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European guidelines
for validating non-formal and informal learning

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The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training. We provide information on and analyses of vocational education and training systems, policies, research and practice.
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Foreword

We are presented with opportunities to learn every day. Beyond the formal classroom setting, we can acquire the most valuable of knowledge, skills and competences in our daily lives, be it at work, at home or during leisure time. Learning throughout life is a key route to personal development and acknowledging such learning can give greater value to citizen's achievements and their potential contributions to society. Despite this, the influence of traditional forms of education remains strong, with non-formal and informal learning often ignored and undervalued.

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning recognises this conflict and seeks to promote a more systematic approach to 'validation', to increase the visibility and value of learning taking place outside formal education and training systems. A key objective of the 2012 recommendation is for EU Member States to work together towards national arrangements for validation by 2018. This should make it possible for all citizens to have their non-formal or informal learning identified and documented, and if they so wish, assessed and certified.

Validation arrangements can be of benefit to all citizens and help combat unemployment by improving skills matching and social cohesion. Validation can offer crucial support to the unemployed or those at risk of losing their jobs by enabling citizens communicate the value of their skills and experiences either to potential employers or when returning to formal education to earn a new qualification. Validation can also form part of the response to the current refugee crisis through identification, documentation, assessment and certification of migrants' previous experiences, to support quicker and smoother integration into host countries. For individuals that need to redirect their careers, validation can open a door to new occupations. It can also play a major role in combating youth unemployment by making skills acquired through voluntary work, or during leisure, visible to employers.

The European guidelines on validation, presented here, address the wide range of policy-makers and practitioners involved in developing and implementing validation arrangements. The target audience includes European, national, sectoral and local institutions from different contexts (public, private and voluntary sectors; education and training; and labour market services). The guidelines seek to clarify the conditions for implementing validation, pointing to the critical choices to be made by stakeholders when implementing validation arrangements. The guidelines do not advocate right or wrong answers; any approach to validation will be determined by the specific setting and context in which validation is implemented.

The guidelines complement the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning compiled by Cedefop and the European Commission with Member States. The inventory provides an overview of validation arrangements in European countries.

This is the second edition of the European guidelines. As with the 2009 edition, this publication is the result of cooperation between the European Commission and Cedefop in full consultation with the Member States. It is based on input from a wide variety of

European and national experts and stakeholders. We trust it will assist all concerned in their efforts to develop and improve validation arrangements in Europe.

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- members of the EU Council education committee commented on the draft final version of the publication;
- members of the EQF advisory group provided detailed comments on different versions and contributed to the publication's overall relevance and quality;
- participants in the 2013 Mechelen European conference revised the guidelines and offered important advice;
- validation stakeholders at national and European levels responded to the spring 2015 consultation on the draft guidelines.

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Cedefop, represented by Jens Bjornavold, Ernesto Villalba-Garcia and Hanne Christensen, provided technical and conceptual support and drafted the guidelines. Cedefop's work has been supported by the preparatory update carried out by Mike Coles in 2011-12.

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Executive summary

A set of European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning were published jointly by the European Commission and Cedefop in 2009. The 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning invites the European Commission – in consultation with Member States and stakeholders – to review the guidelines regularly. The guidelines presented in this publication are the first update since the recommendation. They have been elaborated through extensive consultation with stakeholders at European, national and regional levels.

The guidelines acknowledge that any solution must be fit for purpose and that arrangements need to be designed according to the particular context in which they operate. The guidelines aim at assisting stakeholders by clarifying the different options and possible steps they face when establishing and operating validation arrangements in Europe.

The guidelines follow the themes identified by the 2012 recommendation on validating non-formal and informal learning. For each of the themes a set of questions are introduced as check lists to reflect on the critical issues to be addressed for validation arrangements to be fully functional. The themes identified by the recommendation are closely interlinked and the different sections of the guidelines should be seen as building blocks which, when combined, can provide the basis for a coherent approach to validating non-formal and informal learning. The guidelines are organised as follows.

Chapter 1 outlines the context in which the guidelines have been prepared, underlining how they build on and complement the 2012 Council recommendation.

Chapter 2 presents the basic features of validation, emphasising that it is about increasing the visibility of non-formal learning as well as attributing value to the outcomes of this learning. The chapter defines validation as '…a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes against a relevant standard' (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 5) and highlights the different stages of the process. The distinction between identification, documentation, assessment and certification is crucial to making validation arrangements flexible and fit for purpose.

Chapter 3 introduces the necessary conditions for the development and implementation of functional validation arrangements. It emphasises the importance of:

(a) impartial and comprehensive information, guidance and counselling throughout the process;
(b) coordination of relevant actors at different levels and with different functions;
(c) linking validation arrangements to national qualifications frameworks and systems;
(d) referring to learning-outcomes-based standards, similar and/or equivalent to those used for formal education and training;
(e) creation of quality assurance mechanisms;
(f) provision of qualified professionals.

Chapter 4 discusses the different settings in which validation is used. It first talks about validation arrangements in education and training, with special emphasis on open educational resources. It then discusses how human resource management practices in

enterprises can be linked to validation arrangements and how enterprises can contribute to the transferability and portability of validation results. It also addresses arrangements for 'skills audits', the possibility for individuals to undergo a process aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences. It shows how the voluntary (or 'third') sector plays an important role on validation.

Chapter 5 discusses tools for validation and the need that these are fit for purpose and remain reliable and fair. Tools are important as they will influence the overall quality – the validity and reliability – of the validation process and its outcomes. They greatly influence the way individual learners experience the process and determine whether their experiences are captured or not. The chapter differentiates between tools that are used for extracting evidence and tools that are mainly used to present it.

The guidelines conclude with a summary of the interconnected steps necessary to establish functional validation arrangements. The central message of the guidelines is that validation is about making outcomes of non-formal and informal learning visible and attributing them appropriate value.

CHAPTER 1

Purpose and link to the 2012 recommendation on validating non-formal and informal learning

The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning are written for individuals and institutions responsible for initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation. These stakeholders operate at different levels (European, national, sectoral and local) and in different contexts (in public, private and voluntary sectors; in education and training and in labour market services). The ambition and purpose of the guidelines is to clarify the conditions for implementing validation, highlighting critical choices to be made by stakeholders at different stages of the process. Validation arrangements must be fit for purpose and designed according to their particular operational context, so the guidelines do not promote a single 'correct solution' but strive to identify relevant actions to create sustainable solutions. The purpose is to clarify choices facing stakeholders when implementing validation arrangements, and point to possible steps to be taken and the implications of these.

A first set of European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning were published jointly by the European Commission and Cedefop in 2009 (Cedefop and European Commission, 2009). Acknowledging the positive reception of these, the Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on validation of non-formal and informal learning ([1]) invited the European Commission – in consultation with Member States and stakeholders – regularly to review the guidelines. The recommendation provides a strong platform for European cooperation in validation of non-formal and informal learning. Member States, education and training institutions, social partners and other relevant stakeholders have been invited to intensify work in this area and, by 2018, put in place appropriate national arrangements allowing individuals to value and make visible the outcomes of learning at work, at home, during leisure time and in voluntary activities.

The recommendation identifies a few critical issues, both political and practical, which have to be addressed for validation to become fully integrated and accepted nationally. To add detail and value to the recommendation, the revised guidelines closely mirror and are structured according to the themes it promotes, with detailed guidelines for each. The themes identified by the recommendation should not be read in isolation but as building blocks which, when combined, can provide the basis for a coherent approach to validating non-formal and informal learning. The following questions, linked to each theme, are crucial.

([1]) Council of the EU, 2012. Hereafter, the recommendation.

Key questions on the implementation of validation

- Has the purpose of the validation initiative been clarified (Section 2.1)?
- How does the validation initiative respond to the interests of the individual citizen (Section 2.2)?
- Have steps been taken to coordinate and target guidance and counselling services (Section 3.1)?
- Are mechanisms for coordination of relevant stakeholders in place, to avoid fragmentation and ensure a coherent approach (Section 3.2)?
- Are validation arrangements linked to national qualifications frameworks (Section 3.3) and how does this impact transparency and access?
- Do the outcomes of validation refer to the same or equivalent standards as those used for formal education (Section 3.4) and how does this affect its value and currency?
- Are validation arrangements linked to quality assurance arrangements (Section 3.5) and how does this influence trust and credibility?
- What steps have been taken to strengthen the professional competences of validation practitioners (Section 3.6)?
- What is the role of validation in education and training systems (Section 4.1); in relation to the labour market (Sections 4.2 and 4.3); and in the voluntary sector (Section 4.4)?
- What tools and instruments can be used (and combined) for identification, documentation and assessment of learning (Chapter 5)?

These themes are discussed in more detail in the following chapters, allowing for identification of issues to be considered by those involved in developing and implementing validation across Europe.

The current printed version of the guidelines does not, for reason of length, contain practice examples. These will be made available in the electronic version of these guidelines on the Cedefop web page ([2]). This extended version will contain links to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning and provide detailed examples related to the issues dealt with by the guidelines. This will allow the guidelines and the inventory to act together as an integrated tool directly supporting the work of policy-makers and practitioners.

([2]) Cedefop web page: http://cedefop.europe.eu/validation. Events and projects: *validation of non-formal and informal learning*: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning [accessed 11.11.2015].

CHAPTER 2

Basic validation features

> An important purpose of the recommendation has been to identify the essential features of validation. It defines validation as 'a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard' (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 5).

Validation is, first, about making visible the diverse and rich learning of individuals. This learning frequently takes place outside formal education and training – at home, in the workplace or through leisure time-activities – and is frequently overlooked and ignored. Validation is, second, about attributing value to the learning of individuals, irrespective of the context in which this learning took place. Going through validation helps a learner to 'exchange' the outcomes non-formal and informal learning for future learning or employment opportunities. The process must generate trust, notably by demonstrating that requirements of reliability, validity and quality assurance have been met. These elements of visibility and value will always have to be taken into account when designing validation arrangements, although in different ways and combinations.

2.1. The four phases of validation

The above definition does not limit validation to a particular institutional context. While it is most commonly found within education and training, making it possible for individuals to acquire a formal qualification on the basis of non-formal and informal learning, validation is also carried out by several institutions and stakeholders outside education and training: labour market authorities, economic sectors, enterprises and voluntary organisations. The multiple outcomes of validation, ranging from formal qualifications to enterprise-internal proofs of acquired competences, are all united through their efforts to increase the visibility and value of the learning taking place outside classrooms. To clarify the basic features of validation, the recommendation identifies four distinct phases: identification; documentation; assessment; and certification.

> - 'Identification of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
> - Documentation of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
> - Assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning;
> - Certification of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.' (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 3, points 2a to 2d).

