



# European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning

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## Summary

## 1 Introduction

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is increasingly seen as a way of enhancing lifelong and lifewide learning. A growing number of European countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing the learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions, for example at work, in leisure time activities and at home.

Recognising the importance and relevance of learning taking place outside the formal education and training context a set of common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning were adopted by the European Council in May 2004<sup>1</sup>. Formulated at a high level of abstraction, these principles identified key issues that are critical to the development and implementation of methods and systems for validation (see Box 1).

*Box 1: The fundamental principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*

### **Individual entitlements**

*The identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning should, in principle, be a voluntary matter for the individual. There should be equal access and equal and fair treatment for all individuals. The privacy and rights of the individual are to be respected.*

### **Obligations of stakeholders**

*Stakeholders, should establish, in accordance with their rights, responsibilities and competences, systems and approaches for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. These should include appropriate quality assurance mechanisms.*

*Stakeholders should provide guidance, counseling and information about these systems and approaches to individuals.*

### **Confidence and trust**

*The processes, procedures and criteria for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms.*

### **Credibility and legitimacy**

*Systems and approaches for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning should respect the legitimate interests ensure the balanced participation of the relevant stakeholders.*

Since 2004 these principles have been used in countries as a reference for national developments. Following the adoption of the principles, stakeholders from various countries have raised the question as to whether a more detailed set of guidelines for validation could be developed that build on the widening experience of the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The establishment (in 2006) of the Cluster on 'Recognition of Learning Outcomes', in the context of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme<sup>2</sup>, has made it possible to follow up the common principles in a systematic way. This cluster brings together

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1 Commission of the European Communities (2004), Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, 9600/04 EDUC 118 SOC 253, 18 May 2004  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/validation2004\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/validation2004_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/comp\\_en.html#2](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/comp_en.html#2)

representatives of 25<sup>3</sup> countries with the objective to exchange and identify good practice in areas related to recognition of learning outcomes. Building on the conclusions of peer-learning activities on 'effective practice in validation processes' (Brussels, January 2007 and Paris, July 2007), prepared and attended by the cluster, the work on drafting *European Guidelines for the validation of non-formal and informal learning* began in August 2007. The content of these guidelines was identified by the cluster members and the text was repeatedly consulted with and validated by the members of the cluster.

### **1.1 Why European Guidelines on validation?**

The European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning were designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries. The Guidelines support these goals and offer some detail on the structure and processes of validation. The Guidelines can be written because national positions have become stronger in this field and greater exchange of practice and policy learning is now possible.

The Guidelines are intended to support the different development process in countries, regions and sectors and respect the wide range of different models for validation. Essentially the European Guidelines should be seen as an evaluative tool those involved with validation at local, regional and national level.

These Guidelines should be read in conjunction with the 2008 publication of the most extensive inventory to date of practice in the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>4</sup> (referred to as 2007 Inventory in this text). This 2007 inventory includes a summary practice in public, private and voluntary sectors in 32 countries together with six case studies that are presented in some detail. This inventory will be updated on a bi-annual basis and will thus, together with these Guidelines, provide countries with an instrument for improving practises in this field.

### **1.2 The basis in evidence of this Guideline document**

These Guidelines aim to use all of the evidence that has become available since the 2004 principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning were published. Thus the Guidelines will underline these principles and strengthen the validation process in its various settings. The evidence sources that have been used include:

- the discussions in the Peer Learning Cluster on the Recognition of Learning Outcomes (25 countries involved);
- peer learning activities organised by the above cluster in Brussels (Jan 2007) and Paris (July 2007);
- CEDEFOP study visit in Portugal (2006);
- three European inventories of national experience of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning<sup>5</sup>;
- a wide range of Leonardo da Vinci projects that support the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- reviews of research literature in this field.

The Guidelines also take account of the outcomes of discussions at the Portuguese Presidency conference on Valuing Learning in November, 2007. The main summary points

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<sup>3</sup> Annex 1, list of members of the cluster on Recognition of learning outcomes.

<sup>4</sup> ECOTEC research and consulting, 2007, European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, for European Commission, DG EAC,  
<http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/EuropeanInventory.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The 2004, 2005 and 2007 versions see  
<http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/2007.html>

in this conference represent a current European view of the validation process for non-formal and informal learning. Conference delegates agreed that:

- individuals (learners) are central to the validation process (and therefore should be involved in dialogue about the process, together with self assessment, reflection, self realisation and they should receive guidance as necessary);
- it is necessary to create systems in which the results of validation are transferable to the formal qualifications system if desired by learners;
- the shift to learning outcomes based approaches within curricula and qualifications systems is facilitating introduction of validation and the use of common standards with the formal recognition system;
- there is a clear link between validation procedures and introduction of outcomes based qualifications frameworks;
- validation can be used for both formative and summative purposes;
- since validation touches upon personal attitudes certain ethical principles should be respected and data should be protected;
- successful assessment methodologies usually combine several techniques but the use of portfolios often has a central role;
- the quality assurance of validation procedures is key for creation of mutual trust and credibility;
- there is a need for better data on the financial implications of validation procedures and especially cost - benefit analysis;
- some countries have difficulty in developing a sustainable large scale system of validation of non-formal and informal learning which builds on and goes beyond project-based practice;
- guidance and training for those who manage and carry out the validation process are essential for the professionalisation of practitioners, communities of practice, and transparency of the validation processes.

These Guidelines are made up of nine chapters. Following this first chapter on background to the validation process and the guidelines, the second chapter provides a summary of the current position on validation from a European level perspective. The third chapter focuses on the national level and provides a rationale for the strong policy interest in this area. The fourth chapter includes a discussion of how organisations in the public and private sectors interface with validation processes. In the fifth chapter the focus is on the main beneficiary of validation processes – the individual. The structure of the validation process is examined in chapter six. Chapter seven covers the assessment processes in some detail. In the eighth chapter the roles, skills and values of the people who carry out the validation process are discussed. Chapter nine contains a summary of validation principles and guidelines. Some annexes are included which can support the development of validation processes

### **1.3 Terminological challenges**

Exchanges of projects and experiences in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning are beset with problems that arise from the different understandings of the commonly used words or phrases. This challenge was recognised by the Education Council in its 2004 conclusions on common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The council agreed that no single concept would be able to capture the complexities of these processes and therefore decided to refer to identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Identification of non-formal and informal learning is seen as a process which

*'...records and makes visible the individual's learning outcomes. This does not result in a formal certificate or diploma, but it may provide the basis for such formal recognition.'*

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

*'...is based on the assessment of the individual's learning outcomes and may result in a certificate or diploma.'*

This distinction between identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning reflects the distinction drawn between formative and summative assessment in the research literature (see also chapter 3.2 for a discussion on the formative and summative purposes of validation).

These conceptual challenges have also been addressed by CEDEFOP in its updated multilingual glossary of 100 terms used in education and training across Europe<sup>6</sup>. This glossary takes into account recent OECD work on qualifications and recognition of non-formal learning. It also uses the definitions related to the European Qualifications Framework. The definitions of terms used in the validation processes are included in Annex 1 of these guidelines.

The term *validation of learning outcomes* is understood as:

*'The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of an validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.'*

It should be noted that in the definition above validation applies to formal as well as non-formal and informal learning. In these Guidelines the context of validation is in non-formal and informal settings only and practices for validation in the formal context are not discussed. To make clear the relationship between validation in formal settings and the process applied to non-formal and informal settings, Figure 1 illustrates the main phases involved.

There are some broader concepts involved in the validation of learning that do not yet appear in glossaries linked with validation. The concept of social validation of learning is a good example. It is common for a learner to document achievements against standards (occupational standards, qualification standards or advertised expectations for a specific job) and for this documented evidence to be sufficient to gain social recognition, for example being offered a better job or a place on a higher education programme. In this process, that is addressed as 'social validation of learning', certification and formal recognition (e.g. by institutions awarding qualifications) do not occur.

#### **1.4 The importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning**

Indications from the 2007 Inventory suggest that the validation of informal and non-formal learning is of increasing importance across Europe. Furthermore the commitment of large numbers of countries to the OECD activity in this field and participation in the European Commission's peer learning cluster indicate that validation is seen as an important element of national policies on education, training and learning.

Expansion and diversification of education and training policies towards a broader, lifelong learning perspective, widens the focus from the delivery of qualifications by formal education and training institutions to include other, more flexible routes to qualification. These are sensitive to different ways in which people have developed their knowledge and skills and the way they live their lives. To facilitate such flexible pathways, validation of non-formal and informal learning makes visible the learning that is gained outside learning

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<sup>6</sup> Terminology of education and training policy - A multilingual glossary, CEDEFOP, Forthcoming

institutions. Across a country this represents a vast untapped resource of invisible knowledge and skills and, notwithstanding the rights of the individual to have their learning recognised, its increased visibility could lead to significant economic and social benefits for individuals, communities and countries.

### **1.5 Routes from learning to certification**

There are different ways in which validation of non-formal and informal learning is organised across Europe. The system for validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes can be designed as an integrated part of the existing formal education and training system. When this is the case it is seen as another nationally endorsed route to recognition of learning outcomes and possibly to certification. In some countries the validation of non-formal and informal learning operates in parallel with the formal system. It is managed in a different way but uses some of the infrastructure from the formal system, such as the educational benchmarks or standards for formal qualification. It can also be an entirely separate process leading to distinctive recognition that bears no institutional, standards or certification link to the formal system.

For the purpose of these guidelines, it is useful to set the validation of non-formal and informal learning against the validation process for the formal system. Firstly because it emphasises the existence of the validation process for informal and non-formal learning and secondly because it helps to show that validation of non-formal and informal learning can establish its legitimacy through the use of the same standards or benchmarks that are used in the formal process. Figure 1 is a schematic diagram that aims to show in the broad terms how the formal and informal systems can align with each other. At the top of the diagram we can see the formal system and at the bottom we can see the informal system. As learners participate in these systems they move to the right hand side where they can obtain certification of their learning. The black arrows show this pathway from left to right. In both systems the individual has choices about their learning and how it can be made visible. Generally the nature of validation processes outside the formal system presents many more choices for the learner than in the formal system. This is because the process of validation as well as the learning careers may be more complex and because it serves a greater diversity of purposes. The grey boxes at the bottom of the diagram show some of this complexity in terms of the choices learners can make. In the case of the formal system, the learning and validation environment is likely to be simpler.

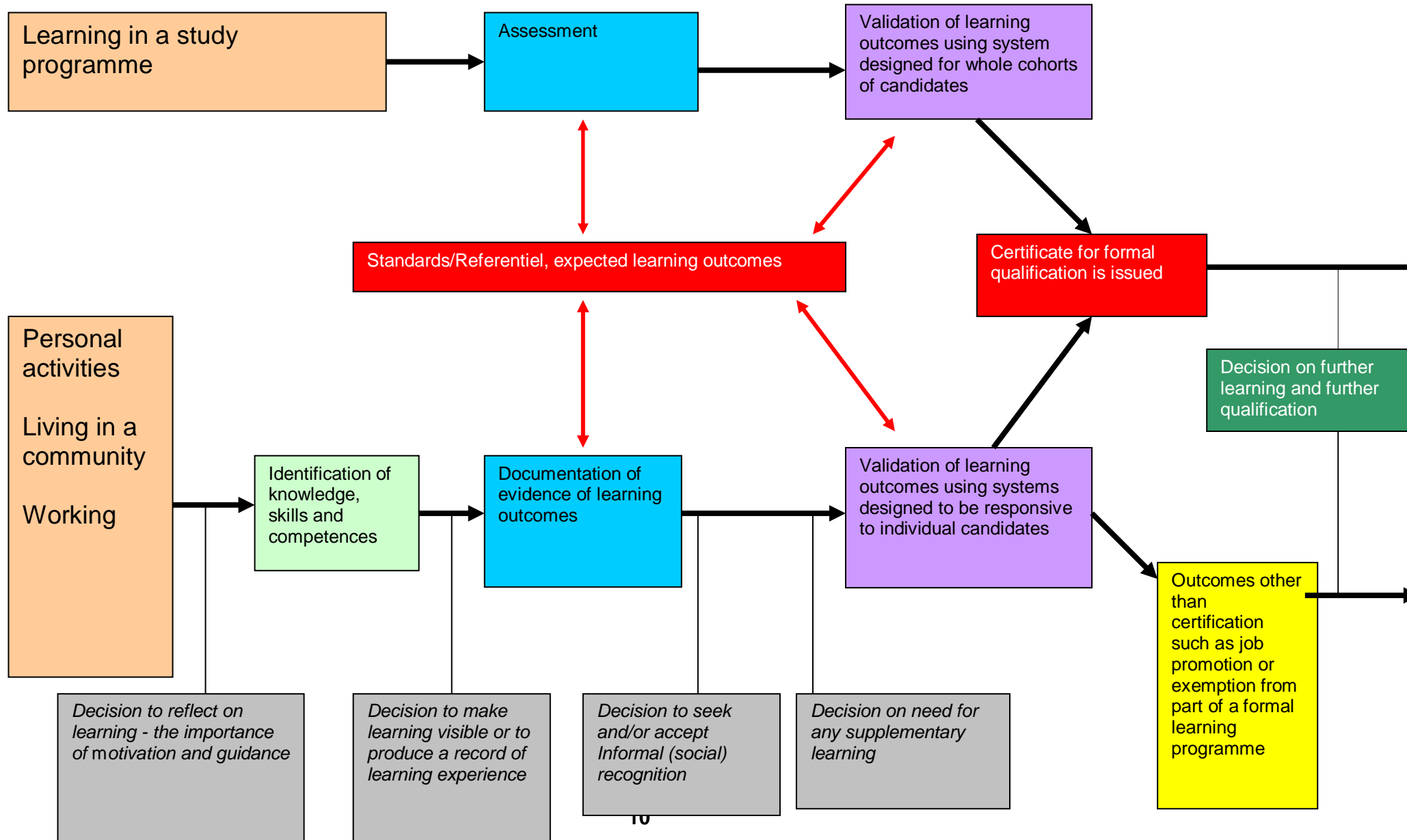
Whilst the validation process for non-formal and informal learning is designed to be more sensitive to the circumstances of an individual learner, it is essential for status and trust that the summative element of the validation is based on the same standards which apply in the formal system<sup>7</sup>. The red arrows in the diagram signal the use of the common standards by the different validation processes. This use of common standards provides consistency and comparability of outcomes of the two different assessment and validation approaches<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> This point raises important questions as regards the way standards are defined. Input-based standards may provide a serious obstacle to validation of non-formal and informal learning by limiting the number and range of learning pathways and experiences considered to be relevant. A more in depth discussion of standards can be found in chapter 3.5.

