

'2010 update of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning - Final Report'

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In order to ensure that collaborative, transnational actions can reach their desired goals, partners often seem to ‘agree to disagree’ on the question of terminology but it does remain a potential challenge to wider implementation and take-up, particularly in terms of public awareness and understanding of the concept of validation. It therefore seems particularly important that individual validation initiatives make clear their aims and scope to potential users and stakeholders and that greater efforts are made to adopt a common terminology in this area.....	30
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1 INTRODUCTION

This final report is the last deliverable of the 2010 Update to the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (Reference No. 2009-5035 /001-001).

The European Inventory provides a unique record on how validation is already being used at national, regional and local level to address issues relating to lifelong learning, employment and social exclusion. This is particularly important in the context of the current economic crisis, which has accelerated the importance of validation drivers identified in the 2007 Inventory, such as the need for effective re-deployment of the adult population into employment. A number of countries have recognised the role validation has to play in addressing skills shortages and in supporting those facing redundancy to identify and pursue an alternative career pathway. Other initiatives recognise the role of validation in combating social exclusion, by empowering 'the low qualified' and other disadvantaged groups to identify and understand their own competences and potential.

A new 'landscape' in the validation of non-formal and informal learning has appeared since the last Inventory was produced. This is now a fast-moving field, with developments taking place at a number of levels and in a number of sectors in each country (although it should be acknowledged that there are a small number of countries where little progress has been observed since the last Inventory update). With the increasing importance of validation not only as a topic for discussion but as a field of activity, the process of updating the European Inventory has become a more important and increasingly challenging task, with each country update having to take account of developments across the sectors of, for example, general, vocational, adult and higher education and training, as well as the private and third sectors and projects supported by European and national funding sources.

This report is intended to complete the portfolio of products which make up the 2010 European Inventory by providing a 'European perspective' to the Update, which has been structured to link with the European Guidelines on Validation, as follows:

- *European Perspective*: final report; thematic reports; case studies on EU-funded initiatives;
- *National Perspective*: country updates; case studies; thematic reports; final report;
- *Organisational Perspective*: country updates; case studies; thematic reports;
- *Individual Perspective*: country updates; case studies; thematic reports;
- *Quality Assurance*: country updates; case studies;
- *Assessment methods*: country updates; case studies; thematic report on assessment methods;
- *Role of validation practitioners*: country updates; case studies.

The report is accompanied by 34¹ country reports, 10 case studies and four thematic reports, which have also been prepared with the Guidelines in mind, as outlined above.

In order to fulfil the requirement of providing a 'European perspective' on validation, this report focuses on providing a synthesis of the information presented in the various other project outputs. Each country update has been reviewed, together with the case studies

¹ There are two reports for Belgium and the UK, in order to take account of the devolved responsibility for education and training policy in these countries

and thematic reports, in order to provide an overview of progress and trends across the 32 countries covered by the study and to highlight some key issues and challenges.

A technical update is provided in Annex 1 to confirm the methodology pursued in order to deliver the project. In this technical update, suggestions are also made as to how the Inventory might be taken forward in the future to continue to serve as a useful reference point for its readers.

The following additional documentation can be found in the annexes to the report.

- Annex 1: Technical update
- Annex 2: Cross-country overview by level of development
- Annex 3: Results of survey of practitioners
- Annex 4: Catalogue of projects
- Annex 5: Guidance note for country experts
- Annex 6: Survey of practitioners/ projects

2 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING – A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

2.1 European Context

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (the process of its identification, documentation and recognition) is recognised as an important tool in the pursuit of economic and social goals at European level. A number of key developments, either directly relating to validation, or contributing to or promoting further development of validation, have started or gathered further momentum between the previous and the current version of the Inventory, including:

- The European Principles for the Identification and Validation of non-formal and informal learning, which were intended to encourage and guide the development of comparable approaches and systems, by providing Member States with some key principles for the implementation of validation;
- The work of the cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes, which opened up discussions on key issues relating to validation, including for example costs and benefits and quality assurance;
- The 2009 European Guidelines on Validation, which provide guidance for policy makers and practitioners on how to address the main challenges associated with the development of validation approaches and systems;
- The European Qualifications Framework, which has encouraged Member States to work towards the introduction of their own National Qualifications Frameworks, defining levels of learning in terms of learning outcomes;
- The Action Plan on Adult Learning, which identified several activities in the area of validation to be delivered by the Commission in the period 2008-2010.;
- The European Credit System for VET (ECVET), a unit-based credit system for vocational education and training, which requires a validation system in order to recognise learning acquired through non-formal and informal means;
- The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET, which provides a framework for a common approach to QA in VET and as such also concerns validation;
- Europass, a set of documents which are recognised across Europe, which people can use to present their skills and qualifications and which enable individuals to 'visualise and validate' their learning outcomes;
- The Youthpass tool for young people (see the 2010 Inventory case study on this tool for further information), which enables young people to 'visualise and validate' learning outcomes gained through Youth in Action projects;
- The proposal for a European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy, a multilingual dictionary linking skills and competences to occupations, will help to create a common language for employment and education / training and could help to raise the profile of validation; and
- The Bologna Process in higher education and the European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, which includes 'recognition of prior learning' as one of the ten

commitments made by universities in addressing the development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies.

Moreover, the long-term commitment to validation has been recently reinforced. The revised *Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training until 2020* (adopted in 2009) identified ‘making lifelong learning a reality’ as one of its four strategic objectives to be addressed in the upcoming decade. Within this objective, the Strategy states that “*work is needed to ensure the development of national qualifications frameworks based on relevant learning outcomes and their link to the European Qualifications Framework, the establishment of more flexible learning pathways – including better transitions between the various education and training sectors, greater openness towards non-formal and informal learning, and increased transparency and recognition of learning outcomes*”. Thus, the Strategy makes clear that there is more work to be done in order to increase the implementation of validation in the Member States.

The Europe 2020 Strategy², the EU’s growth strategy for the coming decade, acknowledges the role of validation in supporting young people, particularly those with fewer opportunities and / or at risk of social exclusion, to access the labour market. The Commission sets out a commitment under its ‘Youth on the Move’ flagship initiative to promote the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Validation is also referred to under Employment Guideline 9³, which refers to the need to take account of non-formal and informal learning in actions to improve the quality and performance of education and training systems.

Yet there is still much more to be done to meet the objectives set out in these strategic documents. While in a small number of countries, validation is now being used to support large numbers of learners, in many it remains a marginal activity, with pockets of activity and/ or good practice. While systems begin to be in place in general terms, issues pertaining to their effective use become more relevant in the policy agenda.

In late 2010, the Commission launched a public consultation on possible future action to support the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning⁴. The aim is to collect views on whether further action is needed, what type of action is required and which policy priorities should be given attention. Once the consultation period has closed, the European Commission services will prepare a report on its results, which will be published on the website of the Directorate General for Education and Culture in the first semester of 2011. This report will give an indication of how the Commission will take the responses into account in preparing its proposal for future action on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning. Current proposals for further action include the introduction of an integrated Europass Skills Passport, capable of recording the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning whether acquired abroad or domestically, and a proposal for a draft Council Recommendation on the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2011, under the auspices of the Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative ‘Youth on the Move’⁵.

² Europe 2020 Strategy. Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

³ Europe 2020 Integrated Guidelines for the Economic and Employment Policies of the Member States. Internet: <http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/Brochure%20Integrated%20Guidelines.pdf>

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/consult/learning_en.html

⁵ European Commission, Youth on the Move, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/education/yom/com_en.pdf

2.2 Cross-country analysis

For the 2010 Update, the scope of the country updates has widened significantly, to incorporate all aspects of validation as outlined in the European Guidelines. The aim is to look at validation not only from a national perspective but also from an organisational and individual perspective. Key issues such as quality assurance and practitioner profiles are also covered in the country updates.

Based on a review of the country updates, it seems that while in most countries there is now recognition of the role validation has to play and a commitment to introducing, implementing, or consolidating systems of validation, the actual scale of implementation 'on the ground' – i.e. the number of people who have benefited from validation and / or the number of qualifications awarded - remains on the whole relatively small in scale, with the exception of a small number of countries and initiatives. It is not that systems are not used. Rather, it is that their full potential has clearly not been reached. There may be a number of reasons for this. For example, in some countries there may be structural barriers when a project needs to be expanded to a national level or be embedded in the apparatus of the education system. The commitment to validation in policy documents may not be supported by adequate funding to enable providers to carry it out in practice. Or the formal education system may already be considered to be flexible enough to reduce the pressure for validation.

This section commences with a cross-country analysis of the 2010 country updates, to assess how countries can be categorised according to their 'level of development'. The following section provides a second categorisation of the countries, according to the approach taken to developing or implementing a system of validation.

2.3 Level of development

In the previous European Inventory update, countries were categorised according to their level of development, as being either at a high, medium or low level. This categorisation by 'level of development' is useful to obtain a view of the state of the art (and by comparison with the 2007 Inventory relative progress made by different countries) in validation. However, it is important to note that the categorisation provides only an overall assessment. In fact, the situation is often complex and multi-faceted at the national level, as different degrees of progress and development are in operation in different sectors (e.g. vocational education/ training, higher education, the private sector, etc.) within the same country. Furthermore, while there may on the surface appear to be a comprehensive system in place, in practice it may not be implemented to its full potential by providers, or take-up may be low by actual learners, for various reasons (e.g. lack of awareness). In contrast, some countries may not have a clear national legal or policy framework but have bottom-up initiatives with very high levels of take-up. The effectiveness of the systems in place and their impact on individuals may also differ. For such reasons, it is particularly difficult to categorise the 32 countries concerned in a 'neat' fashion. Nevertheless, an attempt will be made here.

In order to take account of the great diversity in the level of development of the 32 countries covered by the Inventory, it is necessary to extend the three categories employed in the previous versions (high, medium and low degree of development), to four categories: high, medium-high, medium-low and low. The focus of this classification is on relative, rather than absolute, levels of performance. This is justified because relative comparisons are considered to be more useful at the time of benchmarking in this area than stricter 'absolute' levels of performance against a set cannon.

An indicative spread of countries is suggested in the table below, based on the information provided within the country updates. As is clear from the information provided below, this is not an 'exact science' and this table is based on a judgement by the authors of this report. Nevertheless, it serves to give an idea of the extent of development across Europe.

