have not been able to acquire these diplomas. With the need for a qualified and mobile workforce growing, validation of non-formal and informal learning is required to provide direct ways to gaining formal qualifications or as door openers to higher education courses.
- *Improving the efficiency of the education and training system.* By validating people's prior experience and competences, focus falls on people's skills and competences. Focusing on competences implies acknowledging that the time required by different people – depending upon other factors such as previous learning – to obtain a formal qualification may be subject to differences. Depending on the non-formal and informal learning acquired by individuals, their period of participation in the formal system until they obtain a given qualification can be accelerated and cost savings achieved. This can benefit education providers as well as those seeking qualifications.
- *Providing opportunities for disadvantaged or excluded people.* Validating non-formal and informal learning also has an important social dimension. The social inclusion of disadvantaged people, such as groups of immigrants, is an important reason for European countries to embrace initiatives to validate non-formal and informal learning. Immigrants often arrive to their country of destination with much experience but a lack of nationally recognised qualifications or proven language skills, thus reducing their opportunities for economic participation and social integration. Validation of acquired competences helps the socially excluded to re-integrate into the labour market and society as a whole.

These reasons can, to a large extent, be integrated into one 'meta-reason'; the need to facilitate lifelong learning, as confirmed by the inventory national chapters where validation frequently is seen as an intrinsic part of such strategies. These needs are linked to specific validation approaches and aims in the next section.

## **1.2 Addressing existing needs: Key messages on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe**

The overview of key stakeholders presented above shows that a large number of organisations are involved in the discussion, development and application of methods for validating non-formal and informal learning. Indeed, this area is characterised by a certain "methodological crowding": both within individual countries and across the continent a large number of different methods are being developed and are already applied by organisations in the public, private and third sector. However, while a variety of organisations are active in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning, not all are equally involved. The public sector

and organisations of the third sector are particularly prominent in leading the debate. Private firms *appear* to be the least active, even though they are also starting to use methods to validate their employees' knowledge gained in a non-formal and informal way, usually in the workplace. It is, however, the case that information on initiatives in the private sector is very difficult to obtain. It could well be that the scarcity of information about private sector initiatives is a sign of lack of information / openness rather than lack of initiative. As will become clear from the overview below, methods used or developed in European countries are a mix of top-down (i.e. state-led) and bottom-up (i.e. driven by local or sectoral interest groups) approaches.

The remainder of this section summarises the key messages on methodologies emanating from the national chapters and stakeholder interviews undertaken for the Inventory. To this end we will present the main methodologies developed and applied across Europe in order to address the needs of the European economy and society.

### *1.2.1 Improving access to the formal education system and the efficiency of education and training systems*

Opening up paths into further or higher education, or issuing national certificates for prior or non-formal and informal learning, is seen in many European countries as important for realising the knowledge economy and as a key rationale for endorsing the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Indeed, many European countries have, through legal acts, made this possible. Because FE and HE systems are state-regulated, government ministries dominate as stakeholders in this set of methods. These are therefore top-down approaches.

There are, essentially, four approaches with which European governments are looking to increase the transparency of their FE or HE systems:

- *Validation of non-formal and informal learning through access to formal examinations.*  
Some European countries give access to final examinations in the FE or vocational training system to students who have not passed through the preceding training period in the formal system. For instance, this is the case in Germany, Austria, Norway, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Finland. While the exact procedures inevitably vary, access to the examinations is always dependent on a prior assessment of experience and knowledge through a formal education body. For example, in Germany, Austria and Liechtenstein the assessment necessary for access to final exams of vocational training courses can be done by the relevant crafts' chambers on the basis of employer-issued descriptions of work experience.
- *Access to the formal education system if entry criteria are met through prior learning.*  
Some countries (most notably Finland, Norway and the Czech Republic) give access to further and higher education courses to prospective students who lack the necessary formal certificates but can demonstrate that they have gained equivalent competences to those acquired in the formal education system, through prior learning. In Finland, for instance, a student can be admitted to polytechnic universities by demonstrating they have gained the relevant knowledge through work experience. Another example is the

University of Tartu in Estonia that has set up an accreditation method for prior learning with the aim of giving access to individuals that do not have the formal qualifications for entering higher education.