<sup>8</sup> Meaning the validation approach in the formal system and the validation approach for non-formal and informal learning.

Figure 1: Routes from learning to certification



## 1.6 The role of different stakeholders

The number of stakeholders and agencies involved in validation of non-formal and informal learning can make it difficult to see the whole picture from any one perspective. The integrated view presented in Table 1 maps out and extends current boundaries of thinking regarding how, where and why validation of non-formal and informal learning occurs<sup>9</sup>. Five distinctive but interrelated levels of management by stakeholders are described - individual learners, organisations, the educational and training sectors, national and regional policymakers and European policymakers. This integrated view can be used to broaden understanding about the practical challenges of validating non-formal and informal learning when developing and implementing validation approaches at all levels.

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted and extended from work by Nilsen-Mohn and McHenry

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**Table 1: An integrated view of validation of non-formal and informal learning**

	Who is involved?	What are the results?	Why are they doing it?	How is this done?
<b>European level</b>	EU Commission and Council EU Agencies, Cedefop and ETF Social partners organisations Ministers of Education and Training Employment Ministers	EQF Europass Common European Principles for Validation Draft European Guidelines for validation ECVET and ECTS	Comparability and transparency Increased mobility Competitiveness Life Long Learning	Open method of coordination (OMC) Technical cooperation (peer learning) Experimental and research programmes (Lifelong learning programme, Framework research programmes)
<b>National level (including regional stakeholders such as local government)</b>	Ministries Qualification Authorities Social partners NGOs	National Curricula Qualifications	Knowledge society Mobility Innovation Skills supply	Systems Projects Networks Financing Legal framework
<b>Education and training sector</b>	Local government institutions Private institutions Assessment centres Vocational Schools Universities Specialist recognition centres	Education programmes (standards) Certificates recognising participation Diplomas	Education for all Tailored training Shortened study period Increased admission	Defining assessment and validation methods
<b>Business sector</b>	Business managers Human resource managers Trade union representatives	Occupational standards Competence profile Work descriptions	Modernisation Competitive advantage Resourcing Career planning Training	Mapping Counselling Assessment Validation
<b>Voluntary sector</b>	Communities NGOs Projects	Skills profile	Social and personal reasons Employability	Mapping Youthpass Europass CV

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<i>Individual</i>	Candidate Employee	Motivation to learn Self esteem Proof of knowledge and skills	Personal reasons Employability Mobility Career advancement Entrance to education	Supplementary learning Documentation Taking part in assessment
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## 1.7 Summarising current experience with the validation of non-formal and informal learning

It is possible to summarise some of the factors that can make a validation process for non-formal and informal learning a success. Drawing on the 2007 Inventory it is clear that the following are important factors:

- Partnership-working and consultation
- Sufficient financial and human resources,
- Training and guidance for staff involved to support policy and legislation
- Use of clear reference points such as standards and qualification levels
- Developing methodologies which are learning-outcomes-based
- Quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation to ensure fairness and build confidence
- Learning from others and sharing experiences

Similarly it is possible to identify common barriers to successful adoption of a validation system for non-formal and informal learning.

- The resources that are available are not sufficient to meet the demand for validation or sustain them
- Insufficient volume of training for staff responsible for validation
- Uncertainty in planning due to variation in the scope and quality of pilot projects
- Lack of collaboration between stakeholder groups
- Lack of buy-in to the validation process from companies
- High levels of trust in the traditions and culture of validation of formal learning
- Perceptions of lengthy and complex procedures for validation of non-formal and informal learning
- Poor access to information about validation procedures
- Low personal expectations from potential candidates for validation of non-formal and informal learning, especially low-skilled males.
- Employers' fear of greater contractual / salary demands
- Large variety of methodologies that can hinder reliable assessment and trust
- Consideration, by the private sector, that validation of non-formal and informal learning is a public sector responsibility
- The lack of a legal framework for validation processes
- Private sector unwillingness to share experiences/policies
- Hostility towards non traditional qualifications

Fundamentally, success in this field requires that validation is broadly accepted as being relevant for reaching overarching political goals like lifelong learning, employability and social inclusion. Success will also require that validation is 'mainstreamed' and becomes an integrated part of qualifications systems; politically, legally, administratively and financially.

## 2 Effective practises in validation; The European perspective

### **Guidelines**

*The practice of validation of informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the European principles for quality assurance of education and training and the Recommendation for a European quality assurance reference framework for VET<sup>10</sup>*

*European cooperation in the field of validation should be further developed, in particular by regularly updating and improving these guidelines and the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.*

*The European level tools and frameworks (e.g. EQF, Europass, European credit systems) could be used to promote validation and to enhance comparability and transparency of the outcomes of validation processes and so build trust across national boundaries.*

### **2.1 Making validation processes comparable**

From a European perspective, the strengthening of the comparability of approaches to validation at different levels and in different contexts is important - this is part of the process of developing trust at the international level. It has been said that the national and regional methods and systems developed so far can be considered 'islands' of validation. Lack of comparability of validation systems makes it difficult for individuals to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, at different levels and in different countries. These Guidelines can develop links between these islands and enable policy learning, increased transparency and greater mutual trust.

### **2.2 Quality assurance instruments**

Quality assurance processes across Europe set benchmarks for procedures of validation. The European Principles for Quality Assurance in Education and Training<sup>11</sup> can increase cross-national trust in these validation processes. The principles are as follows:

- quality assurance policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training systems;
- quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions;
- quality assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions or programmes by external monitoring bodies or agencies;
- external monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance should be subject to regular review.
- quality assurance should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes;
- quality assurance systems should include the following elements
  - clear and measurable objectives and standards,

<sup>10</sup> European Commission Proposal for a Reference Framework for the Quality Assurance for vocational educational and training, COM(2008) 179 2008/0069 (COD) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0179:FIN:EN:PDF>

<sup>11</sup> Annex 3, Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (April 2008) on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning 2008/C 111/01. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>

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- guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement;
  - appropriate resources,
  - - consistent evaluation methods including self-assessment and external review,
  - feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement,
  - widely accessible evaluation results;
- quality assurance initiatives at international, national and regional level should be coordinated in order to ensure overview, coherence, synergy and system-wide analysis;
  - quality assurance should be a cooperative process across education and training levels and systems, involving all relevant stakeholders, within Member States and across the Community;
  - quality assurance guidelines at Community level may provide reference points for evaluations and peer learning.

These European Guidelines seek to show how the above quality assurance principles can establish consistency of application across the many national contexts for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Many factors can provide or undermine confidence in either the methods used in validation or the outcome achieved. The success of national and local validation processes depends on the level of confidence they inspire. Therefore, as far as possible, national validation processes should be compliant with the European quality assurance principles and the follow up to these<sup>12</sup>.

### **2.3 Other European policy tools**

European networks for enhancing cooperation in quality assurance procedures (ENQA<sup>13</sup> for higher education, ENQA – VET<sup>14</sup> for vocational education and training) play an important role across many nations and institutions for enhancing the quality and transparency of education and training. These networks are for the most part concerned with the quality of institutional practices and programmes but they also highlight the general principles of quality assurance that apply across education, training and processes leading to qualification.

There are other European level policy tools that have important interactions with validation processes. The European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)<sup>15</sup> will support the validation processes by providing European benchmarks for qualification levels across Europe and encourage the embedding of validation systems with formal qualifications systems. The qualifications levels in the EQF will help to create transparency in qualifications levels and comparability across nations and regions. The structure of the EQF descriptors - that set out knowledge, skills and competence in terms of learning outcomes - is proving to be a useful tool in the development of national qualifications systems. In many national settings the development of validation systems has been

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<sup>12</sup> The general principles outlined in the European guidelines have been specified by frameworks covering sub-sectors of education and training, notably higher education and vocational education and training. The CQAF – the common quality assurance framework for VET, initiated in 2008, is an example of the latter.

<sup>13</sup> European Network for Quality Assurance in higher education ([www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu))

<sup>14</sup> European Network for Quality Assurance in vocational education and training ([www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/projects\\_networks/quality/](http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/projects_networks/quality/))

<sup>15</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (April 2008) on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning 2008/C 111/01 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:111:0001:0007:EN:PDF>

hampered by, amongst other things, the need to define the learning that individuals must demonstrate to reach a standard. When learning programmes are defined in terms of length of study and topics to be covered it is difficult to define the actual learning required. It is possible that the current trend to increase the 'outcome' formulation of standards, possibly as a result of the formulation of learning outcomes in the EQF, will also enable validation processes to lead to formal qualification. In other words there is likely to be increasing convergence in the definition of standards expected in validation of non-formal and informal learning and those expected for formal qualifications (see figure 1).

Each of the elements in the Europass portfolio<sup>16</sup> also interacts with validation systems since they document learning. In particular the structure of the Europass CV serves to encourage recognition of learning through expecting the documentation of evidence for the learning of particular types of knowledge and skills, including personal skills. The CV is completed by individuals and the process of development is essentially a reflective one where the individual considers the types and levels of learning that they have achieved. The encouragement to identify learning, and therefore competence and qualifications levels, is an important first step towards full recognition, validation and certification.

The existence of the European credit transfer and accumulation system for higher education<sup>17</sup> and the commitment to the credit transfer system for VET (ECVET)<sup>18</sup> are based on their potential to give value to learning that has been achieved in other institutions and outside the home country. The learning in question is currently often formal learning, however these tools have the potential to allow the transfer of informal and non-formal learning if the essential elements of comparability and trust are in place. The standardised modes these credit transfer processes use, such as describing learning through defining outcomes (instead of programmes), is a powerful mechanism for increasing trust. Consequently engagement with these credit transfer tools offers the potential to enhance the process of the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Just as validation of non-formal and informal learning can benefit from the existence of credit transfer processes it be argued that the credit transfer processes, such as ECVET, will benefit from the practice of validation of non-formal and informal learning processes in countries, particularly the assessment methodologies commonly used<sup>19</sup>.

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16 the five elements of Europass are Europass CV, Mobilipass, Language portfolio, Certificate Supplement, Diploma Supplement. See <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/>

17 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index_en.html)

18 See [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm)

19 For a discussion of the relationship between validation and credit transfer, see Bjornavold, J. and Mouillor, I. (2008), *La validation des acquis d'apprentissage en Europe; un sujet d'actualite. Actualite de la formation permanente*, Paris

### 3 Effective practice in validation: the national perspective

#### **Guidelines**

*The validation of non-formal and informal learning should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system*

*The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the 'identification' of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part lifelong learning*

*Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework)*

*The entitlement to validation could be considered in cases where non-formal and informal learning is seen as a normal route to a qualification – parallel to formal education and training*

*The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks could be used as an opportunity to systematically integrate validation into qualifications systems*

*The introduction of validation as an integrated part of a national qualifications framework could be linked to the need to improve access to, progression within and transfer of qualifications*

*The sustainability and coherence of national systems of validation should be supported by regular cost benefit analysis*

#### **3.1 The social and economic rationale for national validation strategies**

The extent to which users trust a validation process depends on national and local practices. The 2005 Inventory of practice<sup>20</sup> indicates that the strength of these national and local practices hinge on the approach to three challenges:

1. What links are there between (the different forms) of validation of non-formal informal learning and the national qualifications systems?
2. What kind of standards ('referentiels') are used for validation of non-formal and informal learning?
3. How is the long term sustainability of validation of non-formal and informal learning ensured?

Discussions of these three challenges form the basis of this section of the Guidelines.

National and local policy makers have expressed strong social arguments for engaging more fully with the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The 2005 European Inventory explains these arguments in full and provides examples of practice to support them. Here we summarise the main points to clarify the social and economic policy objectives for validation process.

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is expected to:

- support mobility within education/training and in the labour market by improving access and mobility of individuals, both into and within education and employment;
- promote 'efficiency' within education and training by helping to ensure that individuals are able to access tailored learning opportunities;

<sup>20</sup> Ecotec for the European Commission DG EAC, European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning, 2005  
<http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/EuropeanInventory.pdf>

- promote equality of opportunity for individuals to achieve recognition for their skills and competences, regardless of where these were acquired, as such, it helps to establish a 'level playing field' in education / training and the labour market;
- support disadvantaged groups such as immigrants and refugees, the unemployed, older workers;
- support lifelong learning by making it more likely that lifelong recognition of learning is possible;
- achieve 'coherence' with other (EU) countries;
- address sectoral needs in relation to skills shortages or in order to comply with regulations regarding professional qualifications
- support the response to demographic change;
- combat a qualifications deficit.

These are wide ranging expectations of validation which may - partly at least - explain the increased level of interest in establishing national policy and practice in this area.

### **3.2 National qualifications systems and the validation of non-formal and informal learning**

The concept of a national qualifications system is now widely accepted<sup>21</sup> as all aspects of a country's activity that result in the recognition of learning. These systems include the means of developing and operationalising national or regional policy on qualifications, institutional arrangements, quality assurance processes, assessment and awarding processes, skills recognition and other mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.

