Making validation a reality for individuals

1. Designing and managing user-oriented validation arrangements – a checklist

This note discusses the conditions to be met for individuals to seek validation as a part of their learning and employment careers. The current note, with reference to the questions raised by note EQF AG 53-4, changes the perspective to the individual and identifies issues influencing the take up of validation and how validation arrangements are (or could be) designed by putting the individual at the centre. While this is connected to and dependent on the political, institutional, financial and legal arrangements discussed in the previous note, focusing on the end-user points to a range of specific challenges which must be met for validation to become widely appreciated and used. In order to make validation a reality for individuals, strategies and policies need to be translated into practical possibilities for individual to go through a validation process.

The following sections point to critical conditions for implementing user-oriented validation arrangements. Now including ten factors, the list can be clarified and extended. The ordering of the factors reflects the process that an individual undergoes when approaching and using validation:

1. Raising awareness
2. Building trust
3. Sharing information
4. Offering guidance and counselling
5. Facilitating access
6. Financing validation
7. Tailoring to individual needs and objectives
8. Protecting individual rights
9. Making standards visible
10. Ensuring portability and transferability

The list takes as its starting point that validation, to become main-streamed, needs to reach a

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diverse and broad group of individuals. While often promoted to support individuals at risk of unemployment or social exclusion, validation can also take on a broader role facilitating lifelong learning and supporting transfer between education and the labour market and it can be important at all qualification levels. This means that there is no one-size-fits all, and that validation needs to serve a wide variety of individual conditions and needs.

1. Raising awareness

Validation fundamentally builds on the understanding that all learning, independent from where, when and how it takes place, is potentially valuable. Reflecting the traditionally strong trust in formal learning, this understanding cannot be taken for granted. Promoting validation therefore requires a systematic effort to demonstrate the relevance of all forms of learning, notably at work, at home or through civic engagement, and how validation directly and legitimately can make these outcomes visible and relevant for further learning and employment. Society must accept validation as a valid route to qualifications or to accessing education and training and work. Individuals should be made aware of what validation is, what the process entails and what it implies to undertake this process, both in terms of personal engagement and of possible outcomes. Education and training providers and employers should also be aware of the opportunities of validation and of its status that equals formal or partial qualifications. .

2. Building trust

For validation to become a fully integrated part of national skills strategies and lifelong learning, its outcomes must be trusted by both the individual and by actors in society. This means that the value of validation should be clear, shared and tangible. One of the principles of validation is to make it possible to exchange the outcomes of validation into further learning and employment. For this to occur, stakeholders have to accept the legitimacy of validation outcomes, which requires quality assurance and monitoring and evaluation that proves its value.

The value of validation is not always obvious to individual users: the processes leading to validation may be perceived as scattered, fragmented, and often tackled on a case-by-case basis. For validation to be used on a broader basis, and for it to support lifelong and life-wide learning, potential users need to see and trust the (exchange) value of validation.

3. Dissemination of information

For validation to reach a broad group of potential users, addressing the widest possible variety of needs, information must be systematically disseminated within and across institutions and sectors. Information should not be distributed in 'silos' only reflecting the needs of the providing institutions. Instead it should be structured in a way which enables individuals at the cross-roads of education/training and employment - and having reached different stages of their learning and employment careers - to judge the relevance of validation. It is crucial for the individuals to receive clear information on both costs and benefits of validation. Potential candidates for validation need to know what is required in terms of time, money and personal commitment. The information on benefits needs to reflect the exchange value of validation; clarifying whether outcomes are recognised by education and training institutions and employers. Designing information flows in a way which benefits individual users of validation

requires working across sectors (education, employment, social services etc.) and cooperation between institutions and stakeholders at different levels (local, regional, national and European).

4. Guidance and counselling before, during and after validation

While transparent information must be available, guidance and counselling must also be available to all before, during and after a validation process. Validation needs to work in coordination with career lifelong guidance service provision in different education and work settings, close to where people leave and work and at all stages in life. Multi-channel guidance provision must be tailored to the specific individual needs and consider their level of readiness while serving as a stepping stone, and be coherent with validation processes. One can distinguish three stages of guidance and counselling in the context of validation:

1. Initial stages of validation, encompassing identification and documentation, can be shared with guidance services.
2. Support during assessment and certification process is necessary to manage expectations and to increase chances to succeed.
3. Equally important is that the individual receives guidance and counselling for making best use of the outcomes after the validation process.

For the different stages of guidance to be properly delivered, adequate resources at all stages of the process are needed. Guidance practitioners that have both, a broad understanding of validation as well as a more specialised connection to validation are needed. Specialised professionals are a requirement to support the individual during the validation process to translate the diverse range of learning experiences into learning proof that can be assessed against agreed standards.

5. Facilitating access

Coordination and coherence of validation with other services, such as guidance, community or health services, will support outreach measures and facilitate access to the wide diversity of individuals potentially able to benefit from validation. Validation must be connected to and be an integral part of education and training, employment and third sector provisions, assuring a smooth connection between services. Validation processes need to be user-friendly, reducing as much as possible the administrative burden for the individual and avoiding fragmentation or duplication of service. In addition, limitations to access validation in terms of age, previous formal education and employment situation need to be reduced/removed for all individuals, especially for the initial stages of the process, as these constitute the basis on which to decide further steps towards formal certification and recognition.

