

## **Note EQF AG 56-5**

### **Exploring complementary routes to certification<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. Validation as an enabler for lifelong learning and employment**

Through certification individuals obtain proof from an authorised body that they have achieved learning outcomes to a given standard. The certification stage adds value (currency) to the learning which has been identified, documented and assessed and makes it possible for individuals to exchange their prior learning into further education, training learning or employment.

The note looks at how the changing landscape of qualifications and the emergence of alternative credentials (such as micro-credentials and digital badges) is affecting the certification phase of validation. Content and structure of qualifications are evolving. Short training courses and learning experiences are developing rapidly across Europe by a wide variety of public and private stakeholders, in response to the need for more flexible, learner- centred forms of education and training. These shorter forms of learning can be formal but will mostly be non-formal and often labour-market related. The potential role of and the interest in credentials that certify the outcomes of these short learning experiences is thus increasing.

A key purpose of validation is to be an enabler of lifelong learning by supporting the transfer and accumulation of individually acquired learning outcomes across institutional and sectoral borders. Given that the individual is at the centre of the validation process, it is essential to allow for accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes. In a truly implemented lifelong learning system, a certification obtained at one point in time through a shorter course with labour market orientation could later on be integrated into a more formalised, full qualification. In this way individuals are able to build their credentials during their entire life, drawing from different learning contexts. Validation should therefore not be seen as something happening once, but rather as something that can happen at different stages of an education and employment career.

A key question is whether it is necessary and/or possible to establish a ‘system’ in which certificates obtained in different settings, inside as well as outside formal education and training, can be connected and accumulated (“stacked”) in ways which can serve the lifelong learning needs of individual. While this connection and accumulation in some cases result in the award of a partial or full formal qualification, certificates will in many cases operate outside traditional qualifications systems, for example serving competence development in companies or within sectors of activity. The need for individuals to move between education, work and other activities, requires a wider reflection on the role to be played by certification in validation.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is adapted from the note: European Commission and Cedefop (2021). Exploring complementary routes to certification Note EQF AG 56-5, 56th EQF Advisory Group Meeting, 15-16 June 2021.

## **2 Certification - The fourth and final stage of validation**

The Council Recommendation of 2012 refers to “certification” as the fourth stage in validation, after identification, documentation and assessment. The recommendation is explicit in stating that member states should have in place arrangements that allow the individual to “obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences” and “have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated”. In this sense, the certification stage in validation serves two important and interconnected purposes:

- First, it makes it possible for individuals with appropriate prior learning to acquire a qualification (or part of a qualification) without participating in unnecessary and costly learning activities to achieve the same learning outcomes. This implicitly broadens the range of experiences considered relevant for formal education and training, stressing that all learning, irrespective of how, when and where they were acquired, is valuable.
- Second, the certification stage may - if trustworthy - serve validation outside formal education and training, for example for labour market and third sector stakeholders. Many sectoral associations, employers or civil society organisations award certification based on non-formal and informal learning.

The crucial aspect to consider is to what extent these two purposes reinforce each other and in what way they are interlinked to serve the individual in a lifelong learning perspective, in which certification acquired in one context can be easily connected or complemented with qualifications/certifications obtained in the other context.

## **3 Opening qualifications to validation as an accepted pathway – opportunities and challenges**

Qualifications are the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process by a competent authority and typically take the form of documents such as certificates or diplomas. They determine that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards. Those learning outcomes may be achieved through a variety of paths in formal, non-formal or informal settings, whether in national or international contexts. The increasing usage of learning outcomes-based standards, stressing the potentially equal importance of formal, non-formal and informal learning, have played a key role in facilitating validation across Europe. This has been further strengthened by efforts aimed at increasing the flexibility of education and training, allowing for the assessment of individual modules and units.

Data show that qualifications frameworks are becoming more open to validation of knowledge, skills and competences as a complementary route to qualifications other than the standard route of a course followed by an assessment. As table 1 shows, a majority of countries now award qualifications on the basis of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In 22 countries a full qualification can be obtained that is issued through the formal education and training system, especially in IVET (around three quarters of the countries allow for the acquisition of a full qualification). In 25 countries, candidates can be exempted from parts of qualifications, normally linked to the assessment of modules of education and training or units of learning outcomes. In 27 countries, validation give access to formal programmes, especially in higher education.

