

European Inventory

on validation of informal and
non-formal learning



Education and Culture DG



Validation of Informal and Non-Formal Learning in the Third Sector – A Compendium

1.1 Introduction

This compendium forms part of the 2007 European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning¹. The Inventory provides an up-to-date catalogue of good practices in validation and is an important reference for stakeholders. It is made up of 32 individual country chapters, six case studies, three ‘sectoral’ compendia (of which this is one) and an overall report of findings. The compendia (public, private and third sector) discuss key trends, characteristics and methodological approaches within the three different sectors. They are intended for use by stakeholders in the field of validation (in particular practitioners), who will find the compendia have an eminently practical focus.

This Third Sector compendium examines the following issues in turn:

- Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning in the Third Sector
- Rationale for involvement in validation initiatives
- Approaches to the development of VINFL initiatives
- Methods employed
- Outputs / Outcomes and Impact
- Barriers to take-up
- Success Factors
- Conclusions

The findings within the 32 country chapters of the European Inventory have been analysed to inform the content of this compendium. Throughout, examples of initiatives have been taken from the country chapters², to illustrate good practice and lessons learned in the implementation of validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL) in the third sector. The aim is to enhance the exchange of experiences and to enable different sectoral stakeholders to learn from tried and tested initiatives in their field without needing to refer to the detailed individual country chapters.

¹ www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/

² Many examples are examined in more detail within the individual country chapters, all of which can be found on the European Inventory website

1.2 Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning in the Third Sector

1.2.1 What is the third sector?

Terminology and definitions for the third sector are complex at both national and European level. The term '**third sector**' has a variety of definitions and is subject to some debate. For example, in the UK, the Government defines the third sector as "*non-governmental organisations that are value-driven and which principally reinvest their surpluses to further social, environmental or cultural objectives*"¹. It includes within this definition the following types of organization:

- Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), consisting of charities (registered and unregistered) and of non-charitable VCOs
- Social enterprises
- Cooperatives and mutuals

A related term used in some countries and also by EU institutions is 'civil society'. The European Union website, Europa, notes that in the same way as the third sector, "*There is no commonly accepted or legal definition of the term 'civil society organisation'*".² A definition adopted by the EU is:

*"a range of organisations which include: the labour-market players (i.e. trade unions and employers federations - the "social partners"); organisations representing social and economic players, which are not social partners in the strict sense of the term (for instance, consumer organisations); NGOs (non-governmental organisations), which bring people together in a common cause, such as environmental organisations, human rights organisations, charitable organisations, educational and training organisations, etc.; CBOs (community-based organisations), i.e. organisations set up within society at grassroots level which pursue member-oriented objectives, e.g. youth organisations, family associations and all organisations through which citizens participate in local and municipal life; and religious communities."*³

The third sector initiatives referred to in the country chapters of the European Inventory refer to organisations which would be considered, in that country, to be 'third sector'. We have not included labour-market organisations. Their involvement is referred to in the

¹ HM Treasury, 2007, The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration: Final Report, Available at: <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/>

² The European Commission and Civil Society, http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/apgen_en.htm

³ Commission Communication: General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission, COM(2002)704

‘Private Sector’ section of each chapter. Thus, broadly, our analysis covers the work of non-profit organisations such as:

- Voluntary organisations
- Community-based organisations
- Charitable organisations
- Member-based organisations (youth organisations in particular).

Initial analysis suggests that validation is particularly relevant / prominent for three particular 'types' of third sector organisations. These are voluntary organisations, youth organisations and also education and training providers which are considered to be part of the ‘third sector’. They are generally providers of non-formal and above all informal education. Validation initiatives within youth organisations can be found for example in the Netherlands, Finland and Luxembourg and within volunteering associations in Croatia, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scotland. Examples of VINFL delivered by non-formal education and training providers can be found in Belgium, Finland and Denmark, among others.

There are also some community organisations and charities which are active in the field of validation. As an example, partners in the *Sylfaen Cymunedol* community development project in Wales have developed a portfolio method of accrediting informal and non-formal learning for participants in its programme. We explore this in further detail below.

The third sector provides great opportunities for individuals to gain skills and competences, through a variety of activities. For example, volunteer work, membership of a club or group (e.g. sports, youth organisations) or as a paid member of staff (validation offers an alternative method for third sector organisations to support career development of individuals and thereby increased ‘professionalism’ within the sector).

Individuals can gain a wide range of skills through their involvement in third sector organisations - a few examples are given in the table below:

Independence	Self-discipline
Communication skills	Creativity
ICT skills	Team-working skills
Language skills	Environmental protection

Leadership

Organisation and problem-solving skills

VINFL aims to make visible and to value the full range of knowledge and competences held by an individual, irrespective of where or how these have been acquired and is a key instrument for the transfer and acceptance of all learning outcomes across different settings. As such, it represents a key tool for recognising skills and competences gained through third sector activities and experience, as equal to those gained in a formal education or professional setting. Further, validation activities within the third sector help to recognise the valuable contribution these organisations, and the individuals involved in them, make to our societies and economies.

1.2.2 Third sector stakeholders

Stakeholders in the development of VINFL for the third sector include:

Third sector organisations: may be interested and / or involved in the development of validation initiatives. Also, peer organisations which may not have a history of involvement represent a ‘mainstreaming’¹ target audience for sharing learning and experience.

Third sector umbrella / representative bodies or fora: may be interested and / or involved in the development of validation initiatives. These organisations may be able to represent a sub-sector or group of organisations with a common message and can ensure consistency and transferability in the development of VINFL initiatives.

National Ministries / policy makers: where there is no involvement of policy-makers in the development of an initiative, these represent a target audience for dissemination and mainstreaming activities.

National Validation bodies (where these exist): they can provide support and guidance in the development of initiatives and help to transfer good practice and lessons learned.

Potential beneficiaries: it is important to know what the beneficiaries want from VINFL and which methods will work best for them. Consultation with potential users of a validation initiative is essential to ensure that it is designed in response to demand and tailored to the needs of the target group.

¹ Mainstreaming can be defined as: *"the sharing and transferring of good practice, lessons learned and innovative areas of projects or programmes"*.

Education and Training Providers: represent potential partners in the development of initiatives and/or target audiences for dissemination and mainstreaming. They can offer valuable expertise and their buy-in can mean that validation methodologies can be used to facilitate access to education and training opportunities and further employment for individual beneficiaries.

Employers: also represent potential partners in the development of initiatives and/or target audiences for dissemination and mainstreaming. They can offer valuable expertise and their buy-in can mean that validation methodologies can be used to facilitate access to education and training opportunities for individual beneficiaries.

1.2.3 VINFL in the Third Sector

The final main report of the 2005 European Inventory concluded that public and voluntary sector organisations were particularly prominent in leading the debate on methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. The report also identified that voluntary sector organisations are mainly “users and developers” of validation methodologies rather than being involved in the regulation of this area.