The most prominent forms of recognition of learning arise through certification of formal learning programmes – it is often the case that some form of assessment is used to validate this learning. Whilst this process of achieving qualifications is prominent in terms of formal recognition of learning, it is possibly not as significant when it comes to the proportion of learning that it recognizes. Non-formal and informal learning takes place everyday and in almost all settings where people live and work. This suggests that most national qualifications systems are not recognising the bulk of learning taking place in a country. Thus the high policy interest in broadening the range of learning that is recognized, through mainstreaming approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Not all forms of validation of non-formal and informal learning result in award of a qualification. The assessment process that leads to validation can have two main forms. *Formative approaches to assessment* will not aim at a formal certification of the learning outcomes, but will provide feedback to the learning process or learning career, indicating strengths and weaknesses and providing a basis for personal or organisational improvement. Formative assessment fulfils a very important role and is used in numerous settings ranging from guidance and counselling to human resource management in enterprises. *Summative approaches to assessment and validation* aim explicitly at the formalisation and certification of the learning outcomes and are thus linked to and integrated into institutions and bodies authorised to award qualifications<sup>22</sup>. Both formative and summative assessment have a role in the validation of learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings. However in the validation process that leads to certification it is summative assessment that is important. The process of summative assessment needs to

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<sup>21</sup> OECD (2007), *Qualifications Systems: bridges to lifelong learning*, Paris  
[http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_39263238\\_38465013\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_38465013_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>22</sup> A qualification is here understood as ...*the formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcome to a given standard.*

take account of national standards (see section 3.5) and must be operable by the national qualifications awarding bodies. This implies that the use of summative approaches for validating non-formal and informal learning needs to be strongly linked – or possibly integrated - into national qualifications systems. This link can take many forms and the rapid development of National Qualifications Framework may be seen as a development of particular importance (see section 3.4).

An important issue is the extent to which non-formal and informal learning is accepted and established as an accepted and normal route to a certificate or qualification. By integrating the validation of non-formal or informal learning with the national qualifications system the legal status, governance, stakeholder involvement and financing of the validation of non-formal and informal learning becomes more transparent. The standards on which the validation processes are based can also be the same and the result is a unified certification of learning outcomes which does not recognise different routes to learning. This opening up of qualifications to a broader set of learning experiences and pathways can be seen as closely linked to the shift to learning outcomes characterising current education and training policies and practices – in particular the development and implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks (see also 2.4).

### **3.3 The legal standing of validation**

Some countries have introduced a legal right to summative validation of non-formal and informal learning for their citizens. This right is not always universal, sometimes the right to validation is part of the right of adults to access and complete general or upper secondary education. This legal right can be seen as an effort to integrate validation of non-formal and informal learning into qualifications systems and as an effort to address lifelong learning in a concrete way. The majority of European countries have so far been reluctant to introduce a legal right in this field. This seems partly to be motivated by concerns regarding cost, partly motivated by a preference for a decentralised, formative approach to the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

At the same time, discussion with leading national experts in the peer learning cluster for recognition of learning outcomes suggests that validation (and certification) of non-formal and informal learning is becoming more integrated in qualifications systems and frameworks. Therefore the individual access to validation has to be considered. A decision to establish validation of non-formal and informal learning as a normal route to qualifications – parallel to the traditional route going via formal education and training – may require that individuals have a right to access and make use of validation, in the same way as they have a right to access and use formal education and training.

### **3.4 National Qualifications Frameworks**

The setting up of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is of relevance to the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The shift to learning outcomes promoted by the EQF, and increasingly part of new NQFs developing all over Europe, may prove to be very important for the further development of the validation of non-formal learning. The emerging NQFs may be said to operate according to four main aims<sup>23</sup>:

- to facilitate establishment of national standards for learning outcomes (competences);
- to relate qualifications to each other;
- to promote access to learning, transfer of learning and progression;
- to promote the quality of education and training provision.

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<sup>23</sup> Coles, M., 2007, Qualifications frameworks in Europe: platforms for collaboration, integration and reform, *Making the European Learning Area a Reality*, EU conference paper, 3-5 June 2007, Munich

Each of these four aims may be directly related to the further development of methods and approaches for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The key advantage of frameworks in facilitating validation of non-formal and informal learning is that the classifications of qualification levels are usually written in the form of learning outcomes. These qualifications levels are independent of any specific kind of qualification and therefore open up the possibility of non-formal and informal learning being validated at a particular level – to be used as basis for the award of a partial or complete qualification. The development of validation of non-formal and informal learning and NQFs thus have a common objective: enabling individuals to make progress in their learning careers on the basis of their learning outcomes and competences; not on the basis of the duration and location of a particular learning programme.

An objective shared by many emerging NQFs is to relate qualifications to one another and thereby reduce barriers between education and training sectors and promote access, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. Methods and systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning can contribute directly to this objective. If introduced on a systematic basis, as a part of the overall qualifications system, validation of non-formal and informal learning will open up qualifications to a broader set of users, for example by certifying work experience and voluntary work.

### **3.5 National standards for learning outcomes**

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is inconceivable without a clearly defined and agreed reference point. Standards influence validation practises in two main ways. Firstly, the impact of validation of non-formal and informal learning depends on this standard and how it is defined and interpreted. Standards may effectively be defined and formulated in such a way that they exclude validation. Secondly, the standard can also influence the credibility of validation. Validation referring to visible standards defined and supported by the main, relevant stakeholders will greatly increase the acceptance among users – individuals as well as employers – of these practises.

A standard that is too narrowly defined may not be able to accommodate some highly relevant learning taking place outside schools and colleges. Whilst a lot of attention has been paid to methodologies for validation of non-formal and informal learning, relatively little has been paid to the standards and how they influence the final results of the validation process. In general, qualifications – and validation of non-formal and informal learning - relate to two<sup>24</sup> main categories of standards; *occupational* and *education-training standards*. These two categories operate according to different logics, reflecting different sets of priorities, motivations and purposes.

- Occupational standards are classifications and definitions of the main jobs that people do. Following the logic of employment, these standards will focus on what people need to do, how they will do it, and how well they do it. Occupational standards thus have to be written as competences and formulated in terms of outcomes. They exist in all European countries but each nation has its own style of derivation and presentation of the standards. Occupational standards form a bridge between the labour market and education because educational standards (syllabuses and pedagogies) can be developed from them.
- Education-training standards, following the logic of education and training, will focus on what people need to learn, how they will learn it, and how the quality and content of learning will be assessed. The main interest is thus formulated in terms of input (subject, syllabus, teaching methods, process and assessment). Educational standards are normally written as teaching specifications and

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24 In some countries we note that assessment and qualifications standards are developed as a third, separate category of standards

qualification specifications. For example to be a skilled plumber you need to study these subjects at this type of institution for this many years and use this text book or manual. Occupational standards are more and more influencing the way educational standards are to be written - as learning outcomes which are statements of what a person knows and can do in the work situation.

Many approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning tend relate to the second category of standards, those designed specifically for the education and training system. The critical question is whether these standards are defined through the specification of teaching input or learning outcomes (as required in occupational standards).? Outcome-based approaches are generally used for vocational education and training (due to the fact that the link to occupational standards normally will be stronger), the situation in other parts of the education and training system might be different. A particular question should be asked about practises to validate non-formal informal or learning developing in higher education. Higher education institutions largely operate validation on an autonomous basis and in relation to their internal (educational) standards.

The emerging national qualifications framework may influence the way standards are formulated and used. Currently, the description of national qualifications levels are often implicit and based on duration and location of programmes of education and training. The development of NQFs can lead to the development of explicit, coherent, learning outcomes based standards for qualifications that could accommodate outcomes of learning in non-formal and informal settings. Additionally these implicit levels could depend on entry requirements to learning or work and on work related licenses to practise. In the future it will be crucial that the definition of these national standards for learning outcomes takes into account the particular requirements posed by validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Standards may be considered as a key factor in guaranteeing the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. An often heard argument against summative validation is that the resulting qualifications are inferior in quality to those delivered by the formal education and training system. This is based on the assumption that the learning processes in question have not been controlled or overseen by any appropriate expert body. While it is correct that non-formal and informal learning is non-standardised, (sometimes) non-intentional and always reflects specific individual experiences, this does not - as such - provide any basis for drawing conclusions on the quality of these learning processes. Awarding a certificate on the basis of learning outcomes acquired outside formal systems therefore heavily rely on an assessment in relation to an agreed standard. As long as it can be documented (and this is the task of the methodologies developed for this purpose, see chapter 7), this argument against validation can be addressed. Some of the scepticism towards validation may be based on lack of visible standards (it is not clear to the users which standards are applied) or on too weak standards (main stakeholders have not been involved in the definition of standards). A particular danger occurs when validation is based on standards separate from those used in formal education and training. This may give the impression that validation refers to inferior. As indicated in figure 1, a mainstreaming of validation will normally require one set of standards used for formal, non-formal and informal learning.

As seen above appropriate definition of standards can support development of validation of non-formal and informal learning. At the same the practice of validation in these contexts may provide useful feedback for the validation in formal system. A systematic approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning may be seen as providing external benchmarking of standards used in the qualifications system, in particular if these experiences can influence the dialogue between stakeholders involved in defining and reviewing standards. This external standards may also be useful for validation in the formal system, making it possible to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different routes to the same qualification.

In addition to occupational and educational standards which may be considered to be primarily concerned with the content (or knowledge, skills and competence) of learning there are standards that apply to the process of assessment, validation and certification of learning. These process based standards are equally important in enhancing trust and developing currency of qualifications earned on the basis of some informal or non-formal learning.

- Assessment or evaluation standards (e.g. criteria defining types of qualifications, syllabi for qualifications, assessor qualifications);
- Validation standards (e.g. rules for methodologies, jury practice, availability of information, advice and guidance);
- Certification standards (e.g. criteria for the award of a certificate, (legal) definition of who can make awards, regulation practice).

All these standards make it easier to trust the quality of qualifications. But this requires, as indicated above, that they are visible, that they are based on input from relevant stakeholders and that they are regularly reviewed and updated. Thus the concepts of quality and trust are intertwined and depend on clear and relevant standards both in the context of formal as well as validation of non-formal and informal learning.

### **3.6 Sustainable and cost-efficient systems**

The question of sustainability of national systems of validation of non-formal and informal learning is becoming a key issue in national debates on the subject. Some projects that have successfully established procedures to validate non-formal or informal learning have failed to secure ongoing financial support. This was either because the project goals (which are always limited in scale) have been met or the infrastructure for validation proved too expensive for key stakeholders to implement as a national scheme. Therefore the question of how can validation approaches be valued as cost effective in the long term for all the stakeholders involved has become key for policy-makers as well as stakeholders in this area<sup>25</sup>.

The first consideration in terms of sustainability is to determine what it is that will need to be sustained. Validation can take many forms and the following elements have to be considered:

- who are the beneficiaries of the validation process;
- the expected volume of validation candidates;
- what has to be put in place (in terms of infrastructures, human resources but also processes);
- what are the costs (set up and maintenance);
- who are the partners in operating the process;
- and,
- what are the long term forecasts for validation candidate numbers and costs?

One of the findings of the 2007 European Inventory<sup>26</sup> was that lack of national level mechanisms combined with a wide diversity of provisions can lead to problems. Users who

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<sup>25</sup> Cost benefit analysis will be the subject of a peer learning activity to be organised in Iceland in 2009

<sup>26</sup> ECOTEC research and consulting, 2007, European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, for European Commission, DG EAC, <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/publications/inventory/EuropeanInventory.pdf>

are fortunate to know of provision can be confused by the different practises of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In other words the approach to validation that is based on supporting micro-scale initiatives that are, by themselves, relatively inexpensive and highly candidate-centred, are problematic and potentially counter-productive, when it comes to seeking system level structured funding.

Practice suggests that key sustainable funding sources include:

- government funding specifically linked with research and pilot schemes for validation;
- governmental broad funding streams where validation of non-formal and informal learning can make a contribution - for example social interventions such as engaging the unemployed or developing inclusive policies for migrants;
- governmental initiatives for example increasing skills supply in a specific part of the labour market;
- private funding of projects linked to business need - mainly from larger companies but also from sectoral representative bodies;
- employers funding for individuals seeking a skills audit;
- funding from charities and voluntary bodies wishing to document non-formal and informal learning arising from voluntary work;
- funding from institutions and awarding bodies wishing to open access to programmes and qualifications;
- financing (or co-financing) from individuals putting themselves forward for validation.

A key area of discussion is the extent to which the candidate should pay for validation (see last point above). There are complex issues involved here, especially with regard to the lowly qualified and those re-engaging with education and training. Many countries see the charging of fees to individuals as unacceptable. For those countries that do charge fees to individuals the following three options for charging are possible:

- fees based on the time spent to complete the validation process; or
- a common basic fee irrespective of time spent or the number of certification awarded; or
- a fee based on the volume and level of certification applied for and awarded.

Each of these has benefits and problems associated with them. While there are reasons for making individuals bear some of the costs (e.g. so that they take more responsibility for their learning) they are not the only beneficiaries of validation. Education and training providers also benefit from validating non-formal and informal learning and this constitutes a reason for them to bear some of the costs - for example:

- new and experienced learners are attracted to the institution;
- learner recruitment and retention rates tend to increase;
- teachers can learn from candidates, for example about developments in the workplace – this is useful for curriculum and pedagogy;
- teachers can gain valuable insights into different and non-dominant cultures of knowledge – which can and should form a useful adjunct to traditionally academic ways of thinking about knowledge;
- engaging with validation of non-formal and informal learning means that curricula can build meaningful links with the communities they seek to serve;

- the process of implementing a validation process encourages staff to understand what their curriculum actually requires of learners and to clarify issues such as the meaning of particular levels, notions of academic coherence and equivalence.

One of the key determinants of costs of validation is the assessment methodology involved (See section 6). With regard to this aspect, more research is needed to unravel the relative costs and benefits for different validation models.

## 4 Effective practice in validation - the organisational perspective

### **Guidelines**

*Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and volunteering organisations are key stakeholders in providing opportunities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.*

*The validation of non-formal and informal learning poses challenges to formal education in terms of the range of learning that can be validated and how this process can be integrated with the formal curriculum and its assessment.*

*There are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems for the documentation of the knowledge, skills and competences of employees.*

*Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with the likewise legitimate interests of individual employees.*

*The adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative as well as summative validation*

*The third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as facilitate their transfer to other settings*

*The functions of the different bodies involved in validation requires coordination through an institutional framework.*

*The institutional route to validation and certification should not lead to certificates that are distinguishable as of different status on the basis of the route taken to achieve them.*

Validation is not only something which concerns national (public) stakeholders. The 2007 European Inventory indicates that validation is increasingly playing a part in enterprise human resource development strategies. The same tendency is also the case in third sector or voluntary organisations.