- *Individual competence assessment to shorten vocational training.* In Denmark, prospective students can undergo a competence assessment before taking up vocational training. Relevant competences acquired through prior, non-formal and informal learning are then counted towards the training course the duration of which is shortened accordingly.
- *Making non-formal and informal learning an integral part of formal training.* In some countries, like Sweden and Malta, methods have been developed that make non-formal and informal learning an integral part of a formal training programme. In Sweden, practical training at the workplace can earn a pupil the necessary credits for gaining a high school diploma. The University of Malta has set up a system that allows students to gain credit points for volunteering and have these counted towards the final degree.

### *1.2.2 Meeting needs of the knowledge economy and business needs for a qualified workforce*

The knowledge economy and growing international competition means that businesses require an increasingly well qualified workforce and employees that keep on learning in order to be able to stay in business. Historically, these objectives have been achieved through continuing training. Increasingly, businesses are supplementing this by employing methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. However, based on the evidence of the national chapters, it appears that the development of private-sector methods is uneven across European countries. While private sector organisations in Scandinavian countries as well as the Netherlands, Germany, France and Belgium have developed and are applying a good set of validation methodologies, it is more difficult to find extensive usage of validation methodologies across other European countries.

Methods developed and employed by businesses serve three main purposes:

- *Validating employees' competencies gained at the workplace.* Across Europe, individual businesses and business representatives are developing and employing methods to identify and assess and recognise the skills that their employees have gained at the workplace. In some countries, this activity may lead to the issuing of certificates as "proof of competence". In France, for instance, the Association for the Certification of Vocational Skills (*L'Association pour la certification de compétences professionnelles*), created by the national network of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, has established a system of certifying work-based skills for nine occupations.<sup>3</sup> The certification is available to all employees based on a portfolio submitted to an assessment panel. In the Netherlands, a number of industry sectors (house painting, meat, construction, process industries as well

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<sup>3</sup> Secretarial and personal assistant skills, sales, remote sales, customer service, management, office IT skills, maintenance, hotel reception, communication.

as the care sector) have developed methods to validate the work-based skills of employees with 3-5 years' of experience. Collective agreements in certain sectors (for instance the metal industry) give employees the right to participate in validation initiatives obliging the employer to support this endeavour.

- *Identifying employee skills in order to identify skills gaps in the company.* While the end-purpose of the above methodologies is the validation, and often certification, of competences, thus showing both employer and employee the skills that have been acquired at the work-place, a second set of private sector methodologies aims specifically at identifying skills gaps in order to tailor company training around this information. A telecommunications company in Denmark, for instance, has introduced validation of non-formal and informal learning into its 11-day basic training courses. In the first two days of the course reading and writing tests as well as individual interviews determine the learning needs and preferences of individual employees. Training in the following 9 days is tailored to the employees' needs as determined with the help of validation methods of non-formal and informal learning. Similar types of methodologies can be identified for the private sectors in Norway and Belgium.
- *Awarding professional qualifications on the basis of skills gained through non-formal and informal learning.* A final set of private sector methodologies aims at issuing professional qualifications based on competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning. Methodologies to achieve this aim are used in several countries. In order to widen its employees' skills base, a wood processing company in Finland developed a system of practical and written tests taken by an external assessor, employer and employee representatives for employees with 1-2 years' experience. This together with the in-company training can result in obtaining nationally recognised qualifications. In Slovenia, individual companies and the Chamber of Craft are drawing up and implementing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) as a way to certify non-formal and informal learning at the national level.

### *1.2.3 The need to certify and recognise people's skills, including those at greater disadvantage in the labour market*

Recognising and certifying individuals' skills is an important element of lifelong learning and the continuing upskilling of the European workforce. It identifies the skills an individual has gained outside the formal education system and thus demonstrates an individual's continuous professional and skills development.