The individual country chapters of the 2007 European Inventory focus in greater detail on validation in the third sector. Within the chapters, three different approaches to this issue are evident:

- validation delivered by third sector organisations in relation to **non-formal learning** (we have found many examples of third sector organisations which deliver non-formal learning courses, such as liberal adult education in Finland);
- validation delivered by third sector organisations in relation to **informal learning** (competences acquired through participation in activities such as voluntary and community work, membership of youth groups, sports clubs etc);
- validation of third sector activities taken into account in **initiatives delivered within other sectors** (generally, public initiatives). For example, under the French national system of VAE, voluntary (unpaid) activities are eligible within the three years of experience required to undergo a validation procedure but assessment and certification is delivered, in general, by formal education and training providers.

This compendium will focus on the first two of the above scenarios (validation delivered by third sector organisations). Further information on public sector initiatives can be found in the equivalent Public Sector Compendium, in the overall final report and in the individual country chapters.

The 2007 Inventory country chapters reveal that there is a great variety in the level of interest and activity in validation across the third sector. In some countries (e.g. Estonia, Hungary, Latvia) few (if any) examples of third sector initiatives were identified, whereas in others (e.g. Germany, Finland, the Netherlands) the third sector was found to be very active, either in delivering their own validation initiatives, or working in partnership with public and/or private actors. This Compendium will identify good practice and lessons learned from across the 32 countries, with the aim of contributing to the exchange of learning and experiences among interested stakeholders.

1.3 Rationale for involvement

As stated above, initial analysis suggests that validation is particularly relevant / prominent for three particular 'types' of third sector organisations. These are voluntary organisations, youth organisations and education and training providers which are considered to be part of the 'third sector' (generally, providers of non-formal education). Examples of initiatives led by charities and community organisations can also be drawn from our research. The research has identified some of the reasons for involvement of the different third sector stakeholders in validation. We will explore these in turn below.

1.3.1 Third sector organisations – why get involved?

- *To gain recognition for non-formal and informal learning within third sector*

We have identified many examples of education and training provided by third sector organisations. In several countries, it is evident that this type of education and training is recognised and respected.

For example, in Italy, training provided by the third sector, especially by Catholic associations, is highly prevalent and valued. Italian-based charities, such as the *Red Cross*, have developed validation methods for their training courses. The attendance certificate for these courses, for instance in first aid, can result in additional credits for jobs in the health service.¹

In Finland too, liberal adult education (non-certificate-orientated learning) has a strong foot-hold in society, thus the way in which formal education institutes and employers take into consideration learning which has taken place within the non-formal education sphere is of both great interest and importance to a range of different stakeholders.

Thus, it is evident that a lot of valuable learning is facilitated by third sector organisations. VINFL represents a tool to recognise this learning and the skills and competences individual participants develop as a result.

- *To gain recognition for voluntary/community/youth activities*

As indicated above, a high volume of skills and competences are developed through third sector activities and experiences. Validation represents an opportunity to capture and record these and enhance their transferability to other sectors. It is argued by third sector organisations that these skills and competences vary greatly but all deserve recognition, on a par with formal and professional learning experiences.

¹ VPL, WP3: National Review, Italy. Available at: http://www.vpl4.eu/national/download_view.php?id=78

The wide variety of third sector learning opportunities is demonstrated in the German certificate *Landesnachweis Nordrhein-Westfalen – Engagiert im sozialen Ehrenamt* which was introduced in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia in 2000 for the broad social (mainly volunteer) sector. This includes, for example, working within health self-help groups, projects concerning women's issues, youth work activities, nursing, assistance to elderly people, etc.¹

These activities clearly help individuals to develop a range of competences such as communication skills, team working and problem-solving skills. The certificate can be used to capture these skills and represents evidence which can be used to ensure their recognition in other environments.

- *As a recruitment tool*

Validation represents a useful tool during the recruitment process – of staff, volunteers, members or learners for example.

The Lithuanian *Child Line* charity (as well as other telephone help services in Lithuania) uses a validation method to carry out an initial assessment of an individual's competences acquired in different settings (for example, family, community life, individual experience etc.) and through non-formal and informal learning. This assessment is very important in order to determine their suitability for the roles involved, since volunteers are not required to have any specific / formal qualification in order to start work within the organisation - instead they are required to have "suitable" personal features and competences that correspond to the service field checked through validation methods.

VINFL therefore represents a method of recognising skills which may not be recorded through formal certificates and is particularly useful during the recruitment process, to determine whether an individual possesses the skills required to fulfil a certain role.

- *To support the career development of their volunteers/employees*

Time and resource constraints may mean that career development opportunities are restricted within the third sector, as in other sectors. VINFL therefore represents a chance to capture the progress of an individual and reward their development appropriately.

Volunteer Development Scotland is a voluntary sector learning and training provider, which provides a short one-day course to volunteer organisations on developing volunteer

¹ The assessment is usually performed by the internal assessors and the procedure leads to an official certificate. An example can be found at: http://www.mgffi.nrw.de/ehrenamt/musterbeispiele_landesnachweis.pdf

portfolios. The portfolios can be developed to assist volunteer organisations in the training and development of volunteers. Validation is highlighted as a means of assessing experience and training to provide evidence for use in further or higher education or in employment.¹

Thus, in this case, a portfolio detailing the competences an individual has acquired through volunteer work can be used to assess their progress and achievements, and to support their further development in line with these.

- *To improve the 'image' / professionalism of the sector*

Validation of the skills and competences acquired through involvement in third sector activities represents an opportunity to gain recognition and 'credibility', within the sector, as well as by the public and private sector. It can also help to encourage quality and professionalism within the third sector, by introducing methods of capturing and providing evidence of the skills and competences acquired through third sector activities.

In Poland, the Non-Governmental Organisations' Trainers' Association (STOP) implements a jointly developed certification system aimed at increasing professionalism of the occupation of trainers for NGOs.

STOP, certification for NGO trainers, Poland²

STOP, the Non-Governmental Organisations' Trainers' Association in Poland, decided to provide competence standards for its NGO trainers, supported by a certification system. In so doing, STOP hopes to ensure quality of service provision by its members and by those means it hopes to increase the trust and motivation of NGOs in training.

A description of the competences of a STOP trainer has been developed, with a list of minimum entrance competence requirements. STOP trainers are expected to:

- be able to identify training needs
- prepare training and evaluate its results
- apply active learning methods
- implement training in accordance with the specific needs and situation of the group.

The system has elaborated a three-stage procedure of certification. It distinguishes two degrees of certificates, where a higher amount of actually taught hours (practical experience) is required for the higher degree.

The concept is based on sharing competences and evaluation by supervisors on the basis of actual training delivery. A set of required documents, along with the assessment by the supervisor is submitted to the

¹ OECD (2006) Scottish Contribution to UK Report on Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning

² <http://free.ngo.pl/stop/>

Certification Commission of STOP, which takes the final decision.

If awarded, the certificate is valid for five years. During the first three months after obtaining the certificate the trainer has to provide feedback on the experience and from clients.