These phases are mixed and balanced in different ways, reflecting the particular purpose of each validation arrangement. When working towards a formal qualification, the robustness and credibility of the assessment stage are crucial.

In other cases, for example in relation to voluntary work, more emphasis is given to identification and documentation, less to formal assessment and certification. However, the four phases are likely to be present in all validation arrangements.

The purpose of validation is to produce proof of learning, potentially to be exchanged into future learning and/or work. This requires identification, documentation and assessment of the learning in question to refer to an agreed and transparent reference point or standard. In validation for formal qualifications, official standards used by the education and training system/institution will largely define the requirements of the validation process. In other settings, as when mapping competences in enterprises, internal and less formal reference points will be used. While the same elements of identification, documentation, assessment and certification will be found in both cases, their relative 'weighting' differs significantly. Overall, the extent to which validation process outcomes can be transferred and exchanged very much depends on the extent to which the resulting document, portfolio, certificate or qualification is trusted by external parties and stakeholders, which reflects the way the four phases have been designed and carried out.

Validation arrangements need to be presented in a way that clarifies their main purpose and allows individuals to choose the form best suited to their particular needs. A person not interested in acquiring a formal qualification should be able to opt for a solution giving more emphasis to identification and documentation phases. Since validation has been found to influence positively individuals' self-awareness and self-esteem, it should be about individual choice: arrangements must be designed to allow the individual to opt for the most cost-efficient solutions, possibly for limited documentation rather than full, formal certification.

Key questions on the basic features of validation

It is crucial to distinguish between the different purposes served by validation and the different phases involved. The following questions provide a starting point for this clarification:

- has the purpose of the validation been clearly defined and communicated?
- have the different phases of the validation process been clearly defined and communicated to the individual candidates?

2.1.1. **Identification**

Validation necessarily starts with the identification of knowledge, skills and competence acquired and is where the individual becomes increasingly aware of prior achievements. This stage is crucial as learning outcomes differ from person to person and will have been acquired in various contexts: at home, during work or through voluntary activities. For many, discovery and increased awareness of own capabilities is a valuable outcome of the process.

Identifying this non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning is a considerable methodological challenge. Methods and approaches must be 'open to the unexpected' and not be designed in ways which narrow down the range of knowledge, skills and competences that may be considered. While the identification phase in some countries is supported by the use of standardised ICT tools allowing self-assessment, this stage will frequently require active involvement of advisers and counsellors able to enter into a dialogue with the candidate and direct him/her to appropriate options and tools. In this initial phase the individual must be made aware of the costs and benefits of validation, compared to further education and training. If validation is the preferred option, the appropriate form has to be chosen. While ICT-based tools may reach more people and can be cheaper to use, due to their standardised character, they can fail to identify and value the particular combination of skills and competences acquired by an individual. Using interviews and dialogue-based approaches can be more costly but potentially of greater value to the candidate (see also Chapter 5).

Key questions on identification

For the identification phase, the following questions need to be asked:

- which procedures and tools support identification?
- how are standardised and dialogue-based identification approaches mixed and balanced?
- how is guidance and counselling supporting and integrated into the identification phase?

2.1.2. **Documentation**

Documentation will normally follow the identification stage and involves provision of evidence of the learning outcomes acquired. This can be carried out through the 'building' of a portfolio that tends to include a CV and a career history of the individual, with documents and/or work samples that attest to their learning achievements. Validation needs to be open to various evidence types, ranging from written documents to work samples and demonstrations of practice (Chapter 5). This evidence must provide sufficient insight into the learning outcomes acquired: simply listing job-titles or positions will not be enough. The portability of evidence is crucial and requires some degree of coordination at national and European level. A situation where every validation provider

– at local, regional, sectoral, national and European level – operates with different (and competing) documentation formats will inevitably make it difficult for the individual citizen to present and get acceptance for his or her acquired skills and competences. Common formats for the presentation of learning experiences, as demonstrated by Europass ([3]), can aid this transfer and promote better understanding of these outcomes. The gradual shift to learning outcomes currently taking place across Europe may support overall transparency and comparability as it (gradually) promotes a common way of expressing knowledge, skills and competences across different economic sectors and education and training qualifications. In some countries, identification and documentation are grouped together, viewed as one stage of collecting evidence to build the dossier that will be assessed by an external evaluator.

Key questions on documentation

For the documentation phase, the following questions need to be asked:
- what criteria are used for admitting evidence into the process?
- what formats are used for documenting non-formal and informal learning?
- to what extent do existing documentation formats support the transfer and portability of acquired knowledge, skills and competences?

2.1.3. **Assessment**

Assessment is normally referred to as the stage in which an individual's learning outcomes are compared against specific reference points and/or standards.

This can imply evaluation of written and documentary evidence but might also involve evaluation of other forms of evidence. Assessment is crucial to the overall credibility of validation of non-formal and informal learning. In some cases, certificates based on validation are perceived as inferior to those awarded by traditional courses and programmes. To counter such perceptions, which in some cases reflect the relative novelty of validation, tools and processes must be presented in as transparent a way as possible. Building mutual trust is closely linked to the existence of robust quality assurance arrangements ensuring that all phases of validation, including assessment, are open to critical scrutiny.

This phase depends on the standard or reference point used (see also Section 3.4). The shift to learning-outcomes-based standards is generally considered to benefit validation. Focusing on what a learner knows, understands and is able to do, a learning-outcomes-based assessment is not obliged to consider particular input-factors (such as duration or location of learning). This makes it easier to reflect and respect individual variation in learning careers. Many of the tools and methods used for assessing non-formal and informal learning will be based on, or similar to, those used in formal education and training. As validation is about capturing diverse individual learning experiences,

([3]) Cedefop: *Europass*: http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/home [accessed 11.11.2015].

assessment tools need to be designed to capture and assess the learning specific to each individual and the context in which this learning took place. This is different from formal learning where assessment tools can be applied across larger cohorts of students and where less priority is given to the particular needs of subgroups or individuals. The individual specificity of learning outcomes concerned may require more than one tool, for example, a combination of written tests and practical challenges. Tools will frequently need to apply practical demonstrations, simulations or gathering of evidence from past practices.

Key questions on assessment

For the assessment phase, the following questions need to be asked:

- are assessment tools adapted to the individual's needs and characteristics?
- to what extent have assessment tools been chosen according to their reliability and/or validity?
- which reference point (standard) is being used and how suitable is this for capturing the individual variation characterising non-formal and informal learning?
- have the conditions for assessment been clearly defined and communicated in terms of procedure, tools and evaluation/assessment standards:
  – to candidates?
  – to employers and education institutions?

2.1.4. **Certification**

The final phase of validation is linked to the certification – and final valuing – of the learning identified, documented and assessed. This can take different forms, but is commonly the award of a formal qualification (or part-qualification). In enterprises or economic sectors, certification may also involve issuing a licence allowing the individual to carry out specific tasks. Whatever the case, validation reaching the stage of certification requires a summative assessment officially confirming the achievement of learning outcomes against a specified standard. It is crucial that this process is managed by a credible authority or organisation. The value – or the currency – of a certificate or qualification acquired through validation largely depends on the legitimacy of the awarding body or authority. The use of summative approaches (see also Section 5.1) for validating non-formal and informal learning needs to be strongly linked – preferably integrated – into national qualifications systems (Section 3.3). Some countries have chosen to issue separate certificates or qualifications for non-formal and informal learning. While this might be appropriate in some settings, there is risk of creating A and B certificates where those resulting from validation are seen as inferior.

Establishing validation of non-formal and informal learning as a normal route to

qualifications – in parallel to the traditional route of formal education and training courses and programmes – could imply a legal right to validation. Such a right, as already found in some European countries, would guarantee access to a qualification, but not specify the learning path on which it is based. This might take several forms and will depend on the constraints and opportunities offered by the national legal and political context.

Key questions on certification

For the certification stage, the following questions need to be asked:

- how is the credibility of the authority/awarding body assured?
- to what extent can the outcomes of validation (documents, portfolios, certificates, etc.) be exchanged into further education, job opportunities?

2.2. The centrality of the individual

> The 2012 recommendation underlines that the individual must be at the focus of validation arrangements: '[the] arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to (a) have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources; (b) obtain a full qualification, or, where applicable, part qualification, on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences' (Council of the EU, 2012, p. 3, point 1, emphasis added).

Validation arrangements should enable the individual to acquire a qualification (or part of it) and/or to make visible (to him/herself and to others) their knowledge, skills and competences. Validation aims at empowering the individual and can serve as a tool for providing second chance opportunities to disadvantaged individuals. Validation is (normally) voluntary and it is up to the individual to take the first step and decide whether she or he wants to enter the process of identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning. The individual should be able to take control of the process and decide at what stage to end it. However, the individual has to receive adequate information and guidance not only through the entire process, but also before the decision to seek validation is taken. Candidates need to know what to expect, which requirements to meet and what evidence to provide. It is also necessary to inform individuals of the costs and benefits of validation, allowing them to make informed decisions on whether to proceed or not.

To be trustworthy, validation arrangements have to comply with standard individual data

protection and privacy rights, ensuring strict confidentiality and fair treatment. For this to happen, and to avoid conflict of interests, a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities is necessary. Those who manage the validation process must not enter into personal deliberations beyond a point which makes the individual vulnerable or uncomfortable.

As the main owner and actor of the validation process, the individual's privacy must be assured, protected and respected. The results of validation normally remain the property of the individual, though when validation is carried out by private bodies and/or enterprises this might not be the case. Issues of fairness, privacy and confidentially should also be respected.

Key questions on individuals' rights and obligations

The individual is at the focus of validation processes and his or her rights and obligations must be treated with care and respect. The following questions provide a starting point:

- is the privacy and personal integrity of the candidates protected throughout the validation process?
- have explicit procedures been put in place to guarantee confidentiality?
- have ethical standards been developed and applied?
- are the outcomes of the process the exclusive property of the candidate?
- if not, what are the implications?
- what arrangements have been put in place to guarantee fair and equal treatment?

CHAPTER 3

Conditions for developing and implementing validation

Referring to the themes of the recommendation, the following sections seek to clarify the main conditions for introducing high quality and trusted validation arrangements.

3.1. Information, guidance and counselling

> The recommendation pays particular attention to the role of guidance and counselling in taking forward validation. Member States should ensure within validation arrangements 'information and guidance on the benefits of, and opportunities for validation, as well as on the relevant procedures, are available to individuals and organisations' and 'the validation of non-formal and informal learning is supported by appropriate guidance and counselling and is readily accessible' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, points 3b and 3e).