6. Financial support to validation

Validation may be a lengthy process and requires investment from the individual in terms of time and effort. A major limitation for accessing validation might be its financing. In order for

all, especially those more vulnerable, to access validation and remain in the process, this needs to be affordable. Different financial instruments should be put in place to lower the cost to individual and make validation a viable and affordable solution. Proper staffing and quality procedures might be costly, so validation needs to be taking into account within education and training, employment and social budgets. Stakeholders' involvement and investment in validation is necessary, cost-sharing mechanisms could be explored. It is necessary to adapt the financial support to the individual needs and circumstances and to this end the possible use of individual learning accounts for validation procedures should be explored.

7. Tailoring the process to individual needs and objectives

In the same way that financing needs to be adapted, the whole validation process needs to be tailored to individual needs. Validation is a personal process that involves individual growth and reflection on an individual's past experiences. The richness of individual experiences needs to be considered to realise each individual's full potential. This requires validation procedures that are flexible and adaptable to the specific individual needs and circumstances. Taking into account personal preferences, circumstances and needs, validation should utilise the most adequate methods and individuals should receive individualised and personalised support as needed. Validation should fit within a lifelong individual learning plan based on a skills assessment that includes customization of learning offers to the specific competences and learning needs of the individual. Similarly, validation should fit and be thought within the overall career aspirations of the individual. Adaptation to the needs of the individual means that the process allows for different objectives and purposes. The individual needs to make informed decisions (assisted by a professional counsellor) on how far in the process s/he wants to go and where to stop.

8. Protecting individual rights

It is crucial that the validation process be designed and managed in a way which protects the rights and interests of individual citizens. The planned 2021 Guidelines provide an opportunity to address this point in a transparent and systematic manner. It will be important to address principles of privacy, fairness and control of the process (right to appeal, etc.) and ownership of outcomes. The common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning agreed in 2004 and followed up in the 2009 and 2014 Guidelines need to be revisited and discussed by the EQF AG. In this context, it is important to underline the individual rights that should underpin validation arrangements. Moreover, validation procedures should ensure fairness as a function of validity and reliability. This means that a suitable and solid validation process will ensure that individuals will achieve the same results and outputs under the   same

circumstances, and that the methods used to validate the skills and competences of individuals are reliable and valid. These individual rights should ensure as well the right for the individual to appeal to a decision that has been taken, the right of the individual to own the outcomes of a validation procedure, and the right for a fair treatment of his/her data in compliance with GDPR principles.

9. Making standards visible

Validation implies making a judgement of past experiences and prior learning. This judgement, influencing in different ways the four stages of the validation process, will always be informed by some form of reference point or standard. These standards need to be coherent across stages as well as across the diversified set of providers that might carry out validation. Individuals, when considering and entering validation, need to be informed about and be aware of these reference points and standards. The tailoring of validation (see above) requires a clarification of how complex and highly personal learning experiences are identified, documented and assessed. While formal certification mostly refers to standards set by education and training, the processes involved in identification and documentation may refer to implicit and not clearly articulated references, sometimes reflecting the tools being used. Making standards and reference points visible helps the potential candidate to better understand what is expected and possible for him/herself. Validation standards furthermore directly influence the portability and transferability of validation outcomes. Trusting validation requires transparency of standards and reference points. It is of direct interest to the individual candidate that these standards are known to stakeholders in education and employment, facilitating future acceptance and recognition of outcomes.

10. Ensuring portability and transferability

For validation to be relevant to individuals, the exchange value (currency) of outcomes (identified, documented and/or certified skills and competences) is of critical importance to individuals. The results of validation must make a difference to further learning (access to education, exemption from parts of education or the award of a qualification) or employment (improving employability, supporting careers and facilitating job-changes). Ensuring portability and transferability requires that the outcomes of validation are presented in a clear and transparent way, clearly signalling what the individual knows, can do or understands. Using this learning outcomes format makes sure that not only the individual but also future receivers of these outcomes are able to understand what has been achieved. Ensuring portability and transferability furthermore requires that different stakeholders, across institutions and sectors, agree on the exchange value of validated skills. The learning outcomes format furthermore

provides an opportunity to look at the relationship between learning at work and in education and training.

2. The current guidelines

Making validation a reality for individuals is at the core of the current European Guidelines. The chapter 2, Section 2.2 of the current Guidelines highlights the centrality of the individual and provides a series of issues highlighting the importance of putting the individual at the center of the process. Section 3.1 talks about the importance of the provision of information, guidance and counselling, while section 3.3. talks about transferability issues, however, more focus on the linkages to QNFs. This note provides a wider and more detailed series of aspects related to putting individual at the center. Participants in the workshop will be able to explore in what way the issues treated in this note can be integrated into the new guidelines.