

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe

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Ernesto Villalba and Jens Bjørnåvold

Validation of non-formal and informal learning, or the effort to make visible and value the learning taking place outside formal education, has grown in importance and visibility over the last few decades. Stakeholders at national as well as European level have argued consistently that validation can play a key role in opening up education and training systems to the learning taking place at work and during leisure time. In recent years validation is increasingly being related to the needs of groups at risk, arguing that validation can support integration into the labour market and society at large (see Souto-Otero and Villalba, 2015). The transformation of these general objectives into concrete practises relevant to individuals is a different issue. This article¹ will look into the development of validation in Europe during the last few decades and discuss to what extent the fundamental values underpinning validation have been accepted and internalised. This approach also allows us to reflect on the interaction between national and European policies in this area².

1. Validation - an issue of values

The acceptance of validation of non-formal and informal learning into national qualification and skill formation systems implies the acceptance of two main values:

- All learning, irrespective of where and when it takes place, is valuable for the individual and for society.
- Formal learning needs to be supplemented by validation to make visible and value the rich learning of individuals.

These two values are closely interlinked and constitute what we will refer to in this article as 'the validation norm'. Actively promoting this norm means that the strong position of formal education and training systems is challenged; in effect,

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the 'exclusive' right of formal education and training to value (and certify) learning is questioned. For these two values to be generally accepted, and for validation to become an integral and effective part of national policies and practises, three main conditions have to be fulfilled. The first condition refers to the institutional setting of validation. Are adequate laws and institutions put in place, allowing for long-term and legitimate implementation of policies? The second condition refers to resources and whether policy objectives are translated into concrete arrangements on the ground, giving citizens access to validation. The third condition refers to methodology. Validation requires that the methodologies use for validation guarantee reliability and validity of the learning outcomes acquired. A lack of trust in any of these three conditions undermines the principle that all learnings are equal and that formal learning needs to be supplemented with validation of non-formal and informal learning. The key questions we address in this paper are the following:

- Have the values underpinning the promotion of validation been internalised?
- Have the associated conditions for implementing validation at national and European level been addressed?

The paper borrows from the theory on 'diffusion of norms of actions between nation states' as used by Helgøy and Homme (2013) based on Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). For them, there are three stages in the policy process: 'norm emergence', 'norm cascade' and 'norm internalisation'. Helgøy and Homme use this framework to explain the implementation process of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in three European countries. 'Norm emergence' is characterised by the development of the norm and the role played by frontrunners; countries acting as 'entrepreneurs. The second stage, the 'norm cascade', takes place after a 'tipping point' has been reached, meaning that a critical number of countries have accepted and adapted the norm. Once the tipping point has been reached, the norm that comes from outside has more importance than the local norms. The internalisation stage refers to the point at which the norm has been fully accepted and is no longer part of the public debate.

The above analytical approach is highly relevant for validation, given the fact that developments to a large extent have been based on an interaction of national and European initiatives and stakeholders. In this paper we will discuss the acceptance and internalisation of the 'validation norm'. The paper starts with reviewing the recent history of validation in Europe from its emergence in the 1980s and 1990s. A second stage is presented from 2002 to the adoption of the 2012 Recommendation on validation. The third part of the paper discusses the current situation and the extent to which we can speak of an acceptance of the basic norm or not at this stage. The assessment of this third stage is based on the data collected for the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

2. The early days (1980-2002) – Emergence of a norm?

Validation, as a separate policy field, starts to emerge during the late 1980s. This does not mean that countries started without prior experience in this area. A number of countries already operated with arrangements allowing individuals with relevant work experience to sit for exams, in effect awarding a qualification without attending classes. The so called 'Article 20' arrangement in Norway, in existence since 1952, illustrates this. These arrangements, however, were mostly seen as technical arrangements ensuring the flexibility of (mainly) formal training, and not as policy initiatives in their own right.

National developments

The emergence of the 'validation norm' – or the acknowledgement that all learning, irrespective of the context in which it takes place, should be recognised – is closely linked to the introduction of learning outcomes and/or competences based education standards and curricula in the 1980s and 1990s. The shift to learning outcomes, focusing on what learners are expected to know, be able to do and understand, states that the same outcomes can be reached in different ways and by following a variety of pathways (including learning at work and during leisure time). The introduction of national vocational qualifications in the UK in the 1980s and the development of competence based education in Finland in the 1990s both illustrate how national learning outcomes based approaches trigger the development and introduction of validation arrangements. In the UK the combination of learning outcomes (and modularised qualifications) resulted in arrangements like Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). In 1991, the National Council for vocational qualifications required that 'accreditation of prior learning should be available for all qualifications accredited by these bodies' (Davidson, 2008).