In this section the types of organisation that facilitate validation of non-formal and informal learning are considered. First the formal education sector is discussed. This is followed by the contribution made by the private sector. The adult education and voluntary (or third) sector also make a contribution to validation of non-formal and informal learning. The final section considers institutions that facilitate the validation process in general.

### **4.1 The formal education sector**

The validation of non-formal and informal learning is a major challenge to the national education systems. In many countries it challenges traditional ways of providing and recognising learning. It is often the case that people feel safe when learning achievement is benchmarked against the time a learner has spent in tuition with expert teachers in a school or a college. When this traditional benchmark is substituted by learning gained in a wide range of very diverse settings, the trust has to be restored. Therefore the ways that non-formal and informal learning is defined, assessed, validated and certificated must be quality assured to raise trust and confidence. And as already indicated in 2.5, the way standards are defined and supported will also influence this trust and confidence. By validating non-formal and informal learning, institutions are becoming better at recognising what people actually can. Institutions in the education sector are hence presented with a new instrument for meeting some of the basic social challenges that the education system has previously had problems dealing with. At the same time, it becomes possible for the education system to develop its own role in the development of the competences of the population.

**European Guidelines for the Validation of non-formal and informal learning**  
**Draft Final – 7 November 2008**

Many countries find unacceptable the level of drop out from basic education and failure to re-engage the young people who make the wrong choice when they are choosing the education programme. One of the factors identified as contributing to this tendency is that the design of the established learning culture in the education system is not sufficiently adapted to the needs of the individual person. By making the recognition of non-formal and informal learning an integrated dimension in the national education system, the waste of learning and competences could possibly be converted into visible and usable competences.

For education providers, the concrete challenges include how existing procedures to validate formal learning can be adapted to meet the needs of learners outside the formal system. Questions include:

- How can we avoid that validation of non-formal and informal learning is seen as undermining the existing activities of formal education and training, for example by reducing the number of full time pupils and students?
- How can we create incentives (economic and otherwise) that stimulates formal education to adopt validation methodologies?
- How can the existing education objectives be converted to competence objectives in each individual area of education?
- How can work on methods that are relevant and reliable for an assessment of prior learning be organised – simultaneously guaranteeing the quality of the education?
- How can we be sure that coherent practices are used that are based on consistent national standards?
- How can pedagogical methods be adapted to incorporate greater roles for guidance and counselling?
- What are the administrative requirements for guidance/counselling, documentation, assessment and validation?

However education providers are likely to see significant benefits by engaging with the validation of non-formal and informal learning. For example validation of non-formal informal learning can:

- address the needs of mature learners and part-time students, by recognising alternative forms of entry requirements and shortening the period of study through earning exemptions;
- engage people who are developing knowledge, skills and competences in the context of third or voluntary sector; work based learning, trade union learning and community learning;
- enhance support strategies for retention, guidance and learner support by identifying the needs of learners before entry;
- contribute to curriculum development in relation to the nature of learning, knowledge and assessment. It is integral to the development and operation of work-based learning programmes;
- enhance transparency of decisions regarding entry and credit, by developing a consistent, and recorded, approach to validation for entry to or exemption within a programme;
- lead to the development of learning partnerships between colleges; universities; employers; professional bodies; and community learning and voluntary sector learning providers, by using formative and summative assessment which may require collaboration between learning providers across the different education and training sectors in order to ensure the needs of the learner are most effectively met;

## 4.2 Private sector companies

It is broadly accepted that the workplace is a significant learning environment. Where workplaces are conducive to learning there is likely to be benefit for all with an interest in the company. Indeed some employers are beginning to use validation procedures<sup>27</sup> to identify, assess and make full use of these learning processes. Validation, building on existing appraisal processes, makes it possible to identify skills gaps and to tailor company training around this information. At the same time good appraisal processes offer formative assessments that enable an individual to identify the skills and competences they possess as well as their further learning needs. The common outcome of such formative assessment is to support career development. Work modernisation is often a driving force for an audit of competences – the formative nature of a validation process can be used to develop work practices in line with company plans.

These benefits are exemplified in a wide range of illuminative examples of employer involvement in validation processes in the 2007 European Inventory. It also contains some concrete survey information that can be used to tailor new validation processes in companies. The benefits for employers of engaging in validation processes with employees can:

- increase motivation and interest in workplace practice on the part of the employee/learner;
- reduce the amount of time needed to complete a qualification and therefore require less time away from the workplace;
- generate new ideas and developments in the workplace as a result of process of reflection on practice by employee/learner;
- improve employee retention and reduce recruitment and training costs.

In some cases the company needs to demonstrate that its workforce is highly qualified – for example when competing for contracts or seeking insurance for safe working on an assignment. When this is the case the normal duration of professional training programmes can make such qualifications very expensive. Validation can lead to exemptions for some learning and thus reduce direct training costs and indirect opportunity costs for losing people from the workplace during training.

The organisation of companies (even small ones) provides a kind of framework that can help the validation process to develop, function and link in with services external to the company. Table 2 below illustrates a generalised process of validation operating within a company that is essentially driven by the skills needs of the company but which leads to immediate and tangible benefits for the individual workers. It is important to state that this table highlights a series of elements in a process and is not intended to be a useful model in its own right.

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<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that the term validation is not in common use in companies, a term like competence measurement is more likely to be used. The activities as such are clearly relevant in this context.

**Table 2            A generic process of validation for companies**

Build commitment	The company becomes aware of the opportunities and understands what will be done and how it will be done, the costs, and the possible outcomes. The commitment to a skills and competence documentation is shared across decision-making levels. Plans for company development of a recognition scheme is explained to all stakeholders.
Company competence profile	Define all types of expected functions within the company and for each type of job the competences that are expected from each worker doing these jobs.
Involve candidates	The involvement of candidates requires information about the process, the objectives, the opportunities for the candidate and if there are any criticalities that they will face.
Portfolio completion	The candidates complete the portfolio reporting all educational, training and work experiences and inserting evidences of documented or non-documented competencies acquired. For example through the use of a self-evaluation questionnaire on behavioural competencies.
Assessment	On the basis of the portfolio an assessment group can start to evaluate the profile of individuals. An external assessor can be involved.
Personal Development Plan	Results of assessments are discussed with candidates and within the company and become the basis of a Personal Development Plan that takes into consideration of the candidates competencies, the company's plan.
Vocational Training	On the basis of the Personal Development Plan a tailor-made training is defined.
Validation of competencies	The competencies are validated by the company and documented and provide credit to start a new job or to get into a vocational training route.

The final stage of validation by the company of the competences of an employee is sometimes the final stage only for the company. The employee is presented with further opportunities for progression and certification and these could be classified into five generic choices:

- to do no more in terms of making their learning visible and enjoy the benefits (personal and work related) that the company process has brought them;
- to seek further learning opportunities within their current job, for example updating some skills;
- to look at qualifications beyond the company and in the light of this re-examine their documentation to identify further learning necessary for certification;
- to seek learning opportunities in a new job in the company;
- to seek learning opportunities in full time study outside the company.

Making company validation processes compatible with national systems can be advantageous to companies (e.g. in using tried and tested processes that are well known) and to employees who want to use their validated work experience for certification. External reference points, for example sector or branch competence profiles and/or standards, can

also be used to strengthen compatibility and ensure the transferability/portability of the skills and competences in question.

The involvement of companies in validation process is important if the bulk of personal learning, which is probably work-based, is to be made visible in a country. It is also important to appreciate that the company process can raise expectations of further learning and certification as outlined in the last three choices above. Thus a company's involvement should be based on a long term, sustainable human resource development that is of benefit to all partners. Having said that, company's interest in validation is usually driven by the short and medium term needs in terms of human resources and strongly focused on modernisation of work practices and upskilling of the work force. This is especially the case for small and medium sized companies.

It is possible that the drive for visibility and upgrading of an individual's competences will not be seen as entirely beneficial from the individual's perspective. For example the employee may see themselves as not in control of the validation of their own competences. They may also feel unable to challenge validation decisions in the way they might do if validation is the responsibility of an independent jury (as often in the formal education system). These two cases illustrate conflicts of interest between company and employee that can challenge the integrity of a company scheme. The European Principles for the validation of informal and non-formal learning make clear the importance of avoiding conflicts of interest such as these by putting emphasis is on transparency of the validation process and the close involvement of a range of stakeholders. In case of companies these can be employee representatives but also other company employees who are not hierarchically superior nor in potential competition with the person undergoing validation. At the European level and nationally, the individual has protection from misuse of their personal information though data protection legislation. Information supplied to third parties for validation purposes cannot therefore be used for other purposes, such as restructuring of a work force or for remuneration decisions without the permission of the individual.

The company may also seek formative validation of competences of potential employees during the recruitment process. The company may have a need for particular skills that are not sufficiently reflected in formal qualifications or it may be that the number of people with a specific skills set are not coming forward for employment and there is a skills shortage. In such cases recruitment agencies can arrange for candidate self assessment against a specific company skills set. The job centre may carry out the early stages of validation themselves. This approach illustrates another important aspect of validation in the human resource management functions of companies.

Notwithstanding issues of long-term sustainability and conflicts of interest it remains the case that the need for employer involvement in national validation processes is crucial. Without employer involvement capitalizing on the workplace as a learning arena is reduced and the implementation of large scale validation of learning in a population is restricted. Sustainability can also be supported by more systematic intervention at sector or branch level, for example by the introduction of supporting competence frameworks and standards, providing a reference point and facilitating transfer. Mobilising employers, by explaining the human resource development advantages and the time commitments that are necessary to manage the scheme, allows a fair cost-benefit analysis to follow. The critical interventions with companies seem to be:

- the availability of documentation of experience of companies in the validation process;
- availability of advice to the company from local experts;
- a positive partnership with trade unions in this field;
- independent counselling for employees;

- the lack of sector and branch strategies and supporting frameworks for validation;
- the availability of technical advice on summative validation methods based on standards.

The involvement of small and medium sized companies (SMEs) in the validation process present special challenges because resources and capacity for developments are limited. However the SME is an organisation that typically experiences a continuous need to develop skills in its workers. Research shows that SMEs are positive about the process of validation but that the intervention by external agencies in this field needs special consideration<sup>28</sup>.

### **4.3 Adult education and the third sector**

Recognising and appreciating the significance of adult and learning in the third or voluntary sector for the development of skills and competences is one of the major challenges. These sectors are administratively independent of both the public education system and the labour market, however the adult and third sector both provide learning contexts that are valuable to the formal education sector and the labour market. The validation of learning from adult and third sector learning raises the question about how it is possible to create closer interaction with formal education and the labour market while at the same time safeguarding their key attributes of independence and the concept of volunteering. Some of the questions are:

- How can validation be offered to volunteers without imposing obstacles to learning and participation?
- What knowledge, skills and competences does it make sense to measure through validation?
- How should achievement through voluntary activities be documented to make visible the learning?
- How can validation strengthen the adult and third sectors?

In general terms what kinds of learning do the adult/third sector offer? It includes the following types of competences.

- Professional/vocational – academic or practical;
- Managerial;
- Cooperative and organisational;
- Communication and linguistic;
- Personal and social.

This wide range of learning opportunities closely intersect with life and work and therefore it is likely that many people will seek the opportunities for validation of their non formal and informal learning.

#### **4.3.1 Adult education and learning**

Adult education and learning is commonly understood as covering all forms of learning at all levels undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training. While this sector is very diverse and complex in terms of provisions, structures and stakeholders, its

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1 <sup>28</sup> Lillis and Stott, (2007), Examining the implications of APL and Exemption within the QCF in the context of supporting and measuring learner progression, a report for QCA, London

importance for enabling the learning and validation of knowledge, skills and competences cannot be exaggerated.

To understand adult education and learning it is necessary to distinguish between learning for personal and for professional purposes. Adult learning for professional purposes is normally closely linked to enterprises and the labour market and can be more readily identified as further education or continuing vocational training etc. The importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning in this field has already been underlined (see in particular chapter 4.2).

Learning for simply wanting to learn, in other words for private, social and/or recreational purposes, forms a very important part of lifelong learning contributes significantly not only to knowledge and skills developments, but also to citizenship, political participation and cultural integration and social renewal. The crucial role played by this form of adult learning can be seen in many European countries, and as documented by the OECD, notably so in the Nordic countries<sup>29</sup>. This learning - frequently made possible by voluntary and political organisations - is normally not assessed or formally recognised. This invisibility can raise issues:

- Individuals may believe that learning for personal development purposes is less valuable, relevant and useful than education and learning designed for directly professional purposes.
- The important role played by adult learning for professional developments is at risk of systematically being understated, thus reducing its potential positive and long term influence and impact.

Identification and validation of non-formal and informal adult learning can address the problem of invisibility and help adults to become more conscious of their broader, personal knowledge, skills and competences. Using validation in this field must, however, be treated carefully. Assessment and validation may be regarded by some individuals as unnecessary and a barrier to engaging more positively in learning. The voluntary character of the process must be emphasised, as must the distinction and necessary balance between formative and summative approaches to assessment.

The relationship between general adult education and validation is important as it raises the question of what is considered as useful, relevant and valuable learning. Experience of adult learning is believed to be a useful means of raising self esteem and consequentially removing a significant barrier to more formal learning. It may be argued that rapid economic and societal changes actually increases the importance of adult learning for personal development and reduces the importance of task specific and narrowly defined, instrumental knowledge and skills. The importance attributed to key-competences like learning to learn, communication and teamwork illustrates this. The role of identification and validation may be to help individuals to see this important part of their own learning experiences and enable them to strike the right balance between strictly professional and broader personal developments.

