Note EQF AG – 53-6

Note on Validation in national skills strategies (integrated approach)[1]

1. The added value of integrated validation approaches

The aim of this note is to clarify **how validation of non-formal and informal learning can be integrated and better embedded in broader national strategies and policies**. Validation is a process that aims at assigning value and making visible the individual's learning in all settings and during the whole life span.

Focussing on the diverse needs of individuals requires a **coordinated, coherent approach across different policy areas.** At its core, validation arrangements must make it possible for individuals to transfer and accumulate learning across institutional and sectoral borders. Limiting validation to a restricted area, for example in education and training, employment or social policies, will inevitably create barriers to transfer and accumulation.

This **fragmented approach** to validation has been common in Europe for decades and is still the case today. It may explain why the full potential of validation has still not been released. While the 2012 Recommendation has contributed to a common understanding of validation and its stages, and countries are moving towards overarching strategies, there is still a need to focus more systematically on the overall integration of validation into national skills policies and strategies.

For validation de facto to support transfer and accumulation of learning experiences, we need a **common vision on the role of validation in education and training, employment and social policies.** We also need to understand how the important contributions of civil society influence the overall approach. For arrangements in these areas to support individuals throughout their lives, they must interact across institutional and sectoral borders. The following questions inform the discussion to follow:

➤ What are the key functions of validation arrangements for education, employment and social policies respectively?

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[1] This note is adapted from European Commission and Cedefop (2020) Note on Validation in national skills strategies (integrated approach). Note EQF AG – 53-6. *53rd meeting of the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group, 16-17 June 2020*.

➢ Which interfaces exist between validation arrangements in education, employment and social policies respectively and how can these be reinforced to achieve an integrated approach?

2. Validation functions

2.1 Validation in education and training

In most European countries, structured strategies on validation emerged (from the 1980s) as part of education, training and qualifications policies. These have significantly influenced the current understanding and design of validation arrangements. The main functions of validation can be summarised as follows:

Validation facilitates more flexible **access** to education and training. This is typically exemplified by vocational education and training where adult learners with low formal qualifications have been granted access to training based on their work experience. Similar practices can be observed in higher education where validation is frequently used to recruit learners falling short of formal credentials and requirements.

- Validation facilitates **exemption** from part(s) of an education and training programme, shortening the time spent in education and training. This is commonly illustrated in VET where prior work experiences are frequently counted as equivalent to parts of the programme, module or qualification. In higher education credits might be awarded from previous experience.
- Validation provides the basis for awarding **full qualifications**. This implies that qualifications can be acquired through a variety of learning forms and pathways; thus challenging the provision of education and training as a monopoly of formal educational institutions. What matters are the learning outcomes, i.e. that the candidate knows, understands and is able to do what is required by the qualification.

Validation as described above is thus about opening up education and training institutions and their qualifications to skills and competences acquired outside classrooms, in non-formal and informal settings. The purpose of these arrangements is mainly to ascertain whether a candidate meets the specific requirements set by the institution or sector in question. These arrangements are critically important for opening education and training to a wider range of learners, for including a wider set of skills and competences and creating more flexible educational pathways. However, there are several implications:

- Validation arrangements in education are (narrowly) focussed on a programme or, qualification and/or institution; the full set of skills and competence held by individuals is outside the scope of the arrangement.
- Through validation, educational institutions are becoming 'gate-keepers'; checking whether the non-formal and informal learning at work and in life is up to the standards of learning in formal education and training.
- The outcomes of validation are in most cases locked into a single institution and education sector and are not transferable beyond the programme or qualification in question.

The current approach is not sufficient to achieve the full potential of validation. If validation is to serve the progression of learners across education and training programmes and institutions,

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validation in education and training cannot be exclusively limited to the purposes listed above.

2.2   Validation in the labour market

The identification and documentation of skills is an important and common feature of human resource practices in companies (Cedefop 2013). While normally not termed validation, methodologies and outcomes are frequently like those found in other areas. The same need for identification and documentation of skills exists in public employment services, notably linked to guidance and counselling services. While only exceptionally resulting in certification, the identification and documentation parts of these practices are important and extensively used in many countries. Forming part of private businesses as well as public policies, labour market related validation fulfils a number of functions:

Interviews, tests and other forms of skills assessments are used in **recruitment processes** to identify the suitability of a candidate for a post or career path. In addition to formal qualifications, learning experiences are considered.

- Validation supports **training and staff development strategies** of employers. It is used in informal ways to recognise the expertise of staff and allows employers to plan their skills needs.
- Validation increases staff retention and motivation and supports **career progression**.
- Validation allows individuals to **re-direct their careers**, and supports reskilling and up-skilling by reducing their training time and opening new employment and career opportunities.
- Validation processes support the development of a training map and a **tailored training offer** that adapts to the specific needs of the individual, thus supporting their career progression.

Validation thus increases the prospects for inclusion and participation in the labour market, while making labour markets more efficient by making skills supply more transparent. In this context, validation can be valuable for the individuals, who can be recruited or progress in their career, and for employers, who can retain staff and plan for further skills needs.