The extent to which this shift to learning outcomes facilitated the introduction of validation arrangements varies. While the Finnish competence-based system has developed into a strong and integrated part of the national system, and is still serving a high number of individuals, the NVQ system has only to a limited extent been able to promote validation of non-formal and informal learning. The relative lack of progress in the UK may come down to lack of policy priorities, but may also be linked to the controversy around the quality and the relevance of the NVQ system. Some of the criticism currently raised against the learning outcomes approach (and implicitly validation) seems to be linked to the particular ('narrow') way learning outcomes were defined for NVQs (Allais 2016). So while learning outcomes based standards and curricula are important to promote validation, they cannot do so alone.

As indicated above, a limited number of countries stand out as pioneers in implementing validation arrangements. In addition to the UK and Finland mentioned above, France stands out as an important frontrunner. The *bilan de competence* was established in 1985, supporting employers and employees in identifying (making visible) competences acquired at work. From 1992 vocational certificates (Certificate d'aptitude professionnelle) could be achieved (to various degrees) on the basis of assessment of non-formal and prior learning, and in 2002 legislation was adopted establishing a comprehensive national framework for validation (VAE). Nordic countries increasingly focused on developing legislation and institutional solutions allowing for validation. Norway, as a part of the 1999 Competence Reform, carried out an extensive three-year experimental scheme to develop and test the various elements necessary for an operational national system on validation (VOX, 2002). This led to the setting-up of operational validation schemes from the early 2000s, addressing vocational education and training in particular. Denmark and Sweden, addressing validation as an integrated part of lifelong learning policies, also exemplify this. In the Netherlands the commission on Erkenning Verwoven Kwalificaties (EVK) developed recommendations to establish a system for validation that was then tested in some sectors (construction industry and childcare). Also in Switzerland, the association CH-Q Swiss Qualification Programme for Job Careers started to develop methodologies for assessing learning acquired outside the formal system in 1999. All these countries can be considered as 'entrepreneurs' in the sense that Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) use the term. They 'pave the way' for turning validation into a visible policy priority, stressing the values underpinning the 'validation norm'.

European level

Bjørnåvold (2000) and Duvekot, Schuur and Paulusse (2005) point to the 1995 Commission White Paper on Teaching and Learning (European Commission 1995) as the first explicit effort to promote validation at European level. The White Paper emphasised the importance of recognising competences acquired outside formal education and paved the way for extensive testing and experimentation to be financed through European programmes (for example Adapt, Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, Equal). This experimentation, also supported by the work of Cedefop (Bjørnåvold 1999 and 2000), focused on the development of methodologies for validation in particular, testing the practical feasibility of the approach. While only in a few cases leading to permanent arrangements for validation being set up, the European programmes played a key role in disseminating 'the validation norm' to countries, institutions and experts previously not involved in this area.

The 2001 publication of the European Commission 'Memorandum on lifelong learning' ('Making the European area of lifelong learning a reality') gave further impetus to the role of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Rooted in the Delors' (1996) declaration, UNESCO's 1972 publication "Learning to be" (Fraure,

1972) and the subsequent changes to the concept of lifelong learning (see e.g. Rubensson 2001, Jarvis 2002, Villalba 2006), the 2001 Communication emphasised the importance of learning throughout one's life and across the life span (in formal, non-formal and informal settings). Rubensson (2003) has argued that the Communication clearly places a major emphasis on informal learning and gives the individual significant responsibility in the management of their learning history. Thus, validation became a central element in the implementation of lifelong learning policies. Around the same time, the European Union started developing transparency tools that would allow for better portability of skills and qualifications. The Copenhagen Declaration of 29-30 November 2002 launched the European strategy for enhanced Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET). The Copenhagen Declaration established the need for "developing a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater compatibility between approaches in different countries" (European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, 2002, 2).