National experience underlines the importance of providing impartial and comprehensive information, guidance and counselling throughout the entire validation process. Experiences also underline the importance of coordination: relevant information and advice must be offered close to where people live, work, and study and when they need it. Individuals need to be informed on the costs and benefits of validation, notably on how the process can influence progress in learning and employment. Guidance and counselling is of particular importance for reaching disadvantaged groups and for releasing their inherent potential. Existing guidance methods and tools devised to respond to the identified needs of specific target groups based on age, employment situation, socioeconomic background or migrant status can be incorporated in validation initiatives to assist in the definition of the purpose of the process. Box 1 lists the main areas where information and advice is needed.

Box 1. **Information to be provided to individuals**

Candidates will need information and advice on the following aspects:

- existing alternative validation forms available (formative as well as summative);
- timelines for validation;
- costs;

- procedure;
- forms of evidence of learning outcomes;
- presentation of evidence;
- requirements for evidence;
- standards to be applied;
- assessment and how best to approach the process;
- support available;
- appeal procedures;
- results and outcomes of the validation process.

Source: Based on Cedefop and European Commission, 2009.

Guidance and counselling for validation share common features with similar services for other purposes. Career guidance, for example, is commonly seen as a continuous process enabling citizens at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests. This guidance helps them to reach decisions relevant to their future learning and employment, making better use of their (sometimes invisible) inherent capacities and potential. This form of guidance includes a range of activities such as provision of information, counselling, mentoring and training in career management skills. Experience from existing guidance practices can often be directly applied throughout the process, particularly in initial identification and documentation. Guidance and counselling is important for reaching disadvantaged groups and releasing their inherent potential. Existing guidance methods and tools devised to respond to the identified needs of specific target groups based on age, employment situation, socioeconomic background or migrant status can be used in validation initiatives to assist in defining validation purpose.

While it is possible to build on general experiences from existing guidance and counselling services, translation of these experiences into validation requires increased coordination. Since guidance can originate from a range of services and stakeholders (education and training, employment services, local administration, voluntary sector organisations) cross-sector coordination becomes fundamental. Linking guidance and validation services requires communication and cooperation between sectors and institutions, notably between career guidance by employment (and social) services and lifelong learning advice from education and training institutions. Adequate guidance and counselling needs to focus on all the phases referred to in Chapter 2 but pay particular attention to identification and documentation phases. While strengthening communication and coordination is essential for linking validation and guidance, countries might opt for different ways of achieving this (see also Section 3.2), potentially combining the following approaches:

(a) one organisation with central responsibility for provision of guidance and counselling for validation;
(b) coordinated networks of validation-relevant guidance, involving employment, social, and education and training services;
(c) guidance and counselling services from occupation sectors, such as offered by chambers of commerce and industry;
(d) guidance and counselling services from the voluntary sector; such as youth and non-formal education.

Different approaches vary in strengths and weaknesses and will normally have to be combined. The identification of one central organisation to mobilise and coordinate regional, local and sectoral networking needs to be carefully considered, particularly in the context of developing a national strategy on validation.

The question of coordination also depends on the format used for delivering guidance and counselling. Countries tend to combine web-based delivery and face-to-face provision. Web-based approaches might also include self-assessment tools enabling individuals to take a first step towards validation. Face-to-face provision might be provided on a one-to-one basis or in groups and will directly depend on the existence of local and regional guidance services and professionals.

Linking validation and guidance facilitates better use of resources. Coordination and communication between the bodies involved in validation and guidance can reduce procedural costs and add value to service provision. More coordinated guidance and validation can also contribute to changing mind-sets and reducing/removing prejudices over the added value of validation.

Key questions on information, guidance and counseling

The following questions provide a starting point when considering delivery of guidance and counselling for validation:

- to what extent can existing career guidance and counselling services, for example in education and training, labour market and social services, be mobilised to provide information and advice on validation?
- how can existing career guidance and counselling service networking be improved to address all potential target groups for validation?
- what kind of coordination mechanism is used to ensure that candidates are served where they live, study and work?
- how can public and private stakeholders cooperate to offer better information and advice on validation?
- are guidance services providing information on the costs and benefits of validation?

3.2. Stakeholder coordination

> The recommendation emphasises the importance of coordination of and appropriate information on validation. The Member States are invited to 'promote the involvement in the development and implementation of the elements and principles […] of all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry, commerce and skilled crafts, national entities involved in the process of recognition of professional qualifications, employment services, youth organisations, youth workers, education and training providers, and civil society organisations'. The Member States are furthermore called to 'promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, points 4 and 5).

Validation is a complex process that requires the involvement of many different actors with different responsibilities and functions. Communication and coordination are necessary to develop and implement guidance services able to serve and support validation. The 2014 update of the European inventory ([4]) demonstrates significant differences in the way validation is organised in different contexts and settings (see also Chapter 4). Validation in the different education and training sectors, for example, varies considerably from validation related to labour market services, in enterprises and in the voluntary sector. Bringing together the different stakeholders within a coordinated (national) strategy is challenging and has so far been addressed differently across countries. While some countries are introducing new legislation and new governance arrangements to support validation, others still lack a national strategy in this area, making it difficult to identify and mobilise stakeholders willing to drive validation policy at national level.

While the situation will vary between countries, main stakeholders can be identified quite easily. Table 1 provides a starting point for such an analysis eventually to be carried out at national, regional, sectoral and local levels.

([4]) Cedefop: Validation of non-formal and informal learning: *European inventory on validation: 2014 update*: http:www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory [accessed 11.11.2015].

Table 1. **Validation and stakeholders**

	Who is involved?	Example of main functions
European stakeholders	• EU Commission and Council • EU agencies, Cedefop and the European Training Foundation • European programmes • European social funds • European social partner organisations • European employers • European projects • European non-governmental organisations • European youth organisations	• provide common guidelines • provide common EU tools for validation • support transparency and portability • support policy learning and best practices transfer
Public national stakeholders	• ministries (of education, labour, etc.) • education, training and qualification authorities • national projects • public employment services • social services • social partners	• provide adequate legislation • establish procedures • determine role and responsibilities • coordinate institutional actors • provide national guidelines • establish quality assurance mechanisms
Public regional and local stakeholders	• regional public authorities in education and training, labour and social services, etc. • local public authorities in education, employment and social services • regional and local projects	• provide support to institutions • establish procedures • adapt guidelines to local environment • coordinate among regional actors • provide information and support • carry out identification, documentation, assessment and certification
Education and training institutions	• vocational schools • universities • private education institutions • assessment centres and specialist recognition centres • projects	• carry out assessment and certification • provide support for identification and documentation, including information and guidance • support individuals

	Who is involved?	Example of main functions
Business sector	• enterprises • sector or branch associations • trade unions • employer organisations • chambers of commerce and industry • projects	• provide information • carry out assessment and certification • carry out identification and documentation of competences
Voluntary sector	• non-governmental organisations • projects	• provide information and guidance • carry out assessment and certification • carry out identification and documentation of competences

Source: Authors.

This complexity is reflected in national validation arrangements. The 2014 inventory shows that few countries have put in place a single national-level organisation in charge of validation. In most, responsibility for validation is attributed to several national organisations, normally following the traditional division of public services (education, employment, etc.). Given the complex nature of validation, countries need to reflect on their own institutional framework and the overall division of roles and tasks to permit synergies. Working towards better coordination of validation arrangements requires focus on several aspects:

(a) the legal framework matters. The existence of different, possibly competing, legal systems may hinder developments. The introduction of centralised solutions, however, has to be balanced with the need to develop targeted arrangements for specific areas and stakeholders;

(b) attention must be paid to national coordination. Most countries have no single coordinating organisation for validation; instead, responsibility is shared across several ministries, or other national authorities, making validation a transversal issue. Countries need to consider whether a coordinating organisation should be identified and appointed;

(c) increased attention should be paid to networking within and across sectors where validation is currently developed and implemented. National strategies on validation must address these networking issues explicitly, aiming at visible, well-known, reliable and cost-efficient validation services close to where people live, learn and work;

(d) it is important to reflect on the overall 'balance' of validation arrangements. The 2014 inventory shows that education and training institutions currently dominate. While positive in terms of opening up an alternative route to formal qualifications, this dominance should not overshadow the potentially important role to be played by validation for other purposes, for example supporting career development and employability;

(e) many countries tend to define (and limit) validation systems with reference to the needs of particular groups, for example the unemployed, low-qualified and migrants. While important and relevant, this (limited) focus needs to be balanced with the

broader potential of validation, as a way to make visible and value non-formal and informal learning in general.

Key questions on coordination of stakeholders

Coordination of validation must primarily take place at national level, addressing the complex division of roles and responsibilities between public, voluntary sector and private stakeholders. The following questions can be asked:

- what validation arrangements exist and what is their legal and political basis?
- which stakeholders are involved?
- have single or multiple legal framework(s) been put in place?
- what administrative processes are in place (contact and information procedures, recording and monitoring of results, shared quality assurance arrangements)?
- how are stakeholders at different levels related to each other and networking?
- to what extent is validation reaching citizens where they live, work
- and study: how can coordination improve current situation?
- who is responsible for coordination at regional and local levels?

3.3. Links to national qualifications systems and frameworks

The recommendation stresses the importance of linking validation arrangements to national qualifications systems and frameworks: Member States should enable individuals to 'obtain a full qualification or, where applicable, part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 1b). They should ensure that 'validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the European qualifications framework' (ibid. point 3a), that 'synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system such as ECTS and ECVET' (ibid. p. 4, point 3j). They should also ensure that 'education and training providers […] facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings.' (ibid., point 4b).

Development of validation of non-formal and informal learning and of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) share a common objective: enabling individuals to make progress in

their learning careers based on learning outcomes achieved, not on duration and location of a particular learning programme.

The concept of a national qualifications system is now widely understood 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 policies 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. Arrangements for validation are an important and integrated part of these qualifications systems. By integrating, politically and legally, the validation of non-formal or informal learning with the national qualifications system, the validation aspect becomes more transparent through a clearer legal status, governance and financing. Most important, validation gives practical support to progression between different levels and types of education and training. Integration of validation into the national qualification system requires that qualifications are opened up to a broader set of learning pathways and that validation arrangements are established as an accepted and normal route to a certificate or qualification. This requires a shift to learning outcomes, reducing emphasis on particular learning forms and approaches.

As part of modernising their national qualifications systems, all EU Member States are now developing and implementing learning-outcomes-based NQFs; most are aiming for comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualification. The design of NQFs and learning-outcomes-based qualifications provides an opportunity to turn validation into an accepted and mainstream route to qualifications. An objective shared by most NQFs is better relation between different qualifications, aiding progression. This can be accomplished by reducing barriers to transfer and accumulation of learning achievements. Methods and systems for validating non-formal and informal learning, focusing on what has actually been achieved, contribute directly to this objective. If introduced systematically, validation will not only open up qualifications to a broader set of learning experiences but also make it easier for individuals to progress across institutional, sectoral and national borders.

