

## **Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: policy and practices in EU Member States<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The knowledge-based economy, new technologies, the growing speed of technological changes and globalisation all influence the needs to improve the population's skills and competences. In Europe, this has been acknowledged for several years. Lifelong learning has been emphasised as a major policy that enables economic competitiveness, employability, individual fulfilment and self-development (European Commission, 2002; OECD, 2001). Currently, at EU level, one approach to lifelong learning studies the distinction between formal and non-formal (and informal) learning to examine if the relationship and links between various types of learning would help in the formulation and implementation of lifelong learning policies. The issue is whether this would be a valuable track to enable all individuals to be part of lifelong learning (Colardyn, 2002).

In general, change has become a core concept in today's working life. Lifetime employment becomes an exception, the majority of employees will, voluntarily or not, change job and career several times in their work lifespan. Labour market change, reflecting evolutions in technologies, markets and organisations, requires that skills and competences can be transferred and be 'reprocessed' within a new working environment. Employees who leave or lose their job must be able to transfer knowledge and experience to a new enterprise, sector or even a new country.

*Validation of non-formal and informal learning is very much related to this.* The purpose is to make visible the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, irrespective of the context where the learning originally took place. For an employer it is a question of human resource management, for individuals a question of having the full range of skills and competences valued and for society a question of making full use of existing knowledge and experience, thus avoiding waste and duplication.

Gradually, validation of non-formal and informal learning is becoming a key aspect of lifelong learning policies. Lifelong learning, it is asserted, requires that learning outcomes from different settings and contexts can be linked together. As long as learning, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training remain invisible and poorly valued the ambition of lifelong learning cannot be achieved.

## **A European Inventory**

This article addresses the European efforts to put in place systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. First, an important part of the European effort aims at improving transparency of formal education: diplomas and certificates from one country must be understandable and trustworthy in another country. The intention is to suppress education and training obstacles to mobility; to access work and/or education institutions in and between Member States. Moreover, validation of non-formal and informal learning has to be transparent and credible from one Member State to another to allow individuals to move and the full range of their skills and competences to be taken into consideration. Since 2000, there has been an active process at the EU policy level to affirm the importance of 'valuing learning'.

Following the Lisbon summit (2000), the priorities proposed in the Memorandum (2000) and the Communiqué (2002) underlined the key role played by validation of non-formal and informal learning in lifelong learning strategy and the decisive role of 'valuing learning'<sup>2</sup>. The Copenhagen Declaration (2002) stressed that political agenda<sup>3</sup>. Ministers (Education, Training and Employment) have passed resolutions to develop cooperation in vocational education and training. They invite Member States to elaborate 'a set of common principles' regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning.

As a starting point, Member States exchanged experiences on national policies, innovative experiences and practices. It was proposed to launch a European Inventory of approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning from which 'Common principles' would be defined.<sup>4</sup> These will concern the methodologies, the validation procedures and the coordination mechanisms because these are the factors that ensure the coherence and transparency of a system. Launched by the European Commission, the Cedefop and Member States, the European Inventory is currently completing its first round of collection of information. The report (Colardyn & Bjornavold, forthcoming 2004) covers 14 countries and most of the candidate countries.<sup>5</sup>

## **From the European Inventory To Common Principles**

This article presents some of the main findings of this report. First, it provides a short definition of core concepts (learning and validation); second, it reviews the stages of development of validation policies in Member States. Third, it examines areas of convergence. Fourth, it considers the assessment and validation methodologies used in Member States to collect and document evidence. Fifth, in its conclusion, the question of the co-existence of national comprehensive validation system along with common principles at the European level is raised. A set of European 'Common principles' based on methodologies and practices in the Member States would contribute to ensure coherence, transparency, trust and credibility: it would constitute a good basis for a lifelong learning strategy.

### *Definitions*

The European Inventory refers to a recently updated glossary developed by Cedefop for the purpose of comparisons in vocational education and training.

While these definitions can be questioned at policy level, countries find them practical and useful (even with national additions or specifications).

### *Learning*

The glossary (Cedefop, 2000) and the Communication (2001) give the following definition of formal, non-formal and informal learning:

- **Formal learning** consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective
- **Non-formal learning** consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.
- **Informal learning** is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).

These definitions insist on the intention to learn and the structure in which learning takes place. The intention to learn explains the centrality of the learner in the learning process and the structure refers to the context in which learning takes place.

### *Validation*

The Cedefop glossary (2000) and the Communication on Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2001) define *validation* as the process of identifying, assessing and recognising a wider range of skills and competences which people develop through their lives and in different contexts, e.g. through education, work and leisure activities. In lifelong and life-wide learning, 'validation' is a crucial element to ensure the *visibility* and to indicate the appropriate *value* of the learning that took place anywhere and at any time in the life of the individual.

### **Stages of Developments in Member States**

National policies on validation of non-formal and informal learning cover several objectives centred on individuals, on economic purposes and on institutional aims. The objectives concerning individuals relate to their development, to a greater access to educational and training institutions and to better insertion in the labour market. This objective is expressed in a large number of Member States. Economic and institutional issues appear with less frequency but are hardly marginal. Competitiveness of the country and the improvement of its labour market define the economic issues. Greater flexibility in the functioning of the education and training institutions characterises the institutional issues.