#### **4.3.2 The third sector**

There are a vast number of people who regularly volunteer their services to support fellow citizens. Some do this as an individual operating alone and others join organisations and give their spare time to charities and youth groups. Other people develop a career and earn their living from voluntary organisations.

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<sup>29</sup>OECD (2003). *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult learning policies and practises*, Paris

Volunteering involves organising and interacting with others, sometimes in challenging circumstances. Experts agree that volunteering experiences generate knowledge, skills and wider competences that often remain invisible. From the perspective of the individual, experience of volunteering presents an opportunity for validation that will generate benefit in terms of jobs and studies. Individuals who engage with validation as a candidate 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.

Working in voluntary organisations is a serious career choice for many people and job progression within such organisations is enhanced if the competences associated with voluntary working situations can be made explicit. Thus the validation process is important for individuals but also for voluntary organisations in terms of recruitment practice and in the ongoing career development of employees.

Validation of the skills and competences acquired through involvement in voluntary 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 sector, by introducing methods of capturing and providing evidence of the skills and competences acquired through voluntary sector activities.

Some volunteering organisations play an important role in working with disadvantaged groups. Validation of non-formal and informal learning 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

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.

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

The youth field of volunteering is a particularly important area for considering validation. There are several reasons for this, firstly the whole field is based on informal activities that are intended to benefit the youth participating by facilitating personal growth and competence development. Until recently the competencies developed remain mostly invisible to all but the individual concerned. However increasingly voluntary organisations, sponsoring bodies and national governments are asking for concrete statements of outcomes from voluntary activities. It is also the case that volunteering is increasingly seen as part of lifelong learning and policies leading to lifelong learning need to generate concrete outcomes for all participants. The demand for concrete outcomes are now being addressed through European, national and project based tools. Youthpass and the Europass CV are examples of European level tools.

The process of validation of the learning outcomes from voluntary activities is very dependent on the skills of youth professionals. There is much work going on across Europe to define the skills of youth workers and to validate them in practice.

The extent to which learning outcomes acquired from voluntary activities should form part of a summative approach and eventually lead to certification is very much debated by stakeholders in this field. Many see such summative approaches to be in conflict with the voluntary and in many cases idealistic character of these activities. Others stress that while the formative aspect of validation indeed may be important, there is no advantage gained by excluding certification. Validation in the voluntary sector illustrates the principles in figure 1 very well. Most approaches to validation on this field will be concluded through the

identification and documentation of learning outcomes. Potentially, though, this identification and documentation can be used as a platform for certification.

#### **4.4 The institutions involved in validation**

There is a clear link between the 2004 principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning and how institutions offering validation function. This applies in particular to the section of the principles which states that the roots of trust in the process of validation depends on fairness, transparency and quality assurance and the choice of robust methodologies. Institutions are in a strong position to optimise these fundamental elements of trust.

There are many different institutional arrangements for validating non-formal or informal learning. To analyse these different arrangements it is useful to start from the viewpoint of the functions that have to be covered by institutions. The functions include:

- formal development of policies
- underpinning administrative processes for receiving applications for validation, administering assessment, recording results, advising learners of the outcome, and administering appeals processes;
- procedures leading to the engagement of potential candidates for validation, including marketing which explains benefits and costs, informs about how to apply for validation, who to contact for further information, who to contact for support in preparing an application, and information about timelines, appeals processes, and fees;
- provision of information, advice and guidance during documentation of evidence, covering subjects, modules, competencies, courses and qualifications for which validation can be useful for establishing access and exemptions;
- provision of advice to learners on the assessment process, particularly the kind of evidence that can be used, the forms in which it can be presented, and, where appropriate, a guide as to what is considered sufficient and valid evidence;
- arranging for assessment and informing and explaining the learning or competency outcomes that are the focus and the responsibilities and accountabilities of the various participants;
- ensuring the qualifications and skills of assessors, counsellors and other actors are appropriate;
- ensuring a formal judgement on validation of the assessment outcome is made;
- arranging certification of the outcome;
- determining the way in which validation policies, processes and assessments are quality assured (regulated).

These functions can be combined in different ways as they are allocated to the different bodies located in an institutional system. The 2007 European Inventory should be consulted for examples of institutional systems; some general points about these systems follow.

Firstly the type of institutional arrangement can vary in size from pan-European recognition of voluntary activities to the way a single school or college validates some learning carried out elsewhere. The scale of the arrangements makes a difference to the design of an efficient institutional structure. In large systems the certification function is usually separated from the validation process. This arrangement can be used to create an overarching quality assurance process, it can build coherence and consistency – especially in the application of standards. A certification agency at government level can offer official endorsement to validated non-formal and informal learning. A central assessment and validation agency can

also be used to generate broadly applicable processes that may encourage smaller agencies to offer validation and assessment functions.

It is generally the case that education and training bodies have a dominant position in the validation process. This is helpful from the point of view of comparability of standards between the informal and formal systems. However it is possible that the dominance of the formal system could inhibit the development of assessment practices that do not depend on formal learning environments. It is likely that the responsiveness of the validation process to the needs of candidates is dependent on the different types of institution offering validation of the knowledge, skills and competences to individuals.

The majority of countries seem to tailor validation systems to the needs of particular groups; notably immigrants, individuals with disabilities, unemployed or low qualified. While there may be good reason for choosing this approach it also runs the risk of placing validation outside mainstream qualifications policies – running the risk of creating ‘A class’ and ‘B class’ certificates depending on the route to certification.

## 5 Effective practice of validation - the individual

### **Guidelines**

*The centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved in validation should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual.*

*All people should have access to the validation process and the emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important.*

*The multi stage process of validation offers individuals many opportunities for deciding about the future direction of their validation process. This decision making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.*

The first European Principle for validation of non-formal and informal learning puts the individual at the centre of the validation process and insists that the process of making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and competence held by an individual is carried out in a way that remains voluntary and that the results of validation remain the property of the individual. Whether the context of the validation process is work, social communities or higher education, whatever the purpose, the individual is always at the centre.

Validation systems need to acknowledge the fact that it is the choice of the individual to decide to take the first and crucial step to explore the possibilities of at least documenting their learning. Communication strategies about the benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning explaining how the system works can motivate the individual to take control of the validation process.

Individuals who engage with validation as a candidate benefit from personal outcomes such as improved confidence and self-esteem. These soft outcomes may 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 in society.

### **5.1 Why do individuals seek validation of non-formal or informal learning?**

Evidence from the 2007 European Inventory suggests that the perceptions of individuals about the advantages of having non-formal and informal learning validated falls under the following headings.

#### *Gaining credit for learning from experience for purposes of further formal learning*

This may lead to entry to a programme of study at a college or university or allow them to join a more advanced level than would normally be the case, thus shortening the period of study.

#### *Increased self-confidence*

The process of reflection that the recognition of prior informal learning involves, as well as the promotion of the valuing of learning by self and others, often leads to increased self-confidence as a learner. This can enhance the motivation to continue learning.

#### *Planning for further learning*

The process of validation helps learners to think about what they have achieved so far and identify their strengths and skills, this helps with identifying longer term goals and what they need to do to achieve them.

### **5.2 Choices for individuals**

The validation process for non-formal and informal learning presents the individual with opportunities and choices. The grey boxes at the bottom of figure 1 represent the basic choices to be made but in reality many more may need to be made. Table 3 below offers a

more detailed synopsis of choice situations for individuals. The decision making in these situations is often supported by the provision of information, advice and guidance.

The 2007 European Inventory contains concrete examples of the stages in the table and survey evidence of the views of individuals at various stages of engagement.

**Table 3: choices for individual learners**

<b>Stage of validation</b>	<b>Choice to be made</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Access and motivation</b>	Whether or not to begin the process of thinking seriously about prior learning and whether opportunities for validation are available and suitable.	The motivation to begin the process is important here. Personal reasons can be based on boosting self-esteem or for economic reasons such as getting a new job or through the recruitment process for a formal learning programme. Sometimes employers can initiate this thinking about validation through changes to work practices and presenting new opportunities that require proof of competences.  Another important condition for this stage is the extent to which the individual is empowered to manage their involvement with validation and the extent to which they sense they are empowered.
<b>Initiation</b>	To identify in outline the knowledge and skills that have been learned	The standards that are expected for formal qualification or for a job represent a starting point for identification
<b>Pre - documentation</b>	How to find out about the requirements of the documentation process? Whether to proceed to documentation?	Accurate, timely and accessible information, advice and guidance are critical to the decision to proceed with the documentation process. It is also critical to the decision to undertake any supplementary learning.
<b>Documentation</b>	How best to carry out evidence gathering and mapping? What is sufficient in terms of evidence? What to do about areas of insufficient evidence?  Whether to submit for validation?	From the perspective of the individual this is the substantial part of the validation exercise. Issues arising during the process need to be discussed with expert counsellors (on subject content and documentation process). Decisions on sufficiency of evidence will be based on these discussions.  The need for additional learning will become clear during documentation. Here too advice will be required.
<b>Informal recognition</b>	Whether to accept or seek informal recognition for the evidence of competences that have been documented?	Sometimes this recognition will be automatic, for example, if it is part of a company appraisal scheme. Otherwise it might be possible to use the documented evidence in the process of seeking promotion or applying for a place on an education or training programme.
<b>Further learning</b>	Whether any further learning is necessary and	The need for further learning may arise as the standards are used for documentation

<b>Stage of validation</b>	<b>Choice to be made</b>	<b>Notes</b>
	how best to arrange for learning experiences?	(learning gaps) or through the need to show recent and up-to-date knowledge of a familiar field. The learning may best be achieved through arrangements for different work experience or through a formal learning programme.
<b>Submission for validation</b>	Does the evidence meet the standards for validation? How best to prepare for interview questions and for independent assessment?	Independent advice is needed on the sufficiency of evidence and how best to orally support the evidence base.
<b>Validation</b>	How to understand and use the various possible outcomes of validation?	Credit, partial qualification or full qualification are the outcomes. Each of these may be useful in different situations.
<b>Certification</b>	Whether to seek certification?	Advice is needed on the added value of certification.
<b>Further qualification</b>	Decision to make a further step in learning and certification.	It is well known that achieving recognition is likely to lead to the desire for more learning and more qualification.

### **5.3 Counselling and Guidance**

All of the national experience reflected in national projects, the work of the Peer Learning Cluster for the Recognition of Learning Outcomes and the 2007 European Inventory indicate that potential candidates and those in the process of receiving validation should have access to impartial and informed advice. It is not possible to establish a single process for validation that will accommodate the needs of all candidates. It is widely accepted that the system needs careful tailoring to the needs of the individual and this is at least partially achieved by providing information, advice and guidance at the right times.

It is clear that even before a decision is made to seek validation, candidates need to know what is the added value, what to expect, what standards have to be met and what form the evidence of learning outcomes needs to take. Similarly at the end of validation, or of certification, evidence suggests a candidate will want to know of potential routes to further qualification are available. In between these two points exists the whole process of validation where candidates will need information, advice and guidance on such things as:

- timelines for validation;
- costs;
- procedure;
- forms of evidence of learning outcomes;
- sufficiency of evidence;
- quality and standards;
- presentation of evidence;
- assessment and how best to approach the process;
- support available;
- appeal procedure;

Timely access to information, advice and guidance is essential and ICT based systems offer many advantages to users as well as providing cost effective tools for information

exchange between candidates and counsellors. The 2007 Inventory shows the trend to developing ICT solutions for guidance within the validation systems continues. Many initiatives are on a national scale and it seems clear that ICT systems are the key to further expansion of validation processes, especially in the assessment phase.

It is clear that a distinction can be made between guidance related to assessment issues and more general process guidance. These two categories of guidance will require different skills sets in the professionals delivering the guidance.

The need for information, advice and guidance has already been identified in chapter 4. In the next chapter and its associated annexes the provision of guidance is included in the separate sections of orientation of candidates and assessment of candidates' learning outcomes.

## 6 The structure of validation procedures

### **Guideline**

*The three processes of orientation, assessment and external audit can be used to evaluate existing validation procedures and support the development of new validation procedures.*

Learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions is not standardised and predictable. The outcomes of these learning processes are - frequently and typically – diverse and multidimensional. The methods and instruments used to identify, assess and attribute recognition must be open to this particular character of non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes. This is very much reflected in the methods developed by countries, for example through an extensive use of portfolio approaches and by using observation and simulation rather than written tests. There is also a changed attitude to assessment - the applicant and the assessor need to engage with the flexible spirit of the validation processes

The diverse methods of validation used at national and local level can be generalised into a basic structure of three stages of validation procedures – they all have an orientation stage - where the individual becomes prepared for the second stage - assessment. The orientation and assessment are subject to quality assurance but there is also a need for a third stage of the validation process - the overall procedure should be checked for effectiveness, fairness and efficiency. In this section the generalised approach to the structure of validation procedures is proposed.

In advance of the basic structural elements presented here there are further general considerations that lead to effective validation procedures.

### **6.1 The validation process**

Effective validation processes are underpinned by some general qualities. These qualities support orientation, assessment and quality assurance more generally.

- Reliability: would the outcome be the same if the process were repeated under the same condition?
- Validity: is the learning that is being validated the learning that is intended to be validated?
- Safety, security and confidentiality: is the candidate protected from abuse during the validation process?
- Standards/referential: are the benchmarks of content and level of learning well defined?
- Sustainability: will the validation process operate over time within resources of the money and time required?
- Visibility/transparency: is the process of validation generally understood and does it lead to wider recognition of the candidate's learning?
- Fitness for purpose: does the validation process reflect the circumstances and intentions of the learner?
- Cost efficiency: can the process be modified so that the benefits (personal and financial) are optimal in proportion to the cost of the process?

These general considerations are amplified further in the checklist that is Table 4 in Annex 2.

Validation procedures can seem complex as many elements interact with others. To simplify the process for the purposes of this guideline it is suggested that there are three distinct stages of validation procedures.