- *To facilitate access to formal education and/or employment*

VINFL can be used to enable an individual to gain access to or credit for formal education. It can also be used as a stepping stone towards employment.

The example below, from Finland, shows how partnership-working facilitated the development of a validation method which can be used to gain an exemption from a formal training course.

Handicrafts and arts in Mid-Finland (*Käsi- ja taideteollinen yhteistyö Keski-Suomessa*)

The Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School (*Keski-Suomen käsi- ja taideteollisen oppilaitos*) and the Institute representing employees in the Jyväskylä region (*Jyväskylän kaupungin työväenopiston*) have had a method in place for the validation of non-formal learning since 1992. These two educational (formal and non-formal) establishments have worked together to ensure that the students of the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School can access official validation for the studies that they have completed at the Institute representing employees in the Jyväskylä region. In other words, a successful completion of one of the textile courses of this third sector Institute leads to an exemption at the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School.

This has been established by close collaboration between these two establishments. The textile courses at the Institute were created in consultation with staff from the art school. A director of the school has also personally attended some of the courses of the Institute to learn about their content and to assess complementarity between their own courses and those of the Institute.

Today the students of the Institute receive a certificate upon a successful completion of one of their courses, which are officially recognised by the Mid-Finland Handicraft and Art School.

Thus, validation can be used to formally recognise skills which have been developed in the third sector, converting these skills into evidence (a certificate) which is recognised and accepted by other organisations and in other sectors. This can help an individual to take up further opportunities, such as in education / training or employment.

- *To integrate particular target groups*

Some third sector organisations play an important role in working with disadvantaged groups. VINFL 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, as demonstrated in the example given below.

Progress GB, using VINFL to help refugees, UK

'Progress GB' is a development partnership funded by the ESF EQUAL programme. Its lead partner is NIACE¹, a non-governmental organisation working in the field of adult learning. The purpose of the Progress-GB Development Partnership is to pilot and disseminate innovative approaches that will support employers to overcome skill shortages, by promoting inclusive work practices, and to address the needs of refugee and migrant workers to develop and adapt their skills for the UK labour market through a range of lifelong learning opportunities.

People who come to the UK from other countries can encounter considerable difficulties in gaining recognition for their existing skills, experience and qualifications. As part of the Progress GB project, the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham has developed new models to support recognition through skills auditing, work experience, top-up training, and developing migrants' awareness of the UK labour market.

Refugees are offered an assessment by an advisor, who discusses the programme and audits candidates' language and skills levels. They are then directed either to a vocational orientation programme, which identifies gaps in ability and further appropriate training, or to a vocational language programme. In some vocational areas (for example business administration, health care, construction, general maintenance and social research), skills can be accredited whilst on the orientation programme. Different pathways are accredited with different bodies but these include: NOCN (National Open College Network) up to Level 3, NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) Level 2 and the CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) accreditation for construction. Once they are work-ready, refugees are offered a supervised work experience placement, where a mentor is assigned to help them integrate into the workplace. Throughout the process, refugees are offered ongoing assistance with looking for a job or becoming self-employed, and may leave the programme at any time to take up paid employment.²

- *To ensure the sector is represented in the development of (national) initiatives*

In countries where a national system of validation is under development, it is important for all relevant stakeholders to be able to participate in this process.

In Ireland, *Comhairle*, now the *Citizens Information Board*, took part in the 2006 FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) pilot project (a project launched in 2006 to identify and evaluate the experience of providers and FETAC in offering RPL), which enabled the Board to gain experience of the national validation process and recognise emerging issues with the implementation of VINFL. The project involved 9 providers, including former awarding bodies, a college of further education, a sector industry body, a voluntary organisation, a community education provider and two private providers. Hence, although small scale, it aimed to be representative of further education and training.

¹ National Institute of Adult Continuing Education: <http://www.niace.org.uk/>

² Taken from 'Overcoming Barriers', a dissemination leaflet for Progress GB, available at: <http://www.equal-works.com/ProductHome.aspx?ety=2eeca14b-594c-42b0-885d-39c555eaf280>

The evaluation of this pilot has recently been published, in 2007. As a participant in the project, *Comhairle* was able to gain experience of the RPL process and recognise emerging issues with the implementation of RPL. One of *Comhairle*'s reasons for involvement in the project was to be able to develop VINFL in line with their own training and development services – as one of the nine providers involved, *Comhairle* would have been able to give input on the needs and experiences of the third sector and ensure that these were captured alongside those of other providers in the evaluation report.

- *In response to national/European policy initiatives (e.g. lifelong learning strategies, Youth Programme common objectives)*

Increasingly, the importance of implementing measures to facilitate validation of informal and non-formal learning is referred to in national and European policies. Some third sector organisations recognise their role in the delivery of such policies and undertake their own validation initiatives with these in mind.

For example, the *attestation de compétences* developed in Luxembourg for validation of youth voluntary work is said to be a response to both European and national recommendations with regards lifelong learning. The need for a validation process to recognise skills and competences developed through voluntary work was seen as a vital component of lifelong learning.

Thus, through validation, third sector organisations are able to contribute to the achievement of the common national or European goals.

1.3.2 Individual beneficiaries

Some of the reasons for involvement in validation initiatives listed above also apply to the individual beneficiaries of validation initiatives, such as:

- *To gain recognition for non-formal training provided within third sector*
- *To gain recognition for voluntary/community/youth activities*
- *To gain access to formal education and/or employment*

Another reason for individuals to take part in validation initiatives is to benefit from its 'soft outcomes' such as improved confidence and self-esteem. These soft outcomes may then help an individual to gain access to formal education and/or employment, or simply to take on more variety or responsibilities within their current role. These benefits to individuals are explored in more detail in the 'Outputs / Outcomes and Impact' section below.

1.4 Approaches to the development of VINFL initiatives

1.4.1 Bottom-up approaches

As stated in the 2005 Inventory, third sector organisations are mainly “users and developers” of validation methodologies, rather than being involved in regulation. The country chapters of the 2007 European Inventory reveal examples of ‘bottom-up’ initiatives which have been developed by third sector organisations, individually or collectively, in response to identified needs.

Thus, steps towards the introduction of VINFL may be made by third sector organisations without their explicit awareness that their activities would be deemed as ‘validation’. The Inventory has revealed a number of cases, where third sector organisations are employing relatively ‘simple’ methodologies for assessment and validation of an individual’s participation in their activities (e.g. recording only duration of service, post held and activities undertaken, rather than competences developed and at what level), which are as yet not linked in to formal qualifications and standards systems.

For example, in Germany, there are several ‘pass’ initiatives in the voluntary sector, such as the *Hamburger Freiwilligenbuch* (Hamburg voluntary booklet). They describe the tasks that the ‘pass’ owner has performed and the duration, which are both certified by a third person or organisation. However, there are no standards for describing the tasks and often there is wide variety and inconsistencies in the descriptions provided¹.

These initial activities demonstrate the potential within the third sector for the introduction of more ‘refined’ VINFL procedures and verify an identified need for such procedures.