High	Medium-high	Medium-low	Low
Finland, Netherlands, Portugal	France, Norway, Denmark, Romania, Sweden, (England, Northern Ireland), UK (Scotland)	Germany, Spain, UK (Wales, Northern Ireland), UK	Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Belgium (Wallonia), Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Turkey

▪ **Countries with a high degree of development**

In 2007 this category was defined as countries which have “moved from the introduction of validation policies to the implementation of validation practices”. Given developments in this area, it is now more appropriate to include in this category countries which have *established practices for validation, encompassing all or most sectors of learning, and which already show a significant level of take-up*. In this category, countries generally have a national legislative framework or national policy in place, which might be one national policy relating to validation in all sectors, or a set of policies / laws relating to different sectors which together form an overall framework.

Countries which would fall under this category include France, Norway and Portugal.

France	<p>Validation of prior learning has been established as a right for every citizen in France. The current system (<i>Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience</i>, VAE), which was established in 2002, is used to deliver whole or partial qualifications. Each body awarding qualifications has developed its own rules for the context-specific implementation of the principles outlined in the legislation.</p> <p>The VAE system stems from legislation introduced in 1992 for qualifications awarded by the Ministries of Education and Agriculture, extended to qualifications delivered by the Ministry of Youth and Sport in 1999, and to all main types of qualification in 2002. The most recent change in 2009 aimed to increase the number of individuals accessing the VAE process, in particular private sector workers, and to develop guidance for VAE.</p> <p>Since 2002 a significant investment has been made in the higher education sector in particular to produce standards (<i>référentiels</i>) described in terms of learning outcomes in order to facilitate VAE (all vocational training diplomas included in the national qualifications directory (RNCP) must be described in terms of learning outcomes). In addition, in higher education, recognition of professional experience has also been used for a long time (in fact it dates back to the 1930s) to allow access to individuals who do not meet formal requirement criteria and, in some cases, acquisition of a diploma.</p>
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	<p>The number of VAE candidates per year is high in comparison to most other European countries, with 53,000 in 2008. The number of qualifications awarded through VAE in this year was between 72,000 and 75,000.</p>
<p>Norway</p>	<p>Non-formal and informal learning has deep historic roots in Norway and has been developed in parallel with the formal education system. It is highly recognised in civil society and is important for skill formation in the Norwegian economy.</p> <p>There is a comprehensive legal framework in place covering the different sectors of learning (i.e. vocational education, adult education, Higher Education). There is also quantitative data to show relatively high levels of take-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Admissions to a study programme in higher education, based on documented prior learning by adults lacking formal qualifications is widespread. The number of HE applicants who requested that their non-formal and informal qualifications be taken into account in their application to enter HE was 2,565 in 2008. - In terms of the crafts examination based on practical work experience, the latest available data show that on average, around 6,000 individuals take this examination each year and that around 95% of these are successful. - Around a third (3,162) of the total number (9,439) of adults who applied for enrolment in upper secondary education and training in 2008 had undergone validation of non-formal and informal learning. <p>While validation in Norway is based on a national approach, with national laws and common principles, there is a certain degree of institutional autonomy, particularly at higher education level.</p>
<p>Portugal</p>	<p>In Portugal, the national system of validation is one part of the strategy to reduce the qualifications deficit among the adult population, notably through the New Opportunities initiative launched in December 2005.</p> <p>In 2001 the National System for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (SNRVCC) was created. The Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) now represents an important part of the measures in place to meet the goals of the New Opportunities initiative. New Opportunities defines a strategy for national education and training in Portugal, aiming to raise the qualifications level of the population to secondary level (12th grade).</p> <p>In higher education, recent legislation allows access to adult students who do not meet the standard admissions requirements based on the recognition of prior learning.</p> <p>According to data from the National Agency for Qualifications (ANQ), by April 2010, 324,370 adults had been granted a certificate through RVCC processes (i.e. as a result of validation processes and complementary learning).</p>

▪ **Countries with a medium-high degree of development**

This category would include either countries where there is a national system, or a framework of systems, for validation but take-up remains relatively low, or countries where there is a particularly well-established system of validation in a certain sector with a high level of take-up, but not a national framework in place.

Examples of countries which fall under this category include Denmark, Germany and Spain.

<p>Denmark</p>	<p>The validation of non-formal and informal learning has been high on the policy agenda in Denmark for more than a decade and is well developed especially in VET, adult education programmes and tertiary education. The recent key legislation on validation of prior learning is Act no 556 of the 6 June 2007 on the development of the recognition of prior learning in adult education and continuing training. It covers single course subjects in general adult education and general upper secondary education, vocational training programmes; basic adult education; short-cycle and medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programmes).</p> <p>Validation of non-formal and informal learning aimed at all citizens, often with a special focus on low-qualified people, also features strongly in policies and strategies focusing more broadly on lifelong learning. Although recognition of prior learning has been established for some time it is also considered that more needs to be done to recognise competences achieved at work and from taking part in non-formal adult education and training etc.</p> <p>The Danish Ministry of Education has launched a number of initiatives that seek to improve the understanding of prior learning assessment and to promote its use (e.g. setting up a National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning) and is evaluating the implementation of the legislation in 2011-2011 with the view to defining a new action plan to promote the validation of prior learning.</p> <p>Validation activity is still relatively low because the new regulations are still under implementation. But at the same time the development of activity is increasing within all fields of education.</p>
<p>Germany</p>	<p>In Germany, there is currently no legal framework and no standardised system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning at national level. Due to the complex allocation of responsibilities in Germany in the field of education and training, there is a variety of approaches, particularly below political level. Similarly there is no standardised funding framework for validation.</p> <p>In vocational education and training, the External students' examination under § 45 (2) of the Vocational Training Act (BbIG) includes provision for the validation of prior learning leading to the award of a qualification in a recognised apprenticeship trade.</p> <p>Access to higher education for qualified workers has been regulated since 2009 by a decision of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Länder.</p> <p>There is also a well-known system of formative validation for both adults and young people, entitled ProfilPASS. This initiative is more formative in its approach and emphasises the identification and</p>

	<p>documentation of learning outcomes, rather than their recognition for qualifications purposes. Since 2006 the ProfilPASS has been used by more than 80,000 people, of which half were adults (43,000) and the other half young people (41,600). There are now more than 4,000 ProfilPASS Counsellors ('Beratende'), about 70 'Multiplikatoren' ('opinion formers') and more than 50 'Dialogzentren' ('Dialogue centres').</p> <p>In addition, many different approaches to recognition and validation of prior learning supported by public funds have been developed at regional and national level for different target groups in recent years.</p>
<p>Spain</p>	<p>Today there are some opportunities for validation in relation to Higher Education (HE) and now also professional competences (up to a certain level). Some Autonomous Communities (Comunidades Autónomas – CCAAs) have also established procedures for validation.</p> <p>In Higher Education (HE), since the 1970s individuals aged over 25 without upper secondary education have been entitled to access HE upon satisfactory performance in 'over-25s' HE access exams – although without receiving a secondary school qualification through this process. Later, from the early 2000s new measures were put in place at national level in order to further recognise competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. A new decree to regulate validation procedures in Higher Education has been drafted and will be finalised by the end of 2010.</p> <p>In 2009, the Royal Decree on the recognition of professional competences acquired through work experience established the procedures and requirements for the validation of professional competences acquired through work experience and non formal learning processes. The Decree opened up a structure for validation of professional competences, for modules of formal VET or full qualifications at levels 1 to 5, according to the criteria specified in the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications. The decree is restricted to only some levels of competence and the calls for examination will only apply to certain economic sectors each year. The first joint call for validation of professional competences will be carried out in 2011 and will only cover some competences. It is planned that other competences will be included in the calls launched in the following years.</p> <p>Data on validation is limited. However, take-up of some of the validation initiatives currently available is relatively high. For example, between 2004 and 2005 the number of people who made use of the registered university entrance examinations for over 25s was 19,853 and the number of students who accessed VET via entrance examinations at intermediate level was 12,267, while at higher level the number was 7,796.</p>

▪ **Countries with a medium-low degree of development**

Countries with a medium-low degree of development are likely to have established validation systems in one or more sectors, but not amounting to an overall framework for all types of learning. Validation systems are utilised, but take-up remains more limited than in countries with a high or medium-high degree of development.

Some of the countries included in this category are: the Czech Republic, Iceland and Lithuania.

<p>Czech Republic</p>	<p>Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is now well defined in the Czech Republic since September 2007 by law 179/2006, which defines the conditions and the process for recognition to achieve full and partial qualifications (at all levels except higher education).</p> <p>As the recognition process started in 2009, take up remains modest and validation only has only taken place for a limited number of qualifications.</p> <p>The validation procedure is tightly related to the (ongoing) development of the NQF: a recognition procedure can only be carried out if the qualifications and assessment standard are defined in the qualifications register (defined by law 179/2006 and still incomplete when the law entered into force).</p> <p>Assessment standards (e.g. oral explanation, practical demonstration, etc.) are used both for recognition of non-formal and informal learning and examination/certification in formal education and training. They are are being progressively developed by the sectoral councils and approved by the Ministry of Education.</p> <p>Validation based on the standards can be carried out by schools for full qualifications or by authorised institutions (schools, private institutions, companies as well as individuals) for partial qualifications.</p>
<p>Iceland</p>	<p>A national strategy for the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been in development since 2002. Most of the work that has been undertaken on validation has been carried out by Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins, the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC), established by social partners. It works according to a contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The focus has been on learners who have not completed upper secondary education and a 2008 law on Upper Secondary Schools and the 2010 law on Adult Learning contain provisions on individual entitlement to the validation of non-formal and informal learning towards credits/units at the Upper Secondary level. The national strategy focuses on covering all the sectors in stages, through close cooperation with stakeholders.</p> <p>Over the period 2007-2009 a total of 492 individuals had their competences validated within the certified trades.</p> <p>The validation process has not yet been regulated in Higher Education.</p> <p>Pilot projects validating learning against specific job standards have been carried out, most prominently in the banking sector.</p>
<p>Lithuania</p>	<p>Validation of non-formal and informal learning is not a new concept in Lithuania as such, although practical implementation has been rather slow and so far based on single initiatives.</p> <p>An early impetus was provided by the White Paper on VET (1998) through the principle of 'formal recognition of the acquired qualification, irrespective of how it has been acquired'. Since then legal acts defining</p>

	<p>the procedures for the formal recognition of competences acquired through non-formal (including vocational training and adult education) or informal learning have been adopted.</p> <p>In addition several strategic documents (Strategy on Vocational Guidance, Strategy Paper on Lifelong Learning and their action plans, Strategic Guidelines for the Development of Education for 2003-2012 and Single Programming Documents for 2004-2006 and 2007-2013) have set out concrete measures for the further development of a national knowledge and competence assessment system, including the validation of non-formal learning experiences.</p> <p>These documents call on the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour to implement respective measures. At national level, different projects were undertaken as follow up actions, the main one being the development of a national qualification system under the ESF national level project 'The Creation of the National System of Qualifications in Lithuania'.</p> <p>Numbers of beneficiaries are so far relatively low but are gradually increasing.</p>
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▪ **Countries with a low degree of development**

This category was previously defined as encompassing countries in which “as yet there is little in terms of policy or practice which actually facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning”. This category now includes countries which may be *in the process of developing, or approving legislation or policy relating to validation, or tools which might support the introduction of a process of validation such as occupational profiles, as well as those countries where very little activity, if any at all, is taking place.*

Countries which would fall under this category include Bulgaria, Greece and Latvia.