The data from the European inventory further show that validation initiatives in the labour market and the third sector normally operate on the basis of own standards, not always connected to qualifications from formal education and training: this is the case in only 14 and 4 countries respectively<sup>2</sup>.

The inventory did not explore sufficiently, however, to what extent qualification frameworks are opening up to qualifications from outside the formal system, such as private and international qualifications, and the possibilities to obtain these on the basis of validation of learning outcomes.

*Table 1: The outputs of validation by country.*

<b>A) Award of full formal qualification (22)</b>	
Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland)	
<b>B) Award of part of a formal qualification (27)</b>	<b>C) Award of other non-formal qualification/certificate (15)</b>
Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland) United Kingdom (Wales)	Austria, Belgium-Wallonia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom (Scotland), United Kingdom (Wales)
<b>D) Award of credit points (25)</b>	<b>E) Award of modules (22)</b>
Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland) United Kingdom (Wales)	Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland) United Kingdom (Wales)
<b>F) Exemptions from part of course (25)</b>	<b>G) Access to formal programmes (e.g. programmes in formal education) (27)</b>
Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland) United Kingdom (Wales)	Austria, Belgium-Flanders, Belgium-Wallonia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Scotland) United Kingdom (Wales)
<b>H) Training specification (i.e. to map what training needs to be completed in order to achieve a (full) qualification) (18)</b>	<b>I) Access to the labour market (e.g. a qualification that is compulsory to exercise a certain job) (9)</b>
Austria, Belgium-Wallonia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom (England Northern Ireland), United Kingdom (Wales)	Belgium-Wallonia, Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden, United Kingdom (Wales)

Source: 2018 European Inventory. Note: The table relates to the education and training area only.

#### 4 Strengthening the currency of validation – connecting certification

For this increased connectivity and accumulation to be achieved, we need to ‘unpack’ the certification process and identify the factors influencing its currency and exchange value. Building on the definition of qualification introduced by the 2008 EQF Recommendation<sup>3</sup> (2), several

<sup>2</sup> See [https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/european\\_inventory\\_validation\\_2018\\_synthesis.pdf](https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_synthesis.pdf) p. 17

<sup>3</sup> Qualification’ means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.

elements may contribute to the understanding of what is required for qualifications and certifications so that they can better serve the interests and needs of individuals.

The EQF recommendation establishes that, “where possible” member states should “ensure that information on qualifications and their learning outcomes is accessible and published. Annex Vi identifies fields that can be considered the minimum for the electronic publication of information on qualifications with an EQF level. These fields are important elements for the transparency of any certification:

- Identification of the learner
- Title of the credential or qualification
- Awarding body
- Date of issuing
- Learning outcomes
- Notional learning volume needed to achieve the learning outcomes (eg in ECTS)
- Level of the credential or qualification within the NQF/EQF
- Type of assessment
- Type of quality assurance used to underpin the credential or qualification
- Ways of acquiring the qualification

In the following, a limited set of specific aspects are addressed, indicating issues to be addressed for diverse certificates to be connected and accumulated.

### **5.1 Awarding body: Who provides the certification?**

The currency of a certificate is traditionally linked to the reputation and credibility of the awarding institution, authority or body (what the EQF recommendation defines as ‘competent body’). Qualifications awarded on behalf of national authorities will normally be seen as the ‘gold standard’ of certification as they are well known, trusted and normally linked to transparent quality assurance. An increasing diversity of certification modes, as currently exemplified by the awarding of micro-credentials and badges by a widening range of companies and institutions - in education, labour market, and third sector – raises questions about the credibility of awarding bodies. For these new certificates to serve the needs and interests of individuals, the background and characteristics of the awarding body needs to be clarified. From the perspective of the individual, and in a situation where fake certificates and qualifications are a reality, it is crucial to be able to judge the body behind the certificate.

### **5.2 Learning outcomes: What is being certified?**

According to the EQF definition, a qualification or a certificate attests that the individual has acquired specified learning outcomes. This requires the certificate to contain information on the learning outcomes achieved. Traditionally focus has been on the location and duration of the learning process, not on outcomes. While progress has been made for qualifications awarded through the formal education and training system, the learning outcomes focus is less systematically applied in other certificates. For individuals to accumulate different certificates successfully over time, agreeing on minimum requirements regarding the inclusion of achieved learning outcomes in qualifications will be crucial. Digitalisation of certificates may facilitate such a development, allowing for the on-line inclusion of learning outcomes information. Blockchain technology is

securing further the information contained in each certificate, making it harder to falsify<sup>4</sup>.