Our research has shown that umbrella organisations play a very important role in the development and implementation of VINFL within the third sector. There are a number of examples of umbrella organisations or sectoral fora taking the lead on the development of validation policies and methodologies which can apply across a particular sector or type of learning.

For example, in Belgium, a working group was established in 2005, led by SoCiuS (the support service for social and cultural adult education) and FOV (Federation of Organisations active in the popular (non-formal) adult education scene), to develop a vision around EVC² in socio-cultural work. In the same year, a strategy on EVC was developed by the socio-cultural sector, including the policy areas of Youth (represented by

¹ BMBF 2004, p. 73

² In Flanders, as in the Netherlands, the concept of validation of informal and non-formal learning is generally referred to under the heading of *Erkenning van Verworven Competenties* or EVC (Recognition of Acquired Competences or Recognition of Acquired Skills, RAS)

Steunpunt Jeugd) and Sport (represented by the *Vlaamse Sportfederatie* VSF). In this vision, the term 'recognition' or 'assessment' is taken to mean *“the assessment of the listed skills that are supported by documentary evidence. Such assessment happens on the basis of (a) reference framework(s), also known as (a) standard(s). Such assessment may be done by the individual himself or herself, by means of a self-evaluation. The latter is especially the case when EVC has a formative function¹.*

The Danish Adult Education Association, a non-profit umbrella association, has a *Realkompetenceforum²* for input, mutual learning and coordinating ongoing work in its member organisations. National and international actors and experts are invited to the Forum meetings, where experiences across the different sectors are discussed. The Forum meetings have been held with short intervals since August 2004 and are widely supported by the participants.

Working in collaboration, with coordination through an umbrella organisation or forum can encourage consistency across a sector. For example, the Dutch umbrella organisation *Movisie³* started several validation projects in 2001, which have now led to a finalised validation procedure for Dutch volunteer organisations. The EVC⁴ (validation) certificate which the volunteer receives after finishing the procedure includes a maximum of 12 competences. These competences have been determined through consultation with volunteer organisations and are also based on validation procedures from other fields (education and the labour market)⁵.

In Croatia, a volunteering booklet was developed through a 'bottom-up' initiative led by a network of volunteer centres. All of the regional centres in the network issue and promote the same type of volunteer booklet, introduced by Association MI, the volunteer centre in Split. As they state on their website, the volunteer booklet is their original product which started life as an internal way of rewarding and recognising work of their volunteers. Eventually, it gained interest among other non-governmental organisations and institutions and is now more widely used.

We have already noted that third sector organisations may become involved in the development of (national) VINFL initiatives in order to ensure the sector itself is adequately represented. As a collective, third sector organisations may find that they are able to have

¹ By 'formative function' the socio-cultural sector understands the advantages (social integration, social involvement, active citizenship) and personal development of EVC. This is distinguished from the summative function, which refers more to the economic and educational advantages of EVC.

² An English description of the Forum can be seen on <http://www.nordvux.net/object/5983/validationobject.htm>.

³ The Netherlands centre for social development, <http://www.movisie.nl/>

⁴ *Erkenning Verworven Competenties* - Recognition of Acquired Skills

⁵ *Herkennen van competencies*, MOVISIE & CIVIQ. Retrieved 18 August: <http://www.civiq.nl/emc.asp?pagelid=2104>

a greater influence on the development of validation in their country. For example, in Italy, a co-ordination Forum (Third Sector Forum¹) has been established to represent all Voluntary Associations. In 2000 the Forum signed an agreement with the Ministry of Education stating *“the possibility of a certification of training credits acquired through association activities, with a specific attention to the definition of competences acquired by young people (also in distance learning), in voluntary activities, in social and cultural enterprises and associations”*.

1.4.2 Top-down approaches

There are also some examples of ‘top-down’ initiatives or procedures which have resulted from a stimulus at national policy level (although these are less frequent in the third sector than in the public or private sectors). For example, the Norwegian "National Validation Project" carried out between 1999 and 2002 supported the development of a number of validation projects in the third sector. As we have already seen, participation in public sector initiatives represents an opportunity for third sector organisations to influence their development and ensure that the ‘voice’ of the third sector is heard and taken into account.

National policies and/or legislation recognising the value of competences acquired through third sector experience can help to encourage more validation activities within the sector. For example, in France, in 2000 the Ministry of Youth and Sports modified a previous law of 1984 related to the organisation and promotion of physical and sport activities. Following the 2000 amendment of the law qualifications required for teaching and training in a professional perspective in the field of Youth and Sports can now be validated through professional or voluntary experience.

In Croatia, an Act on Volunteering adopted in 2007 created a starting point for the development of validation initiatives, since it established an obligation on the part of the volunteer organisation ‘employer’ to issue a written confirmation of volunteer work experience. This provision within the law serves as a good example of the impact third sector organisations can have when they work together. The provision is the result of initiatives from the third sector, especially the Croatian network of volunteer centres. They had advocated for the introduction of a volunteer booklet that would serve as a publicly validated document to testify to the experience that a volunteer acquired through higher volunteer work. They proposed that the volunteer organisation ‘employer’ would be responsible for recording the period of work, type of work done as well as any education and training in which the volunteer had taken part. Although the volunteer booklet was not legislated through the Act as such, it is specified that the employer is obliged to issue the volunteer a written confirmation of work, which must include the following information: time

¹ www.forumterzosettore.it

period spent volunteering, short description of activities, and education and training provided. Article 34 of the Act also specifies that an employer may issue booklets, cards or other forms of documents for this purpose. In this sense, the Act now provides minimal legal requirements regarding recording volunteer experience.

1.4.3 Support from EU institutions

A final stimulus for a number of transnational VINFL initiatives is the availability of European funding for such work. Our research identified a number of projects funded through, for example, the Leonardo da Vinci and EQUAL programmes.

For example, the project '*Assessing Voluntary Experiences (AVE) in a professional perspective*'¹ was supported by the Leonardo da Vinci programme. The project ran from 2003 until 2006 and involved partners from seven countries (Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and the UK). The main results of the project were a tool (a portfolio of skills and competences for volunteers) and method (a guide to accompany this portfolio). The Progress GB project mentioned above, is another example of a project developed using European (EQUAL) funding.

The EU also provides support for the development of VINFL through providing information (e.g. the European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning) and guidance (e.g. the Common European Principles for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning).

1.4.4 Partnership-working and consultation

All three of the above methods of development demonstrate the importance of working in partnership and consultation with relevant stakeholders, in order to ensure buy-in and take-up of initiatives developed.

A good example of a project which recognised the importance of stakeholder involvement and buy-in is the *attestation de competences* which is currently being piloted in Luxembourg for the validation of skills and competences acquired by young people through voluntary work.² Third sector organisations have worked in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth to develop this project. After an initial proposal was developed, a consultation with employers was carried out to gather their views. The *attestation, de competences* which is now being used for the pilot was amended in line with their feedback, thus helping to ensure buy-in from the start from relevant stakeholders.