3. Expansion of validation (2002-2012) – towards a 'tipping point'?

National developments

At national level, the 'entrepreneur' countries, exemplified by France, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands, stabilised their validation approaches during this period, notably by integrating validation arrangements into their national education and training systems and by increasing the number of persons being validated. A number of new countries acknowledged the potential importance of validation and initiated systematic processes during this period. Portugal is the most remarkable example of this. The 'New Opportunities initiative' (2005) defined a national strategy, largely based on validation, to raise the qualification level of low-qualified individuals. Including a National System for Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC), the new opportunities initiative established more than 400 centres at local and regional level and led to the award of more than 300,000 certificates. Denmark established legislation in 2007 on the development of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning across all sectors of education and launched several initiatives with the aim of increasing its use. In Germany, the introduction of the ProfilPass (a tool to document people's skills) in 2005 can be considered a first move towards a broader validation approach. The 2005 reform of the Vocational training act (BBiG)³, including the 'external student examinations' that allowed individuals not enrolled in formal education to obtain apprenticeships certificates proving professional experience, is also an indication of a certain movement towards accepting validation. In Spain, the Royal Decree 1224/2009 on the recognition of professional competencies acquired through work experience established the mechanisms for the validation

3 https://www.bmbf.de/pub/The_2005_Vocational_Training_Act.pdf

of non-formal and informal learning in VET qualifications. Belgium, Estonia, Luxembourg Ireland, Iceland and Slovenia also exemplify the introduction of legislation and administrative procedures for validation, although the degree of practical implementation varies. Other countries, such as the Czech Republic and Lithuania, also started developments during this period.

European level

As in the first period, the European programmes play a key role in testing solutions and disseminating experiences (and attitudes to) validation. In the decade from 2002-2012 in particular the European Social Funds play a critical role in supporting the setting up of validation arrangements in 'new' countries, exemplified by the new opportunities programme in Portugal. Programmes like Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig and Socrates (later; the lifelong learning programme) continues support to testing and piloting, overall supporting several hundred projects. These projects were to a large extent triggered by the policy objectives on validation included in the lifelong learning initiatives, the Copenhagen process as well as Bologna. This interaction between European policy initiatives, European programmes and national developments is of key importance to understand developments during this period.

Furthermore, the adoption of instruments like the EQF and the increased attention to the learning outcomes principle can be seen as an indirect (and important) support to 'the validation norm'. The broad implementation of learning outcomes in all sectors of education and training and in most European countries during the decade (Cedefop 2009, 2016) means that the conditions for opening up qualifications to a wider range of learning pathways were being addressed.

In 2004, the Council adopted a set of conclusion regarding 'Common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning' (Council of the European Union, 2004). These principles were formulated at a high level of abstraction and identify issues and conditions critical to the implementation of validation (Cedefop 2009). This was followed up by the first European inventory on validation (Colardyn and Bjørnåvold, 2005), providing an overview over national developments and arrangements (followed by other editions (Souto Otero, McCoshan, Junge, 2005; Otero, Hawley and Nevala, 2007, Hawley, Otero and Duchemin, 2010). Work on the first set of European Guidelines on validation of non-formal and informal learning was also started (Cedefop 2009). Both the Inventory and the Guidelines support national implementation of validation in Europe and have been widely disseminated and used. The 2004 Council Decision on a single Community Framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences in Europe (Europass) (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2004) can be said to support the 'validation norm' also. In particular the Europass CV is explicitly focused on the identification and documentation of learning outcomes in different contexts, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The 2008 adoption of the

European Qualification framework (EQF AG) is of key importance to validation. The establishment of the EQF triggered the introduction of learning outcomes based national qualification frameworks across the continent. The long-term effect of this, directly influencing validation, is the more systematic promotion of learning outcomes at national level. When countries are referencing their NQFs to the EQF, the role of validation is explicitly addressed.

While initially largely focusing on vocational education and training, other areas and sectors were gradually being included in the policy discourse. In higher education, the Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education held in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve on 28 and 29 April 2009 expanded the Bologna process and recognition convention to include also recognition of prior learning. In 2011, the Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education also called Member States to develop clear routes into higher education from vocational and other types of education, as well as mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience gained outside formal education and training.

In 2006, a resolution of the Council invited Member States to enable the identification of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field. The resulting Youthpass (as the Europass) supports the documentation of all forms of learning and promotes transfer of learning as well as transparency of qualifications (European Parliament and the Council in Decision No 1719/2006/EC). This was followed up in 2009 by the renewed framework for EU cooperation in the youth field that places non-formal learning and its validation at the core of youth initiatives.