1. *Orientation of an individual* - this is a broad area covering all aspects of producing and distributing information, interaction of learners with advisers, counsellors, and other significant actors such as employers. Orientation is never complete but it always reaches a significant point when the activity begins to focus on the assessment of the individual's actual learning.

2. *Assessment of the learning of an individual* - this is also a broad area which covers the whole process of assessment from understanding requirements and standards, identification of learning, searching for evidence, organising it for assessment, and following agreed assessment and validation procedures. Validation is the most obvious end point of this stage, however the monitoring of the effects of validation on learners is an important follow up activity.

3. *Audit of the validation process* - this is easier to define and represents a post validation stage that involves an external, independent review of orientation and assessment. This stage does not harbour all the quality assurance processes – these are present during orientation and assessment. In this stage it is the whole process of orientation and assessment that is under independent scrutiny.

It is possible to identify the key components of each of these three stages. Such a listing of components has been derived from discussion amongst experts from many countries and can serve as a kind of evaluative checklist for specific validation systems. Moreover such a checklist can also help in discussions of the setting up of new validation systems.

When each of the stages are analysed it is clear that the components of each can be grouped under four headings. Some components are considered to be about setting the right *conditions* for validation. A second set of components are about the actual technical processes or *practice requirements*. The third set of components are about what *knowledge* is necessary for the validation process to proceed. Finally there is a set of components that are clearly *outcomes* of validation.

In the Annex 2 tables are used to set out the sets of components that might be part of each stages of the validation process.

## **6.2 The orientation of the individual**

This is a broad area of activity for advisers, counsellors, and other significant actors such as employers. It covers all aspects of producing and distributing information, motivating potential candidates and then offering them individualised advice and guidance on the whole process from identification of learning through to certification. Figure 1 shows that each individual can make many decisions (grey boxes) as they proceed with the process. Guidance offered at appropriate points can make this process efficient and effective for all partners. The orientation stage can take many months and the provision of well trained advisers contributes significantly to the overall cost of the validation process. The guidance and counselling aspect of this stage is crucially important as it extends through the next stage – that of the assessment of a person's knowledge, skills and competence against predefined standards.

## **6.3 The assessment of the individual**

From the beginning of the assessment stage the candidate has to understand the requirements and standards expected of them. They have to ensure that the learning they have identified is properly sampled, well documented, organised and ready for assessment. The candidate also needs to know the assessment and validation procedures and the possible outcomes.

## **6.4 The audit of the process**

A post assessment process that involves an external and independent review of orientation and assessment. This has nothing to do with any candidate's learning and only concerns

the provision of the validation process (orientation and assessment) and its efficiency and effectiveness.

## 7 Methods of assessment

### **Guidelines**

*The methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools that are used in the assessment of formal learning*

*When used for validation, tools have to be combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning,*

*Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose*

Learning that is achieved through non-formal or informal means is only distinguishable from learning achieved through formal programmes by the context of learning. The tools for assessing learning are essentially the same however some adaptation of the tools is necessary to take account of contextual differences, such as the timescale over which the learning took place. This is an important point as the outcomes of validation of non-formal and informal learning is sometimes perceived as inferior in some way to validation applied to the formal situation because (a) different assessment tools are used, or (b) they are applied in a different way.

There is a range of tools available for assessing learning (irrespective of whether this learning has occurred in formal, non-formal or informal settings). These tools capture different aspects of the outcomes in question, for example being able to reflect practical skills or theoretical reflections in varying degrees. Like in formal education, the individual specificity of learning outcomes concerned may require more than one tool, for example a combination of written tests and practical challenges. These learning outcomes may also require tools able to capture specific aspects; for example through practical demonstration, simulation or gathering of evidence from past practises. In formal learning the specific assessment tools are applied across a large cohort of students and sometimes this makes them difficult to adapt to the needs of a sub-group or an individual.

### **7.1 What sort of criteria are needed to evaluate assessment tools?**

Before the assessment tool can be selected it is important to look at the learning to be assessed. It is generally accepted that the following criteria need to be considered.

- breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;
- depth of learning required
- currency or recency of knowledge skills and competence;
- sufficiency of information for an assessor to make a judgement;
- authenticity of the evidence being the candidate's own learning outcomes.

Having determined the basis of learning, it is possible to examine the fitness for purpose of different assessment tools. The following criteria need to be considered for each potentially useful assessment tool:

- validity – the tool must measure what it is intended to measure;
- reliability - the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions;
- fairness - the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and assessor bias).
- cognitive range – does the tool enable assessors to judge the breadth and depth of candidate's learning;

- fitness for purpose of the assessment – ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which they are intended.

## 7.2 A classification of methods

According to the 2007 Inventory it is possible to classify assessment tools in the following way:

**Debate** offers the candidate a purpose to demonstrate depth of knowledge as well as communicative skills.

**Declarative methods:** based on individuals' own identification and recording of their competences, normally signed by a third party, in order to verify the self-assessment.

**Interviews** can be used to clarify issues raised in documentary evidence presented and/or to review scope and depth of learning.

**Observation:** extracting evidence of competence from an individual while they are performing everyday tasks at work.

**Portfolio method:** using a mix of methods and instruments employed in consecutive stages to produce a coherent set of documents or work samples showing an individual's skills and competences in different ways.

It is now possible to extend the classification to encompass some assessment methods that are common but are not easy to classify on the five categories above.

**Presentation** can be formal or informal and can be used to check ability to present information in a way appropriate to subject and audience.

This is now a useful broad classification and whilst some categories overlap a little, others may be further distinguished. Some specific validation processes may make use of more than one of these approaches to achieve greater validity, reliability, fairness and fitness for purpose of results. Each of the categories is now expanded to show the range of assessment methods embedded in each of them. Following this issues of quality are discussed.

**Simulation and evidences extracted from work:** where an individual is placed in a situation that fulfils all the criteria of the real-life scenario in order to have their competencies assessed.

**Tests and examinations:** the identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning through or with the help of examinations in the formal system.

### 7.2.1 Debate

The candidate can by taking part in debate, confirm his or her capacity to sustain a considered argument and demonstrate a depth of adequate knowledge of a subject. The debate also offers a context where the candidate can demonstrate communication and social skills.

### 7.2.2 Declarative methods

Here the candidate makes an evidence based statement about their learning by responding in writing to pre-set criteria designed to help them be evaluative. The ability to use critical reflection is important and therefore this method is used in conjunction with other methods that have more independent evaluation built in.

### 7.2.3 Interview

Interviews may be particularly useful in areas where judgement and values are important. Interviews usually accompany other tools for a more complete assessment of a candidate and to allow for commentary and clarifications.

#### **7.2.4 Observation**

A third party assesses the candidate's behaviour in a particular setting – there is an opportunity to observe real practice. Assessment criteria are set in advance.

This method does not proscribe collaboration with co-workers or fellow learners. Depending on the context, it may be complicated to set up and can be time consuming and costly.

#### **7.2.5 Portfolio method**

A portfolio is an organised collection of materials that presents and verifies skills and knowledge acquired through experience. The portfolio is of particular relevance to validation of non-formal and informal learning. This is both due to the fact that the portfolio allows the individual candidate to contribute actively to the collection of evidence and offers a mix of approaches strengthening the overall validity of the approach. This is confirmed by the fact that many countries have introduced the portfolio as a central element in their validation of non-formal or informal learning approaches.

A portfolio might include documents such as resumes, performance appraisals, references from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues, photographs of completed work certified by a referee. If self-employed in the past, a candidate might include evidence of running a business using the skills and knowledge being claimed. There is much evidence in the portfolio literature that the selection process included in portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses learner' attention on quality criteria as also documented in the 2007 Inventory (as well as its previous versions). In general, we have seen that a good portfolio for validation, in the eyes of assessors, is characterised by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes. The most important risks in the preparation of portfolios identified by the 2007 Inventory is when applicants prepare these alone or with little mediation from one tutor. One practice that counters such possible limitations is gathering groups of claimants together specifically for the purposes of sharing experience and learning from each other, thus enabling all participants to proceed with greater assurance to preparing their own portfolio for validation. Such sessions can then be complemented with individual tutorials.

One recent trend is the use of digital portfolios. Such portfolios could offer the possibility to combine text, audio, graphic and video-based representation of information. It also offers greater capacity to accumulate data that can provide the audience with greater insights into the achievements and successes of the learner. However digital portfolios do carry some potential risks, for example the technological novelty of the product can overshadow the purpose of the portfolio and that the learning to use the technology itself could subsume the learning opportunities of portfolio construction. Furthermore, the development of a digital portfolio facilitates the compilation of too much unnecessary information and the inclusion of material that is not wholly derived from the candidates' own efforts.

Some countries that provide national guidelines, rather than prescribing the methods that should be used for validation, recommend a stage in the validation process which involves some form of assessment by a third party (e.g. the jury procedure in France) in order to ensure greater validity and reliability of portfolios, which they tend to advocate vis-à-vis declarative approaches. However, the introduction of third party assessment does not solve all problems. It is still very important that quality assurance processes are in place to ensure the consistency and transparency of this third party assessment and ensure equality and fairness in the validation process for all candidates. In general, we have seen that a good portfolio for validation, in the eyes of assessors, is characterised by being easy to assess because it is focused on specific matched learning outcomes. The most important risks in the preparation of portfolios we have seen in the course of our research, which can result in a clear lack of focus, is when applicants prepare these alone or with little mediation from one tutor. One practice that counters such possible limitations is gathering groups of claimants together specifically for the purposes of sharing experience and learning from

each other, thus enabling all participants to proceed with greater assurance to preparing their own portfolio for validation. Such sessions can then be complemented with individual tutorials.

### **7.2.6 Presentation**

Here a candidate makes a formal presentation to a panel of experts. This form emphasises communicative skills, analytical skills as well as ability to structure complex information in a clear way.

### **7.2.7 Simulation and evidences extracted from work**

Here a candidate performs in a structured situation that is modeled on real life. The method allows for testing of complex interacting skills sets. It requires clear assessment criteria and may be costly.

There are variations to this popular method. One such variation is where a candidate verbally and physically presents a demonstration of their skills. Another variation involves observed role play where actors or peers take on roles to simulate a problem that requires the attention of the candidate.

### **7.2.8 Tests and examinations**

In the formal process of validating learning tests can dominate because of their qualities of wide applicability across populations, low costs and high levels of perceived fairness. In general a test is set so that candidates respond orally or in writing to preset questions (and answers). A test provides direct assessment of specific knowledge and skills. They may advantage candidates with strong written and oral skills and can cause candidate anxiety.

Oral tests may be used to check deep understanding of complex issues and ability to explain them in simple terms.

Many tests employ a multiple choice and true or false format and many well known tests are pre-tested across populations so that norm referencing of responses is useful. They are considered more objective than many other methods. This type of test is well suited to being completed, marked and graded by computer.

Essays can be used as test items to check the quality and standard of academic writing and use of references, ability to develop a coherent argument, and to confirm extent, understanding and transferability of knowledge and critical evaluation of the ideas. Generally speaking the essay tests are easier to prepare but testing is limited to a narrow sampling of content.

Tests become 'examinations' when the test is applied widely and the quality assurance processes that govern the administration of the test questions and the judgement of responses are controlled.

### **7.2.9 The form, quality and sources of evidence**

As stated earlier in this chapter the quality of evidence relates to reliability, validity, authenticity and sufficiency. The last two points are important in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the case of sufficiency, it is not only a question of whether enough evidence has been gathered. Sometimes, in an attempt to ensure rigour, assessors can require too much evidence (e.g. extensive triangulation) and thus make the assessment process very onerous for candidates and for assessors. It is unfair to candidates for validation of non-formal or informal learning to expect more than the minimum requirements for learners in formal study.

A more recent development in this field of assessment in the context of validation processes for non-formal or informal learning is the use of controlled assessments. The assessment is carried out in conditions where the use of evidence is restricted to certain predefined acceptable forms. In this way fairness of assessments is enhanced and

candidates who in normal circumstances would not have the advantage of access to many resources and externality are not discriminated against. The controlled assessment is also indicative of the trend to increase the level of independent assessment which is external to the candidates normal circle of operation.

### **7.3 Application of methods of assessment in different sectors**

#### *The formal education sector*

Tests and examinations are a popular approach to validate non-formal and informal learning by educational institutions, indeed, a large number of higher education institutions in Europe have set up systems for validating competences acquired through such methods. However this approach can be problematic for individuals accessing validation as a 'second chance', in particular in those cases when they have dropped out of formal education earlier in life, tests and examinations may represent a barrier to access, as they may be associated with previous negative experiences of education and training. Declarative approaches are more accessible to groups which are at a distance from formal education and training and can be used to provide an overview of the competences and skills that an individual has gained throughout his or her 'life-wide' experiences, including those acquired at home, through voluntary or community work and in employment. However, declarative methods rely on the individual's ability to provide a realistic assessment of his or her own competences. In terms of validity and reliability, the strength of this method therefore depends on clear guidelines and standards for the individual to use and on the provision of support or 'mentoring' during the preparation phase.

The portfolio approach aims to overcome the risk of subjectivity, by introducing a mix of instruments to assess the individual's competences and can incorporate assessments by third parties and has recently been highly taken up for validation of informal and informal learning in some public service professions, such as teachers and trainers. There is much evidence in the portfolio literature that the selection process included in portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses students' attention on quality criteria. Examples of the use of observation can be found in the vocational education and training sector. It involves the extraction of evidence of competences while an individual is performing everyday tasks at work, which then is judged by a third party. The implementation of such an approach is facilitated by the existence of standards or agreed learning outcomes which is often the case in the vocational education and training sector. The problem of recruitment / training of assessors may not be such an issue in the public / formal education sector (compared to other sectors –see below), as staff can be expected to have a good understanding of the assessment criteria for each qualification.

