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COMMON EUROPEAN PRINCIPLES FOR VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

**Note for meeting of Commission expert group
on validation of non-formal
and informal learning 30 January 2004**

This note presents an updated overview over the work on common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning'. It builds on previous notes (March, May, October and November 2003). Input from the members of group H of the objectives process and members of the Commission expert group on validation of non-formal and informal learning has been integrated.

What is presented in this note can be characterised as a 'diversified' approach to common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning. Validation is carried out for a number of reasons and in a wide range of settings. This contextual factor will eventually influence the choice of methods, the application of procedures and the choice of institutional frameworks. A set of European principles for validation can help to 'bridge' this diversity. This will not be achieved through a narrowing down of methodological and institutional options at local, national or European level. Rather it will be achieved through the introduction of a limited set of guiding principles to be applied on a voluntary basis. We suggest organising these principles according to three main areas of validation:

- Validation of learning taking place in formal education and training settings.

- Validation of learning taking place in relation to the labour market (enterprises and sectors).

- Validation of learning taking place in relation to voluntary activities (exemplified by the activities of youth organisations).

This diversified approach should not lead to three completely separate sets of principles. While acknowledging that the different fields of validation operate according to different objectives and interests, the principles must point to common challenges and common solutions. An important reason for introducing common principles is to strengthen the links between different fields of validation and strengthen overall coherence of initiatives.

1. WHY COMMON PRINCIPLES FOR VALIDATION?

The need for common guiding principles for validation have been stated repeatedly in recent years, most significantly in the Communication on Lifelong Learning (2001), in the conclusions of the European conference on validation of non-formal and informal learning (Oslo, 2002) and by the Copenhagen declaration (November 2002). The 31 Ministers of Education and Training, the European social partners and the Commission stated that there is a need to

> *'...develop a set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels.'*

The Copenhagen agreement reflects the increasing political attention given to learning taking place outside formal education and training institutions. During the last couple of years, a number of initiatives have been taken at national and European level supporting the development of new approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning. In the Communication on Lifelong Learning (2001), 'Valuing Learning' is a main priority, emphasising the need for mutual learning in Europe. The same attention to non-formal and informal learning can be observed in the 2001 (Education) Council decision 'Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems' and in the White Paper on Youth policies adopted by the Commission in 2001. Under the Objectives work programme, *developing ways for the official validation of non-formal learning experiences* has been identified as a key issue in making learning more attractive and relevant for the individual. All these initiatives reflect the very strong political momentum existing in this particular field.

Developing a set of common European principles for validation of learning is a way to bring added value to ongoing work at local, regional and national level. According to the Copenhagen declaration, the main motivation for developing such principles is to strengthen the *comparability* (and thus compatibility) of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Validation methods and systems developed so far have to a large extent been designed and set up in isolation from each other and can not easily be linked and combined. We can to a certain extent speak of a process where 'islands' of validation have been established but where the 'bridges' between these remain to be drawn and built. Lack of comparability makes it difficult for individuals to combine learning outcomes acquired in different settings, at different levels and in different countries.

A set of common European principles on validation can contribute to increased comparability and coherence and can thus support lifelong and lifewide learning. A set of European principles cannot replace work at national, regional, sectoral and local level but have to bring in an additional element contributing to increased overall quality and the linking and bridging of approaches at different levels and in different contexts.

Generally speaking, common European principles must make it possible for different systems to communicate with each other, be this across national, sector or institutional borders. The Common principles for validation have to support and extend credit transfer system developed within formal education and training systems (notably the existing European Credit Transfer System developed for higher education, ECTS, and the credit transfer system currently being considered for vocational education and training).

2. COMMON EUROPEAN PRINCIPLES

A set of common European principles for validation will be organised according to the five main themes; purpose of *validation*, *individual rights*, *institutional obligations*, c*onfidence and trust*, *impartiality* and *credibility and legitimacy.*

All these themes are important but particular attention must be paid to the three last themes, confidence, impartiality and credibility. Formulated in a sufficiently precise way, these may be developed into guiding principles for validation systems in all the three areas mentioned above.

To be efficient, however, these three principles must be based on a clear understanding of the diverse purposes of validation as well as of the individual rights and institutional obligations involved.

2.1 THE PURPOSE OF VALIDATION[i]

The overall aim of validation must be clearly formulated by the principles, underlining the need to make use of all available knowledge and competences, irrespective of the context where these have been acquired. It is also important to stress that validations may be used for formative (learning) as well as summative (certification) purposes.

Proposal for text

> **Validation of learning outcomes, be these acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal setting[1], aim at making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and experiences held by an individual.**
>
> **Validation of learning outcomes, be these acquired in a formal, non-formal or informal, can serve formative (support an ongoing learning process not leading to formal recognition) as well as summative purposes (leading to a formal recognition).**

2.2 INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

The individual rights of individuals must be clearly stated by a set of common principles. These individual rights will differ according to the specific field of activity. This does not prevent that a number of common issues have to be raised, for example regarding the ownership of validation results and the right to appeal. The questions related to access and economic support is not part of the principles, these issues must be treated at the appropriate level.