Towards a tipping point?

In this second phase we can observe a gradual expansion of validation objectives from the pioneering countries to an increasing number of 'newcomers'. In the pioneering countries, validation was becoming more institutionalised, and although not necessarily always fully developed, the arrangements were becoming increasingly established within the institutional network. In other countries, new legislation was developed to try to boost validation practices, in many cases within the development of national qualification frameworks. However, initiatives were still limited to specific sectors and in many cases lacking full-scale implementation. While European initiatives, and in particular the programmes, helped to promote the issue, a "tipping point", as referred by Helgøy and Homme (2013), was not reached during this decade. While the number of countries working with validation increased, full scale, comprehensive implementation was largely lacking. Validation was furthermore taken forward in a fragmented way, lacking overall coordination. Practices remained confined to specific sectors with no relationship to other practices. It is important to note, however, that some critical conditions for

developments were created, notably through the intensified role of NQFs and the more systematic focus on the implementation of learning outcomes.

4. The current situation – norm-cascade and internalisation?

In 2012, following an open consultation, the European Council adopted the Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning⁴. Differently from previous initiatives, where validation was treated as a part of broader initiatives, the 2012 Recommendation establishes validation as an independent policy instrument, relevant for policy development in a number of areas. The public consultation preceding the Recommendation demonstrated that validation was considered increasingly relevant and important by a majority of EU countries. The timing of the 2012 Recommendation is important: Following the financial crisis in 2008-2009 a majority of EU countries faced serious problems linked to unemployment, re-direction of people's careers, marginalisation of social groups and a general rise in poverty and social exclusion. Seen from this perspective, the perception of validation at national level underwent a change. While previously seen by many as an instrument to increase the flexibility of formal education and training (open up qualifications to non-formal and informal learning), countries now increasingly started to see validation as a way to (for example) support integration of groups at risk and 're-skill' unemployed workers. Validation changed from being a tool relevant to the education and training sector to becoming an instrument of interest to labour market and social policies. The adoption of the Recommendation is thus not an isolated initiative at European level, but reflects a changing political and economic reality requiring responses at national level.

The 2012 recommendation on validation – confirming 'the validation norm'?

The following aspects of the recommendation illustrate this change of emphasis and the changed position of validation in the overall policy landscape: First, the Recommendation clarifies the concept of validation, establishing a common understanding of what validation is. The concept of validation had remained difficult to define, with different terms used in different countries and contexts: Validation of non-formal and informal learning, prior learning assessment, recognition of prior learning, certification of learning, accreditation and validation of experiential learning, etc. All these terms are related, but address slightly different ideas. The Recommendation provides a definition that can serve as an umbrella for all these existing, related terms. It defines validation as a process of confirmation, and it consists of 4 different phases: identification, documentation, assessment and certification. The four stages permit a much needed flexibilisation of the validation concept. They make it easier for countries to adapt and accept the norm as well as to articulate the concept to represent the complex different realities in which it operates. The definition also indicates that the process of

4 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF>

confirmation is carried out by an authorising body that checks the learning outcomes an individual has acquired, measured against relevant standards. The inclusion of an authorising body means that certain institutional structures have to be in place to allow for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This addresses one of the three basic critical conditions referred at the beginning of the chapter, namely the necessary institutional setting for validation. Secondly, the Recommendation gives a clear time frame for the establishment of national arrangements. It states that Member states should establish, no later than 2018, validation arrangements that allow for awarding qualifications (or parts of them). Although initially the aim was to put in place 2015 as the cut-off date, member states considered that more time was needed, as in many instances, the national structures were not ready.

A third important aspect of the Recommendation is that it draws up a series of principles in these validation arrangements. These principles build on the 2004 principles, but are more concrete and further integrated into existing policy actions established by the Union during the previous stage. Validation arrangements need to provide information, advice and guidance on benefits, opportunities and procedures. This means that guidance and counselling have to be in place during the process of validation. The Recommendation also asked Member States to link validation to NQFs, which are referenced to the EQF, as well as establish synergies with existing credit systems. Member States are also asked to make use of existing transparency tools, especially Europass and Youthpass. The standards used for validation are meant to be the same or equivalent to those of formally acquired qualifications. In here, the shift to learning outcomes described above becomes specially relevant as standards for validation cannot rely on time or place of learning, but on learning outcomes irrespective of how they have been acquired. Other principles relate to the transparency of quality assurance and the provision for professional development in order to guarantee trust and reliability.