Arguably, recognising and certifying an individual's skills is particularly beneficial in the case of disadvantaged people (for instance immigrants, hard-to-reach young people, women outside of the labour market) who, for a variety of reasons, may lack formal proof of their competencies. In this area both public and third sector organisations (in particular training and voluntary organisations) are developing and applying relevant methodologies. These fall roughly into the following two categories:

- *Using national competence standards as a framework for identifying and evaluating skills gained through non-formal and informal learning.* A number of organisations are using national competence standards as a framework for their methodologies to validate non-formal and informal learning. This is most notably the case for eastern European countries, where in several cases national education and training systems are currently being comprehensively re-organised. In Romania, for instance, the development of around 300 occupational standards goes hand in hand with building a national system for validating non-formal and informal learning. A similar process can be observed in Estonia, where the development of professional standards has been linked to a method to attest an individual's professional qualifications (through either written / oral exams, test assignment, attestation on the basis of documents or a combination of these).
- *Capturing soft skills.* The chapters provided in this report show that great methodological variety exists for validating soft skills. The motivations for validating these skills vary, but also include the need to recognise the skills that people at disadvantage in the labour market have. Often, these methodologies tend to involve a mix of approaches (usually a combination of self-assessment, external assessment and written work), brought together in competence portfolios. These methods are able to capture both soft skills, for instance social skills or management competencies, as well as technical knowledge. Examples for such methods include the recreational activity study book developed by the Finnish Youth Organisation or the Volunteers' Book, developed by a voluntary sector organisation in Hamburg.

### **1.3 Key features of the validation methodologies**

Methods to validate non-formal and informal learning thus have a variety of purposes and are designed in different ways to accommodate these purposes. Nevertheless, certain common traits can be identified regarding a number of key areas relevant for validation. These are areas of use; transferability between sectors; reliability; validity; and authenticity. This section of the chapter examines each of these areas in greater detail.

#### **1.3.1 Areas of use**

The summary of validation approaches given in the section above indicates that the use of validation methods is concentrated on a small number of areas. This is confirmed by information given by stakeholders in interviews given as part of this project. Across European countries, key areas of use for validation of non-formal and informal learning are:

- *Traditional professions.* In some countries, traditional professions (for instance wood processing) are an important area for the application of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. In these industries, employees tend to be less well qualified and businesses also find it difficult to release employees for training. This makes validation of non-formal and informal learning the most cost-effective way of upskilling the workforce. Thus, traditional professions dominate validation practices in Norway, Lithuania and Finland. Indeed, the initiative by a Finnish wood processing company highlighted above is

a prime example of the use of validation in the sector and the benefits to both employer and employee thereof obtained.

- *New professions where formal qualifications have not yet been established.* New professions are a prime area for applying methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In Iceland, for instance, new professions by far dominate the use of validation methods according to the opinion of stakeholders interviewed for this project. 'New' in this context can mean two things. New might refer to a professions that, compared to the traditional occupations in a country, have emerged relatively recently (for instance ones related to IT) so that frameworks for examining skills similar to those of established occupations do not (yet) exist. New professions may also be occupations that are not in themselves new (for instance caring for the elderly at home) but for which a set "learning path" had not previously existed. Professions that fall into this category are non-medical home based care for the elderly, the infirm, children and others; the real estate sector; trainers; project managers; and the fields of IT and leisure.
- *Social recognition in civil society.* This is a wide area capturing both civil society engagement (i.e. volunteering) and the recognition by society of an individual's achievements through validation. Both fields are an important area of application for validation methods in Europe. In some countries, such as Cyprus, it is the main field of application. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in this area can provide for the social and economic integration of disadvantaged groups (such as immigrants, older workers or disengaged young people) by demonstrating to them and to the outside world their abilities and achievements. The methods referred to under "the need to recognise people's skills" in the section above are good examples for this kind of use.

### *1.3.2 Transferability*

Methods to validate non-formal and informal learning are applied in different sectors - public, private and the third sector. The question of whether validation in one sector is recognised in another sector is important because it creates the preconditions for people to move between education systems and jobs more easily.