### **5.3 The certification standard: what is the certification referring to?**

A certificates' currency and exchange value may be influenced by the standards it refers to. National qualifications systems are increasingly using the same learning outcomes-based standards for assessment of formal, non-formal and informal learning. This avoids the creation of A and B certificates whose currency refers to the location and method rather than to the outcomes of learning. Lacking reference to standards may also influence currency, triggering a suspicion of poor quality and questioning the relevance of the certificate for further learning or employment. While the shift to learning outcomes-based standards has made it easier to consult the standards of formal, national qualifications, many other certificates make no reference to a standard or reference point. Both for the individual learner and the potential receiver of a certificate (in education or employment), future certificates should make it possible to (potentially) consult and document the standards, which have been successfully met by the learner. The potential for connecting and accumulating different certificates may be enhanced by strengthening the dialogue on standards between different stakeholders, notably between national qualification authorities and stakeholders in the labour market and the third sector. The challenge is to develop standards that can be used across sectors. The recently finalised Balancing-point project carried out in the Retail sector<sup>5</sup> illustrates this.

### **5.4 Type of assessment: What is the reliability and validity of the assessment?**

The credibility of a certificate is influenced by the way assessment is organised and carried out. The extent to which assessment processes are documented in certificates is therefore of relevance to the individual holder as well as potential receivers in education and training and the labour market. Attention is traditionally paid to the reliability of the process and the extent to which different candidates are treated fairly and equally. There is a direct relationship between the assessment process and the currency of the certificate. While formal, national qualifications normally refer to explicit quality assurance arrangements for assessment, other and emerging forms of certification will, if not already complying, have to include a reference to quality assurance of assessment. While assessment through peer review and on-line recommendations may challenge traditional forms, they constitute new ways in which people present their skills and competences. As such they need to become visible in certificates.

### **5.5 Technical format – digitalisation of certificates**

Certificates can be provided in different formats. Traditional diplomas, in paper, are well known and people tend to trust them. In recent years, more and more institutions are moving to paperless certification, issuing diplomas only in digital format. Digital credentials can make certification more transparent as more information can be added to the certificate. Digitalisation of credentials provides infinite possibilities of linking the certificate to information elements.

Digitally issued credentials (e.g. through the Europass Digital Credentials) give the possibility of certifying a wide range of activities and experiences by any issuer. For example, digital badges

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<sup>4</sup> A major disadvantage of Blockchain technology is its enormous carbon footprint

<sup>5</sup> This project was presented to the EQF AG February 2021: <https://www.virke.no/Statistikk-Rapporter/balansekunst/>

have emerged as a flexible format to document experiences. Badges are used in many different ways to signal that an individual has carried out a certain experience or accomplishment. They have a broad coverage, from the gamification of online learning to certification of assessed skills and competences.

Further, the certificate can be much faster checked for authenticity and its information can be compared across sectors more easily; this makes recognition faster and easier. Blockchain technology also can increase the security and make it harder for people to falsify certificates.

## **5. The current Guidelines**

The 2015 Guidelines treated the issue of certification in section 3.3. and 3.4. The focus was mainly on the importance of making sure that standards of validation are equivalent to those of formal qualifications and in the need of connecting validation arrangements to NQFs. However, as described in this note, the issue of certification has become more complex through the availability of a broader spectrum of qualifications; shorter duration of learning due to needs for up- and reskilling and the emergence of alternative credentials (such as micro-credentials, badges). Furthermore, opportunities offered by the digitalisation of credentialing have emerged.

These developments require further reflection on certification within lifelong learning systems and strategies. Given that traditional formal qualifications co-exist and/or compete with an increasing diversity of alternative certificates and credentials, increased attention needs to be given to the way individuals can combine, connect and accumulate qualifications, certificates and other types of credentials over a lifetime. While raising questions, which go beyond the restricted topic of validation it also fundamentally influences the way we think about validation and its integration into overall education, training and skills policies. Participants in the workshop will be able to discuss the topics in depth.