The Recommendation also establishes a body that oversees and is responsible for the implementation of the Recommendation: The European Qualification Framework Advisory Group. This gives Member States a forum for discussion and exchange of views as well as a place for the norm to be further internalised. Giving responsibility to a specific body assures a certain degree of commitment and peer pressure for the implementation of validation initiatives. Finally, the Recommendation gives an important role to the European guidelines⁵ and the inventory on validation as tools to support the implementation of the Recommendation, proving in this way an extra platform for discussion and

5 The European guidelines, reviewed in 2015 after its first edition in 2009, were the result of a process of consultation with Member States and relevant stakeholders that lasted several years. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

common understanding. The guidelines seek to clarify the conditions for the implementation of validation arrangements. The guidelines can be considered the text in which the ‘validation norm’ is defined and shared, providing the blueprint for the adoption, acceptance and adaptation of the values and principles included in the norm. While the guidelines provide the principles and conditions to consider when implementing validation, the European inventory provides an overview of how validation is actually being implemented in the European countries. The following section presents data from the last inventory update to illustrate to what extent the ‘validation norm’ is being adopted.

National level developments – confirming ‘the validation norm’?

The most recent edition of the European Inventory on validation⁶ shows that in 2016, all countries have validation arrangements in place or are in an advanced stage of development.

Table 1. Possible outcomes of validation in one or more sectors of education where there are validation arrangements

Award of partial/full formal qualification	
AT, BE-fl, BG, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, TR, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	
Award of other non-formal qualification/certificate	Award of credits
AT, BE-fr, CY, DE, EL, ES, FI, IE, IS, LU, NL, PL, SI, UK (S)	AT, BE-fl, CH, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, HU, IE, IS, IT, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SI, SE, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)
Award of modules	Exemptions
AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, DK, EE, ES, FI, IE, IT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, CH, CZ, DK, EE, ES, FI, HU, IE, IS, LI, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, SE, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)
Access to formal programmes	Training specifications
AT, BE-fl, BE-fr, BG, CH, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, IS, IE, LI, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SE, SI, UK (E&NI), UK (S), UK (W)	AT, CH, DK, ES, FI, IE, IS, LI, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SI, UK (E&NI)

N.B.: Multiple responses possible

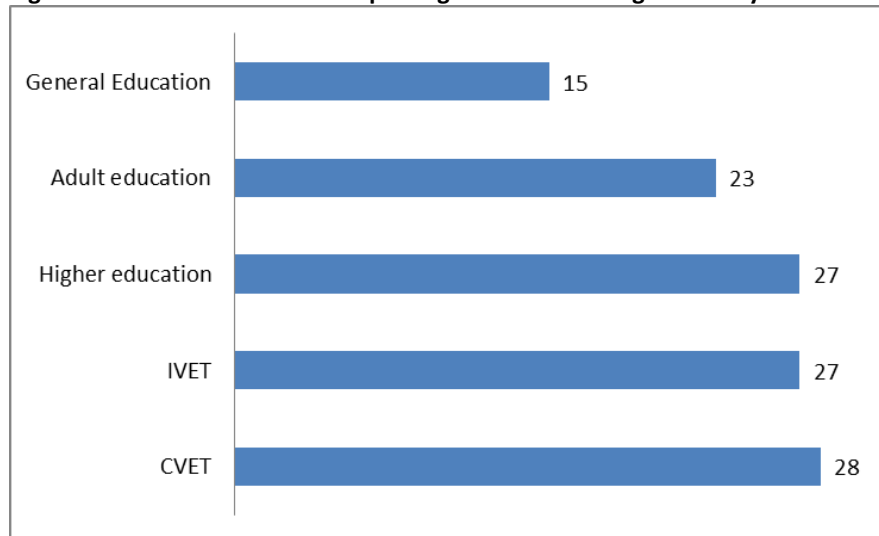
Source: 2016 European inventory.