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1 Common principles for validation must be accompanied by a glossary, available in all Community languages, giving clear definitions of the terms used.

Proposal for text

Validation in relation to formal education and training	*Validation in relation to the labour market (enterprises, branches and sectors)*	*Validation in relation to voluntary work and leisure time activities*
• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.	• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not. • Validation can/may take place based on dialogue and agreement between the individual employee and the enterprise/ organisation in question and the trade union, where this exists.	• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.
• The **results** of validation must be the property[ii] of the individual.[iii]	• The results of validation must normally be the property of the individual. If something else is agreed, the privacy of the individual must be respected.	• The results of validation must be the property of the individual

• Individuals enjoy the right <u>not</u> to participate in validation if there is doubt about the transparency, fairness and use of the results of the validation.

• Individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in transparent way at the start of the validation process.[iv]

2.3   INSTITUTIONAL OBLIGATIONS

Institutions (public organisation, private enterprise and voluntary organisations) face certain obligations when the initiate validation, for example in terms of providing proper guidance and support. These obligations will differ according to the specific field of activity.

Proposal for text

• Results of validation must be designed in such a way that they can be understood at European and international level. When possible, common European instruments like the European CV and the EUROPASS framework for transparency of qualifications and competences should be used

• The privacy of the individual must be respected.		
• Education and training systems should provide a legal and practical basis enabling individuals to have their learning validated.[v] • Validation should be supported by guidance and counselling services.	• (to be discussed WG 30.1.04)	• (to be discussed WG 30.1.04)

2.4. CONFIDENCE AND TRUST

Confidence is about the transparency of procedures, standards and assessment criteria. It is also about availability of information. Everybody involved must be able to make his or her own informed judgements of the approach. A set of common principles should establish some 'ground rules' for this, indicating where transparency is an absolute must. This requires:

- Well-defined standards;
- Clear information on how assessments are conducted and on which basis[2] conclusions are drawn.
- Clear and accessible information on conditions for validation, for example time and cost involved as well as support/guidance provided.

Proposal for text

Transparency of procedures

- The validation process must give confidence to all concerned that the person named is competent to undertake specific tasks or has some other specified competences. [3]
- Validation schemes must be designed in such a way that potential users, be thy individuals or institutions, are able to observe and judge the entire validation process.
- The basis (methodologies) of validation should be stated clearly (written exams, practical tests, involvement in a specific field of activity, other).

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[2] National, European (EN 45013) and International (ISO 17024) exist and can be refereed to. An interesting dimension concerns the participation of all parties without any particular interest predominating. For the consensus building, this last point would be quite relevant.

[3] [3] ISO 17024 addresses the same issue when stating that 'the certification body shall be structured so as yo give confidence to interested parties in its competence, impartiality and integrity. In particular the certification body shall be independent and impartial in relation to its applicants, candidates and certified persons, including their employers and their customers, and shall take all possible steps to assure ethical operations'.

Transparency of criteria

- The requirements met by the individual must be so precisely described that two validation bodies acting independently can be expected to reach the same conclusions.
- The criteria used by "assessors» when "weighting" (parallel to the "marking" taking place in formal education) different competence aspects must, as far as possible, be clarified to all involved parties.

Availability of information

- The criteria and requirements for validation (standards, *référentiels)* must be presented in such a way that they are transparent to all involved, including the individual being validated.

2.5 IMPARTIALITY

Impartiality relates to the roles and responsibilities of the "assessors" involved in the validation process.

- Undue mixing of roles (training and certification) should be avoided as this will negatively affect overall confidence and trust to validation results.
- Impartiality can be strengthened through training and systematic networking, something that needs to be promoted by validation providers.

Proposal for text

Impartiality is about the role and responsibility of the trained and certified "assessors".

The role and responsibility of the "assessors"

- "Assessors" should operate according to a code of conduct and not combine function (training and assessment) in such a way that confidentiality and impartiality are compromised.[4]
- "Assessors" must be provided with systematic initial and continuing training; where possible local, regional and national networks of "assessors" should be set up to assure updating and coherent practices.

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[4] ISO 17024 states that '…the certification body shall not offer or provide training, or aid others in preparation of such services, unless it demonstrates how training is independent of the evaluation and certification of persons to ensure that confidentiality and impartiality are not compromised.' This is an important point as it questions undue mixing of roles (training and certification).

2.6   CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY

Credibility and legitimacy must be based on the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders at appropriate levels. The social and professional credibility of validations reflects the inclusion and commitment of relevant stakeholders. Credibility is closely linked to the (above) issues of confidence and impartiality. Credibility can furthermore be strengthened by referring to existing national and international standards/principles (like the EN 45013/ISO 17024 on 'General requirements for bodies operating certification of personnel').

Proposal for text

Credibility is about the inclusion of the relevant stakeholders at the appropriate levels.