Bulgaria	<p>Plans to introduce validation of prior learning only began in Bulgaria in the context of fulfilling EU accession requirements and are still developing. Strategic documents such as the National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2008-2013, Action Plan 2009, the National Strategy for Further Vocational Education and Training 2005 – 2010, the Renewed Employment Strategy 2008-2015 and the 2010 National Action Plan on Employment highlight the establishment of a system of validation of non-formal and informal learning as a priority.</p> <p>Currently the only legislative regulation of validation is laid down in the 1999 Vocational Education and Training (VET) Act, however it has limited practical application. The 2008 Law for amending and expanding the Employment Promotion Act stipulates that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science should create conditions for the assessment and recognition of the knowledge and skills of adults acquired through non-formal and informal learning.</p> <p>In 2009 a working group on validation within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Science elaborated several proposals on amending the current legal framework in the field.</p> <p>Bulgaria is trying to build on good practice from other countries. A model system for validation was designed in 2009 as part of the project “Promoting adults’ vocational training and employability in Bulgaria” and tested in three professions: carpenter, tailor, and social worker. Amendments to the VET Act are being designed on the basis of the above model.</p>
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<p>Greece</p>	<p>A national system for validation has not yet been implemented in Greece; although the legal framework for the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning is currently being developed by the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs. Forthcoming legislation is to introduce a NQF and create an integrated system of validation of informal and non-formal learning.</p> <p>Currently, the Greek authorities only issue certificates to accredit prior learning in relation to language and ICT skills.</p> <p>In the field of professional qualifications, the Common Ministerial Decision by the Ministers of Economy and Finance, Employment and Social Protection 'Certification System of Programmes, Knowledge, Skills and Competences' defines the procedures for the certification of knowledge, skills and competences of trainees. However, this common ministerial decision has not been implemented to date.</p>
<p>Latvia</p>	<p>In Latvia, recent policy and legislative documents have supported the concept of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The introduction of a National Qualifications Framework and the development of a system of validation of non-formal and informal learning are twin objectives.</p> <p>In vocational education, a system (except for tertiary levels and regulated professions) will be put in place as of 1 January 2011, via an amendment of the Vocational Education Law. It states that the assessment of vocational competence performed by accredited education institutions shall take into account the requirements of the respective Occupational Standard.</p>

2.4 Types of approach or system

Alongside this categorisation of the level of development of each country, it is also possible to group countries according to the various approaches/systems used to steer their development of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Based on the 2010 country updates, countries can be divided into two main categories those with a centrally designed and managed system of validation on the one hand and those with local project based initiatives on the other. These two main categories encompass several different approaches. In countries with a centrally regulated approach, validation is driven by a national law, policy or strategy, a national framework with devolved responsibilities, or is based on centrally-designed qualifications which include a validation 'component' or validation procedures to facilitate access to formal education / training or employment. In countries where local or project-based initiatives are prominent, these may emerge in response to an identified need to support specific target groups, or from demand from employers in a certain sector. Pilot projects focusing on testing a methodology for a specific target group, or among a small number of providers are another source of less centralised approaches.

Furthermore, while it is analytically useful to distinguish between these types of approaches, there are also different intersections between them. Firstly, both types of initiatives, the Inventory has documented, coexist in a number of European countries (e.g. Germany), although in some countries a particular approach may tend to dominate (e.g. sectoral initiatives in Iceland). Second, the development of each type of initiative tends to generate the further development or recognition of the other. Validation initiatives generated at the grass-root level, thus, can inspire or even force national legislation over validation. Similarly, the development of a national framework for validation can stimulate and affect the development of related bottom-up initiatives.

2.4.1 **Countries with a centrally regulated approach**

In countries with a centrally regulated approach, validation is driven by a ***national law, policy or strategy***. This might be either by establishing a right for individuals to, under certain conditions, undergo a validation process, or an obligation on learning or validation providers to develop and implement validation processes. The degree of implementation and take-up may, however, be varied:

- For example, in France the 2002 Social Modernisation Act made access to validation of knowledge gained through experience a right for everyone with at least three years of paid or voluntary experience.
- In Norway, the 2003 amendment to the Education Act gave adults a right to have their realkompetanse documented, including when not seeking further education.
- In Slovenia, the National Vocational Qualification Act (NVQA) makes it possible for individuals to obtain a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) through recognition of prior learning and experiences. The Act binds providers to take into consideration, alongside formal education, informal learning experiences.
- In Sweden, the decree on Higher Education (Högskoleförordningen) states that all higher education institutions are obliged to assess prior and experiential learning of applicants who demand such an assessment and who lack the formal qualifications.

Another form of central direction is to set ***targets*** at national level for the number of validations to be carried out. In Latvia for example, the national Lifelong Learning Strategy set a target for the first 100 persons to have acquired a qualification through the validation system of non-formal learning in 2010 and in Spain, the 2008 Roadmap to boost and promote vocational training (*Hoja de ruta” para la potenciación y el impulso de la Formación Profesional en España*) allocated funding (EUR 3.5 million) for the training of 3,000 practitioners, as well as the processing of an anticipated 8,000 validation applications in 2011. In Sweden, the Public Employment Service has, during 2009 and 2010, undertaken initiatives to increase the use of validation as a tool to enhance individuals' employability. Funding was earmarked to support approximately 3,800 validation processes.

This centralised approach is evident in a number of the new Member States and candidate countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Latvia, Turkey), where policy and / or legislation is currently in the process of being introduced, often in response to the drive from European-level strategies and guidelines (which will be discussed in more detail below).

A less direct approach to central direction is based on ***the central design of qualifications which include a validation ‘component’, or specific procedures to facilitate access to formal education / training or employment***. Such qualifications and procedures can be found in a number of countries. These seem to present a more ‘rigid’ infrastructure for validation, in comparison to policies/strategies/guidelines which encourage learning providers to use validation or set out an entitlement to validation for individuals. It can also be a means of avoiding the resistance from educational institutions refusing to open traditional qualifications to validation. These qualifications or procedures may however be implemented in addition to, or alongside such policies.

For example, in Finland validation is at the very core of the competence-based qualifications (CBQs) system, which offers an opportunity for adults to obtain basic (initial), further and specialist vocational qualifications based on the principle that full and partial competence-based qualifications can be awarded regardless of how and where the competences and knowledge have been acquired. In principle candidates can obtain such

qualifications without any formal training at all. The competence-based qualification system also offers by law and in practice each and every student a personalised study and assessment plan that takes into account their personal circumstances, including relevant learning acquired through informal and non-formal means, for example at work or hobbies. Training providers are responsible for guiding candidates through this process. To date, over 65,000 CBQs have been awarded and there is also evidence to suggest that a growing number of adults are making use of the validation procedures available as part of these qualifications. There are no statistics on the number or share of participants benefiting from validation in this way but it has been estimated that the majority of learners benefit from validation. The level of expertise of the certificate holder is the same irrespective of whether validation of prior learning is used or not.

Other examples of qualifications which can include a validation component are: certificates of vocational competence in Belgium (Flanders), journeyman and master of crafts vocational qualifications in Latvia, the crafts examination in Poland, National Vocational Qualifications in Slovenia, and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) / Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) in the UK.

In terms of specific procedures which facilitate access to formal education / training or employment, some examples can be found in Austria, Croatia, Germany and Norway:

- In Austria, qualifications from the school system and dual system, but not university degrees, can be obtained without participating in the relevant programmes or courses, but not without passing the same exam as required in the regular system (as an 'external'). External exams are theoretically possible in all authorised Austrian education and training institutions for both general education and VET.
- In Germany, the External students' examination under § 45 (2) of the Vocational Training Act (BBiG) includes provision for validation of prior learning leading to the award of a qualification in a recognised apprenticeship trade.
- In Norway, individuals can pass a crafts or journeyman's examination based on practical work experience, rather than education and training in school and/or the apprenticeship which would normally be required.
- In Croatia, the Crafts Act (2003) defines the process of validation of informal learning within its scope (Article 55.). It states that "*For the purpose of running associated crafts businesses for which adequate qualifications are required, an examination for evidencing necessary competences is taken in accordance with the programme prescribed by the Minister of Crafts, Small and Medium Enterprises upon the proposal of the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts. The examination for evidencing necessary competences can be taken by a person having completed at least primary school education.*" After the examination has been successfully passed, the Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts issues a certificate to the individual, enabling him / her to run a crafts business.

Centralised approaches are not necessarily strongly prescriptive. It is possible to use **a loose framework, with devolved responsibility**. This might be a legislative framework which gives individual learning providers the freedom to design and develop their own processes for implementing validation at local level (e.g. in France) or a set of national guidelines or principles, which might cover one or more sectors of learning.

In the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) for example, the 'Guidance on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within the Qualifications and Credit Framework' sets out principles to help individual awarding organisations to develop or review their own RPL policies. There are also specific guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning for the HE

sector. In Estonia too, principles for the recognition of prior learning have been developed relatively recently at national level.

Providing guidelines at national level, or setting out principles which learning providers should adhere to is a flexible way to regulate this area without being unduly prescriptive and enabling individual providers to deal with variable circumstances. However there is also a risk that there will be a considerable differentiation in the delivery of validation across providers and sectors. In the Netherlands for example, where the original approach to the development of a validation (EVC) system was a policy of “*stimulating and not regulating*”, concerns about the quality of provision led the stakeholders involved to develop a ‘Quality Code’ which in 2010 has been taken over by the Ministry of Education, following a critical evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education of the quality of the accredited EVC providers. In Belgium (Flanders) there are concerns that the existence of different individual practices on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in HEIs can lead to students ‘shopping around’ and stimulating unhelpful provider competition. Thus a ‘loose framework’ can put the quality of provision at risk, as well as leading to a variation in (the cost of) provision which can be confusing for the individual.