Where validation of non-formal and informal learning is embedded into a national qualification framework and / or occupational standards, the general recognition of competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning can be ensured. This is, for instance, the case in France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Romania and Estonia. In Austria, transferability is possible where validation is integrated in national legislation and is embedded in exams that are part of the formal system as this awards officially recognised certificates and qualifications.

In a number of countries, new legislation envisages the recognition of validation across sectors. For instance, in Spain a new Law on Qualifications and VET will establish a validation system that has a national reach and will be implemented in all sectors. Similarly, new legislation in the UK, Luxembourg and Italy is likely to improve the transferability of validation methods in use and under development.

### 1.3.3 *Reliability, validity and authenticity*

Because non-formal and informal learning is, by definition, not subject to explicitly defined learning steps and is thus more individualised than formal learning, it is important that the methodologies applied are valid, reliable and authentic.

Even though the development of most methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning precedes proposals for the recently adopted Common European Principles on validation of non-formal and informal learning, which emphasise the importance of validity and reliability, it is noteworthy that on balance much care has been taken to ensure the methods are reliable, valid and authentic:

- In several countries formal exams are used to validate non-formal and informal learning (notably in the case of Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Luxembourg). This ensures that all three criteria – validity, reliability and authenticity – are met through a procedure that is both tailored to the subject and objective.
- Portfolio approaches are often frequently applied. This involves assessment with the help of a combination of methodologies, usually a mix of self-assessment, external assessment (either in a group or individually) and written tests. The competence portfolios used in France, Luxembourg and the UK are good examples for such an approach. This approach reduces the probability that tests results are subjective while at the same time improving reliability, authenticity and validity.
- Where competences gained through non-formal and informal learning are validated neither through formal exams nor through the portfolio method, an external assessor is often involved, who takes a leading role in certifying an individual's competences. This is, for instance, the case in the Finnish Recreational Activity Studies book where a young person's volunteering experience is assessed by one adult. One of the methods practiced in the Czech Republic – the recognition of an individual's prior learning for the enrolment in initial vocational training courses – gives the decision-making power to one individual: the school headmaster. The same method does not have, however, a fully standardised final examination system so results vary from school to school.

Despite these encouraging signs and existing examples of good practice, lack of reliability and validity in validation methodologies is seen by European stakeholders as a barrier to the take-up of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. High-quality tutors and assessors are as paramount for the successful take-up of validation methods as reliable, valid and authentic methods. The section below explores the issue of take-up in more detail, whereas the following section outlines in more detail the range of stakeholders involved in validation of non-formal and informal learning initiatives.

#### **1.4 Take-up and acceptance of validation of non-formal and informal learning**

The take-up and acceptance of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning varies greatly across European countries and methodologies. Information on take-up relies on the existence of a monitoring system. Many of the initiatives examined, however, are at an early stage of implementation and thus have not yet developed to the point whereby the collection of statistics is relevant or feasible.

Moreover, the general acceptance of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning varies greatly across European countries. Indeed, it would appear that with regard to the status of implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning, European countries can be divided into three broad clusters: high, medium or low degree of development. This assessment can be made by looking at individual countries in response to three criteria, which are: existence of a national legal framework of strategy on validation of lifelong learning; high quality methods (ie those that are valid and reliable); and participation of all three sectors (public, private and voluntary) in the development of methodologies.

Countries with a *high degree of acceptance* of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning have either a national strategy on the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning or a strong legal framework. They will have a good set of established high quality methods in place. All sectors – public, private and voluntary – have developed and applied these methods. According to the information collected for the national chapters, these criteria currently apply to the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland as well as the Netherlands and France. In Sweden and Finland, for instance, validation is part of comprehensive national (lifelong learning) policies which means that a national framework and coherent strategies are in place.

Countries with a *medium degree of acceptance* of methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning have some form of national policy in place, an uneven set of methods across the sectors (for instance, public sector or voluntary sector initiatives may dominate). Existing methods are at an early stage of development. Countries that fall in this category are the UK, Italy, Ireland and Norway. In Italy, for instance, legislation exists, but remains at an early (framework) stage. Germany and Austria are also part of this group. While a variety of methods, some of them well-established, exists take up and transferability tend to be low.