Ensuring the integration of validation and NQFs may promote overall flexibility of education and training. This is particularly the case if validation supports exemption from parts of a programme to avoid repeating learning already achieved: this could aid progression and signal that non-formal and informal learning is taken serious by education and training institutions. The savings in money and time will be significant if vertical (between levels) and horizontal (between subjects and areas) progression is made possible.

In developing NQFs it is important to consider how a more systematic integration of validation and credit transfer arrangements can be achieved. Development of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) has similar functions (identification, documentation, assessment and certification) to those being pursued by validation and credit arrangements. Given that validation arrangements involve putting in place extensive practical arrangements, separate development of similar arrangements for credit purposes could prove negative.

The emerging NQF can be used to influence the way standards are formulated and used. Until recently, the description of national qualifications levels have been implicit and based on duration and location of education and training programmes. The rapid

development and implementation of NQFs can be used to promote the development of explicit, coherent, learning-outcomes-based standards for qualifications that could accommodate outcomes of learning in non-formal and informal settings.

Key questions on national qualifications systems and frameworks

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are now being implemented across Europe. These frameworks may aid introduction and integration of validation. The following questions point to some key issues to be addressed:

- are validation arrangements (all, only some) seen as an integrated part of the national qualifications system and as a normal route to qualifications?
- what is the relationship between validation and the NQF?
- to what extent can validation be used to support progression between all types and levels of qualifications in the NQF?
- is there a link between validation and (possible) credit transfer and accumulation arrangements?

3.4. Standards and learning outcomes

> The recommendation asks Member States to assure that 'qualifications or, where applicable, parts of qualifications obtained by means of the validation of non-formal and informal learning experiences comply with agreed standards that are either the same as, or equivalent to, the standards for qualifications obtained through formal education programmes'
> (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 3h).

Awarding a certificate on the basis of non-formal and informal learning requires an agreed reference point, for example in the form of an official qualifications standard, an occupational standard or an approved education programme or curriculum. While it is possible to envisage the identification and documentation phases of validation – such as skills audits – to be carried out without a formalised standard, assessment and certification aiming for a qualification need to be carried out to an agreed and approved standard.

An argument against awarding qualifications based on non-formal and informal learning is that they are inferior in quality to those delivered by formal education and training. This scepticism is partly inked to the role played by standards in the validation process:

(a) lack of visible standards; it is not clear to the users which standard is applied;
(b) too weak standards; main stakeholders have not been involved in defining standards;
(c) outdated standards: not seen as relevant;
(d) different standards used for formal education and training and for validation; implicitly signalling differences in value and status of the resulting certificate or qualification.

The standard is thus crucially important to validation and the resulting outcomes. Qualifications – and validation of non-formal and informal learning – generally relate to two main categories of standard: occupational and education-training standards ([5]). These two, although not separate entities in all countries, operate according to different logics, reflecting different sets of priorities, motivations and purposes:

(a) occupational standards: following the logic of employment, these standards focus on what people need to do, how they do it, and how well they do it in an occupational context. They exist in all European countries but each nation has its own style of derivation and presentation. Occupational standards form a bridge between the labour market and education because educational standards (syllabuses and pedagogies) can be developed from them;

(b) education/training standards: following the logic of education and training, these standards focus on what people need to learn, how they learn it, and how the quality and content of learning are assessed. Traditionally these standards have been formulated in terms of input (subject, syllabus, teaching methods, process and assessment) but the ongoing shift to learning outcomes in most European countries means that educational standards increasingly apply principles typically found in occupational standards.

Many approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning tend to relate to the second category of standards, those designed specifically for education and training. The critical question is whether these standards are defined through the specification of teaching input or learning outcomes? A standard referring to the specific inputs of a particular learning context can make it difficult to value learning in a different context and according to a different logic. A learning-outcomes-based standard – expressing what a candidate is expected to know, and be able to do – usually provides better reference for validation, implicitly acknowledging that the same outcome can be reached in various ways. Using learning outcomes, however, provides no guarantee of success. If written too narrowly, important facets of the individual learning experience may be lost; if written in too general a way, assessment may lose orientation and result in lack of consistency and reliability. The writing of learning-outcomes-based standards also requires attention to be paid to the balance between job/task-specific and transversal skills and competences.

Experience from validation of non-formal and informal learning may be seen as providing important feedback to standards used in the qualifications system, particularly if this can influence dialogue between those involved in defining and reviewing the standards. The initial writing of standards, as well as their continuous review and renewal, can draw on the experiences gained from validation.

([5]) Alongside occupational and educational standards, considered as primarily concerned with the content (or knowledge, skills and competence) of learning, some countries (e.g. the UK) operate with standards that apply specifically to the process of assessment, validation and certification of learning.

Key questions on national qualifications systems and frameworks

- Do qualifications awarded on the basis of non-formal and informal learning refer to the same or equivalent standards as those used for formal education and training?
- If not, which other standards are used and how do they relate to formal standards?
- Are standards written in learning outcomes?
- If not, what are the implications for validation?
- Who developed the standards and in reference to which sources (education or occupation)?
- Are there feedback mechanisms in place to ensure review and renewal of standards used for validation?

3.5. Quality assurance

> The recommendation asks Member States to assure that 'transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 3f).

Quality assurance in validation must be systematic, take place on a continuous basis and be an integrated part of the process:

(a) systematic quality improvement requires an explicit and agreed quality strategy;
(b) a system for feedback from users/customers should always be considered;
(c) a quality plan/strategy must be known to the public, including candidates;
(d) a quality/plan strategy can prepare the ground for external quality assessment and review.

The overall quality of validation depends on a range of factors reflecting the character and complexity of the process. Ensuring and improving quality is complex but needs to be applied following the principles of the quality circle: plan, do, check and change.

While the specific form of the quality process will vary between countries and contexts, the following issues have to be considered when developing a quality strategy for validation:

(a) fitness for purpose is of critical importance. There are many methods for judging evidence of learning: the choice of method (or combination of methods) must be sensitive to the learning form and context;
(b) the safety, security, confidentiality and consistency of the process must be ensured and continuously improved. The candidate's initial and continuing engagement with the process, from identification to certification, must not be compromised by lack of trust, which can result in reduced motivation to proceed;

(c) the process must be reliable, and lead to trusted results. The evidence documented for an individual must be valid and be directly related to the standards used for validation. The candidate must feel confident that interpretation of evidence and standards is thorough and not based on arbitrary judgements;
(d) standards are the basis of measuring learning outcomes and validation. They must exist in a clear and unambiguous form that the key stakeholders support. Systematic quality assurance of standards, and how these are defined and reviewed, is crucial to generate reliability, validity, consistency and trust;
(e) quality assurance arrangements should support the long-term implementation of validation. Sustainability is a must for processes to be trusted. Going through validation is often expensive for individuals and it is important to put in place permanent arrangements which are known to, and valued in, society at large and/or in the particular sector.

Validation need to be supported by transparent quality assurance arrangements addressing all phases and features of the process. The visibility and credibility of this quality assurance approach can be supported by adoption of national, regional or sectoral quality codes, as seen in an increasing number of countries.

Key questions on quality assurance of validation

- Have explicit and integrated quality assurance measures been put in place for validation? If existing:
  – do these measures reflect an explicit and agreed quality strategy?
  – how does the quality strategy address key objectives like reliability, validity and credibility of the process?
  – who participated in defining this quality strategy?
  – who are involved, at different levels, in implementing this quality strategy?
- How are quality assurance arrangements divided between internal and external assurance and control?
- Are processes and outcomes being monitored and has a system for feedback from users/customers been put in place?

3.6. Professional competences of practitioners

> The recommendation maintains that 'provision is made for the development of the professional competences of staff involved in the validation process across all relevant sectors' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 3g).

Trust in validation largely depends on the work carried out by 'front-line' practitioners and professionals directly involved with validation candidates at different stages of the

process. 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 process. Such professionals should be equipped not only with validation competences but also soft skills such as intercultural capacity. This is essential in reaching out to prospective candidates.

Existing national data show that guidance and counselling is crucial to the success of validation processes (see also Section 4.1). The work of a counsellor starts with the process of reaching out to engage potential candidates for validation, then supporting the candidate in his or her preparation for assessment; it continues by guiding the candidate after the assessment decision. An important part of the role is to work with the candidate to appraise the breadth and depth of evidence of learning (helping to develop self-awareness). Some would refer to this as competence mapping (Section 5.2), pointing to the critical role of counsellors in skills audits and enterprise internal competence mapping.

To fulfil this role, the counsellor must have clear understanding of the validation context. If the candidate aims for a formal qualification, the counsellor should be aware of the relevant standards and should be able to advise on whether existing evidence is sufficient. The counsellor has to help prepare for assessment, informing the candidate of procedures, how to present evidence of learning, respond to questions, expectations in terms of behaviour, and possible outcomes. This also requires the counsellor to have a thorough knowledge of the assessment process. A distinctive part of the role is independence from the assessment process and ability to offer impartial advice.

Box 2. **Key knowledge and skills of counsellors**

- Thorough knowledge of the validation process.
- Thorough knowledge of the education system.
- Capacity to rephrase learning experience into learning outcomes that can be matched with existing standards.
- Understanding of the labour market.
- A list of contacts (experts) to answer specific technical questions (social partners and other sector experts).

Source: Authors.

The job of an assessor is to seek, review and check evidence of an individual's learning and judge what meets specific standards. Assessors must be familiar with standards and the potentially useful assessment methods for referencing evidence against standards. They should be acknowledged as professionals in their sector, leading to trust and credibility in the assessment process itself. The authenticity of the assessment situation is likely to be improved when sectoral experts can use an assessment instrument or judge the outcomes of its use. Assessors should not be linked to the candidate or their work or social life in any way. The credibility of the validation process depends on the credibility – and neutrality – of the assessor.

Evidence from the 2014 inventory shows that assessor qualifications and experience

are a key element in the quality assurance of validation projects. Assessors are generally required to have a fixed number of years of experience in the respective field; five years is common and assessors could be recently retired professionals, senior managers in the field, expert representatives of the third sector, and social partners or teachers in the specific field, with direct experience in the sector. Training in the validation procedure is also required. Networks of assessors should be set up – where and when possible – to assure professional development and coherent practices.

Box 3. **Key knowledge and skills of assessors**

- Be familiar with the validation process (validity and reliability).
- Have experience in the specific field of work.
- Have no personal interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest).
- Be familiar with different assessment methodologies.
- Be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates.
- Be 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 knowledgeable about quality assurance mechanisms.
- Operate according to a code of conduct.