¹ <http://mapage.noos.fr/leonardo.vaeb/eeuropeassociations.gb.htm>

² More information can be found (in French) at: <http://www.snj.public.lu/publications/publications-diverses/index.html>

1.5 Methods employed

Our research suggests that declarative and portfolio methods¹ are the most prevalent methodologies used within the third sector. This section provides a definition of the types of methods used in the third sector, examines the merits and disadvantages of the different methods used, then discusses the importance of linking methods to formal standards and qualifications.

1.5.1 Declarative methods

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 and relatively inexpensive. Its main purpose is normally the *identification* of skills gained through non-formal and informal learning.

Examples of the use of declarative methods can be found in the Netherlands, where the National Scout Association developed a portfolio for volunteers in 1997, and in France, where the UNCU (National Union for University Clubs) has supported the use of a notebook to record voluntary skills since 1998.

In Germany, we have already mentioned that there are several 'pass' initiatives in the voluntary sector. Some, such as the *Hamburger Freiwilligenbuch* (Hamburg voluntary booklet) simply describe the tasks that the pass owner has performed and the duration, which are both certified by a third person or organisation - there are no standards for describing the tasks. Others describe the competences developed, such as the *Nachweismappe Ehrenamt* (certificate booklet for honorary posts) which includes competences like "ability to work in a team", "motivation", "working independently". The *Deutsches Jugendinstitut* devised a *Kompetenzbilanz* or "competence record" for young people which shows a higher degree of complexity. It derives fields of experiences from family-related activities, that encompass questions like "What have I learned from this?" and "Which competences have I acquired by this activity?" These competences are assessed on a five level scale, from level 1: "I am very good at it", to level 5: "I am not good at it."²

¹ For definitions of the five main categories of validation approaches, please refer to the European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning, 2005

² BMBF 2004, p. 74

A declarative method has been used in Belgium for this digital portfolio developed by the Flemish Youth Service, *Jeugd en Stad*.

Competence Sticks, Belgium

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the youth service *Jeugd en Stad* (JES) used a grant from the European Social Fund (Objective 3, focal point 4) to develop a project called "C sticks" ("competence sticks"). C Sticks are digital portfolios which help young people to identify, access and develop the key competences they have learned through volunteering and to help them to understand how to use these competences in the labour market.

The target groups for the project were young people aged 18-25, volunteers in urban district youth work, young job-seekers and JES workers.

40 beneficiaries took part in the pilot project and developed their own digital portfolio on a usb drive. This enabled them to collect information about themselves and their skills through different media (pictures, videos, images) and to update their portfolio very easily. A second phase of the project was planned, involving more people and an older target group.¹

In Norway too, both the methods and the tools for charting and documenting non-formal learning in the sector often are based on the purposes on individuals' own efforts – a self-declaration with minimum input from assessors. Individual organisations are responsible for guidance, 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. The Personal Competence Document, described in the box below, is an example of an electronic tool which has been developed for this purpose.

The Personal Competence Document (PCD), Norway²

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 competences 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:

¹ Youth Action for Peace, 2007, YAP Mag, Vol. 3 June 2007, available at http://www.yap.org/docs/yapmag!_june2007.pdf and Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² Information provided by T. Nilsen Mohn, Vox- Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning

The Personal Competence Document (PCD), Norway²

- Instructions and guidance
- Forms to document the "totality" of competences and competences 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 competences 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 (in Norwegian only).

1.5.2 Portfolio methods

Competence portfolios 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. The portfolio method tends to be process-orientated. The additional assessment stage (e.g. interview, assessment centre) reduces the problem of subjectivity found with declarative methods, which rely on an individual to assess their own achievements and competences.

Examples of the use of the portfolio method by third sector organisations can be found in Luxembourg and the UK.

In Luxembourg, the pilot *attestation de competences* certificate for youth voluntary work is awarded using the following process:

- An interview is carried out with the young person requesting an attestation in order to discuss the evidence they can provide and the type of attestation they should request.
- An adult member of the organisation drafts an attestation for the young person, using the appropriate template. This is then discussed with the young person.

- The attestation is submitted to the National Youth Service with an accompanying letter from the organisation. The *Commission d'Attestation* then considers the dossier and forwards it, with their recommendations, to the Ministry of Youth.
- Approved dossiers are co-signed by the Ministry of Youth.

The interview stage used in this case provides an opportunity for the young person to receive guidance in the validation process. They can be supported in choosing the right certification to apply for (in this case, three different certificates can be obtained, according to the role and responsibilities the young person has held; leadership, training or project management) and a more reliable assessment can be made as a result of collaboration between the young person and the adult member of the organisation.

A portfolio method is also used in the UK, to accredit training provided by a community development project. A particular strength of this project is that the accreditation of the learning is based on the national framework for qualifications (the CQFW), which means that the learners are able to earn 'credits' which are formally recognised.

Sylfaen Cymunedol, Wales – Learner portfolios

Sylfaen Cymunedol is a community development project, which aims to influence change in communities. It achieves this through engaging community development activists in relevant learning and development programmes.

Initially the learning programmes provided by Sylfaen Cymunedol were not recognised. The charity started to look for ways of accrediting their training largely because they wanted their learners to gain confidence and encourage them to proceed with further learning and development. The CQFW (Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales), via the Open College Network, offered them an opportunity to do this by providing a flexible means of "*accrediting learning wherever and however it took place*". They found that they could assign credit values to all of their units of learning, for example confidence- building, introduction to community development, working with young people etc in a way that they could not with the traditional NVQ system.

In order to achieve credit, the learners have to complete a 'portfolio', which consists of a number of 'task sheets'. For example, learners may be expected to carry out a community audit and evidence their learning by taking photographs, writing up a short report etc. An Internal and External Verifier proceed to review the portfolios before credits are awarded. This assures quality and provides the learner with an opportunity to transfer their credit to other forms of learning.

The research also identified a number of initiatives which relate to non-formal training provided by third sector organisations, which is then certified in some way. Examples of this certification of participation can be found in Finland (among others).

In Flanders, Belgium, organisations in socio-cultural adult education can, at their own discretion, issue a certificate to their members for a completed course of training. Within youth work, attestations for vocational training are delivered by the Flemish government (the Youth Department). The recognition and assessment of skills in the Sports sector is the remit of the sports agency BLOSO (*Intern Verzelfstandigd Agentschap met rechtspersoonlijkheid*).¹

Certificates for non-formal learning, socio-cultural adult education in Belgium

Organisations in socio-cultural adult education can issue a certificate to their members for a completed course of training (these certificates can be downloaded from the SoCiuS website).²

At present responsibility for whether and how such 'assessment' is conducted lies with the providers of the training course themselves. To give a clearer structure to EVC in socio-cultural education, SoCiuS has developed a vision text which proposes making use of two sorts of evidence: the learning certificate and the skills certificate.

The **learning certificate** *"is a piece of documentary evidence of experience in education and vocational training. It is a form that is issued by the entity organizing the activity after completion of a training, study day, course..."* It is therefore a proof of participation by the person in question. The learning certificate also states the educational objectives of the training activity. To increase the recognition of such a certificate SoCiuS provides a common format for organisations in this sector. There are currently no strict conditions to be satisfied for issuing learning certificates.