Countries with a *low degree of acceptance* of methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning have no national legal framework or strategy in place, or have developed this only recently, and have few methods across the sectors with gaps in one or several of them. Existing methods may also be at an early stage of development. In the education and employment systems of these countries as a whole, validation of non-formal and informal learning plays a low role as benefits are regarded as uncertain. Countries that fall into this category are, for instance, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein and Hungary. Equally, other eastern European countries with a (legal) framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in place but methods predominantly still in development (such as Romania, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria) also belong to this category.

The reasons for embracing, developing and taking up validation of non-formal and informal learning initiatives outlined above in this report are to a large extent new; that is they have become important economic or societal issues in the last 10-15 years. With very few exceptions, it is therefore only recently that education stakeholders in Europe have been endorsing and contributing to the development of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning in their respective countries in order to help address these needs. The next section explores in greater detail the main stakeholders that are involved in developing and applying validation methods.

### **1.5 Key stakeholders in the area of validation of non-formal and informal learning**

In most European countries, several types of organisations are active in the area of validating non-formal and informal learning. Key stakeholders can be grouped together into the following categories.

First and foremost, *public sector organisations* are paramount in developing validation methodologies and setting the framework for their use. In all European countries, Ministries of Education are key stakeholders in ongoing debates about non-formal and informal learning. They often set the legal framework for the development and use of methods to validate non-formal learning or commission the development of methodologies by other organisations. In addition, in several countries other ministries are also involved in policy debates because they have some responsibility for education and training relating to their specific area of competence. These include most notably Ministries for Labour, Ministries for Health and occasionally Ministries for Agriculture. In some countries, other Ministries may be involved such as the Romanian Ministry of Culture and Cults. Where countries have strong regional administrations - such as Belgium, Italy or Germany - the equivalent regional ministries are also stakeholders in the process of validating non-formal and informal learning.

Various European countries have also *quasi-governmental bodies* with a key role in the delivery and / or monitoring of education policies. These organisations are often also involved in developing methods for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Examples include the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Romania, Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Romania and Spain.

Finally, other public bodies that are stakeholders in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning are, for instance, national learning / training centres (e.g. Sweden, Malta and Romania), employment services (e.g. in the Netherlands) or Higher Education providers.

In many European countries, *social partners* (trade unions and employer representatives) are also involved to some degree in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is not only the case in corporatist countries such as Germany and Austria where the social partners play an integral role in the development of the dual system of vocational training. Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Lithuania are also among the countries where the social partners are key stakeholders.

*Private sector and voluntary sector organisations* are the last set of stakeholders present in most countries, although their involvement at national level is normally small – there are more “users and developers” of validation methodologies rather than those involved in the regulation of this area. Occasionally, there are also private sector organisations with expertise in validation involved in regulation process or standards’ setting within one or more industry sectors. In the UK and Ireland, for instance, some private organisations that have developed expertise in the area of validation offer services in this area to other private sector organisations.

In all European countries, public sector organisations thus play an important role in the development of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. Indeed, even in countries with a little developed set of methodologies, government departments are heavily involved in driving the agenda in this area forward.

## **1.6 Summary**

Stakeholders in all European countries are developing and applying a variety of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. The motivations for doing so are significantly based on the needs of the knowledge economy for a qualified workforce and the opportunities for social and economic inclusion.

To this end, European stakeholders of have developed a large number of methodologies in order to address these needs. These employ a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches as well as both summative and formative methods.

European countries are at different stages of development when it comes to implementing methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. In general, those countries whose education system is competence based and / or have a national qualifications framework find it easier to implement validation methods comprehensively than in countries where these preconditions are not met. Indeed, several countries in eastern Europe, where education systems are currently being comprehensively re-organised, tend to introduce competence-based systems within which they fit any approaches to validate non-formal and informal learning.

While European countries are at different stages when it comes to developing and applying methods to validate non-formal and informal learning, there is broad consensus on the growing importance of the subject matter nationally and internationally. The coming years are therefore likely to see major developments in this field, relating not only to the application of methods but also to the application of the common European principles and improved information on take-up.