Another risk associated with the use of ‘loose’ guidelines or principles is that implementation and take-up will be low, without the ‘carrot’ (or ‘stick’) of a national policy or law, as some providers show strong resistance to change. If providers are not obliged to develop and implement validation practices, it can mean that there is a lag between policy and practice (see section 2.7.4 for a further discussion of this issue).

2.4.2 Countries with local, project-based or sectoral initiatives

Less centralised approaches are evident where **local project based or sectoral initiatives** emerge in some countries in response to an identified need to support specific target groups, or demand from employers in a certain sector. For instance, in Cyprus, although there is no legislation or guidelines for validation in place at national level, there are some initiatives emerging in the private sector, implemented both by social partners and individual companies, mainly in the areas of IT, banking and accounting/auditing. In Germany, there are a wide variety of bottom-up initiatives, in addition to national systems such as the *Externenprüfung* and the *ProfilPass*.

Iceland is a good example of a country which has taken a sectoral approach. The national strategy for validation focuses on covering the sectors gradually, through close cooperation with stakeholders. The country update provides examples of pilot projects carried out in relation to different professions (banking and carpentry).

In Ireland the Lónra network of colleges implemented a pilot project to develop a standard model for the accreditation of prior learning of employees in the workplace in the area of Information Technology (IT). This model was rolled out across its member institutions. The project was designed to meet a need which had been identified across the region for improved IT skills amongst the workforce, particularly in small and medium enterprises. Many employees in these enterprises had acquired some knowledge and skills relating to IT, however these skills were often uncertified.

A more recent example is the ongoing ‘Shaping the Future’ project in North West Wales (UK), which aims to support the career transitions of the employees of the two nuclear power stations in the region, which currently employ around 1,200 people but will soon be replaced by much smaller installations operating with a different nuclear technology, and requiring a different skill set from the workforce (see the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)).

In Italy, numerous local experiences have been implemented applying to various sectors/ levels of education. In recent years, some Italian regions have introduced tools for the validation of informal and non-formal learning, making it an individual right (e.g. Emilia Romagna and Toscana), linking it to the recognition of credits for access to formal training or education (Valle D'Aosta, Lombardy, Marche, Umbria) or using it to promote the employability of jobseekers (Veneto and Lombardy).

Examples of bottom-up projects focusing on specific target groups can be found in the 2010 Inventory thematic report on this topic (validation to support specific target groups). Projects focus on young people, (older) workers with experience from the workplace, which is not accredited or certificated, the unemployed and those at risk of losing their jobs, and migrants, among others. A number of the 2010 Inventory case studies also provide examples of bottom-up, sectoral or target-group specific initiatives:

- Validation for adult educators in Austria;
- Validation used by Philips Nederland to support its employees;
- Validation for construction workers in Poland;
- Validation for Roma experts in Romania;
- The use of validation for prisoners in Norway;
- Validation in the social services sector in Scotland.

Pilot projects that often focus on testing a methodology for a specific target group, or among a small number of providers are another source of less centralised approaches. For example:

- In Hungary, an experimental project was carried out between 2003 and 2005 by the National Institute for Adult Education. The two-year project (financed by the government) aimed at developing a 'methodology package' for validation in VET.
- In Bulgaria, a model system for validation was designed in 2009 as part of the project 'Promoting adults' vocational training and employability in Bulgaria' and tested in three professions (carpenter, tailor, and social worker).

However these projects can evolve into more substantial systems for validation. For instance:

- In France, a competences portfolio (*Livret de Compétences*) has been trialled in 2010 in a limited number of schools at primary and secondary level and will now be implemented in the rest of the education sector.
- In Italy, the main aim of the 'Investing in People' pilot project was to pilot and transfer the Dutch model of validation (*Erkenning Verwoven Competenties*, EVC) in companies and organisations in the province of Macerata, which had a high level of unemployment as a result of the restructuring of private companies, particularly in the shoemaking industry. A few months after the project's conclusion, the Province promoted and signed an agreement with 14 local stakeholders (social partners, companies, universities, the third sector) to sustain the start-up of the local system of validation on the basis of the model.

These examples show that the provision of national and EU funding to support innovative projects is important, since these pilot projects provide evidence for the implementation of validation initiatives on a wider scale. Pilot projects thus often benefit from European funding, either through the Lifelong Learning programme (principally the Grundtvig and Leonardo da Vinci strands) or through the European Social Fund (and previously the

EQUAL Community Initiative). For example the 'Investing in People' project mentioned above was funded by the EQUAL Community Initiative and a number of the projects selected for the 2010 Inventory Update case studies were (part-)funded through the European Social Fund. For further information on the influence of other policy developments such as the EQF, which apply on a more general basis, see below in this report.

It seems that those countries which have a local approach tend to fall within the lower level of development categories and although there is a mix in terms of the level of development among those countries with a centralised approach (e.g. from Turkey, which is at a low level of development, to Norway, which is at a high level of development), it is interesting to note that all of the countries in the 'high level of development' category have a relatively centralised approach in one or more sectors of learning.

The following section describes some factors that influence the level of development of validation in EU countries and / or the approach taken to developing and implementing a system of validation.

2.5 Factors influencing the level of development or approach to validation

There are a number of factors that influence the level of development or approach to validation. Some of these are discussed in turn below, as follows:

- The country context and wider policy framework; Economic / sectoral drivers;
- The institutional framework and the role of stakeholders;
- The impact of parallel developments in education and training policy;
- The impact of European-level policy / programmes / funding.

2.5.1 Initiatives driven by a wider policy framework or context, including the economic context

Across Europe, the context of the economic downturn has become an important driver of employment, education and social policies and strategies. This economic context, alongside the demise of the concept of a 'job for life', the increased need for skilled workers (with a predicted 16 million more jobs requiring high qualifications by 2020, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs⁶) and high rates of early school leaving, present a number of challenges to the countries of Europe in terms of re- or up-skilling their workforces and ensuring that there is sufficient flexibility within the labour force to address these challenges. They also require that the full extent of individual knowledge, skills and competences are made visible. These recent developments at European/ global level are likely to have increased the importance of validation. The importance of recognition of non-formal and informal learning has thus been recognised in the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth.

There is broad agreement⁷ that socially responsible support practices for those who lose their jobs as a result of the crisis need to go beyond compensation for job loss and extend to career guidance and other forms of support which will help the employee to make the transition into further work, education or training⁸. In the Netherlands, the role of validation

⁶ Europe 2020 Strategy. Internet: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

⁷ Cedefop, 2010, Social responsible restructuring, Effective strategies for supporting redundant workers. Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6107_en.pdf

⁸ Cedefop, 2010, Social responsible restructuring, Effective strategies for supporting redundant workers. Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6107_en.pdf

as a tool to tackle the economic crisis has been recognised. In 2009 a new temporary measure was taken by the government, allowing employers who need to make redundancies because of the economic crisis to offer the employees concerned a procedure for an *Ervaringscertificaat* (a formal procedure in which a candidate can get accreditation of his/her learning outcomes) or an *Ervaringsprofiel* (a generic, formative, personal portfolio). The scheme is targeted at three different specific groups: young unemployed persons without a starting qualification, the unemployed and employed people at risk of losing their jobs. For the young unemployed, only those who do not hold a Level 2 vocational qualification are eligible. The other two groups can use the measure to access qualifications up to the level of higher professional education (HBO), to support their mobility on the labour market. The cost of this procedure is subsidised by the Public Employment Service (UWV), depending on the number of employees the company has. Some EUR 57 million is being made available for the scheme in 2009 - 2010 and an additional EUR 75 million for education and training of people at risk of redundancy.

A number of the country updates show how a specific country context can also influence the development and take-up of validation.

- In Norway for instance, the long tradition of 'appreciation', recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is suggested as a reason for the high level of development of validation in this country.
- In Portugal a clear driver for the national system of recognition and validation of competences (RVCC), and subsequent New Opportunities initiative, was the low level of qualifications among the population, which is several times lower than that in the majority of other European Union countries. At the same time, high rates of early school leaving resulted in high numbers of under-qualified young people entering the labour market⁹. The reinforcement of the national system of validation (RVCC) is one of the axes of the general political framework in place to reduce the qualifications deficit among the adult population.
- In Spain, the labour market situation and the qualifications profile in the country suggested that there was significant scope for extending access to Vocational Education and Training (VET), in particular at the secondary level, to upgrade qualification levels, reduce skills polarisation and bring about economic growth. A 'Roadmap to boost and promote vocational training' (*'Hoja de ruta para la potenciación y el impulso de la Formación Profesional en España'*) was thus developed which aims to increase the attractiveness of VET as well as its labour market relevance. The Roadmap is composed of ten lines of action, which range from the creation of new National Reference Centres for innovation in VET to a new system of validation of competences acquired through professional experience, in what has been the most significant development in Spain since the 2007 Inventory Update.
- In Scotland, within the context of a range of measures led by the Scottish Government to meet the population growth target set out in the Government's Economic Strategy, validation is being considered as a means of recognising the skills of learning and qualifications of migrant workers and refugees, in order to facilitate access to education, employment or training at a level commensurate with existing skills and/or qualifications.

⁹ Gomes, Maria do Carmo e Luís Capucha (2010) New Opportunities Initiative: large-scale and effective solutions for large-scale problems, paper presented 25.09.2010 at the ESREA conference. Internet: <http://www.liu.se/esrea2010/papers-presented?l=en>

- A number of countries focus on using validation as a tool to support disadvantaged groups, or to widen access to higher education to 'non-traditional' groups of learners, which are discussed in more detail in the 2010 Inventory thematic reports on these two topics.

2.5.2 Economic drivers

The workplace offers a rich learning environment where individuals can acquire new skills, develop existing ones or apply their skills to new contexts. There is a need for strong mechanisms to recognise the skills and competences employees acquire both through on-the-job learning and non-formal training, as well as formal learning. Such mechanisms would support the individual's career development and mobility, by enabling learning to be recognised for future pathways in education, training or employment, including pathways into formal learning¹⁰.