National policies on validation have been defined and developed by most countries covered by the Inventory. This often takes the form of legal initiatives. However, the legal option is not the only possible approach. In many countries, agreements between public authorities and social partners play a role, as do initiatives for better coordination of activities within the public sector. The influence of experimental activities should not be underestimated. Stages of development can be characterised. Three stages of policy formulation and implementation of innovations and practices have been identified in Member States. They sometimes overlap:

1. **Experimentation and uncertainties.** Countries at an experimental stage (to a varying extent) accept the need for initiatives but are still uncertain whether and how this could influence existing structures and systems on a more permanent basis. Belgium, Denmark, Italy and Sweden are currently at this stage. Analysis will indicate that important changes can be observed in these countries, pointing towards active policies in this field. It is also the case in Austria and Germany, where the legal and institutional frameworks were for a long time considered sufficient.
2. **National systems emerge.** Countries moving towards 'national systems' building on a defined legal and institutional basis. France, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands illustrate this approach.
3. **Permanent systems already exist.** Countries with permanent systems include Finland and the UK. Belonging to this category does not mean, however, that further policy development is ruled out. In these countries, there is a substantial debate on these issues. In Finland, it is related to the improvement of the existing competence-based system. In the UK, it is related to the role played by Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) within the national education and training system.

The recommendation of the 30 European Education and Training ministers in Copenhagen (November 2002) to develop common principles and guidelines for validation must be understood in this context. Most countries underline an urgent need for exchange of experiences and practice to reduce the negative effects of a trial and error approach.

### **Areas of Convergence**

The analysis of the national policies, innovations and practices on validation of non-formal and informal learning underlines areas of convergence: common features are implemented by Member States. Today, a lesson is that transparency mainly concerns the formal education and training system. However, more Member States are involved in validation of non-formal and informal learning. These initiatives share common features that are discussed below.

#### *Defining Standards*

Usually, national standards exist and they are crucial elements for any validation. Standards are divided into three elements: occupation, education and assessment. Education and training standards derive from occupational standards: they define the education and training process needed to be able to perform the occupation

described in the occupational standards. The three steps are essential to assess and validate learning taking place through an education and training procedure. With the assessment of non-formal and informal learning (acquired outside a learning setting), only the occupational and the assessment standards are essential.

### Standards

**Austria:** The strictly regulated national qualification system provides the standards (called 'profiles') for formal education and training.

**Belgium:** Standards exist but differ between the various education and training systems. Debates are currently taking place concerning the establishment of 'common references or standards'. The former European norm on certification of competences of individuals (EN 45013), now the international norm ISO/IEC 17024, is used in sectors and enterprises. Reference is also made to it at the federal level (Francophone community).

**Denmark.** All public education and training (young and adult) refers to the provision proposed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. The Ministry of Education and the social partners prepare the standards.

**Finland:** Standards exist for the different types of competence-based qualifications. Drawn locally by school and social partners, they are reviewed (and accepted) by the National Board of Education.

**France:** Standards are prepared under the responsibility of the Ministries (Education, Employment, etc.) with the social partners. These standards are used for education and training purposes. The ROME (*Répertoire Opérationnel des Métiers et des Emplois*) provides other standards used for guidance and assessment in the employment agencies (Ministry for employment).

**Germany:** National standards exist and are called 'profiles'. There is a strong commitment on the part of public authorities (federal and Länder) and social partners.

**Ireland:** National standards are key elements of the National Qualifications Framework under development since the Qualification Act of 1999 and launched in 2003. Learning in various settings can be assessed in many ways, providing it is clearly connected to the national standards defined and/or accepted by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)

**Italy:** A decree of the Ministry for Labour in 2001 ruled that the 'Certification of competences in vocational training system' requires national standards of competences for setting a certification system which will be developed shortly.

**Netherlands:** National standards are set up by COLO (*Centraal organ van de Landelijke Opleidingsorganen van het Bedrijfsleven*), an independent standards setting body with all interest parties represented.

**Norway:** So far, the national standards set by the school curricula prevail for all validation (formal, non-formal and informal). The issue of 'non-educational standards' (other than school curricula) has been raised at the same time as the challenge to credit transfer practices.

**Portugal:** As the main policy is to close the qualification gap in the population, all learning can be recognised, provided it is related to the school curricula, i.e. the national educational and training standards.

**Sweden:** The various experiments on validation of (non-formal and informal) learning have largely used the curricula of the upper secondary school (*Gymnasieskolan*) as the standard.

**UK:** National standards are under the responsibility of the National Occupational Standards. They form the basis for the NVQs and the GNVQs.

Source: Colardyn and Bjornavold (forthcoming, 2004).

In Member States, several experiments illustrated the reference to either national standards (Ministry of Education and or Employment) or to 'other' standards, defined by occupational and or professional bodies, Chambers or other organisations. For example, in Ireland, assessment and validation of non-formal and/or informal learning lead to formal certificates and refer to national standards. Identical situations exist in the UK (Access to higher education scheme) and in the Netherlands (validation of non-formal learning leading to partial or total qualification from the National Qualification structure).