Source: Authors.

The third key group of practitioners are the managers of the validation process. They 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 financial management. Whether privately or publicly funded, minimising costs and creating a sustainable operation is challenging.

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; the external observer oversees 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. S/he might not necessarily be expert in the given profession/activity, but needs to be trained in quality assurance procedures. The observer can be considered a source for advice and operate as an external auditor, who does not have a regular presence in the process.

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

(a) responsible people in public bodies that fund the process;

(b) responsible people in public bodies that have agreed a policy for validation;
(c) managers of human resources for private companies;
(d) voluntary sector actors that seek engagement of groups of individuals in learning and working;
(e) education services in the formal sector.

Key questions on validation practitioners

- What requirements, if any, have been set for:
  – counsellors and guidance personnel?
  – assessors?
  – other practitioners involved with validation?
- Is there a strategy in place for the professional development of these practitioners?
- Is the professional development of validation professionals coordinated between different sectors and arrangements?
- Can a community of practice for validation professionals be developed, supporting networking and professional developments?

CHAPTER 4

Validation contexts

In line with the messages of the 2012 recommendation on validating non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop and European Commission, 2009), the following sections address the different validation settings/contexts and the challenges in each.

4.1. Validation in education and training

> The recommendation recognises the key-role played by education and training institutions in taking forward validation: 'education and training providers should facilitate access to formal education and training on the basis of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal settings and, if appropriate and possible, award exemptions and/or credits for relevant learning outcomes acquired in such settings' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, point 4b).

The 2014 inventory ([6]) shows that education and training is still the key promoter of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe and that ministries of education usually play a key promotion and coordinating role. In some cases validation is seen as exclusively linked to education and training, potentially limiting its role in, for example, enterprises and the voluntary sector.

The VET sector has been a main proponent of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe. Its close relationship to the labour market and strong traditions in work-based learning has aided validation. Widespread use of learning outcomes and competence-based standards has also supported developments in VET and standards are normally aligned with occupational standards that are easier to relate to previous work experience. It is reasonable to expect that the VET sector will continue to play an important role in validation.

Validation is particularly important to adult education and training and as a way to support lifelong learning. The 25 to 45 age group is mostly the main user of validation, indicating that these arrangements play an important role in aiding transitions from employment to education and back. In many countries, adult education providers play a key role in implementation. Validation is far less common in relation to higher education qualifications than VET. Higher education institutions are normally more autonomous and determine the scope and possibilities for validation on their own. The Bologna process

([6]) Cedefop: Validation of non-formal and informal learning: *European inventory on validation: 2014 update*: http:/www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory [accessed 11.11.2015].

has put pressure on creating methods and possibilities for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The 2014 inventory shows an increase in recent years, especially in access to university based on validation. Higher education institutions have generally made limited use of validation for awarding exemptions to parts of a learning programme and rarely have full qualifications been awarded in this way. However, some of these processes are embedded into recognition of prior formal education and are ill prepared for learning acquired outside formal institutions. Further use of the learning outcomes approach, both for defining and describing programmes and as an element in European credit transfer system (ECTS), might increase the possibilities for validation on a longer-term basis.

The use of validation in the context of initial, general education is normally limited. One difficulty is that few general educational programmes are described in terms of learning outcomes. The 'take-up' of validation in general education will in addition be linked to the level of information, legal rights and appropriate provisions and services. In many instances, validation of non-formal and informal learning for general education is linked to adult education, to support those lacking formal qualification at this level.

Validation must be designed according to the needs and interests of individual learners, not only according to the needs and interests of particular institutions and systems.

Key questions on validation in and for education and training

The following questions are important when addressing validation in the context of education and training:

- is validation offered in all parts of the education and training system?
- do validation arrangements in the different parts of the education and training system build on similar or differing principles?
- can validation arrangements in the different parts of education and training 'work together' and aid progress across types and levels of education?
- is there a link between validation and credit transfer arrangements?

4.1.1. Validation and open education resources

The recommendation states that the knowledge skills and competences acquired through open educational resources should be addressed by validation arrangements: 'The arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning [which] enable individuals to have knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated, including, where applicable, through open educational resources' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 1).

The reference to open educational resources (OERs) in the recommendation reflects the rapid expansion of online learning opportunities, particularly promoted by higher education institutions. OERs are defined in the recommendation as 'digitised materials

offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research; it includes learning content, software tools to develop, use and distribute content, and implementation resources such as open licences; OER also refers to accumulated digital assets that can be adjusted and which provide benefits without restricting the possibilities for others to enjoy them' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 5, point d). OER may include '…full courses, course modules, syllabuses, lectures, homework assignments, quizzes, lab and classroom activities, pedagogical materials, games, simulations, and many more resources contained in digital media collections from around the world' ([7]). Massive open online courses (MOOCs) and open courseware are examples of OERs.

OERs are seen as important supplements to traditional education and training programmes, reducing overall cost, increasing accessibility and allowing individuals to follow their own learning pace. MOOCs are seen as a way to deliver high quality (world-class) teaching to a broad group of learners.

For all these reasons it is important to consider how the outcomes of this learning can be appropriately documented and assessed and how current practices on validation can take them into account. Box 4 indicates some issues to be considered when linking validation and OERs.

Box 4. **Possible requirements for validation of OERs**

- Learning carried out through OER must be described in the form of learning outcomes.
- Where the OER brings with it some form of internal credit, for example badges, these must explained and documented in a transparent way encouraging trust.
- Standards and/or reference points underpinning credits or badges must be clearly explained.
- Arrangements for quality assurance underpinning OERs must be transparently presented.
- Methods for assessment/testing must be transparently explained.

Source: Authors.

The outcomes of online learning have to be treated with the same care and degree of scrutiny as any other learning outcomes. Given the inevitable variation in quality of OERs, along with the varying success of learners to adapt to online learning, attention has to be given – at national, European and international level – to documenting, assessing and certifying the outcomes OERs. For them to be considered in validation, transparency is crucial. The learning experienced through OERs needs to be described through learning outcomes. The status of standards and testing arrangements, if these exist, need to be clear and available to aid validation. Web-based platforms that allow for recognition

([7]) London Technology and Innovation (citing JISC): *open educational resources (OERs)*: http://lti.lse.ac.uk/digital-and-information-literacy/OERs.php; Unesco and Commonwealth of Learning (2011) [accessed 11.11.2015].

and assessment of specific skills require careful consideration and need to be compared to existing systems of validation to promote adequate quality assurance and allow for rationalisation of efforts.

Key questions regarding on educational resources

The following questions are important when addressing open educational resources:

- are methods for validating learning outcomes acquired through OERs the same as for learning outcomes acquired in a different way?
- how are internal credits (e.g. badges) considered by validation?

4.2. Validation in enterprises

> The recommendation underlines the importance of pursuing validation at the workplace and recommends to: '[…] promote the involvement in the development and implementation of the elements and principles referred to in points 1 to 4 of all relevant stakeholders, such as employers, trade unions, chambers of industry and commerce and skilled crafts. [Furthermore] to foster participation in this process, employers […] should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4).

The recent publication by Cedefop (2014) on validation in enterprises shows that this is a field of increasing importance.

Box 5. **Benefits of competence assessments in companies**

- 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.

Source: Cedefop: 2014.

However, a significant part of what can be termed competence assessment in enterprises will fall outside the definition of validation offered by the recommendation (Chapter 2). While these activities, for example linked to recruitment and personnel development,

seek to increase the visibility of prior learning, results are often the exclusive property of the employer and cannot be used freely by the individuals. For the individual employee the outcomes of these processes only partly add value to their learning experiences.
A key question for the future is whether the outcomes of company-internal arrangements can be presented in a format which allows them to be used outside enterprises, for example when somebody wants/needs to change jobs or seeks further education and training. Finding a solution to this could be important for the overall development of validation and competence assessment in Europe. Transferability and portability are key issues in this context and may point towards a stronger link between the competence assessments of enterprises and national validation arrangements.

National validation requires active involvement of enterprises. The workplace is a key learning arena and the active involvement of enterprises is critical for further developing national systems for validation. One possible approach would be to promote more systematic intervention at sector or branch level, for example by introducing common competence frameworks and standards, acting as reference points and supporting transfer of skills and competences. The involvement of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) in validation represents a particular challenge, reflecting limited resources and capacities. SMEs face a continuous battle to upgrade skills and competences and would benefit directly from sector-based frameworks supporting validation, contributing to internal human resource developments as well as strengthening the portability of employees' skills and competences. Box 6 suggests possible initiatives to support enterprises in promoting validation.

Box 6. **Cooperation on competence assessment in companies**

- Cooperation needs to be industry- or sector-focused to ensure sufficient homogeneity of tasks and competence requirements.
- Development of common competence standards (based on job requirements), including precise and unambiguous knowledge, skills and competence descriptors will be important.
- Building a pool of qualified assessors in firms through common training and instruction; or independent external assessors if appropriate.
- Standardised and informative documentation of assessment results, also made available to employees;
- Considering the various quality factors identified in this study, including employee participation and involvement.

Source: Cedefop, 2014.

For progress to be made in this area, increased cooperation between enterprises is necessary. Today only a small percentage of companies (Cedefop, 2014) are involved in some form of collaborative initiative. However, evidence indicates that there is significant interest among companies to engage in cooperation on competence assessment, particularly assessments for management positions as well as in certain sectors.

Apart from increasing the transferability of assessment results, cooperation can also make validation and appraisal practices more affordable, especially for SMEs. Forming inter-firm initiatives could be promoted by relevant public and semi-public institutions at national and European levels (governments, social partners, public employment services, associations in the human resources area) through awareness-raising, provision of advice, guidance and training, or also financially.

Key questions on validation in enterprises

The following questions are important when addressing validation in enterprises:

- can competence assessment carried out in enterprises be used outside the enterprise in question?
- to what extent can increased networking support further development of methods and standards for competence assessment?
- how can methods for competence assessment be made better accessible for SMEs?
- how can competence assessment in enterprises be made available for a wider range of employees?
- can there be a stronger link between validation in the public sector and competence assessment in enterprises?

4.3. Skills audit and the labour market

The recommendation states that 'disadvantaged groups, including individuals who are unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, are particularly likely to benefit from the validation arrangements, since validation can increase their participation in lifelong learning and their access to the labour market.' It further states that 'individuals who are unemployed or at risk of unemployment have the opportunity, in accordance with national legislation and specificities, to undergo a 'skills audit' aimed at identifying their knowledge, skills and competences within a reasonable period of time, ideally within six months of an identified need' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, point 3c).