A **skills certificate** shows that a coherent whole of skills has in fact been acquired. In order to obtain a skills certificate an assessment must therefore be conducted. The awarding body guarantees that the skills are in fact present and controls the quality of the process and the applied standards. The same format is used for a skills certificate as for the learning certificate, supplemented with a description of the skills and the level at which they were acquired.³

1.5.3 Merits and disadvantages of the methods used

Declarative and portfolio methods may be more prevalent than 'hard assessment' (tests/panel interviews) due to the nature of learning in the third sector and time and

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

³ SoCiuS 2006a, in Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

resources constraints often faced by third sector organisations. Declarative methods rely mainly on the individual's own efforts and therefore represent a cost-effective method of delivering VINFL. Moreover, the target beneficiaries within this sector, as in others (volunteers, young people etc) may prefer such self-evaluation techniques to 'hard assessment' (tests/panel interviews) methods.

The portfolio method too offers a flexible, cost-effective method of validation for the third sector. Individuals participating in third sector activities may do so in addition to other commitments such as paid work and the portfolio method represents a flexible way of recording skills and competences in their own time and at their own pace.

In addition, the portfolio method tries to address 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 lack of reliability of the assessment compared to declarative methods.

However, the disadvantages of using these two methods may be that they lack reliability in the assessment of an individual's competences and learning outcomes and that it is difficult to link them to formal education systems and qualifications frameworks. Using declarative methods in particular, relies on the individual to carry out a self-assessment, which raises issues in terms of, for example, quality control. We have seen that the use of an additional 'quality control' stage in the portfolio method (e.g. an interview, assessment centre) helps to overcome this problem. The use of standard criteria for assessment, where possible linked to formal standards or qualifications frameworks, can also help to ensure greater reliability of the validation method.

Where competences or learning outcomes are not fully defined, or linked to national standards or definitions used in formal education, this can limit the transferability and take-up of an initiative. In Belgium, one of the reasons given by socio-cultural education organisations for their limited use of learning certificates was that the formulation of learning objectives is not clear. In Denmark, the Adult Education Association (DAEA) notes that *"it will be a departure from previous practice for adult education to engage in systematic task of clarification and documentation of real competences. It will require a coordinated cooperation within the liberal adult education and with other sectors"*.¹

However, although we have emphasised the importance of linking in with stakeholders and formal education systems, the research also shows the importance for third sector

¹ Prior Learning, What is new?, Taken from the world wide web on 30 August 2007. Available at: <http://www.dfs.dk/inenglish/priorlearning/whatisnew.aspx>

organisations of being able to develop their own validation processes and procedures, which fit in with the organisations' ethos and way of working, as well as the needs of their target beneficiaries.

SoCiuS, the Belgian support service for social and cultural adult education, emphasises that there are fundamental differences with regards the recognition of skills in socio-cultural adult education, compared with the policy areas Education and Work. In socio-cultural adult education, the actors involved prefer to develop their own instruments and procedures and for vocational training providers to choose the way in which they will or will not develop their training and whether they wish to recognise the acquired skills. This freedom is seen as crucial.¹

In 2003 Jukka Määttä carried out a large-scale study on validation of learning gained within the liberal adult education system in Finland². He also concluded that any development work in this field must respect the autonomy and independence of the many educational providers from the third sector, and the target groups that they cater for.

Thus, declarative and portfolio methods may be chosen by third sector organisations as the most convenient way of delivering VINFL for them and their beneficiaries. If these systems can be designed in consultation with relevant stakeholders and developed to link in with formal education systems or qualifications frameworks and /or employers' needs, they may represent a solution to suit all stakeholders mentioned in the list above.

1.5.4 Links to formal standards and qualifications

An understanding of learning outcomes³ is vital for the validation process and our research has identified the importance of developing validation methodologies which link in with national frameworks of qualifications or standards, or at least use common 'descriptors' for the learning outcomes of participation in third sector activities.

For example, in Finland, the Ministry of Education suggested that in order to further develop methods for the validation of non-formal learning within liberal adult education provision, the providers of non-formal education needed to describe the content of their courses better. A large-scale 2003 study on validation of learning within the liberal adult education system also recommended a more detailed documentation of (non-formal)

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² Jukka Määttä (2003) Tunnusta ja tunnista opittu! Vapaan sivistystyön opitun tunnustaminen formaalissa oppilaitoksissa Selvitys muodoista, käytänteistä, yhteistyösuhteista ja ongelmista.

³ The set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process

course contents and methodologies and that liberal adult education providers should issue certificates more systematically.¹

In Luxembourg, the pilot project mentioned above involved close collaboration with the Ministry of Education (a Ministry representative is involved in the pilot group for the system), which has enabled the initiative to be aligned with the state system for validation of formal professional qualifications.

An example of a project which has successfully used a validation process based on third sector experience for access to and award of formal education qualifications is the 'Graduating Experience' project led by LUMSA University in Italy.

Graduating Experience, a pilot validation project in the Italian University System²

This pilot project was launched in 2001 at LUMSA university in Italy. Its main goal was to develop a method of validation of prior learning (formal and informal) in order to obtain a university degree.

The validation procedure was launched for only two degrees: Educators and Managers of the Third Sector. These are relatively "new" professions that are based on bottom-up practices; very often, workers acquire competences, skills and qualifications through a learning-by-doing process. For educators and for people working in the Third Sector, visibility of knowledge was indeed top priority.

However, it was also felt that the university had an opportunity to switch to a new approach to teaching/learning and its social value: from a one-way, teacher-to-student process, to an interactive process in which the acquisition of a university degree is the result of a virtuous circle between academic learning, working experience, practical skills and training. Through its involvement in another project, the university already had a number of networks among social enterprises and social workers. In the validation process, they acted as the main stakeholders for the design, feasibility, and effectiveness of courses.

Students wanting to enrol in an Italian university must have a five-year secondary school degree. For the Graduating Experience project, students were invited to follow three steps:

- 1) Prepare a detailed curriculum [a portfolio] detailing former education, professional experience, vocational training or any type of formal or informal learning that he/she feels relevant. Students were urged to give a very detailed description of experience, and to supply certifications, if any.
- 2) Participate in an interview with the validation Committee set up at the School of Education, in which prior personal experience is assessed. The Committee would open a personal file and quantify it in ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). This is the "knowledge capital" by which knowledge is made visible and formally recognised for enrolment.
- 3) Prepare a "study plan" for the degree, which brings together the "knowledge capital" of the student and the list of disciplines and examinations required for that degree by the Ministry of Education. In this way, the "study plan" is a merging between informal and formal frames of reference. Every single "study plan" is

¹ Jukka Määttä (2003) Tunnusta ja tunnista opittu! Vapaan sivistystyön opitun tunnustaminen formaalissa oppilaitoksissa

Selvitys muodoista, käytänteistä, yhteistyösuhteista ja ongelmista.