Despite the evident benefits of validation for the labour market, the following shortcomings are evident:

- Existing practices in the labour market remain limited and unstructured;
- Practices of validation are normally very much linked to education and training initiatives and are seldom perceived as part of a structured labour market strategy;
- Validation practices in the labour market and employability sector suffer from a lack of documentation of the identified skills or the absence of common standards;
- The outcomes of company-internal skills and competence assessments can currently only in exceptional cases be used outside the company. Given the increasing rate of job changes in societies, individuals will increasingly need to make use of these outcomes;
- Public employment services' approaches to validation are frequently limited, focussing on short term employment and training needs;
- There is a lack of dialogue regarding the potential role of labour market validation in supporting individual learning and employment progression, including how to link this

progress with further education and training.

2.3   Functions of validation in wider social policies

As in the case of the labour market, identification and documentation of skills occurs in the context of civil society actions or social policies. Validation supports youth work and volunteering and is used as a process of providing value to the experiences that individuals acquire beyond formal education and beyond employment. Validation can also support wider social policies such as the integration of migrants or refugees. In this context, the main functions of validation can be summarised as follows:

Validation contributes to the **integration** of individuals that are at risk of being excluded or marginalised, and provides the opportunity of making the most of their experiences and expertise.

- Validation is also a process of self-reflection and tends to increase the individual's **self-esteem and sense of agency**.
- Validation provision identifies skills and competences on which hard-to-reach and marginalised individuals can build their skills set to **participate in society.**
- Validation plays an important role in making visible the learning from **voluntary experiences, youth work and civic engagement**, especially for young people that lack work experience.

The functions of validation in social policies and the third sector are therefore mainly centred on the individual. They tend to be quite separate from the standards that are set out by the formal gatekeepers of education and training. The third sector has a valuable role in setting up validation arrangements where they are needed the most, which is in the support of individuals who may lack both qualifications and work experience. As a consequence, the following aspects needs to be considered:

- Validation processes in connection to the third sector tend to focus on the identification and documentation of skills, lacking formal assessment or certification.
- The set of skills identified through validation tends to be of different nature and not connected with formal qualifications or occupational standards. This might hinder the usability and transferability of validation outcomes across areas.
- There is a lack of connection between validation arrangements initiated or developed by civil society organisations and other education and training or labour market initiatives.

3. The need for validation arrangements to connect and interact

The picture painted above demonstrates that validation is slowly becoming an important part of several policy areas. These policy areas are only rarely connected to each other and do not form part of a coherent national skills strategy. While addressing many of the same challenges and methodologies, developments have so far been used by public bodies and private companies to meet their own needs for flexibility and efficiency. While these efforts also benefit the individual learners, employees and clients, few of these arrangements produce outcomes which directly serve

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the lifelong and life-wide progression of individuals. Future validation arrangements must be able to support individual transitions between education and employment in the wider perspective of up- and reskilling. A series of questions highlight this challenge:

- Can validation be used to systematically support and develop individual learning and career plans (and portfolios), accompanying individual citizens through their lifelong and life-wide learning?
- Can the identification and documentation stages outlined in the 2012 Recommendation become more prominent in the way education uses validation; notably supporting the integration of adult learners?
- In what way can assessment and certification be better connected with labour market and third sector validation practices, so that the individual can fully utilise the validation outcomes?
- Can the concept of validation-supported individual learning plans be used to promote a more systematic dialogue between education, employment and third sector?
- Is it possible to build stronger links between the occupational requirements (standards) and education and training curricula and requirements to improve continuous learning at work and in education?
- Can there be an agreement on the learning outcomes, standards and assessment criteria that cut across policy areas and can be used in validation?
- Can common templates suitable for different contexts be developed in consensus with relevant stakeholders?

In order for validation to be effective and unleash its full potential, it needs to be framed within a coordinated, coherent policy framework. While access, exemptions and awarding qualifications will be still an important option in education and training policies, it is necessary to consider implications of validation in a wider perspective. This includes a better connection with **career guidance**, to make full use of validation opportunities and to support the individual throughout the validation path, and **skills intelligence**, to direct individuals to jobs that are needed the most. Labour market policies on validation should moreover be addressing the needs of both employers and employees and promote practices that enable individuals to take stock of their experiences for further learning or for advancement in their careers. It will be important that validation initiatives are able to benefit from the expertise and outreach of civil-society organisations, while their activities are not constrained by administrative burden and red tape.

4. The current guidelines

The issue of integrating approaches across contexts is treated in several parts of the current guidelines. The 2015 Guidelines discuss the need of stakeholder consultation in section 3.2 and provide overview of the type of involvement of different stakeholders. In chapter 4 the guidelines discussed validation from different perspectives and in different contexts. This note provides further elaboration on the ways coordination and connection across contexts can be achieved as well as explores further the issue of functions and objectives of validation, that is treated in the section 3.2 of the current Guidelines. In the workshop participants will have the

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opportunity to highlight aspects that need to be better addressed in the next version of the guidelines.

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