According to the 2014 inventory, the definition and interpretation of 'skills audit' varies among European countries. However, the reasons for developing and implementing skills audits seem to be shared and usually focus on identification and documentation of learning outcomes:

(a) to help individuals to reflect on and become conscious of their actual capabilities (knowledge, skills and competence);
(b) to help the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups – for example low skilled adults and migrants – to develop their careers and increase their employability

prospects;
(c) to provide users with a means of making visible and marketing their skills and competences;
(d) to map needs for further training, considering the importance of matching the individuals' competences with labour market needs.

Some countries have for many years operated systems of bilan de compétence which address the objectives listed above. While evidence produced through the bilan de compétence sometimes can be used towards a formal qualification, this is normally not the main purpose. Skills audits can use different tools and methods but will normally require a combination of dialogue and standardised testing/assessment. Self-assessments are also frequently used. As underlined in relation to the identification phases (Chapter 2), skills audits needs to be open to individual variation and diversity, carefully balancing this with the use of standardised tools. How will, for example, the focus on job-specific skills and competences be balanced with a focus on digital, linguistic, transversal skills and competences? While the use of dialogue-based approaches in a face-to-face situation makes it possible to cover all these aspects, the design of standardised approaches, including self-assessment tools, must consider this aspect seriously. It is important to avoid unintended bias created by the tool itself.

A key challenge is to ensure the transferability of the outcomes of a skills audit. There is a tendency for skills audits to be carried out in isolation from other forms of validation (as normally linked to qualifications and education and training systems). Given the emphasis of the recommendation on the four phases of validation, it will be important to consider the relationship between (mainly) employment-led skills audits and (mainly) education-and-training-led validation arrangements. Two issues are particularly relevant: the extent to which employers will recognise and trust the format in which the outcomes will be presented; and the extent to which the outcomes of the audit will be accompanied by a training or development plan, as is the case in some European countries.

Skills audits can be implemented at different levels and with different coverage. One possibility will be to develop a single national tool to be used by those unemployed or at risk of unemployment. Possibly run by employment services, this could build on and scale up existing labour market counselling, for example by increasing the overall capacity for assessment. It is also possible to envisage a more decentralised approach where development and implementation of these instruments is delegated to regional and sectoral stakeholders, as demonstrated by Sweden. Another option is to build on existing methods applied within sectors and enterprises. The choice of methodology for the audit is important and a question is how to balance and combine ICT-based self-assessment with face-to-face, dialogue-based approaches. The use of (online) self-assessment tools is widespread (and increasing) in Europe. The added value of these tools compared to (more costly) dialogue and counselling-oriented approaches must be considered. Given that skills audits, as reported by some countries, have an important motivational effect, the way self-assessment and one-to-one assessment are combined will influence the impact of these activities on the employability of individuals.

Progressing skills audits requires increased cooperation not only within but also between countries. The recommendation provides an opportunity to increase cooperation between countries, allowing for exchange of experiences in this particular field. European cooperation on a common format for documenting results of audits could also be

considered, such as in the context of Europass (as exemplified by the pilot template for Europass experience).

Key questions on skills audit

The following questions are important when addressing skills audit:

- what identification and documentation arrangements exist for people seeking employment or at risk of losing their job?
- can existing approaches be better coordinated?
- how can public and private sector stakeholders cooperate?
- what are appropriate methods; how to balance the need for dialogue and standardised testing?
- how can the outcomes of skills audit be made visible and credible to employers and others who receive them?

4.4. Validation in the voluntary sector

> The recommendation points to the importance of actively involving the voluntary sector in the implementation of validation: '[…] youth organisations and civil society organisations should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant Union transparency tools such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 4, point 4a).

The voluntary (or 'third') sector plays an important role in promoting validation of non-formal and informal learning. Non-governmental organisations involved with adult and lifelong learning exemplify this, as do organisations working in youth sectors. All these organisations see non-formal and informal learning as important outcomes of their activities that need to be made more visible.

The distinction between identification and documentation, on the one hand, and assessment and certification, on the other, is important in this particular context. It is commonly asserted that learning experiences from voluntary work should be valued in their own right and not assessed according to standards developed for formal education and training. Validation in the third sector might also include recognition of social and civic competences as well as soft and life skills gained in informal and non-formal settings, and through activities organised by the third sector (i.e. volunteering). Several approaches in this sector aim at identifying and documenting learning, as with Youthpass. Differentiation between the stages of validation and clarification of the ultimate purpose of validation can accommodate these different possibilities by creating arrangements that do not necessarily formalise non-formal and informal learning in this context.

Others argue that the experiences from the voluntary sector are highly relevant for progressing in formal education and training as well as in employment, and that such experiences must also be considered for summative assessment and certification. Some youth organisations are training providers who have their own certificates, diplomas and other internal forms of validating learning outcomes. Some of these are recognised by public authorities (as in France and Finland). In these situations, once the public authorities have assessed and validated the training in terms of learning outcomes and organisation, the official State qualification is granted to the individual by simple certification of the approved training.

As with the OERs discussed in Section 4.1.1, the credibility of validation carried out by the voluntary sector requires transparent standards and assessment mechanism.

Key questions on validation in the voluntary sector

The following questions are important when addressing validation in the context of the voluntary sector:

- in which cases should validation be limited to identification and documentation; in which cases should validation apply assessment and certification in a summative approach?
- how can validation initiatives in the voluntary sector interact with and strengthen arrangements in the public sector, particularly in education and training?
- which assessment standards used in the voluntary sector could be complementary with formal education and training systems?
- how can the voluntary sector ensure reliability and recognition of existing validation tools?

CHAPTER 5

Validation tools

> The recommendation emphasises the need for appropriate tools and instruments allowing for validation of non-formal and informal learning, also drawing attention to the relevance of common European tools for transparency and recognition and their possible support to the process: 'the use of Union transparency tools, such as the Europass framework and Youthpass, is promoted in order to facilitate the documentation of learning outcome' (Council of EU, 2012, p. 3, point 3i); and asks Member States to assure that '[…] synergies exist between validation arrangements and credit systems applicable in the formal education and training system, such as ECTS and ECVET' (p. 4, point 3j); as well as asking Member States to foster participation of stakeholders that '[…] should promote and facilitate the identification and documentation of learning outcomes acquired at work or in voluntary activities, using relevant Union transparency tools such as those developed under the Europass framework and Youthpass' (p. 4, point 4a).

The quality of any method depends on those implementing it. The level of qualifications/experience of assessors is one key element in quality assurance. The wide range of available tools can be considered as positive but will also require that counsellors and assessors reflect on what is appropriate and fit for purpose. The tools presented below capture different aspects of learning experiences, for example being able to reflect practical skills or theoretical reflections in varying degrees. As in formal education, the characteristics of the learning outcomes in question may require more than one tool, for example a combination of written tests and practical challenges.

The tools used for validation are important as they influence the overall quality – validity and reliability – of the validation process and its outcomes. They influence the way individual learners experience validation and determine whether their experiences are captured or not.

5.1. Selecting tools fit for purpose

The recommendation draws attention to the need to develop and share appropriate tools for validation. Making progress in validation requires that the distinction between formative and summative assessment is clarified. In these guidelines they are defined as:

(a) formative approaches to assessment aim to 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 in numerous settings ranging from guidance and counselling to human resource management in enterprises;

(b) summative approaches to assessment and validation aim explicitly at formalising and certifying learning outcomes and are linked to, and integrated into, institutions and bodies authorised to award qualifications.

The boundaries between formative and summative assessment, however, are not always clear-cut; in some cases tools can be used for both purposes. In both cases, the following criteria need to be considered for each potentially useful assessment tool:

(a) validity: the tool must measure what it is intended to measure;
(b) reliability: the extent to which identical results would be achieved every time a candidate is assessed under the same conditions;
(c) fairness: the extent to which an assessment decision is free from bias (context dependency, culture and assessor bias);
(d) cognitive range: whether the tool enables assessors to judge the breadth and depth of candidate's learning;
(e) fitness for purpose of the assessment: ensuring the purpose of the assessment tool matches the use for which it is intended.

It is helpful to distinguish the methods that aim to extract evidence (tests and examinations, conversational methods, declarative methods, observations, simulations, evidence extracted from work) and the methods for documenting and presenting evidence (such as 'live evidence', CVs, third party declarations and portfolios). Although this differentiation is not always clear-cut (the production of a portfolio may be considered proof of certain competences in itself) it captures the difference in nature between methods that primarily aim to make visible individual competences and those that present the collected evidence.

Key questions on validation tools

Before the validation 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:

- purpose of the validation process;
- breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;
- depth of learning required;
- how current or recent are 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.

5.2. Tools for extracting evidence

Validation tools and methods should strive for clarity, precision and be as unambiguous and non-judgemental as possible. All these qualities are important in generating trust and they lie at the heart of the validation process.

5.2.1. **Tests and examinations**

Tests and examinations have the advantage of being familiar, socially recognised as valid and reliable. Tests are also relatively cheap and quick to administer, when compared to some of the other methods. Tests and examinations can be linked to education standards more straightforwardly than some other methods.

However, tests can be intimidating for those individuals who have had negative experiences in formal education or have poor verbal/writing skills. Some country reports in the 2014 inventory have argued that this method measures relatively superficial knowledge and learning, and that some skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning may not be picked up through this method. For some occupational areas, for instance journalism or law, tests and examinations will normally be relevant for capturing the competences of individuals. In other areas, where practical skills and competences are essential, the potential of tests to assess competences is more limited.

5.2.2. **Dialogue or conversational methods**

Conversational methods of assessment are divided into two main types: interviews and debates (or 'discussions'). A presentation followed by an interview/debate is also relatively common. Interviews can be used to extract further information documented through other means and probe documented knowledge, skills and competences. It has been argued that interviews could be considered to have a 'supporting function', which allows for further exploration, instead of being a primary means to elicit non-formal and informal learning.

However, interviews can have an important role in themselves at various stages of validation, and can be very useful tools at the time of identification of acquired competences. When they take place early on in the process they can be used as a screening tool, to check whether further mechanisms to extract evidence should be applied. Such early interviews can have some summative elements, but they can also concentrate on clarifying options, standards and other key system aspects to the applicant. Their formative character can also be pronounced, and lead these interviews to be close to 'structured guidance sessions'.

Interviews can have a higher degree of validity than tests and examinations as they enable dialogue – so can avoid misunderstandings in the formulation of questions – and also probing. However, they can be less reliable than tests and examinations unless appropriate protocols are implemented as different interviewers (given their experience, personal characteristics, interviewing style) may affect the interview outcome. They can also be less fair than exams (in particular when the assessor does not have any previous information about those who are being examined, which can be the case in validation initiatives), as assessors can be influenced by the personal characteristics of interviewees. Assessors' experience, communication and facilitation skills, and their thorough knowledge of the assessed learning outcomes (so that relevant and appropriate information can be extracted), are vital to the resulting validity, reliability and fairness.