As well as the drive from the public sector, demand from the private sector can also lead to the introduction of validation initiatives – particularly bottom-up or pilot projects as described above. These might be initiatives developed by individual employers, as is the case for example in the Philips Nederland VQP initiative, described in the 2010 Inventory case study on this project, or those developed in response to an identified need within certain sectors to upskill, re-skill or professionalise the workforce. More recently, initiatives are emerging which aim to enable those at risk of redundancy, or already having lost their jobs, to improve their employability. Validation thus has the potential to play a role in the implementation of a 'flexicurity' approach to labour market policies. In terms of sectoral initiatives, a number of specific sectors seem to be more prominent in the examples provided within the country report. These are health and social care professions, manual professions such as construction, and teaching / training roles. For instance, three of the 2010 Inventory case studies focus on these particular fields of work:

- The Scottish Social Services Council, which has used recognition of prior learning as a stepping stone towards a formal qualification, in response to a new registration requirement for social services staff in Scotland;
- 'Towards a Qualified Construction Workforce for Poland' (APL-Bud; Accreditation of Prior Learning for Polish Construction), which was developed in response to the crisis in the European construction labour market in 2008;
- The Academy of Continuing Education in Austria, an initiative to support the professionalisation of the adult-education sector.

There are some examples of initiatives introduced by or with the involvement of individual employers – often in partnership with public sector actors - within the 2010 country updates. Again these can be found mainly in relation to manual occupations (such as metal cutting in Sweden) and within regulated occupations (such as welding in Lithuania).

2.5.3 Stakeholders / institutional framework

As evidenced by the 2010 country updates, the active involvement of a large range of stakeholders from both public and private sectors is a prerequisite for the successful development of validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation needs buy-in from all parties so that the outcomes can be trusted and bring full benefits to beneficiaries, as

¹⁰ Brown, A., Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Kirpal, S., Grønning, T. & Dæhlen, M. (2010) [Changing Patterns of Work, Learning and Career Development Across Europe](#) (Final Report EACEA/2007/07). Brussels: Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency

well as to extend opportunities for accessing validation to different categories of learners and at different levels.

The 2005 and 2007 Inventories observed that public sector organisations are critically important in developing validation methodologies and setting the frameworks for their use. This situation seems largely unchanged, as the role of respective stakeholders seems fairly stable over time.

However, the respective role of stakeholders is somewhat different according to the type of validation. For example, in vocational education and training and in higher education, education providers, private partners and social partners are also responsible for the development of many successful validation practices on the ground. Within these areas, the role of private sector stakeholders is stronger in the VET area.

There are also significant differences between countries, depending on the level of development of validation, and on the way validation has been developed (mostly through local project based or sectoral initiatives or a more centrally-regulated approach). In countries with a centrally regulated approach, it is evident that the public sector is the 'driving force' for validation. In countries with a project based or sectoral approach, validation projects and practices can be implemented by a range of stakeholders, including education and training providers, social partners, employers, or third sector bodies.

- **National Ministries, regional authorities, governmental agencies and other public bodies**

According to the 2010 country updates, *national ministries and regional authorities* still play an essential role in providing a 'steer' for validation and ensuring that it is given enough emphasis in policies and strategies. The OECD also concludes that "*national or local government authorities take the lead in guiding recognition systems*"¹¹.

In a number of countries where validation systems are still emerging or are in the process of development, developments are mostly driven by public sector actors.

In some countries, although there are more established validation practices, the responsibilities are not necessarily clear-cut between institutions working at different levels (e.g. national/regional). For instance in Germany there is neither a central institution nor a standardised institutional framework in place for validation. There are a variety of approaches (some relatively well established) in place and responsibility for these different approaches lies with different organisations. 'Competent authorities' – mainly the Chambers of crafts, Chambers of industry and commerce and Chambers of farming - are responsible for the admission to the External students' examination. For access to higher education, the German Rectors' Conference has defined the framework for validation, but specific regulations and procedures are established by the respective university. The ProfilPASS-system is managed by a national service centre, which supports 55 local 'dialogue centres'.

In other countries, several ministries are involved in the design and implementation of validation procedures, for instance in France, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders) or Denmark.

National / regional institutions and agencies, with responsibility for validation

¹¹ Werquin, P., *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Outcomes, Policies and Practices*, OECD, 2010

In some countries, the responsibility to oversee the development of validation initiatives has been attributed to *existing national/regional institutions and agencies in the field of lifelong learning*. Such structures have a remit to integrate validation into the array of lifelong learning tools they developed for individuals. For example, the Education and Training Service Centre in Iceland as well as the National Agency for Education and Training of Adults in Portugal play an important role in the development of validation. In Norway, Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning is responsible for the overview at national level of the approach to validation of non-formal and informal learning. In Belgium (Wallonia), the Commission for Lifelong Learning (ETALV) has been entrusted with a mission to promote validation with the general public.

In other countries, specialised bodies have been put in place to facilitate validation (although they do not necessarily assume the responsibility for the overall process of validation): for example, *national information centres on validation*, whose role is to gather and share knowledge and good practices on validation of non-formal and informal learning and stimulate the use of efficient validation practices. This is the case for instance of the EVC KennisCentrum (Knowledge Centre) in the Netherlands, or its equivalent in Denmark, the national Knowledge Centre of Competence Assessment which aims to gather, develop and spread knowledge on validation for the benefit of various stakeholders. These organisations, whilst not generally involved in practice, facilitate and catalyse the development of practice through the sharing of good practice and lessons learned.

Other public bodies contribute to reaching out to specific target groups. In some countries *Public Employment Services* (PES) have included in their mission the development of validation pathways for jobseekers (notably Pôle Emploi in France or FOREM in Belgium (Wallonia), as well as the PES in Sweden). In the Netherlands, Labour Mobility Centres can also work together with companies to offer validation for workers. In countries such as Sweden and Austria, the PES (and their specialised services) work to help migrants benefit from validation.

- **The formal education sector**

The 2010 OECD report on validation states that “*providers of learning in the formal context and providers of certified qualifications are at the forefront of recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. They are either stakeholders in the recognition system or its direct competitors, and sometimes both*”¹². For this reason, it is crucial for the successful implementation of validation practices to ensure that the formal education sector adheres to the objectives of validation and is fully committed to the development of policies and strategies. Furthermore, practices in the formal sector could be enhanced by adopting on a more general basis the developments which validation of non formal and informal learning brings, such as self-assessment, evidence gathering and tailored learning and assessment.

In addition, *individual education and training providers* need the right tools, context and funding to develop validation at their level. Indeed, in a number of countries, especially those lacking a formal legislative framework for validation of non-formal and informal learning, validation activities have solely been put in place at the level of the individual education institution.

The role of individual education and training providers is particularly relevant within higher education, where evidence shows that validation practices are markedly fragmented. In some countries, higher education institutions have developed *networks* or other organisational structures to bring greater coherence on validation to the sector, for example

¹² Werquin, P., *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning – Outcomes, Policies and Practices*, OECD, 2010

in Belgium, Scotland, Denmark or Ireland. The purpose of these networks is to address an issue of variation in the existing provision of validation and to encourage collaboration and the sharing of good practices.

In addition, *specific education bodies* responsible for instance for quality assurance in the sector can play a role in the development of validation, for example in the UK, where the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has issued guidelines for validation for higher education institutions.

Within the formal education sector, but also in the private and third sectors, it is important to underline the important role of practitioners. It is their role to implement policies / strategies calling for the introduction or further use of validation and they play a crucial role in the development of new and existing validation systems. They may also be the source of bottom-up approaches, developed in response to an identified need. In order to fulfil their role, practitioners require adequate information on the validation systems and procedures to be applied, where possible training in how to apply them, and of course the appropriate time and resources.

- **Private sector actors (including social partners)**

Private sector organisations play an important role in the development of national initiatives on validation, for example devising validation standards and making sure that the needs of the sector are taken into account. In many countries, the private sector is consulted on standards and methodologies for validation. In addition, in some countries representatives of the relevant occupation / profession are invited to take part in the jury/ committee which conducts a validation assessment, for example in Belgium (Wallonia), Finland, France and Luxembourg.

It remains the case that *private companies* that have used validation of informal and non-formal learning internally are mostly large companies. Other professional bodies such as *chambers of commerce* also play a role as promoters and developers of validation practices, for example in France.

More indirectly, private sector employers and professional bodies also shape the development of validation practices through the formulation of their needs for workforce development and qualifications (encouraging validation practices in the field of health care and other sectors facing shortages for example).

In many countries, the commitment of *social partners* has been essential for the development and evolution of the national validation system. Social partners play an important role in the development of validation and the definition of standards especially in vocational education and training, for example in Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Denmark. In Finland, the validation system is tripartite, with qualification committees involving social partners responsible for competence-based assessments. Some bottom-up validation practices initiated by social partners have also been observed.

Regarding the provision of funding for validation initiatives, bipartite bodies such as training funds play an important role for example in France.

In 2010, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)¹³ commissioned a study on the use of validation by enterprises for human resources and career development purposes. The aim of the study is to investigate how and to what extent enterprises systematically identify and validate knowledge, skills and competences for recruiting, human resource management and/or certification purposes. The final outputs of

¹³ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Index.aspx>

the study will include a number of case studies, illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of enterprise-based validation approaches and arrangements.

2.5.4 Impact of parallel developments in education and training policy

There are a number of other developments, specifically within the sphere of education and training, which have an influence on the development or implementation of validation systems. Perhaps most significant is the move towards a learning outcomes approach, which has to some extent been encouraged by the development of national qualifications frameworks, driven in many countries by the development of a European Qualifications Framework. Two other important developments identified in the national reports are the introduction, or wider use, of occupational profiles or standards and the increased use of modular, unit or credit-based qualifications. In addition, as outlined in more detail in the Inventory 2010 thematic report on the use of validation in the HE sector, the Bologna Process has provided some impetus for further developments in this area. Although it is not discussed in detail below, it is also worth noting that developed guidance and counselling systems also play an important role in the use of validation, as through them individuals can be pointed out towards appropriate educational pathways, and opportunities for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

- **The move to a learning outcomes approach**

It was noted in the 2007 Inventory update that there was an increasing focus in the countries covered by the project on the assessment of learning outcomes for the award of qualifications or for admission to courses, rather than on inputs or processes of study. Cedefop notes that there is a broad consensus among policy-makers, social partners and education and training practitioners on the relevance of learning outcomes for improving access to and progression within education, training and learning¹⁴ and stresses the importance of building NQFs around learning outcomes (*“an NQF that is owned by an administration, and whose use is limited largely to official publications, probably serves little purpose. Here, the identification of learning outcomes can provide the organising factor to make explicit the achievements of a wide range of learners, irrespective of the types or modes or duration of learning and training undertaken.”*)

The move towards learning outcomes based approaches is supported through European-level cooperation and tools. For example, in the HE sector, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool that helps to design, describe, and deliver programmes and higher education qualifications. The use of ECTS, in conjunction with outcomes-based qualifications frameworks, makes programmes and qualifications more transparent and facilitates the recognition of qualifications. In the Vocational Education and Training sector, the introduction of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is intended to facilitate the validation, recognition and accumulation of work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or from different learning experiences. ECVET is based on learning outcomes, units of learning outcomes that are components of qualifications and ECVET points, which provide additional information about units and qualifications in a numerical form. ECVET is intended to facilitate the development of flexible and individualised pathways and also the recognition of those learning outcomes which are acquired through non-formal and informal learning. By 2012, ECVET should create a technical framework to describe qualifications in terms of such units and to include assessment, transfer, accumulation and recognition procedures.