6 The 2016 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning consists of a series of country and thematic reports as well as a synthesis report summarising main results. It covers 33 countries. There are three reports for the UK (England and Northern Ireland; Scotland; Ireland) and two for Belgium (French Community and Flemish Community). These regions are referred to and counted as ‘countries’ in this chapter and in the inventory. Countries include the 28 Member States, the EFTA countries and Turkey. The inventory addresses all aspects discussed in the European guidelines. It provides a detailed view of the different policies and practices on validation. Available at: www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation/inventory

All countries except Croatia have at least one functioning system that allows individuals to obtain a qualification through validation of their non-formal or informal learning. Validation allows individuals to gain full or parts of a formal qualification, in at least one sector of education, in 30 countries, in many instances in the form of credits or modules. In addition, a range of other possibilities based on validation are provided, such as access, exemptions or provision of training specifications (see table 1).

Validation arrangements, however, might not be available in all sectors of education and training. Figure 1 shows that validation is more common in CVET, IVET and Higher Education, while general education and systems of adult education tend to be less inclined to accept validation.

Figure 1: Number of countries reporting validation arrangements by sector

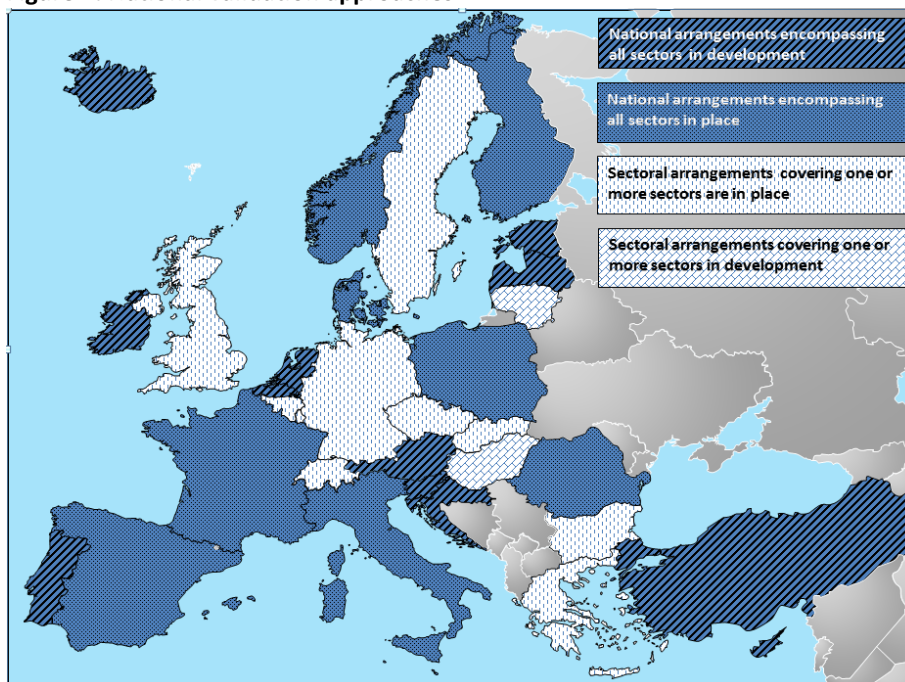


Source: 2016 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Around 60% of the countries under review have or are developing comprehensive systems for validation, while the other 40% have opted for a sectoral approach, in which the legal frameworks, strategies and policies are developed separately in the different sectors. The pioneers, France, Norway, Denmark and Finland now have comprehensive systems internalised into their skills formation systems with relatively high levels of uptake. Also in UK (Scotland, specially), the sectoral approach has permeated all sectors. Other countries might have arrangements with a comprehensive approach but their systems are less established. This is the case in Spain, Poland, Italy and Romania. Portugal, Iceland, Belgium (FL), Ireland, Austria and Slovenia can be seen as countries that are re-formulating existing validation arrangements to assure coherence across sectors, framing the existing

practices built during the first decade of the 21st century. Finally, a few countries have more limited systems of validation, such as Greece, Slovakia or the Czech Republic that have validation practices only pertaining to initial VET.