5.2.3. **Declarative methods**

Declarative methods are based on individuals' independent identification and recording of competences (sometimes against given criteria and sometimes not). However, the declaration is normally signed (verified) by a third party. The assessment results are then recorded, for instance in an individual book of competences but this could also be in a CV or a similar document. Declarative methods are often well suited for formative assessments or as preparation for identification of competences before summative assessment take place.

Declarative methods are also flexible, enabling individuals to reflect on their knowledge, skills and competences at their own pace. However, sometimes these processes may suffer from lack of validity and reliability, due to the absence of external objective assessment. In practice, the validity and reliability of these methods depends on the existence of clear guidelines or standards for the individual to use, on the provision of support or 'mentoring' during the preparation phase, and on the individual's ability to provide a realistic assessment of his/her own competences. Help from counsellors can increase the fairness of this method, in particular as individuals from different backgrounds may have different ways of presenting their skills and competences. Counsellors can help to moderate the importance of such biases in the reporting of individuals' own learning.

One of the main weaknesses of the declarative method is that, on its own, it can rarely lead to clear mapping to existing qualifications or standard frameworks, in particular in the absence of guidance, and rarely lead to the award of qualifications.

5.2.4. **Observations**

Observation as a method means extracting evidence from candidates while they perform everyday tasks. This approach, judged by a neutral assessor, has relatively greater usage in the private sector, but is spreading to other areas as well.

The validity of observations can be high and can give access to competences difficult to capture through other means. Observations have the advantage that sets of skills can be assessed simultaneously, and measurement be valid. They are also fair, as people are not detached from their usual work environment and placed under additional stress before the assessment. Nevertheless, assessor bias may exist as personal characteristics of individuals and their workplace are revealed during the process, which may influence the assessment outcome.

Observations are not always possible due to characteristics, safety, time constraints and other factors. They may also be time-consuming, in particular if there is more than one assessor. Further, because observations are grounded in everyday practice, information obtained through them for assessment of an individual may be context-specific rather than subject to generalisation.

5.2.5. **Simulations**

In simulation methodologies, individuals are placed in a situation close to real-life scenarios to have their competences assessed. In some cases they are used when observations are not possible. Their use, however, is constrained by several aspects, particularly costs. Some situations cannot be observed in real life, for security or other

reasons: examples are reaction of aircraft or bus pilots to extreme weather conditions or a motor/engine failure.

The use of simulations, in the same way as observations, scores high on validity. However, simulations can be more complex to organise and more expensive than other validation methods; they normally require a large amount of study and job analysis to be prepared properly. The higher the level of 'realism' of the simulation, the more effective the assessment will general be. Simulations can solve part of the problems of observations undertaken at work as they can place individuals in various contexts, increase assessment validity. The reliability and fairness of this method are often considered high.

5.2.6. **Evidence extracted from work or other practice**

Here a candidate collects physical or intellectual evidence of learning outcomes from work situations, voluntary activities, family or other settings. This evidence then forms the basis of validation of competences by the assessor. Evidence from work can also include written work, such as essays or transcript reviews. Such evidence is different from observations in that the candidate selects what is to be assessed, and how that evidence has been produced is not necessarily observed by the assessor. The validity of the method may be lower than that of observations, unless it is complemented by checks confirming that the evidence is indeed the product of the work of the candidate. Evidence extracted from work can be usefully accompanied by a declaration (see Section 5.2.3) explaining the knowledge, skills and competences demonstrated in the evidence, to aid assessment and make it more valid and reliable.

Because of the way evidence is selected (by the learner), assessors need to be aware that they are likely to be judging the best of the work of the candidate, rather than his/her average performance. The fairness of this method is generally deemed to be similar to that of observations. Evidence extracted from work is most often used in validating professional competences.

5.3. Tools for presenting evidence

Evidence extracted through the methods outlined in the previous section needs to be documented during validation. Documentation not only enables assessment but can be seen as an independent outcome of validation, for example supporting job-seekers. A key challenge is to develop documentation methods that have credibility and legitimacy across different sectors and institutions, relevant to the workplace and the education system. The different learning arenas have different criteria, sometimes making it difficult to establish equivalent competences across sectors.

5.3.1. **CVs and individual statement of competences**

CVs are probably the most common way to document individual knowledge, skills and competences. They are often used in both job and education applications and they differ considerably from country to country and by economic sector. CVs can be mere

declarations or statements of individuals' qualifications as well as experience or also identify the competences derived from these, – as some sections of the Europass CV do. Individual statements of competences can be aided by competence checklists, or in CV formats that include structured competence sections, (see Europass CV) ([8]).

5.3.2. **Third party reports**

Third party reports for validating non-formal and informal learning can adopt various forms. They can include reference letters (or audio/video declarations) from supervisors, employers and/or colleagues and performance appraisals by companies. The latter are quite common but, as discussed in Chapter 4, are not always designed to be used outside the enterprise. The implication of this is that employees sometimes have difficulty in proving their real level of work experience, particularly where their actual performance – and thus skills and competences – exceeds that indicated by the formal job title. Employer reports can help to document the actual tasks performed.

5.3.3. **Portfolios**

Portfolios are one of the most complex and frequently used methods to document evidence for validation purposes. Portfolios aim to overcome the risk of subjectivity by introducing a mix of instruments to extract evidence of individuals' competences and can incorporate assessments by third parties. They provide the audience with comprehensive insights into the achievements and successes of the learner. There is evidence of a recent increase in the importance of portfolios. The portfolio method tends to be process-orientated, with much evidence that the selection process included in portfolio building promotes self-assessment and focuses students' attention on quality criteria. Some countries that provide national guidelines for validation, rather than prescribe validation methods, recommend a stage in the process which involves some form of assessment of the content of the portfolio by a third party (such as a jury) to ensure greater validity. Introduction of third party assessment does not solve all problems. Quality assurance processes should be in place to ensure consistency and transparency of third party assessment and equality and fairness in the validation process for all candidates.

Portfolios can include evidence extracted through a combination of methods. It is argued that the kind of reflection and investigation associated with portfolio methods empowers people undergoing validation, which helps them obtain jobs or choose appropriate further education. Portfolios can be developed to help disadvantaged people out of social exclusion or into employment by considering their specific characteristics. Building a portfolio is a time-consuming exercise from the point of view of the applicant, but is nevertheless a popular method as candidates have the possibility to show their competences in a flexible and authentic way. Portfolio assessment is often dependent on good written documentation of the individual's skills. Undocumented or tacit knowledge is harder to identify through this method, a fact to be considered when deciding on

([8]) Cedefop: *Europass documents: curriculum vitae*: http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/curriculum-vitae [accessed 11.11.2015].

the mix of tools to be applied in a validation process. The portfolio method can prove difficult for some and should be supported by relevant information and guidance. The most serious risk in preparing portfolios is lack of focus that can occur when applicants prepare them alone or with little mediation from a counsellor. Counsellor aid and sufficient time for self-reflection are, therefore, crucial to this method's effectiveness and fairness. In the process of self-assessment against curriculum standards, guidance should be at hand to explain the theoretical concepts and help the transfer from theory to practice.

CHAPTER 6

Concluding remarks

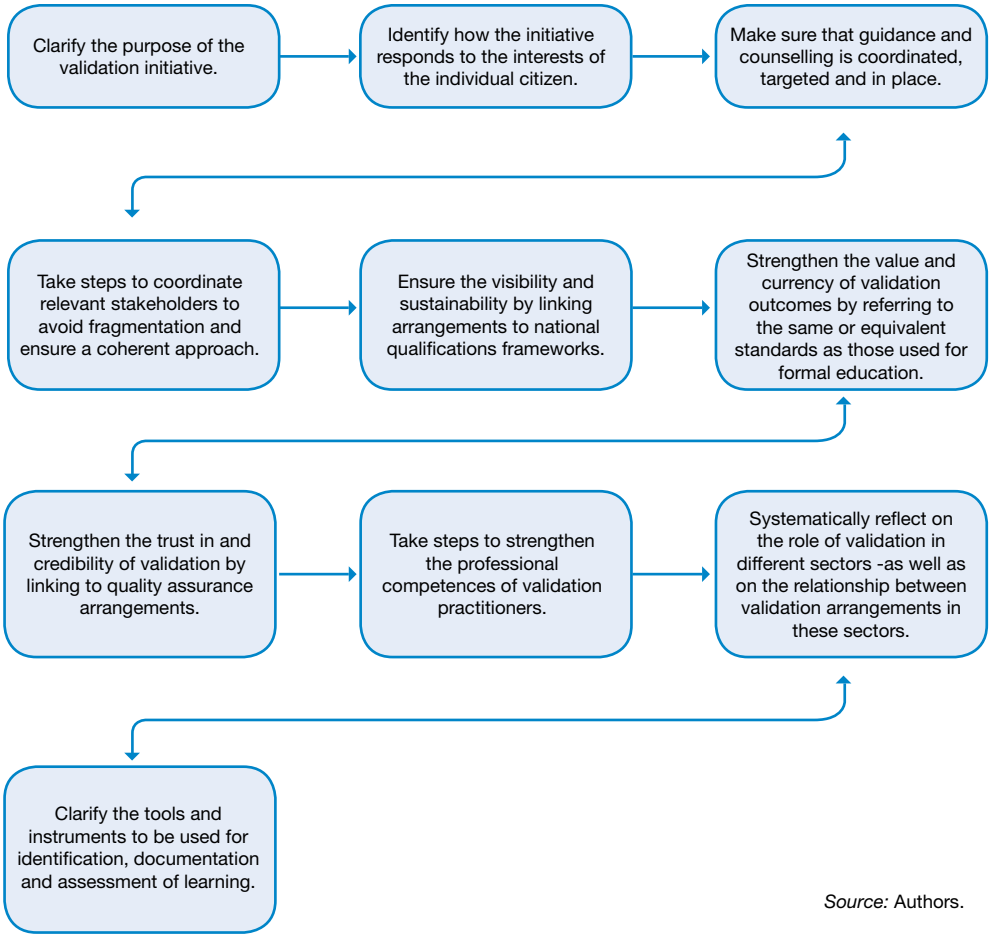
These guidelines have made it clear that development and implementation of validation arrangements relies on several interconnected steps. The central message of these guidelines is that validation is about:

(a) how to make visible the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning;

(b) how to attribute appropriate value to outcomes of non-formal and informal learning.