¹⁴ Cedefop, 2009, The Shift to Learning Outcomes, Policies and Practices in Europe. Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3054_en.pdf

It should be noted however that the country updates for the 2010 Inventory Update show little progress in terms of the implementation of ECVET at national level, which is perhaps not surprising since this is a recent initiative. Yet there also seems to be more work to be done in implementing ECTS. The 2009 Bologna Stocktaking Report notes that although ECTS has been part of the Bologna Process since 1999, it is still not fully implemented across all the countries involved. The report explains that while ECTS credits are widely used for both credit accumulation and transfer, there are two main challenges in fully implementing ECTS: measuring credits in terms of student workload and linking them with learning outcomes¹⁵.

The existence of learning outcomes based standards/qualifications is an important feature for validation which leads to certification. The development of outcomes-based qualifications makes it easier to:

- Establish the link between validation and the formal system (the same standards may be used for both), between experience and formal qualifications;
- Identify the level of learning which takes place outside the formal system provided this is described in terms of learning outcomes and assessed in a quality assured manner.

The design of national qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes based qualifications is therefore an opportunity to mainstream validation and make it become an accepted route to qualifications. It is expected in most countries covered by the Inventory that by linking up the validation system to the development of the national qualifications framework, validation of non-formal and informal learning will be brought 'on a par' with formal learning outcomes.

Some of the 2010 country updates highlight the importance of a learning outcomes approach to the success of a (future) system of validation. For instance, the country update for Hungary notes that the development of the Hungarian NQF and the validation system are interconnected, with the most important common point being the use of a learning outcomes approach in the formulation of the education and training requirements - the same learning outcomes constitute the reference for the validation. In France too, although there is already a comprehensive validation system in place, work is ongoing to produce standards (*référentiels*) described in terms of learning outcomes for higher education, in order to facilitate VAE.

▪ **National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)**

As was the case when the 2007 European Inventory Update was produced, our 2010 country updates show that there is still only a small number of countries which have actually finalised their NQFs, although the majority are in the process of developing a framework. This is confirmed in the Cedefop August 2010 update on the development of NQFs in Europe¹⁶, which shows that all of the 31 countries¹⁷ covered by the report aim

¹⁵ Rauhvargers, A., Deane, C., Pauwels, W., 2009, Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009. Internet: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ Cedefop, 2010, The development of National Qualifications in Europe (August 2010). Internet: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6108_en.pdf

¹⁷ The report covers the same countries as those included in the European Inventory, with the exception of Liechtenstein. It should be noted that Liechtenstein does not currently have a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning but is in the process of developing a framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process.

to develop and introduce a national qualifications framework for lifelong learning responding to the EQF. The majority of these countries aim for comprehensive frameworks covering all levels and types of qualifications and seeking a stronger integration between them.

NQFs based on descriptors are open to different forms of learning, as descriptors are based on learning outcomes. As such, in those countries where NQFs are already in place, the Frameworks are generally seen as being an important part of the infrastructure in place within the country to support validation. In Ireland, the NQF is said to support the recognition of prior learning by providing a common reference point for the assessment of prior non-formal and informal learning. Also in Belgium (Flanders), the NQF will be used as the reference framework for the recognition of prior learning. In Malta, where a system of validation is currently in development, the NQF has been developed to be compatible with the EQF and also with the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning.

Connections between existing frameworks and validation are also being made more explicit. In the UK two sets of guidelines on recognition of prior learning (one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, one for Scotland), linked to the implementation of the respective National Qualifications Frameworks, have been introduced.

Finally, in some of those countries which are in the process of developing NQFs, a link with validation is expected. For instance in Austria, one of the main objectives of the NQF, which is in development, is to support the recognition of a broader range of learning forms. In Croatia, one of the main aims of the national committee for establishing the NQF (CROQF) is to construct 'a system of prior learning evaluation and recognition, including non-formal and informal learning'. In the Czech Republic, validation is tightly related to the (ongoing) development of the NQF: a recognition procedure can only be carried out if the qualifications and assessment standard are defined in the qualifications register (which is the basis of the NQF). However, whilst there may be a 'wish' for NQFs to be an enabling mechanism for validation, the evidence of an actual formative link is still not clear.

Yet it appears that a National Qualifications Framework is not a *necessary* precursor to the introduction of a validation system. Some of those countries where validation is at a high level of development, such as Finland, Norway and Portugal, are still in the process of developing their NQFs, yet have still shown good progress in relation to validation. Nevertheless these countries do recognise the role their future NQFs have to play in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In Finland for instance, it is reported that the developments related to the design and implementation of the NQF have also given new impetus for work in this field.

▪ **Introduction of occupational standards/ profiles**

In a number of countries, occupational standards or profiles are being developed, which represent an important 'stepping stone' towards the introduction or implementation of a system of validation (in relation to vocational or professional education and training). Again, if the occupational standards are designed around learning outcomes (i.e. 'what a person needs to be able to do in order to carry out the job') an individual will be in a better position to appreciate that they have knowledge, skills and competences that could be recognised if a validation procedure was available to them.

For example, a system for occupational standards is currently being developed in Greece, by the National Accreditation Centre of Continuing Vocational Training, with close involvement of the social partners. So far, 202 occupational profiles have been designed, covering a multitude of emerging occupations and economic sectors including

commerce, tourism, industry and banking. These profiles will subsequently be accredited and training institutions will then be expected to adapt their curricula in accordance with these occupational profiles, and validation could lead to the award of such qualifications. Hence, the system of defining occupational standards is one step in the process towards a system for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Greece. The creation of a system for the accreditation of training programmes based on the occupational profiles, and following that, a system for the accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competences that will be acquired through such programmes has not yet been implemented. This is a challenge for the near future, in the context of a National Qualifications' Framework based on learning outcomes, which will be governed by common processes and in parallel to the accreditation of the stakeholders offering continuous training.

In Turkey, individuals will be assessed for the validation of non-formal and informal learning against national qualifications requirements and occupational standards which are currently in development. At present, 72 occupational standards have been approved and legalised, with many more in development.

Again, the ECVET may support developments at national level in this area, since it breaks down vocational qualifications into units, which are coherent sets of knowledge, skills and competence that can be assessed and validated and, potentially, linked back to occupational profiles. There are currently several ongoing projects focusing on the development and promotion of ECVET which are being developed in different sectors (including automobile service, chemistry, tourism, and international trade), funded by the [EU's Leonardo da Vinci Programme](#).

▪ **Introduction of modular/ credit- /unit-based qualifications**

The introduction of modular and unit assessments (credit arrangements¹⁸) can help to encourage the award of partial qualifications through the validation of non formal and informal learning. Yet the evidence of the effects of credit arrangements on validation procedures is on the whole weak. Although there is a section within the 2010 country updates describing the 'link between validation and the existing / developing credit system, unit-based or modularised structure of qualifications' only a few country updates provide evidence of the use and award of credits, modules or units through validation.

In a number of countries validation is used to award credits in order to shorten the required training pathway an individual has to complete in order to acquire a qualification. In Denmark for instance, a reform in 2005 introduced a credit transfer system in general upper secondary education, based on assessment of an individual's prior learning. Students can obtain credits for previously completed studies, periods of stay abroad, etc., and be granted admission to subjects at a higher level or a reduced advanced level course load (where the credit transfer is particularly substantial). In Iceland, validation mostly takes place towards a shortening of a study path at an Upper Secondary School level, where a modular system is in place. The process focuses on assessing competences within each subject of a study path with a specific unit value. The results are calculated in recognised units which are a part of a module. If a participant fulfils the requirements of a subject through a validation process it is registered into his/her educational record. On average a participant going through a validation process within the certified trades has 28 units recognised and registered into his/her educational record

¹⁸ Cedefop, 2010, Linking Credit Systems and Qualifications Frameworks, Internet; http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5505_en.pdf

towards the shortening of a study path. The length of a study path can be, to take carpentry as an example, a total of 100 units. Participants rarely exceed 60 units through the validation process and a full qualification is not granted until a journeyman's examination is completed (which are at upper secondary school graduation level).

In the Czech Republic, it is thought that it is easier for individuals to obtain recognition for smaller sets of competences than for a full qualification, based on their work experience; thus individuals can accumulate partial qualifications for vocational qualifications at levels 3 and 4 of the NQF (these levels are expected to be referenced to levels 3 and 4 of the EQF but the EQF referencing has not yet been carried out) in order to proceed to the final examination directly, without having to attend any formal learning.

Several country updates (Iceland, Norway and Sweden) indicate however that the opportunity to tailor or shorten learning pathways can be difficult to implement in practice. In Iceland for example, the possibility to validate and document competences that are only a part of a course – leading not to credits but to statements of achievement- exists, within adult education at the upper secondary level. The country update however suggests that this validation possibility is rarely used, due to challenges in adapting the organisation of courses – which tend to be delivered to groups of learners - to meet each individual's educational needs.

The introduction of national qualifications frameworks and ECVET may facilitate the award of credits, units or modules of individual qualifications, via formal, non-formal and / or informal learning. This is the case for instance in the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), where the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) can be used to award credit for qualifications and units of learning.