Inclusion of stakeholders

- The development of validation criteria (standards, *référentiels)* must involve all relevant stakeholders (for example, involving social partners in cases where work experience is being assessed).[5]
- Validation bodies need to be impartial. The system of validation, at all levels of operation[6], should be organised to safeguard impartiality and enable participation from all parties involved.

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3.   FOLLOW UP

Agreeing on a set of common European principles on validation must be followed up by a systematic monitoring and evaluation of initiatives at all levels, The European Inventory on validation, introduced by the Communication on lifelong learning in 2001, will play a crucial role in this respect. Not for the sake of control, which would be in conflict with the voluntary character of the initiative. The European Inventory should rather provide support to the different stakeholders in this field, making it possible to develop high quality validation approaches. If such a positive development is started, and there is a mutual understanding that everybody involved pursues a set of basic quality criteria, increased mutual trust will be the result.

Increasing mutual trust is a necessary precondition for creating a more coherent European validation approach, making it possible to transfer qualifications and competences between countries, sectors, regions and enterprises.

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[5] ISO 17024 stresses the importance of '..(Enabling) the participation of all parties significantly concerned, without any particular interest predominating'.
[6] See footnote (4).

ANNEX 1.

Previous proposal, November 2003

Individual rights[vi]		
Validation in relation to formal education and training	*Validation in relation to the labour market (enterprises, branches and sectors)*	*Validation in relation to voluntary work and leisure time activities*
• Individuals enjoy the right <u>not</u> to participate in validation if there is doubt about the transparency, fairness and use of the results of the validation. • Individuals enjoy the right to appeal a validation result; this right should be presented in a transparent way at the start of the validation process.[vii]		
For the individual, validation is a voluntary act		
• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.	• Validation is voluntary and it is normally up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not. • Validation can/may take place based on dialogue and agreement between the individual employee and the enterprise/ organisation in question and the trade union, where this exists.	• Validation is voluntary and it is up to the individual to decide whether validation should take place or not.
Results of validation: Ownership		
• The **results** of validation must be the property[viii] of the individual.[ix] •	• The results of validation must normally be the property of the individual. If something else is agreed, the privacy of the individual must be respected. (Obligations of the enterprise, organisation)	• The **results** of validation must be the property of the individual •
Obligations of institutions[x]		
• Education and training systems should provide a legal and practical basis enabling	•	

individuals to have their learning validated.[xi] • Validation should be supported by guidance and counselling services.		

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[i] A set of common principles must be accompanied by a glossary giving precise definitions of the main concepts used. The glossary developed by Cedefop (2000) should be used as a starting point.

[ii] ISO 17024 touches upon another aspect of ownership when stating that 'the certification body shall provide a certificate to all certified persons. The certification body shall maintain sole ownership of the certificates.'

[iii] The Directive 95/46/EC of the European parliament and Council on 'the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data' may possibly be applied in this context. Article 2 (a) states that *'processing of personal data' ('processing') shall mean any operation or set of operations which is performed upon personal data, whether or not by automatic means, such as collection, recording, organisation, storage, adaptation or alteration, retrieval, consultation, use, disclosure by transmission, dissemination or otherwise making available, alignment or combination, blocking, erasure or destruction'* Furthermore, *'personal data filing system' ('filing system') shall mean any structured set of personal data which are accessible according to specific criteria, whether centralized, decentralized or dispersed on a functional or geographical basis'*. Article 7 of these directive states when data actually may be processed. This is the case when (a) the data subject has unambiguously given his consent; or (b) processing is necessary for the performance of a contract to which the data subject is party or in order to take steps at the request of the data subject prior to entering into a contract; or (c) processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation to which the controller is subject; or (d) processing is necessary in order to protect the vital interests of the data subject; or (e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller or in a third party to whom the data are disclosed; or (f) processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by the third party or parties to whom the data are disclosed, except where such interests are overridden by the interests for fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection under Article 1 (1).

[iv] ISO 17024 requires that policies must defined 'for the resolution of appeals and complaints received from applicants, candidates, certified persons and their employers, and other parties about the certification process and criteria, as well as policies and procedures for the performance of certified persons…are resolved independently, in an unbiased manner.

[v] See also footnote (3).

[vi] It is interesting to note that ISO 17024 states that 'certification shall not be restricted on the grounds of undue financial or other limiting conditions….'

[vii] ISO 17024 requires that policies must defined 'for the resolution of appeals and complaints received from applicants, candidates, certified persons and their employers, and other parties about the certification process and criteria, as well as policies and procedures for the performance of certified persons…are resolved independently, in an unbiased manner.

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exercise of official authority vested in the controller or in a third party to whom the data are disclosed; or (f) processing is necessary for the purposes of the legitimate interests pursued by the controller or by the third party or parties to whom the data are disclosed, except where such interests are overridden by the interests for fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection under Article 1 (1).

[x] ISO 17024 states that '…the certification body can, within reason, accommodate any special needs of candidates, such as languages and/or disabilities.

[xi] See also footnote (3).