Figure 1 illustrates, in a simplified way, how the steps towards this combination of making learning outcomes visible and attributing value to them are connected and how they depend on each other.

Figure 1. **Developing and implementing validation: interrelationships**



Source: Authors.

While all these steps have to be considered when aiming for national validation arrangements, initiatives linked to particular sector or user-groups can concentrate on a more limited selection of issues and steps. Combined with the questions/checklists developed for each of the above steps, it is our hope that the European Guidelines will prove useful for policy-makers and practitioners alike.

List of abbreviations

CV	curriculum vitae
ECTS	European credit transfer system
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
ICT	information and communications technology
MOOC	massive open online course
NQF	national qualifications framework
OER	open educational resource
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
VET	vocational education and training

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[URLs accessed 11.11.2015]

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Cedefop; European Commission (2009). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/553/4054_en.pdf

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Unesco; Commonwealth of Learning (2011). *Guidelines for open educational resources (OER) in higher education.* Paris: Unesco. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002136/213605e.pdf

Web links

Cedefop: *Europass*: http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/home

Cedefop: Europass documents: *curriculum vitae*: http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/documents/curriculum-vitae

Cedefop: Validation of non-formal and informal learning: *European inventory on validation: 2014 update*: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory

Cedefop: Events and projects: *Validation of non-formal and informal learning*: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning

London Technology and Innovation: *Open educational resources (OERs)*: http://lti.lse.ac.uk/digital-and-information-literacy/OERs.php

ANNEX 1

Key questions relevant to developing and implementing validation of non-formal and informal learning

Key questions on implementation of validation

- ❏ Has the purpose of the validation initiative been clarified?
- ❏ How does the validation initiative respond to the interests of the individual citizen?
- ❏ Have steps been taken to coordinate and target guidance and counselling services?
- ❏ Are mechanisms for coordination of relevant stakeholders in place, to avoid fragmentation and ensure a coherent approach?
- ❏ Are validation arrangements linked to national qualifications frameworks and how does this impact transparency and access?
- ❏ Do the outcomes of validation refer to the same or equivalent standards as those used for formal education and how does this affect its value and currency?
- ❏ Are validation arrangements linked to quality assurance arrangements and how does this influence trust and credibility?
- ❏ Which steps have been taken to strengthen the professional competences of validation practitioners?
- ❏ What is the role of validation in education and training systems; in relation to the labour market; and in the voluntary sector?
- ❏ Which tools and instruments can be used (and combined) for identification, documentation and assessment of learning?

Key questions on the basic features of validation

Distinction should be made between the different purposes served by validation and the different phases involved. The following questions provide a starting point for this clarification:

- ❏ has the purpose of the validation been clearly defined and communicated?
- ❏ have the different phases of the validation process been clearly defined and communicated to the individual candidates?

Key questions on identification

For the identification phase, the following questions need to be asked:

- ❏ which procedures and tools support identification?
- ❏ how are standardised and dialogue-based identification approaches

mixed and balanced?
- ❏ how is guidance and counselling supporting and integrated into the identification phase?

Key questions on documentation

For the documentation phase, the following questions need to be asked:
- ❏ what criteria are used for admitting evidence into the process?
- ❏ what formats are used for documenting non-formal and informal learning?
- ❏ to what extent do existing documentation formats support the transfer and portability of acquired knowledge, skills and competences?

Key questions on assessment

For the assessment phase, the following questions need to be asked:
- ❏ are assessment tools adapted to the individual's needs and characteristics?
- ❏ to what extent have assessment tools been chosen according to their reliability and/or validity?
- ❏ which reference point (standard) is being used and how suitable is this for capturing the individual variation characterising non-formal and informal learning?
- ❏ have the conditions for assessment been clearly defined and communicated in terms of procedure, tools and evaluation/assessment standards:
  – to the candidates?
  – to employers and education institutions?

Key questions on certification

For the assessment and certification stages, the following questions need to be asked:
- ❏ how is the credibility of the authority/awarding body assured?
- ❏ to what extent can the outcomes of validation (documents, portfolios, certificates, etc.) be exchanged into further education, job opportunities?

Key questions on individuals' rights and obligations

The individual is at the focus of validation processes and his/her rights and obligations must be treated with care and respect. The following questions provide a starting point:
- ❏ is the privacy and personal integrity of the candidates protected throughout the validation process?
- ❏ have explicit procedures been put in place to guarantee confidentiality?
- ❏ have ethical standards been developed and applied?
- ❏ are the outcomes of the process the exclusive property of the candidate?
- ❏ if not, which are the implications?
- ❏ what arrangements have been put in place to guarantee fair and equal treatment?

Key questions on information, counselling and guidance

The following questions provide a starting point when considering the delivery of guidance and counselling for validation:

- ❏ to what extent can existing career guidance and counselling services, for example in education and training, labour market and social services, be mobilised to provide information and advice on validation?
- ❏ how can existing career guidance and counselling service networking be improved to address all potential target groups for validation?
- ❏ what kind of coordination mechanism is used to ensure that candidates are served where they live, study and work?
- ❏ how can public and private stakeholders cooperate to offer better information and advice on validation?
- ❏ are guidance services providing information on the costs and benefits of validation?

Key questions on coordination of stakeholders

Coordination of validation must primarily take place at national level, addressing the complex division of roles and responsibilities between public, voluntary sector and private stakeholders. The following questions can be asked:

- ❏ what validation arrangements exist and what is their legal and political basis?
- ❏ which stakeholders are involved?
- ❏ have single or multiple legal framework(s) been put in place?
- ❏ what administrative processes are in place (contact and information procedures, recording and monitoring of results, shared quality assurance arrangements)?
- ❏ how are stakeholders at different levels related to each other and networking?
- ❏ to what extent is validation reaching citizens where they live, work and study; how can coordination improve current situation?
- ❏ who is responsible for coordination at regional and local level?

Key questions on national qualifications systems and frameworks

National qualifications frameworks are now being implemented across Europe. These frameworks may aid introduction and integration of validation. The following questions point to some key issues to be addressed:

- ❏ are validation arrangements (all, only some) seen as an integrated part of the national qualifications system and as a normal route to qualifications?
- ❏ what is the relationship between validation and the national qualifications framework (NQF)?
- ❏ to what extent can validation be used to support progression between all types and levels of qualifications in the NQF?
- ❏ is there a link established between validation and (possible) credit transfer and accumulation arrangements?

Key questions on to standards and learning outcomes

- ❏ Do qualifications awarded on the basis of non-formal and informal learning refer to the same or equivalent standards as those used for formal education and training?

- ❏ If not, which other standards are used and how do they relate to formal standards?
- ❏ Are standards written in learning outcomes?
- ❏ If not, what are the implications for validation?
- ❏ Who developed the standards and in reference to which sources (education or occupation).
- ❏ Are there feedback mechanisms in place to ensure review and renewal of standards used for validation?

Key questions on quality assurance of validation

- ❏ Have explicit and integrated quality assurance measures been put in place for validation; if existing:
  - – do these measures reflect an explicit and agreed quality strategy?
  - – how does the quality strategy address key objectives like reliability, validity and credibility of the process?
  - – who participated in the defining this quality strategy?
  - – who are involved, at different levels, in implementing this quality strategy?
- ❏ How are quality assurance arrangements divided between internal and external assurance and control?
- ❏ Are processes and outcomes being monitored and has a system for feedback from users/customers been put in place?

Key questions on validation practitioners

- ❏ What requirements, if any, have been set for:
  - – counsellors and guidance personnel?
  - – assessors?
  - – other practitioners involved with validation?
- ❏ Is there a strategy in place for the professional development of these practitioners?
- ❏ Is the professional development of validation professionals coordinated between different sectors and arrangements?
- ❏ Can a community of practice for validation professionals be developed, supporting networking and professional developments?

Key questions on validation in and for education and training

The following questions are important when addressing validation in the context of education and training:

- ❏ is validation offered in all parts of the education and training system?
- ❏ do validation arrangements in the different parts of the education and training system build on similar or differing principles?
- ❏ can validation arrangements in the different parts of education and training ‘work together’ and facilitate progress across types and levels of education?
- ❏ is there a link between validation and credit transfer arrangements?

Key questions regarding on educational resources

The following questions are important when addressing open educational resources:

- ❏ are the methods for validating learning outcomes acquired through OERs the same as for learning outcomes acquired in a different way?
- ❏ how are internal credits (e.g. badges) taken into account by validation?

Key questions on validation in enterprises

The following questions are important when addressing validation in enterprises:

- ❏ can competence assessment carried out in enterprises be used outside the enterprise in question?
- ❏ to what extent can increased networking support further development of methods and standards for competence assessment?
- ❏ how can methods for competence assessment be made more accessible for SMEs?
- ❏ how can competence assessment in enterprises be made available for a wider range of employees;
- ❏ can there be a stronger link between validation in the public sector and competence assessment in enterprises?

Key questions on skills audit

The following questions are important when addressing skills audit:

- ❏ what identification and documentation arrangements exist for people seeking employment or at risk of losing their job?
- ❏ can existing approaches be better coordinated?
- ❏ how can public and private sector stakeholders cooperate?
- ❏ what are the appropriate methods; how to balance the need for dialogue and standardised testing?
- ❏ how can the outcomes of skills audit be made visible and credible to employers and others who receive them?

Key questions on validation in the voluntary sector

The following questions are important when addressing validation in the context of the voluntary sector:

- ❏ in which cases should validation be limited to identification and documentation; in which cases should validation apply assessment and certification in a summative approach?
- ❏ how can the validation initiatives in the voluntary sector interact with and strengthen arrangements in the public sector, particularly in education and training?
- ❏ which assessment standards used in the voluntary sector could be complementary with formal education and training systems?
- ❏ how can the voluntary sector ensure reliability and recognition of their existing validation tools;

Key questions on validation tools

Before the validation 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:

- ❏ purpose of the validation process;
- ❏ breadth of knowledge, skills and competences to be assessed;
- ❏ depth of learning required;
- ❏ how current or recent knowledge, skills and competence are;
- ❏ sufficiency of information for an assessor to make a judgement;
- ❏ authenticity of the evidence being the candidate's own learning outcomes.

EN

European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning

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The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning are written for individuals and institutions responsible for the initiation, development, implementation and operation of validation arrangements. The ambition of the guidelines is to clarify the conditions for implementation, highlighting the critical choices to be made by stakeholders at different stages of the process.

The 2012 Council recommendation on validation encourages Member States to put in place national arrangements for validation by 2018. These arrangements will enable individuals to increase the visibility and value of their knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training: at work, at home or in voluntary activities.

This second edition of the European guidelines is the result of a two-year process involving a wide range of stakeholders active in validation at European, national and/or sectoral levels.

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