Figure 2: National validation approaches



Source: 2016 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Irrespective of the approach chosen to implement validation, there is certain tendency towards creating a coherent institutional context in which validation can operate across different sectors. 20 countries reported having established mechanisms to coordinate validation across sectors. In several countries this has been done through the development of the NQFs. In Poland, the Ministry of education was given the role of coordinating the implementation of the integrated qualification system (IQS), adopted in 2015. The IQS act describes all qualifications awarded in Poland by authorised entities, and it has two key elements: the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) and the Integrated Qualifications Register (IQR). The act also introduces a formal definition of validation.

This connection to the developments of NQFs is a sign of the increasing institutionalisation of validation. In 2010 the number of countries that reported allowing access or acquisition of parts or full qualifications registered in their NQFs was 12. In 2016, the number has gone up to 28. Table 2 also shows that the

discussion to establish the links between NQF and validation was already present in most countries in 2010.

Table 2: Links between validation and NQFs

	2010	2014	2016
Possible to Access/ acquire NQF qualifications	12	20	28
Link under discussion	18	16	9
No discussion to establish link	4	0	1

Source: 2016 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

This has to do also with the development of NQF in Europe, with countries moving towards an operational phase. Within this operational phase, validation, as argued in the previous section, is one explicit aspect to be implemented. The validation of non-formal and informal learning to gain access to NQF qualifications as well as the acquisition of credits is most common in higher education. 56% of the countries that have validation systems in place permit individuals access through validation, and 48% acquisition of credits for higher education. This is probably related to the implementation of the Bologna process and the extended use of ECTS. In IVET and CVET the connection with NQF is also strong. In these sectors, it is more common to be able to obtain a partial qualification/ modules, while gaining access is less common.

The inventory also explores the extent to which qualifications obtained through validation use the same standards as formal qualifications and if they could be in any way differentiated by looking at the diploma received. This pertains to the idea that all learning is equally valuable, irrespective of the way that it has been acquired. The 2016 data shows that in three quarters of the countries (26 of the 35), the qualifications obtained through validation use the same or equivalent standards to formal qualifications in at least one sector of education. This is the case in 96% of the IVET systems that permit obtaining a qualification, and less common in adult education where just above 60% of the initiatives for validation use the same standards. Similarly, 23 countries have at least one sector of education where certificates obtained through validation are exactly the same as those of formal education and cannot be differentiated. However, only in nine countries this is the case in all sectors of education in which validation is possible. Thus, there are several countries in which validation arrangements provide differentiated qualifications. In total, in 22 countries is possible to find at least one sector in which the diplomas obtained through validation can be differentiated, usually by the way the grades or the time for completion are presented. This means that in several countries validation arrangements in which it is possible to differentiate cohabits with arrangements in which it is not possible. In higher

education, most of the certificates obtained cannot be differentiated. In the other sectors, it is more or less 50% of the existing validation arrangements.

Concerning methodological issues, the four stages of validation were used in 31 systems of the 36 under study. Although it is not possible to fully compare to previous inventories, due to the difference in the way the data collection was carried out, the number indicates a considerable increase from the 21 and 23 registered in 2010 and 2014 as responding positively to the question: "Are all four stages of the validation process used in the process of validation?". Most validation arrangements use a combination of methods when following the four stages. The use of portfolios has been spreading in the later years, but it is normally combined with standard methodology use in formal education such as tests and examinations or declarative methods. Standardised tools are not common and ICT can be considered to be under-utilised.

5. Conclusions

The 2016 data shows that majority of European countries now have accepted and internalised the 'validation norm' as defined at the start of this paper. Almost all countries have put in place arrangements that allow for the acquisition of full or partial qualifications through the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Several countries are now working towards comprehensive systems offering validation opportunities where people live, work and/or study. The development of NQFs, as well as the general acceptance of the learning outcome approach, has been an important driver promoting validation. As regards national policy formulation it can be argued that we have reached a 'tipping point'. Validation is now an explicit and visible part of lifelong learning and (to some extent and importantly) employment and integration policies. This 'tipping point' has been reached through an intense interaction between stakeholders at national and European level. In this sense validation serves as an example of 'the open method of coordination' promoted by the EU during the last few decades.

It is, however, more difficult to determine whether acceptance and integration at the level of national policy formulation is translated into acceptance and internalisation at the level of practical implementation. Policy documents and plans do not necessarily trigger adequate resourcing and financing for implementation at local and regional level. Only developments during the next decade(s) will show whether the acceptance of validation at national policy level will be translated into acceptance and internalisation also at the level of practitioners and among the end-users themselves.

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