#### *Private sector organisations*

The need for partnership-working, consultation and sharing experiences is clear for private sector organisations involved in validation. This is all the more important since the place of validation in companies' overall business and training plans will always evolve according to the needs of the organisations. Validation is part of broader organisational processes, including companies' assessment and training agendas

Stakeholders involved in validation from this sector are generally unfamiliar with education standards and procedures and therefore training for staff within the sector, or collaboration with partners with the relevant experience and expertise, may help to ensure greater success of their initiatives. It seems that declarative and portfolio methods are the most prevalent in the private sector, although the research has also uncovered examples of the use of tests / examinations. The portfolio method can also be used in the private sector, for instance by social partners delivering non-formal training. Declarative and portfolio methods can be used to conduct a summative or formative assessment of the beneficiary of validation procedures and are widely taken-up within the private sector. Summative assessments can help to inform the career development of an individual and may serve as

evidence to support career progression and salary increases, while formative assessments can help employers/employees to identify skills gaps and training needs. These methods are seen as a cost-effective and flexible approach to validation in the private sector. In particular employees who undertake validation in addition to their daily job are likely to appreciate the possibility to prepare their validation 'application' at a pace that suits their own circumstances and abilities.

*The voluntary sector*

The predominant methodologies appear to be *declarative methods and the portfolio method*. They represent cost-effective, flexible approaches to the validation of an individual's learning, which suit the needs of both the beneficiaries and the **voluntary** sector organisations. Declarative and portfolio methods also offer a more accessible approach for certain target groups, who may be unaccustomed to or have had previous negative experiences in a formal education environment. One of the weaknesses which can be associated with the use of declarative and portfolio methods in the voluntary sector is that it may be difficult to link them to national standards, qualifications and frameworks. It may also be more difficult for providers, without appropriate training, to design and deliver validation initiatives which are linked to them. Moreover, declarative and portfolio methods rely on a significant input from the individual beneficiary. In order for beneficiaries to successfully link their learning to formal standards or qualification frameworks, it is likely that a high level of support would be required by them, which is difficult for voluntary sector organisations to provide due to staffing and resource constraints.

## 8 The validation practitioners

### **Guidelines**

Effective operation of validation processes depends in a fundamental way on the professional activity of counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. The preparation and ongoing training of these people is therefore critically important.

Networking that enable the sharing experiences and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners.

Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support the individuals seeking validation.

In this chapter the roles, skills and training of validation practitioners is discussed. These practitioners cover all aspects of validation and include those that offer information, advice and guidance (orientation), those that carry out assessment, the external observers of the process, the managers of assessment centres/procedures and a range of other stakeholders that have an important but less direct role in the validation process. These five groups of practitioner are evident in validation systems across countries. It is not possible to say that each of these five groups are distinct from one another, in practice one person or one kind of body can have roles that cross this classification.

The work of validation practitioners is clearly decisive in determining the quality and trust in the outcomes of the validation process. It is therefore not surprising that much has been written on the training and professional development of these people. It is not quite so obvious why the roles of the different kinds of practitioners are not referenced in documentation about validation processes. For example the inventory of validation practices has few references. There are possible two reasons for this, (i) it is possible that the practitioners aim to be 'invisible facilitators' and the effects of their combined work is the efficient operation of validation that leads to positive outcomes for individuals, and (ii) the roles of practitioners can vary in scope and depth that it is difficult to generalise about their contribution to validation.

The European Inventory of practice does however make the point that validation processes need to ensure that there is interaction between practitioners within a single validation process and between practitioners and other stakeholders in the validation process.

Each validation process is unique and the roles of the practitioners can vary from candidate to candidate. It is likely that the experience that practitioners gain as they move from candidate to candidate is a very important asset. It follows that interactivity between professionals in a validation centre through a community of practice is likely to contribute significantly to the development of individuals and to the more effective working of the whole system.

### **8.1 Counsellors**

There is a strong conviction from national experts that counselling individuals and providing information, advice and guidance is crucial to the success of validation processes. Starting with the process of reaching out to engage potential candidates for validation, then preparing the candidate for assessment, the role continues by guiding the candidate after the assessment decision.

In these guidelines the assessment stage is treated as separate to the orientation stage. In fact part of the role of the counsellor is often to work with the candidate to appraise the breadth and depth of evidence of learning in relation to assessment criteria/standards.

Some would refer to this as competence mapping. To carry out this process the counsellor has to have a clear understanding of the standards involved.

The counsellor has also to prepare the candidate for the assessment process, informing them of procedures, how to present evidence of learning, respond to questions, expectations in terms of behaviour, possible outcomes and so on. This also requires the counsellor to have a thorough knowledge of the assessment process.

The distinctive part of the Counsellors role is their independence of from the actual assessment process for an individual and their ability to offer impartial but useful advice.

To fulfil this role counsellors should have:

- a thorough knowledge of the education system (orientation);
- a thorough knowledge of the validation process (information);
- an understanding of the labour market (expected standards and post assessment advice);
- a list of contacts (experts) to answer specific technical questions (social partners and other sector experts).

## **8.2 Assessors**

The job of an assessor is to seek and review evidence of an individual's learning and judge what meets or does not meet specific standards. They must be familiar with the standards and the potentially useful assessment methods that might be used to reference evidence against standards.

Assessors should be acknowledged as professionals in their sector as this leads to trust and credibility in the assessment process itself. The authenticity of the assessment situation is likely to be improved when sectoral experts can direct the use of an assessment instrument or judges the outcomes of its use.

Assessors should not be linked to the candidate or their work or social life in any way.

To fulfil this role assessors must:

- be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability);
- have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality & avoid conflicts of interest);
- be familiar with different assessment methodologies;
- able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates;
- committed to provide feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems);
- be trained in assessment and validation processes and be knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms.

## **8.3 Process managers**

The third key group of practitioners are the managers of the validation process. The function of these people is to manage the process, the people and possibly a physical or virtual centre where candidates, counsellors and assessors come together. Process managers can have responsibilities for the public profile of the validation centre, for ensuring equality of access to validation, managing an appeals process and ensuring external review.

One key role is the financial management of the validation process. Whether privately or publicly funded, the task of minimising costs and creating a sustainable operation is challenging.

#### **8.4 External Observers**

External observers provide a quality check on validation procedures, training of practitioners and outcomes for candidates. The counsellors and the assessors have distinct roles when engaged with the candidate and the external observer reflects on the maintenance of separation of these roles.

In some settings the external observer is an advisor to counsellors and assessors and helps them to learn from their experience and that of others.

The external observer may have a role in reviewing the efficiency of the process and checking that resource use is optimised.

External Observers should:

- not necessarily be expert in the given profession/activity;
- be trained in quality assurance procedures;
- not necessarily have regular or systematic presence;
- be considered as a source of advice;
- operate as a sort of external auditor;

#### **8.5 Interested stakeholders**

It is not possible to focus on the practitioners involved in validation processes without referring to a group of supporting stakeholders who do not manage, counsel, assess or manage centres. These stakeholders have an interest in the successful operation of validation and they include:

- responsible people in public bodies that fund the process;
- responsible people in public bodies that have agreed a policy for validation;
- managers of human resources for private companies;
- community leaders that seek engagement of groups of individuals in learning and working;
- education services in the formal sector;
- charities that are donors.

These stakeholders often serve on advisory committees within centres and are important links to the various communities served by the outcomes of validation processes.

## 9 Summary of principles and guidelines

### 9.1 The fundamental principles underpinning validation

1. Validation must be voluntary
2. The privacy of individuals should be respected
3. Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed
4. Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.
5. Systems should contain mechanism for guidance and counselling of individuals
6. Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
7. The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
8. Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation.
9. The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
10. The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

### 9.2 The Guidelines

#### ***Effective practises – The European perspective***

*The practice of validation of informal and non-formal learning should be compatible with the main elements in the 2004 European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the European principles for quality assurance of education and training and the Recommendation for a European quality assurance reference framework for VET<sup>30</sup>*

*European cooperation in the field of validation should be further developed, in particular by regularly updating and improving these guidelines and the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.*

*The European level tools and frameworks (e.g. EQF, Europass, European credit systems) could be used to promote validation and to enhance comparability and transparency of the outcomes of validation processes and so build trust across national boundaries.*

#### ***Effective practises – the national perspective***

*The validation of non-formal and informal learning should be seen as an integral part of the national qualifications system*

*The formative approach to assessment is important as it draws attention to the 'identification' of knowledge, skills and wider competences, a crucial part lifelong learning*

<sup>30</sup> European Commission Proposal for a Reference Framework for the Quality Assurance for vocational educational and training, COM(2008) 179 2008/0069 (COD) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0179:FIN:EN:PDF>

*Summative validation needs to have a clearly defined and unambiguous link to the standards used in the national qualifications system (or framework)*

*The entitlement to validation could be considered in cases where non-formal and informal learning is seen as a normal route to a qualification – parallel to formal education and training*

*The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks could be used as an opportunity to systematically integrate validation into qualifications systems*

*The introduction of validation as an integrated part of a national qualifications framework could be linked to the need to improve access to, progression within and transfer of qualifications*

*The sustainability and coherence of national systems of validation should be supported by regular cost benefit analysis*

### **Effective practises – the organisational perspective**

*Formal education, enterprises, adult education providers and volunteering organisations are key stakeholders in providing opportunities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.*

*The validation of non-formal and informal learning poses challenges to formal education in terms of the range of learning that can be validated and how this process can be integrated with the formal curriculum and its assessment.*

*There are major advantages for enterprises in setting up systems for the documentation of the knowledge, skills and competences of employees.*

*Enterprises need to balance their legitimate interests as employers with the likewise legitimate interests of individual employees.*

*The adult education sector is a major contributor to non-formal and informal learning and its further development should be supported by systematic development of formative as well as summative validation*

*The third (or voluntary) sector offers a wide range of personalised learning opportunities that are highly valued in other settings. Validation should be used to make visible and value the outcomes of this learning, as well as facilitate their transfer to other settings*

*The functions of the different bodies involved in validation requires coordination through an institutional framework.*

*The institutional route to validation and certification should not lead to certificates that are distinguishable as of different status on the basis of the route taken to achieve them.*

### **Effective practises – the individual**

*The centre of the validation process is the individual. The activities of other agencies involved in validation should be considered in the light of their impact on the individual.*

*All people should have access to the validation process and the emphasis on motivation to engage in the process is particularly important.*

*The multi stage process of validation offers individuals many opportunities for deciding about the future direction of their validation process. This decision making should be supported by information, advice and guidance.*

***Effective practises – the structure of validation processes***

*The three processes of orientation, assessment and external audit can be used to evaluate existing validation procedures and support the development of new validation procedures.*

***Effective practises – the methods***

*The methods used for validation of non-formal and informal learning are essentially the same tools that are used in the assessment of formal learning*

*When used for validation, tools have to be combined and applied in a way which reflects the individual specificity and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning,*

*Tools for assessment of learning need to be fit-for-purpose*

***Effective practises – the validation practitioners***

Effective operation of validation processes depends in a fundamental way on the professional activity of counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators. The preparation and ongoing training of these people is therefore critically important.

Networking that enable the sharing experiences and the full functioning of a community of practice should be a part of a development programme for practitioners.

Interaction between practitioners in a single validation process is likely to lead to more efficient and effective practices that support the individuals seeking validation.

## **Annex 1 - Glossary of terms**

All of the terms below have been negotiated with representatives across Member States and are part of the CEDEFOP multilingual glossary. This publication has also drawn on work carried out by the OECD and reported in *Qualifications Systems – bridges to lifelong learning*, OECD, Paris, 2007

### ***Assessment of learning outcomes***

The process of appraising knowledge, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria specifying learning methods and expectations. Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification.

### ***Certificate***

An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following a standard assessment procedure.

### ***Certification of learning outcomes***

The process of formally attesting that knowledge, skills and/or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard. Certification results in the issuing of a certificate, diploma or title.

### ***Formal learning***

Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

### ***Formative assessment***

A two-way reflective process between a teacher/assessor and learner to promote learning.

### ***Informal learning***

Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective.

### ***Key competences***

The sum of skills (basic skills and new basic skills) needed to develop in contemporary knowledge society. The European Commission sets out the eight key competences:

- communication in the mother tongue;
- communication in foreign languages;
- competences in maths, science and technology;
- digital competence;
- learning to learn;
- interpersonal, intercultural and social competences, and civic competence;
- entrepreneurship;
- cultural expression.

### ***Learning***

A process by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences.

### ***Learning outcomes***

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

### ***Lifelong learning***

All learning activity undertaken throughout life, and which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons.

### ***Life wide learning***

Learning, either formal, non-formal or informal, that takes place across the full range of life activities (personal, social or professional) and at any stage.

### ***Non-formal learning***

Learning which is embedded in planned activities not always explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.

### ***Qualification***

The term *qualification* covers different aspects:

*formal qualification*: the formal outcome (certificate, diploma or title) of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards and/or possesses the necessary competence to do a job in a specific area of work. A qualification confers official recognition of the value of learning outcomes in the labour market and in education and training. A qualification can be a legal entitlement to practice a trade (OECD);

*job requirements*: the knowledge, aptitudes and skills required to perform the specific tasks attached to a particular work position (ILO);

*personal attributes*: the sum of knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences acquired by an individual in formal, non-formal and/or informal settings.

### ***Qualifications framework***

An instrument for the development and classification of qualifications (e.g. at national or sectoral level) according to a set of criteria (e.g. using descriptors) applicable to specified levels of learning outcomes.

### ***Qualifications system***

A system which provides rules governing all aspects of education and training activities leading to recognition of learning outcomes at national or sectoral level, including:

- definition of qualification policy, training design and implementation, institutional arrangements, funding, quality assurance;
- assessment, validation and certification of learning outcomes; as well as
- *mechanisms that link education and training to the labour market and civil society.*

### ***Recognition of learning outcomes***

(a) *formal recognition*: the process of granting official status to skills and competences either:

- through the award of qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles); or
  - through the grant of equivalence, credit units or waivers, validation of gained skills and/or competences;
- and/or
- *social recognition*: the acknowledgement of the value of skills and/or competences by economic and social stakeholders.