As reported in the 2010 Inventory thematic report on access to higher education, many universities have also developed practices to recognise informal and non-formal learning to exempt students from credits/modules/parts of curricula, e.g.:

- *Based on the recognition of experience acquired through volunteering:* for instance, in Croatia, the Universities of Rijeka and of Zagreb can grant to students who are doing voluntary work in NGOs or public institutions (mainly related to social work) additional ECTS credits for that subject, upon confirmation of their volunteering activities.
- *When the curriculum includes placement periods:* in Latvia some HEIs can reduce the length of such period for those students who have relevant work experience in the field.

A number of country reports also refer to the use of ECTS credits to quantify the learning which can be validated in relation to a higher education qualification, such as for example Belgium (Wallonia) and Denmark.

2.5.5 Impact of European-level drivers

The role of European funding programmes and associated projects in the development of validation has been referred to above. Yet evidence indicates that not only European funding programmes but also wider European drivers have played a significant role in the development of validation practices. For instance in Bulgaria, the 2010 country update observes that plans to introduce validation of prior learning only began in the context of fulfilling EU accession requirements. In Hungary too, the country update suggests that initiatives to develop validation on a larger scale are driven by the government, with strong influence from European Initiatives.

In particular, the EQF is considered to present an important move forward as it is a framework based on learning outcomes which requires that national systems/ frameworks referenced to it are also based on learning outcomes. The EQF referencing criteria also highlight that, where national arrangements for validation exist, these should be linked to the national system/ framework. The EQF recommendation encourages Member States to promote validation together with the design of learning outcomes based qualifications. It also notes that such approaches should be particularly promoted with regard to people at risk of unemployment or in insecure employment positions. As indicated above, nearly all countries covered by the Inventory are now developing or have developed a national qualifications framework, often linked to the development or consolidation of a system of validation.

Furthermore, the European Principles and more recently the European Guidelines on Validation have been identified in some country reports as representing a model or template for the development of national, or local initiatives. The country update for Germany for example suggests that although there is no overall quality framework for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, instead, concrete quality standards – usually based on the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning - have been developed in the context of several approaches. The country update goes on to suggest that the main approaches for validation in that country basically take into consideration the European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning, which is particularly significant given the absence of a central agency responsible for validation at the federal level. In Latvia, the national programme ‘Development of uniform procedures to improve the quality of vocational education and to involve social partners and educate them’, supported by both national and EU funds (the European Social Fund) aimed to develop a regulatory basis for validation and elaborate recommendations for validating non-formal learning following the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning. In Malta, the new national qualifications framework is said to be compatible with the ‘European Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning’, which invite Member States to make validation of non-formal and informal learning an integral part of their national qualification system.

The country updates also show that European funding has played a key role in supporting validation projects across many countries, some of which have led to sustainable outcomes. A number of countries rely on ESF for the development and testing of validation systems and while this is particularly the case among new Member States, it is also evident in other EU countries such as Belgium and Portugal. As will be discussed below, this reliance on EU funding could represent a cause for concern.

One EU-funded project which should be mentioned here is the Observal network, funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme. The network brings together partners from 24 European Union Member States, representing the different educational sectors (higher education, vocational education and training, adult education) to create a database on validation of non formal and informal learning in European countries, available in a ‘European Observatory’ and accessible by Internet. The database includes documents which are intended to be useful for a large range of actors (decision makers at national and institutional level, social partners, human resources managers, people in charge of validation, etc) which are usually confidential or limited in terms of their use and dissemination outside the country, region or institution where they were produced.

2.6 Overview of benefits / outcomes/ impact

The potential benefits of validation to the individual, to the economy and to society are well understood, although less well quantified in the country updates. In basic terms, summative validation offers a means of acquiring a qualification, or accessing a formal learning

opportunity, by recognising an individual's existing, albeit unaccredited, competences. Formative validation can help an individual to understand what he / she is already able to do, and to formulate personal and professional pathways for the future on the basis of this – including, when applicable, summative evaluation as referred to above. It is also commonly reported that validation increases self-esteem, motivation and confidence. For instance validation beneficiaries may find it easier to apply for a job as they gain in professional credibility and know better how to present themselves to employers, or they begin to use more actively their informally acquired knowledge and competences within the working context. Validation thus has the potential to bring a wide range of benefits, which are discussed in more detail in the 2010 Inventory thematic report on the topic of the costs and benefits of validation.

In terms of impact, the 2010 country updates confirm that although awareness of the potential benefits of utilising or developing systems of validation is increasing, the actual take-up of validation could be increased, at least in relation to public sector initiatives leading to a qualification. There are, nevertheless, countries in which this form of validation is already significant (Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal). Other forms of validation, for instance validation in the private sector through the use of interviews and performance reviews are widespread, although strong variations continue to exist between different national traditions and sectors in this area too. Some sectoral or target-group specific initiatives such as the ProfilPASS, the recognition of professional competences in Romania and the university entrance examinations for the over 25s in Spain have also achieved high levels of take-up. It is nevertheless significant that for most countries and initiatives, there is no information on the wider impact of validation activities and the country updates show that in few countries are there plans to carry out evaluations in this area. Further investigations into the impact of validation would help to inform future policy development and the allocation of public funds in this area.

Validation can also bring benefits to the education and training sector in general. Fundamentally, validation is a key tool to support the achievement of Lifelong Learning Strategies. It can also be used to increase the 'permeability' within education and training systems and to create possibilities to transfer between different sectors of learning. The introduction of new certificates which can be awarded through validation (e.g. in Belgium (Flanders) and Turkey) can also help to improve the links between the education and training sector and the labour market.

2.7 Challenges for the future

While the 2010 Update to the European Inventory has shown that much progress has been made since 2007 and has led to the identification of a wide range of good practices from across Europe, it is clear that there remain a number of obstacles / challenges to the wider implementation of validation of non-formal and informal learning in the future. A number of these challenges are discussed in turn below.

2.7.1 Terminology and aims

There remains a great variety in the terminology used across (and also within) countries to refer to validation of non-formal and informal learning. The problem associated with this disparity in terminology is that it brings with it different understandings of the concept. Even across the various policies and strategies produced at European level, it is possible to identify a range of terms, such as 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning' in the Europe 2020 Strategy, compared to 'recognition of prior learning' in the supporting documentation for the Bologna Process (a term which refers also to validation of prior *formal* learning, which as noted in the Inventory's Thematic Report on Validation in the Higher Education Sector is the reason the picture painted by the Bologna report is very

different to the findings of the Inventory country updates for a number of countries) and 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' in other contexts, including the European Principles and Guidelines on Validation. There are a number of countries which also group together the concept of validation of non-formal and informal learning with recognition of prior formal learning, for example in Norway.

In order to ensure that collaborative, transnational actions can reach their desired goals, partners often seem to 'agree to disagree' on the question of terminology but it does remain a potential challenge to wider implementation and take-up, particularly in terms of public awareness and understanding of the concept of validation. It therefore seems particularly important that individual validation initiatives make clear their aims and scope to potential users and stakeholders and that greater efforts are made to adopt a common terminology in this area.

2.7.2 Sustainability and financing issues

The economic downturn has brought with it a climate of financial insecurity, with public budgets under review in many European countries. It remains to be seen whether governments see validation as a 'non-mainstream' activity for which funding can be cut back, or whether they recognise the potential of validation to provide a cost-effective, efficient means of ensuring flexibility of the workforce, in the context of heightened job insecurity.

However, the problem of a lack of designated and/or sufficient financial backing for validation initiatives seems to have been the case since before the economic downturn commenced. As outlined in the 2010 Inventory Thematic Report on Costs and Benefits, the 32 countries covered by the project have very different arrangements in place to allocate funds to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Only a few country updates reported the existence of an earmarked, or ring-fenced budget for validation (e.g. Iceland, Spain), while in many it seems that validation activities have to be covered by fees paid by the learners themselves, or from within learning providers' existing budgets. Without a dedicated budget for validation activities it is likely that implementation and take-up will continue to lag behind the aims and objectives set out within the countries' policies and strategies.

The 2009 Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the Costs and Benefits of Validation¹⁹ concluded that while there are clear direct costs of validation, there are also hidden costs. This means that while countries often have a good understanding of the resources invested directly in validation, the hidden costs are often omitted, thus preventing an appreciation of the full picture. Anecdotal evidence from institutions and employers regarding their validation activities suggests that validation is a resource-intensive activity, yet most are hidden costs (e.g. time invested, human resources costs). High costs to organisations are suggested to be among the main obstacles for greater take up and the development of validation initiatives among the potential providers of these opportunities.

Furthermore, a common trend in Europe is the high impact of EU funds (mainly European Social Fund and Lifelong Learning Programme funding) in most of those countries; not only in Member States which joined more recently but also in some of the older Member States, such as Belgium, Italy and Portugal.

¹⁹ Report from the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the costs and benefits of validation. Internet: <http://www.ksll.net/PeerLearningActivities/PlaDetails.cfm?id=90>

It is clear that for the many pilot projects identified through our national-level research and our review of EU programme databases, sustainability is a key issue. For those projects that have identified sound methodologies or demonstrated good practice, it is important to find a way of ensuring that this learning is not lost and is shared on both a national and transnational level.

2.7.3 The need for a cultural shift / greater trust in validation

There are still important cultural and attitudinal barriers to validation. For instance, in Greece, where validation is currently at a low level of development, the country update suggests that for cultural reasons, formal educational attainment, especially at University level, is held in high esteem, while non-formal and informal learning are not valued. Moreover, the lack of a system for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning in Greece is said to lower the motivation of learners to participate in lifelong learning. Even in Finland, a country with a high level of development, formal learning is reported to be highly regarded with many learners wanting to take part in formal studies even if they have been encouraged by their teachers and guidance professionals to go through a process of validation.

As noted in the 2010 Thematic Report on Validation in the Higher Education Sector, building trust and changing culture and attitudes toward non-formal and informal learning is still a major issue in the HE sector, as highlighted by the Bologna Stocktaking report. The quality and legitimacy of recognition of prior learning is still a concern among some HEIs, due to a certain cultural reluctance to admit that individuals can learn outside formal contexts or that that learning can be of equal value to learning undertaken in a HE institution. Such concerns can be observed in countries with different levels of development of validation in HE, such as Estonia or Scotland. However, other examples show that trust can be built within the sector, for example in Norway, where it seems there was initially some scepticism towards validation, but after a number of years of implementation, the use of validation procedures relating to admissions is now more established in most HEIs.