² Corradi, C., Graduating Experience, A Practice of APEL in the Italian University System

approved by the Faculty Committee of the School.

Over the two years of the project, students enrolled in the procedure were mostly people over 30, with five or more years of working experience and a strong motivation for personal and professional improvement. A number of them already held a university degree which was non-specific for their field, but most of them had none. Some students had attended a university and passed examinations, and then dropped out without completing their degree; for others this was their first academic experience. Many were bound for mobility between different jobs or working places.

The development of learning outcomes, which is discussed in more detail in the public sector compendium of the 2007 Inventory, is recognised as a complex process for educationalists¹, thus for actors in the third sector, with perhaps less expertise in education and training, it presents a significant challenge. It is thus to be recommended that third sector actors work in partnership or seek expert advice when developing this element of their validation methodologies.

¹ Adam, S., Using Learning Outcomes: A consideration of the nature, role, application and implications for European education of employing 'learning outcomes' at the local, national and international levels, University of Westminster, June 2004

1.6 Outputs / Outcomes and Impact

1.6.1 Quantitative data

Very little quantitative data has been found regarding the scale and impact of third sector validation initiatives. However, for some of the third sector validation initiatives we have identified, it is possible to quantify their outputs in terms of, for example, certificates awarded or portfolios completed. The table below gives an overview of the data we have found.

Third sector validation initiatives – quantitative data
Ireland, Comhairle involvement in FETAC pilot project, 2006
6 learners within <i>Comhairle</i> achieved FETAC minor awards at level 6 in the National Framework of Qualifications.
Belgium, 'C Sticks' for young volunteers
40 beneficiaries took part in the pilot project and developed their own digital portfolio on a USB drive. ¹
Germany, Landesnachweis Nordrhein-Westfalen – Engagiert im sozialen Ehrenamt
There are already 70 organisations licensed by the Ministry of Intergenerational Affairs, Family, Women and Integration of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to issue the certificate ²
Belgium, Learning and Skills Certificates
An overview of the use of the learning and skills certificates for socio-cultural adult education was published in October 2005. It showed that learning certificates were issued for 429 (11%) of 3,800 registered activities . ³
Germany, Berlin State Volunteer Pass
At the moment this is the pilot phase of the project for experimenting cooperation between the state and volunteering organisations and for developing adequate training for quality assurance. 500 certificates have been issued to date.
Finland, The Recreational Activity Study Book

¹ Youth Action for Peace, 2007, YAP Mag, Vol. 3 June 2007, available at http://www.yap.org/docs/yapmag!_june2007.pdf and Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

² http://www.mgffi.nrw.de/ehrenamt/wer_stellt_ihn_aus/index.php, 27 July 2007.

³ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

The Finnish Youth Academy has a **written agreement with 250 formal educational institutions** on how to value and credit the entries in the book. Over **80,000 Study Books** have been distributed so far.¹

It is clear that there is a wide range in the scale of the initiatives. Among initiatives clearly identifying outputs, the Finnish recreational activity study book evidently has the largest impact in terms of quantitative outputs. However, it is important to remember that the impact of such initiatives also depends on the quality of the 'soft outcomes' they produce and the 'results', such as facilitating access to formal education and training or employment.

1.6.2 'Soft' outputs for individual beneficiaries

As indicated previously in this document, individuals can gain 'soft outputs' from participating in a validation procedure, such as increased motivation, confidence and self-esteem and an understanding of one's own abilities. Such outcomes are difficult to measure but can have a significant impact on society and the economy, by facilitating an individuals' pathway towards education/training and/or employment, or improving their understanding of and contribution to active citizenship.

In addition, individuals can benefit further from the validation which we have outlined above. Certificates and portfolios can represent valuable 'proof' of their skills and competences. In Italy, for example, some youth associations have experience in the recognition of learning through study visits in foreign countries, which have been validated as university credits. In Finland, an overwhelming majority of respondents to a survey on validation in liberal adult education stated that they were aware of formal educational establishments which provided full or partial course exemptions for those who had successfully completed courses through non-formal learning.

For others, it is simply beneficial to have a record of one's activities, experiences and abilities. For example, in Finland, the Youth Academy carries out biannual surveys on how the Study Book is actually used and how the product could be developed. The main results from the surveys have been to find out that, although some young people have used the book when applying for admission into further education or a job, most of the study book users are somewhat 'passive' in their use of the book. The most important function for the Study Book users seems to be that the book is a black-on-white documentary of what has taken place in their youth.

¹ Nuorten Akatemia (www.nuortenakatemia.fi), September 2007.

1.6.3 Results

The 'results' of the third sector VINFL initiatives are the secondary effects of the introduction of VINFL – for example individuals gaining access to education or employment. The wider results can also bring benefits to the third sector organisations and to the society / economy as a whole. Examples of the wider impact VINFL can have on stakeholders include:

Individual beneficiaries:

- Access to education / training – through recognition of experience and competences for admission or exemption
- Access to employment – following recognition / certification of transferable skills/competences which an individual has developed through voluntary or community work, membership of a third sector organisation or non-formal education / training
- Career development – taking on new roles/responsibilities, as a result of recognition of what an individual is capable of
- Improved quality of life, e.g. resulting from increased self-esteem, or increased income

Third sector organisations:

- Improved recruitment – better match between individuals and roles
- Effective assessment methods to inform 'career development' of individuals – leading to increased 'job' satisfaction (e.g. for volunteers)
- Improved profile and image of organisation and sector as a whole
- Improved quality of life, e.g. resulting from increased self-esteem, or increased income
- Attracting more people to 'join in'

Other results are closely linked to the reasons given in the 'rationale for involvement' sector earlier. These include:

- Optimum use of the skills and competences available within the third sector workforce – 'matching the right person to the right job'

- 'Revitalising' the sector – encouraging more people to join in third sector activities
- Improved quality / professionalism of third sector activities – improving the 'image' of the sector.

The initiatives we have identified are relatively recent, which makes it hard to determine the 'results' they have achieved so far. In order to ensure that the wider impact of VINFL in the third sector is recognised, research and evaluation projects to capture and measure the outcomes and impact, as well as identify good practice and lessons learned, will be crucial in the future.

1.7 Barriers to take-up

Our research has identified several barriers to the take-up of validation in the third sector. These are examined in turn below:

- *Fear of the administrative 'burden' and costs involved*

Third sector organisations may suffer from both resource and time constraints, which can make it difficult to cope with additional demands from individuals seeking validation of their skills and competences. In Belgium, the learning certificates developed for the socio-cultural adult education sector are not used more widely for a number of reasons, including the associated administrative burden. It may be that there is a lack of suitably qualified/specialist staff within the organisation to deal with requests for validation.

Moreover, the lack of suitably qualified/specialist staff may prevent an initiative from being developed to its full potential. For example, in Germany, the main difficulties faced so far in the pilot initiative *Berliner Freiwilligen Pass* or “Berlin State Volunteer Pass” are associated with the lack of quality assurance methodologies and lack of knowledge to develop them.