### ***Standard (or referential)***

Expectation, obligation, requirement or norm expected. It is possible to distinguish between:

- *educational standard* refers to the statements of learning objectives, content of curricula, entry requirements as well as resources required to meet the learning objectives;
- *occupational standard* refers to the statements of the activities and tasks related to - or to the knowledge, skills and understanding needed for - a specific job;
- *assessment standard* refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed, the level of performance to be achieved by the individual assessed and the methodology used);
- *validation standard* refers to the statements of the learning outcomes to be assessed, the assessment methodology used, as well as the level of performance to be reached;
- *certification standard* refers to the statements of the rules applicable for obtaining a certificate or diploma as well as the rights conferred.

***Summative assessment***

The process of assessing (or evaluating) a learner's achievement of specific knowledge, skills and competence at a particular time.

***Validation of learning outcomes***

The confirmation by a competent body that learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual in a formal, non-formal or informal setting have been assessed against predefined criteria and are compliant with the requirements of an validation standard. Validation typically leads to certification.

## **Annex 2 – Evaluation checklists**

This annex offers some tools for evaluating the validation processes as they applied to non formal and informal learning in any setting. The tools have been developed by the peer learning cluster on the recognition of learning outcomes and are based mainly on discussions in the peer learning activity held in Brussels (January 2007).

The first table sets out some general areas that underpin all validation processes. In the second table the range of components of a good orientation processes are defined. The components of assessment (or evaluation) process makes up the third table. No good quality assurance process is complete without some independent check of procedures, the components of such an independent check is outlined in the final table.

For each of the tables concerned with orientation, assessment and independent process check the components have been grouped under four headings.

- Conditions required: this covers the way the context of the process is created and maintained for optimum performance.
- Knowledge requirements: what do the practitioners need to know?
- Practice requirement: what has to happen?
- Expected outcomes: where does the process leave the candidate – what comes next?

**Table 4**        ***A validation checklist: Underpinning quality indicators for validation practices***

<b>Underpinning ideas</b>	<b>Why they are important</b>
Reliability	The process of validation must lead to trusted results. If the settings for learning and validation vary greatly then the process of validation must allow for these differences but should the process be repeated then the outcome must be the same.
Validity	The evidence documented for an individual must be directly related to the standards being used for validation. The evidence must not be allowed to shift the understanding of the standards.
Safety, security and confidentiality	The initial and ongoing engagement with the validation process from identification through to certification must not be compromised by lack of trust and consequential deterioration in motivation to proceed.
Standards/referential	These are the basis of measuring learning outcomes – they must exist in a clear and unambiguous form that has the confidence of the key stakeholders. The standards are also an ‘organiser’ for the documentation phase. Without standards the validation process cannot pass the identification of learning stage.
Sustainability	Validation processes can be resource intensive, especially for an individual who presents themselves for validation. Trust in validation also depends on the time the process has been operating and the way it

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	is known and understood in communities. Thus sustainability is a key consideration.
Visibility/transparency	The way the assessment and validation process operates must generate trust for the judgements to have meaning. Transparency and visibility of the validation is one of the fundamental features supporting trust. The transparency of the process of using established standards is particularly important.
Fitness for purpose	There are many methods for judging the level and sufficiency of evidence of learning. Not only should any one chosen method be suited to the form of the learning but methods in combination should create a sensitive and trustworthy toolbox of methods of assessing learning.
Cost efficiency	It is generally the case that validation processes for non-formal and informal learning do not have the benefit of large scale application (large cohorts of learning being assessed in similar ways). Therefore the economies of scale are limited and costs need to be measured in relation to the expected returns to the stakeholders concerned.

**Table 5** *A Validation checklist: General conditions, practical features, professional requirement and outcome expectation*

		<b>Components</b>	<b>Explanatory notes</b>
<b>General conditions essential for validation of non-formal and informal learning</b>	Orientation phase	Formative process	The primary purpose of orientation is to shape the subsequent assessment stage so that the outcome is optimal for the individual.
		Encouraging psychology	Personal motivation will need to be sustained with encouragement of all participants and the general approach which is taken
		Engaging individuals and providing access	The initial interactions that overcome obstacles to participation are open and motivating (outreach). The procedures minimise potential obstacles (e.g. financial, psychological)
		Impartiality	The interests of the individual are not compromised by the interests of those managing validation and other stakeholders (no conflict of interest).
		Visibility of process	Nothing should be hidden. There should be no surprises arising from poor information
		Visibility for individuals	Printed and spoken information should be structured from the viewpoint of the learner
		Ethical behaviour	Those who manage orientation must not enter into the personal deliberations of the individual beyond the point which makes the individual vulnerable or uncomfortable.
		Appeal procedure	Even a fair system will lead to issues for individuals in specific contexts – there should always be an opening for the individual to question decisions
		Defining role of stakeholders	Everyone involved should understand the role of others.
		Voluntary	There should be no compulsion to continue the process in specific ways.
		Owned by individual	All decisions should be made by the individual
		Flexible	Response to the changing position of the individual should be the norm, therefore there

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			needs to be as few fixed procedures as possible, some may be inevitable
		Trust	Orientation phase has to generate: - Trust in the process and those managing it by the individual - trust by the other managers of the process in the individual, - trust in the process by those using the outcomes of validation
Assessment phase		Privacy and confidentiality	The outcomes of assessment are restricted to the individual and any partners doing the assessment.
		Formative	It is likely that the assessment stage itself will have a formative effects on the individual. This should be generally a positive experience
		Encouraging psychology	Personal motivation will need to be sustained with encouragement of all participants and the general approach which is taken
		Access	The choice of assessment tools should be appropriate to the knowledge, skills and competence of the individual (e.g. use ICT only when the candidate is comfortable with computer techniques)
		Impartiality	Unless the conditions engender an objective approach the fairness of the assessment may be compromised
		Visibility of process	Nothing should be hidden. There should be no surprises in the assessment procedure
		Visibility for individuals	All assessment information and procedures should be structured from the viewpoint of the learner
		Ethical behaviour	Those who make assessments must not enter into the personal deliberations of the individual beyond the point which makes the individual vulnerable or uncomfortable.
		Appeal procedure	It should be possible to challenge decisions on the outcome of assessment from the viewpoint of procedure or

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			fairness
		Defining role of stakeholders	The individual should know the roles of all participants in the assessment process
		Trust	Where the expertise and fairness of the assessors is questionable and procedures are perceived as biased, the outcome of assessment will be perceived as having lesser value (by the individual and other users).
		Focussed on the individual	Within the limitations of agreed procedures the assessment process should focus entirely on the written, spoken and other evidence provided for the assessment of the individual.
		Voluntary	Whilst the assessment process may have fixed procedures the individual should be aware that participation in assessment is voluntary
<b>Practical features of validation of non-formal informal learning</b>	Orientation phase	Information	A full range of accessible information (covering the process requirements) needs to be available to potential candidates
		Guidance and Counselling	These provide important support for self - reflection by the candidate on the learning to be validated and the process of validating it. Some would see guidance and counselling as a counterpart to information. The two components form the basis of the orientation process.
		Privacy and confidentiality	The whole orientation process needs to be private for the individual if self reflection and trust are to be optimal.
		Personal approach	To ensure that the future assessment process is appropriate and the individual remains motivated, s/he should have access to one or more individuals who are knowledgeable about the position of the candidate and skilled in enabling the assessment process to operate in the individual's interests.
		User friendly	If a process is not user-friendly it is likely to damage self-

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			confidence, motivation and raise other barriers to access.
		Listening	With the individual at the heart of the process the facilitators need to engender a listening culture over and above an expert-information giving one
		Fairness	Information, guidance and counselling needs to ensure fair treatment of individuals as unfair approaches will undermine access, self reflection on learning and trust
	Assessment phase	Standards/referential	Assessment instruments require clear criteria so that users can make judgements about the validity and the sufficiency of learning. Assessment criteria are often based on more generic standards such as occupational standards. The validation process itself is sometimes governed by criteria for their operation. These are often based in educational standards.
		Qualified assessor	A qualified assessor has knowledge and experience of standards, assessment criteria and assessment instruments as well as some knowledge of the validation process
		Assessment methods	A range of methods (with their associated standards) should be available to tailor to the particular circumstances of a validation. These methods should result in valid and reliable outcomes
		Self assessment	The central role of the individual means that full use is made of the potential of self assessment (against assessment criteria and standards) by the candidate (e.g. validity and sufficiency of documentation for assessment).
		Further orientation	Assessment is a summative and formative process and further orientation may result from the assessment process.
		Transparency	Assessment instruments should

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			hold no secrets. Their structure and use should be obvious to candidates
		Authenticity	In addition to valid and reliable outcomes assessment instruments should be used in assessment situations that provide, as far as possible, a true reflection of the learning and the learning context.
		Stakeholder involvement	The validity and authenticity of assessment are enhanced with the involvement of the stakeholders who use qualifications and standards. These people (employers and other providers and recruiters) should be involved in assessment processes
		Implementation of the assessment instruments	All the conditions for the assessment have to be in favour of a reliable process (e.g. the structure of the documentation provided has to be clear; the assessment environment should not be distractive)
		Assessment criteria	Standards, such as those defining occupations are used for a range of purposes. It is necessary to tailor them for specific use in assessment through the creation of assessment criteria
		Communication	Candidates require information about assessment processes and when and where they will be carried out.
		Appeal procedure	A clearly defined process should be available
<b>Knowledge requirement for professionals</b>	Orientation phase	Education system	Validation process will draw on the previous formal education and training of the individual and the outcomes may directly link to the system therefore knowledge of the system is essential
		Validation system	From motivation of individuals to seek validation through to post assessment possibilities – the rules and procedures of the whole process needs to be clear. Knowledge of links to other validation systems is also

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			important.
		Labour markets	Progression in the labour market is a common desirable outcome from the validation process. Knowledge of local and national conditions is important
		Qualifications	The qualifications available to individuals can present a complex picture. Knowledge of qualification requirements, currency and potential progression routes related to main qualification needs to be up-to-date
		Legal provision	The legal foundations of the validation process and individual entitlements needs to be understood by managers of the validation process
		Roles of other stakeholders	The individual is at the centre but the validation process could involve others in the documentation process, it will involve others in the assessment stage and if certification follows other agencies will be involved. The smooth operation of validation depends on effective cooperation by different stakeholders therefore good knowledge of their roles is required.
	Assessment phase	Assessment methods	The range of possible methods and their fitness for purpose for the situation of the individual needs to be understood.
		Validation process	From motivation of individuals to seek validation to post assessment possibilities – the rules and procedures of the whole process needs to be clear. Knowledge of links to other validation systems is also important.
		Qualification	Where assessment can lead to certification for a particular qualification level the knowledge of qualification requirements, currency and potential progression routes related to main qualification is critical and needs to be up-to-

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			date
<b>Expected outcomes of validation of non-formal informal learning</b>	Orientation phase	Clear outcome for the individual	The outcome of the validation process should be unambiguous and signal all possible further actions required of the individual.
		Time and effort requirements	Within the constraints of a flexible process there should be clear statements about stages, tasks and time scales expected during the process
		Documentation of process	There should be an up-to-date record of the validation process, decisions taken and outcomes that is accessible to all stakeholders that need to advance the interests of the individual.
	Assessment phase	Validation outcome	The result of assessment should be communicated without delay and with the option of further orientation
		Certification	The way the outcome of the validation process leads to a qualification for the individual should be clear
		Record of the individual achievement	Certification may follow assessment, however a record of the process and its outcome is useful for candidates
		Satisfaction, further orientation	Following an assessment process the individual may wish to provide feedback on the validation process or seek further orientation
		Qualified human resources	Not all successful validation outcomes lead to certification and the social recognition arising from validation may be a required outcome for some individuals

**Table 6** *A validation checklist: The audit of the process*

		<b>Explanatory Notes</b>
<b>Conditions required</b>	External	The external function is designed to build trust in the process by users of the validation process and its outcomes. There will always be a tension for those involved in validation work in making arrangements and assessments of validation that are user friendly and the impartial judgements required by assessment criteria.
	Independent	A review of processes and outcomes should be independent of all interests in the validation processes. It is possible for external reviewers to be involved with an individual, a sector, an institution or company in some way.
	Expert knowledge	Reviewers should be experienced in validation processes
	Regular	The process of review should be set to prescribed time scales
	Transparent	All review criteria and processes should be open for scrutiny
	Frame of reference	Reviews may not cover all aspects of a validation processes – the focus of review should be explicit
	Individual focus	Whilst the review is of the overall arrangements for validation, the procedure for review should take a viewpoint of a candidate for validation whenever possible
<b>Knowledge requirements</b>	Frame of reference	The focus of review should be understood by reviewers. Reviewers should be knowledgeable about validation systems
<b>Practice requirement</b>	Whole or partial review	Attention should focus on aspects of validation that are under review.
	Evidence based	Information about all the orientation and assessment practices relevant to the review should be available and all judgement should be based on this evidence.
	Analytical	The review should aim to be analytical and not descriptive of the validation processes. The analysis should be targeted at creating opportunities for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes in use.
	Statistical part	The review should include numerical data on, for example, candidate numbers, duration of orientation and assessment, outcomes
	Expert part	Judgements based on qualitative evidence such as candidate and assessor feedback
	Style of audit	The formative aspect of validation could be the guide to the style of review with a low profile and interactive style rather than a top down inspection style.
<b>Expected</b>	Recommendations	The formative approach would lead to a sense of

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<b>outcomes</b>	to improve system	self improvement for the validation centre experts and reports could offer further suggestions for improvements to procedures and assessment
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### **Annex 3 - Countries participating in the Peer Learning Cluster**

Austria (from 2008)  
Belgium (Wallonia)  
Belgium (Flanders, from 2007)  
Bulgaria  
Czech republic  
Denmark  
Estonia  
Finland  
France  
Germany (from 2008)  
Greece (from 2008)  
Hungary  
Iceland  
Ireland  
Italy  
Luxembourg  
Malta  
Netherlands  
Norway (from 2007)  
Poland  
Portugal  
Romania  
Slovakia  
Slovenia  
Spain  
Sweden  
Turkey  
UK (Scotland)