This need for a cultural shift, or lack of trust in the introduction / use of validation, also extends to the adult learning sector. At the 2010 European Adult Education Association (EAEA) / Nordic network for adult learning (NVL)²⁰ conference for instance, which focused on the topic of qualifications frameworks, many participants had reservations and anxieties towards qualifications frameworks and associated validation of non-formal and informal learning. It was suggested for example that there is a risk in this sector that accredited courses might give learners the impression that they belong to the formal system, which may deter those with previous negative experiences of education from taking part. Delegates stressed that 'learning for learning's sake' remains important and that there should still be support and financing for non-formal learning, study circles and development of social competences even if the learners choose this type of learning for personal development and do not intend to validate the competences. The conference delegates emphasised that it should be up to the learner to choose what should be validated and not.

Other risks and concerns identified were for example:

- The fear that formalisation may lead to a loss of freedom, creativity and flexibility;
- The risk that funding might move to outcomes rather than the learning experience provided;
- The difficulty to describe and therefore accredit social competences.

²⁰ The full report of the conference can be found at:
<http://www.nordvux.net/page/1163/theeaeavnconference2010onegfandngfs.htm>

These concerns – referring in particular to accreditation and formalisation of learning - appear to relate to validation of an individual's learning outcomes in order to award a certificate or diploma, i.e. summative validation. However, as outlined in the European Principles²¹ and European Guidelines on Validation, while the broad concept of identification, documentation and validation of learning outcomes includes this kind of summative approach, it also takes account of more formative approaches, which according to the Guidelines “do not aim for formal certification of learning outcomes, but 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”²².

In terms of raising awareness of the NQF, delegates recommended continuous and inclusive discussions of all stakeholders, including employers, learners themselves and NGOs, among others, as well as education providers.

In fact it may be that the assessment processes undertaken for the validation of non-formal / informal learning are more comprehensive than those used for formal education and training, as assessments are often undertaken on a one-to-one, rather than a cohort basis and the assessment is more likely to test all of the competences required of the individual, rather than ‘sampling’ as is the case for formal education (e.g. in the case of examinations).

The concept of trust in relation to validation of non-formal and informal learning thus has a dual dimension: trust in the qualifications awarded as a result of validation processes and trust in the validation ‘systems’ in place. Viewed from this angle, a *validation process* results in awarded *qualifications* and both elements are inscribed in existing or emerging *validation systems*. Validation systems are in general linked to the formal education system at national level²³ as well as to the often segmented labour market systems reflecting the public/private sector and various branches (sectors) of the economy.

The level of trust can be influenced by the standards used for the validation process and whether these are deemed to be equal to those applied by the formal education system. Trust can also be ensured through systematic involvement of all stakeholders working together towards a consolidated validation framework (or system). Quality assurance processes are of course also vital to ensure trust and buy-in from both stakeholders and individual participants.

2.7.4 From policy to practice, and from pilot and ad hoc projects to the mainstream

Although many countries now have or are in the process of finalising a national policy or strategy for validation, it seems that the aims and objectives set out in these documents are not always reflected in implementation on the ground or in take-up by individuals. For example in Bulgaria, the only legislative regulation relating to validation is laid down in the 1999 Vocational Education and Training (VET) Act, however the country update suggests that there is limited practical application of this regulation.

²¹ Council of the European Union, *European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning*. Internet: http://www2.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/publications/principles/validation2004_en.pdf

²² CEDEFOP, *European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal Learning*. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2009. Internet: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx>

²³ However this is not always the case, for instance for the Skills Certificates awarded through the validation of professional competences in Wallonia, Belgium.

This lag between policy and practice is also observed in the 2010 Inventory thematic report on the use of Validation to support access to Higher Education. One of the main challenges identified in the thematic report is to increase the use and application of validation among HEIs to reflect recent policy developments, as also noted in the 2009 Bologna Stocktaking report²⁴.

There are a number of reasons for this 'lag' between policy and practice. One of these – a lack of, or insufficient (earmarked) funding - has already been discussed above (2.7.2). Another reason is that there can be difficulties for learning providers to implement in practice, what is set out in the policy documents. For example, as mentioned above, where validation is used to shorten or tailor study paths, in certain countries it seems that this is in practice difficult to implement. Another example is in the UK, where according to anecdotal evidence, although National Vocational Qualifications can be used as an opportunity for learners who have already acquired skills, to have these recognised, in practice they are mostly 'taught' to learners in colleges. It is also possible that – given that validation has emerged in certain countries or sectors in recent years, individuals are not aware of the opportunities available to them. Finally it may simply be that learning providers do not yet have the capacity to implement validation on a larger scale – as the country updates show that practitioners involved are generally existing academic / teaching staff and as noted above, in a number of countries no specific funding is earmarked for validation. When infrastructure has been put in place for validation purposes, as in Portugal, and linked with other measures, validation take-up has increased significantly.

Some countries are now trying to increase the take-up of validation, through measures such as awareness-raising campaigns and subsidies. In the Netherlands for instance, the government introduced a publicity campaign in 2008, entitled 'Know where you stand, ask for your experience certificate' (*Weet waar je staat, vraag je Ervaringscertificaat*) aimed at raising awareness among employees and job seekers of the possibilities of the national system of validation (*Erkenning van Verworven Competenties*, EVC). The Danish Ministry of Education has also launched a number of initiatives that seek to improve the understanding of prior learning assessment and to promote its use, including setting up a National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning and conducting a national information and networking campaign. In Norway, a promotional film has been developed by the national Agency for Lifelong Learning (Vox) which is available from its website²⁵. The film is intended to serve as inspiration for both employers and employees to find ways of visualising and documenting competences and skills.

There is also a danger that, with a lot of validation activity taking place in the form of pilot projects, often supported by fixed-term European funding, that the learning from these projects may be lost after the funding comes to an end. It is therefore important to ensure that there are opportunities for stakeholders and practitioners to learn from each other, and for such projects to include dissemination and 'mainstreaming' activities to try to secure their future.

2.7.5 Data collection and a more robust evidence base

The 2010 country reports show that validation is beginning to reach out to increasingly high numbers of learners. Most notably, in France, Finland and Portugal, the figures are particularly high (see section 2.3). Yet as was the case for the 2007 Inventory update, and

²⁴ Rauhvargers, A., Deane, C., Pauwels, W., 2009, Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009. Internet: http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf

²⁵ <http://www.vox.no/templates/CommonPage.aspx?id=2616&epslanguage=NO>

as also observed by the OECD²⁶, reliable data on the application and take-up of validation of non-formal and informal learning remains scarce in 2010. Although some countries / learning providers do collect data relating specifically to validation, others do not distinguish between learners who have benefited from validation and those who have pursued a formal route to a qualification or a place on a course. Often data is not systematically collected / analysed at national level, although it may be generated at the level of the provider or project. Furthermore, regarding the consequences of validation little work seems to have been carried out to date to compare the benefits of implementing validation initiatives, to the costs involved. This is all also partly to do with the very different nature of varying validation practices, which make data collection more difficult on an aggregate basis –and in particular when we move beyond public sector initiatives.

This is a challenge which must be addressed if the assumed benefits of validation are to be exploited to their full potential. Although validation is often assumed to be a more cost-effective route to a qualification (or other desired outcome) than the provision of and participation in training, there are of course costs associated with any validation system or process, both to the individual and to the organisation. All stakeholders involved - policy makers, learning providers, employers and individuals to name a few - need to be persuaded that these costs can be outweighed by the benefits accrued (assuming this is the case). Thus in order to further develop European and national strategies in this area, it would be important to conduct an analysis of costs both to individuals and organisations involved in the validation process.

Not all the costs and benefits associated with a validation procedure can be easily quantified. According to Werquin (2010) *“any decision to promote or develop arrangements for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes should not hinge exclusively on a cost-benefit analysis. The benefits of a formalised recognition procedure (certification) may not all be measured in monetary terms – there are many potential non-monetary benefits. Not all costs are necessarily financial either, as in the case of opportunity costs and psychological barriers to commitment.”* The wider costs and benefits associated with validation could usefully be examined in a systematic way.

2.7.6 Variation in provision

While many countries now have a national policy, strategy or set of guidelines for validation, the responsibility for the application of validation processes is usually devolved to the level of the individual learning provider (or in some countries, validation centre or provider) with a resulting diversity in how validation is applied in practice. This can lead to varying quality in provision and charges to individuals.

This has been observed in some countries with more established systems of validation, such as for example the Netherlands and Norway. Both have taken action to address this issue, in the Netherlands with the introduction of the aforementioned ‘Quality Code’ (see section 2.4) and in Norway through an ongoing project which is being carried out by the National Institute for Adult Learning (Vox), focused on the quality assurance of validation. In Belgium (Flanders) too, the country update observes that the validation system is currently very fragmented as for instance the associations in the HE sector and the adult education centres have differences in their procedures, standards and methodologies in place. The country update notes that the government is developing a vision aiming to move towards more integration of the procedures in place in education and training.

²⁶ Werquin, P, 2010, Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning – Country Practices. Internet: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/22/12/44600408.pdf>

There are a number of possible ways of dealing with this diversity in provision. One is to promote networking among learning and validation providers and projects, in order to facilitate the sharing of good practice. Another is to provide more (or more standardised) training for practitioners. Robust quality assurance frameworks and processes are also important to ensure the quality of provision.

3 CONCLUSION

The potential benefits of validation of non-formal and informal learning are gaining greater recognition within Europe and this update to the European Inventory has documented considerable activity across the broad spectrum of learning. Based on the information provided in the 2010 country updates, it is possible to group the countries according to their level of development or the approach they have taken to the development or implementation of a validation system – either centrally designed and managed validation initiatives or those which fundamentally rely on local project based initiatives. These categorisations however have clear limitations and do not take account of the often complex and multi-faceted situations at national level.

There are a range of factors which influence the development, implementation and take-up of validation and a number of challenges which remain to be addressed. To inform future developments, it seems in particular that stronger monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are needed, that better enable the assessment and documentation of the costs, benefits and impact of validation in general and the different types of validation initiatives and methodologies.

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ANNEX 1 – TECHNICAL UPDATE

See separate document.

ANNEX 2 – COUNTRY OVERVIEW BY LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT

See separate document.

ANNEX 3 – RESULTS OF SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS

See separate document.

ANNEX 4 – CATALOGUE OF PROJECTS

See separate document.

ANNEX 5 – GUIDANCE NOTE FOR COUNTRY EXPERTS

See separate document.

ANNEX 6 – SURVEY OF PRACTITIONERS / PROJECTS

See separate document.