- *Difficulty to transfer / apply validation methodologies to third sector activities (e.g lack of standards/definitions such as learning outcomes/ occupational profiles)*

Validation methodologies often make use of standards or profiles based on learning outcomes or competences. Third sector organisations may find it difficult to apply VINFL due to a lack of standards / profiles or fixed structures in their activities.

We have already seen that in Finland, the Ministry of Education has suggested that the providers of non-formal education need to describe the content of their courses better. The educational institutions involved in another Finnish Recreational Activity Study Book system, have not always found it easy to use in recognising and valuing previous learning experiences of young people. This has mostly to do with the fact that the book is structured according to the nature of voluntary free-time activities rather than according to the curricula of different formal educational institutions. It is suggested that a more competence-based approach would suit the initiative better.

In Belgium, the main concern within socio-cultural adult education is that the recognition of acquired skills involving training work is excessively geared towards the award of diplomas. This is understood to mean that training courses is highly structured and formalised, with clear objectives and assessment. Stakeholders from socio-cultural education fear that the emphasis is therefore placed on the acquisition of diplomas, rather

than the acquisition of skills, whereas they prefer to focus on lifewide learning and the development of social, cultural and communications skills.¹

- *Moral / ethical issues*

It is possible to identify some third sector organisations which display an element of mistrust towards the introduction of VINFL within the sector. They fear that validation creates a new incentive to take part in third sector activity (i.e. to gain certificates / qualifications) which is not in line with the aims / ethos of the sector (i.e. to give one's own time/skills for the benefit of others).

In Finland, the Recreational Activity Study Book has been designed specifically with this consideration in mind, as explained in the box below:

Finland, The Recreational Activity Study Book

The Recreational Activity Study Book system is aimed at the documentation – and recognition – of qualifications and competences acquired by participating in youth voluntary activities. Its greatest focus is placed on competences. That is because the study book system is centred on the individual learner. In the study book, emphasis is put on the development of each young person's personality rather than the actual qualifications of the skills required in particular job requirements. The underlying idea is that by participating in youth voluntary or recreational activities, young people do have a chance to acquire key competences with regard to personal development, such as social, communicative etc. competences.

The Study Book has no criteria for the measurement of learning outcomes or performance, nor are there any public examinations held to assess the competences acquired by the young people.

It is argued that one of the reasons for the openness and flexibility of the study book system is the appreciation of the voluntary nature of youth informal and non-formal learning. By formalising the system, the basic motivation for participation in youth activities, i.e. the joy of being, doing and learning together, would be endangered. Thus, the system does not aim for direct accreditation in formal education in any way. It is of great importance that the voluntary nature of participating and learning in voluntary youth activities, whether organised or not, will not be endangered.

Youth Academy tries to encourage the representatives of the formal education system to recognise and value the learning and competences young people acquire outside school, as well as to cooperate more with organisations offering young people meaningful learning environments. But the issue is always approached from an individual learner's point of view, not from the point of view of the formal educational system, for example.

It has been a strong strategic – and even ideological – decision by the Academy and its member organisations that the Recreational Activity Study Book should be structured upon activities, not competences. This has to do with a more general question in youth work and youth policy about the extent to which youth work focuses on the employability of young people. The answer to that question has been – at least this far – that youth work focuses on the development of the individual, not merely on employability issues.

¹ Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2007, Recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Flanders (Belgium)

1.8 Success Factors

Our examination of VINFL within the third sector thus enables us to conclude with an exploration of success factors which can be identified from experiences to date. Existing initiatives could serve as candidates for good practice with a view to adapt them to meet the needs of a different context or target group. It seems important to learn from work that has been carried out so far and to take this into account in the development of new initiatives.

Good practice recommendations for VINFL within the third sector are:

- *Developing methodologies which are competence-based, or linked to learning outcomes (where possible, linking with nationally-recognised standards/profiles)*

Using methods which describe the competences/skills an individual has developed, rather than simply the time they have spent, or the role they have held, can help to achieve more take-up and buy-in from stakeholders such as employers and formal education and training providers. Where there is a link to national standards and or qualification frameworks, this can help to improve the transferability to other sectors.

- *Partnership-working and consultation*

Working in partnership to develop VINFL initiatives can help to ensure consistency and transferability across the (sub-) sector. Working with public sector partners can also ensure that third sector initiatives are developed in line with national standards and procedures.

Consultation with relevant stakeholders, both within the third sector and in other sectors (e.g. policy makers, employers), helps to ensure that validation initiatives are developed in line with their demand and tailored to individual needs.

- *Seeking support / buy-in from relevant stakeholders, e.g. umbrella bodies, policy makers*

Support and buy-in from stakeholders can help to ensure the success sustainability of any new initiative. It is important to do this at an early stage – when the initiative is being developed. The example of the *Attestation de Compétences* developed in Luxembourg illustrates this well – employers were asked for their feedback on the draft version, which

was amended in line with their views. This means that employers are more likely to recognise the value of the certificate, e.g. in their recruitment procedures.

- *Ensuring an element of 'freedom' or flexibility in the methodologies used – respecting the needs and wishes of the providers and target groups*

It is important to recognise and respect the diversity of organisations and individuals working within the third sector. Organisations should have an element of freedom in the methodologies they choose to employ and individuals should also benefit from flexible methodologies, which fit with their needs, abilities and lifestyles.

- *Learning from others and sharing experiences*

In a sector which is more likely to suffer from time and resource constraints, it is important to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'. As explained above, it is important for third sector organisations to learn from each other in order to build their VINFL initiatives on the basis of success factors and lessons learned.

1.9 Conclusions

This compendium has given an overview of key trends, characteristics and methodological approaches to VINFL within the third sector. Examples have been taken from the individual country chapters of the 2007 European Inventory to illustrate the range of initiatives which are currently in use and the lessons which can be learned from these.

There is increasing recognition of the need for a validation process to recognise skills and competences developed through third sector activity as a vital component of the concept of lifelong learning. At the same time, experience to date is helping to form an understanding of the issues which must be taken into account when strengthening VINFL in the sector, such as the importance of partnership-working and ensuring methods incorporate an element of flexibility for both providers and beneficiaries.

Evidence collected for the European Inventory shows that currently, declarative and competence portfolio methods are prevalent in the third sector. These methods present advantages (flexible, cost-effective, less 'professional' input required, more suited to target beneficiaries than 'hard assessment' methods) but also disadvantages (issues regarding quality control and reliability of self-assessment methods). In the future, it remains to be seen if more complex methods are devised and the extent to which these are linked to formal standards and frameworks.

Good practice and lessons learned can be drawn from existing initiatives and the importance of sharing learning and experiences cannot be stressed enough. Our research has shown the importance of stakeholders working together in order to improve the quality and transferability of initiatives, to overcome barriers to take-up and encourage more organisations and individuals to get involved. At the same time, it is evident that research and evaluation are vital to measure the outputs and impact of these initiatives and help to identify key messages for dissemination among the actors involved.