The 'immigrants as a resource' programme in Sweden highlights some of the difficulties that arise when validation of non-formal and informal learning refers only to standards of formal learning. When non-formally acquired competences are supposed to be similar to those developed in formal education and training, there is a certain risk that important competences are defined as irrelevant. It is suggested that the outcomes of the various learning should be assessed and validated according to 'common standards' that are not based exclusively on the school standards. A similar debate started in Norway with the '*equivalent competences*'. First treated as a theoretical question, it becomes clear that answers are linked to the interpretation of standards. Whether competences acquired in non-formal settings are equivalent to the qualifications defined in the curricula lies at the heart of the exercise.

### *Modules and Pathways*

In Member States, 'modules' exist under different names, such as 'credit', 'unit' and 'exemption'. Modules are usually set in place in coordination with the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In certain Member States, when formal education has long been organised as 'modules', they can then be used for the validation of new types of learning. In other Member States, 'modularisation' continues to be an issue. In any case, modules imply pathways for individuals to 'find their way' in the system(s).



Organisation of modules differ. Denmark offers an example of a very precisely regulated system that includes consultation processes with many stakeholders. This approach can be considered as a parallel to the Norwegian law and the *Externenprüfung* in Germany and a number of other arrangements in various European countries. Italy emphasises the need for the transfer of training credits. In Belgium, the development of modules that are common to various parts of the education and training systems is seen as a solution to mutual recognition of competences. Finally, modules could also help to create a better pathway between vocational education and training and higher education (Belgium and UK).

Useful for improving flexibility of formal education and training systems, modules also allow non-formal and informal learning to be taken into consideration. They often validate non-formal and informal learning that will then link or relate in a more or less strict way to formal education. By addition or with exemption, one can acquire a certificate of the formal system. This approach opens opportunities for the introduction of a comprehensive validation system (formal, non-formal and informal learning).

#### Example of modules (or modular approaches)

**Austria:** The dynamic in professional sectors explains the current interest in modules which can lead to certificates.

**Belgium:** There are exemptions for years of study based on the number of years of working experience. In addition, there have been recent efforts to develop modules and to improve credit transfer between systems.

**Denmark:** There is great practice of various types of flexible organisation of education and training. It can be an exemption based on prior education or work experience (VEUD); modules (AMU and Open Education); or single subject courses (AVU and HF). A 'credit transfer catalogue' exists for vocational general education and training in continuing vocational training. In addition, the recent 'Better education' initiative (2002) proposes exemption from part of an education or training based on non-formally acquired learning.

**Finland:** Modules are fully integrated in the competence-based qualification. The instruction and the syllabi are drawn in a modular organisation. Students have individual programmes, which take into account previous studies and work experience.

**France:** With the 1992 validation of non-formal learning (VAP), there was exemption for courses but a complete qualification could not be obtained that way. The 2002 law on *Modernisation sociale* includes VAE<sup>6</sup> and credit can now be awarded leading to a full qualification. Modules can be credited and added (accumulated) to form a qualification.

**Germany:** Traditionally, there is very little practice of modules. However, recent innovations such as the 'Part Qualification' are important steps. In that experiment, credit is given for what 20- to 29-year-olds have achieved, even if it does not amount to a complete qualification.

**Ireland:** Credit and modules are built into the system. They can be gained from any learning achieved through work, leisure, and community services.

**Italy:** The recent laws insist on modules and training credit that can be transferred from one system to another. The 1999 Law on Compulsory Training and Higher Technical Training strongly re-stated that approach.

**Netherlands:** Substantial progress is reported in the introduction of modules in vocational education and training.

**Norway:** Credits can be gained for learning outcomes in different contexts and settings. This also applies to Universities and University Colleges.

**Sweden:** Modules are integrated in education and training systems (for formal learning). Exemption is an area (with guidance) that policies for validation of non-formal and informal learning are focused on.

**United Kingdom:** Modules to achieve credits are largely used and recognised by the National Qualification Framework and the Higher Education Recognition Scheme. NVQs and GNVQs are extensively modularised (unit based). Credits and credit transfer schemes exist. Accreditation of prior learning and of prior experiential learning is widespread in further and higher education. It reduces the number of modules needed to obtain a qualification.

*Source:* Colardyn and Bjornavold (forthcoming, 2004).

### *The Roles of Social Partners and Other Stakeholders*

Usually involved in formal education and training, social partners are also involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, with non-formal and informal learning, other stakeholders appear or exert a strong presence. The practical implementation of policies on validation of non-formal and informal learning involves agencies and bodies related to the public authorities, as well as the social partners: the relevant range of actors is broader than with the traditional tripartite approach. The stakeholders concerned are numerous and diverse: from ministries and agencies to education and training providers, as well as NGOs and various Councils or experts. In many Member States, the stakeholders represent educational, social and economic groups: large parts of society have a role in implementing the national policies on validation of non-formal and informal learning. This certainly contributes positively to the consensus building on these issues.

The coordination of actions is basically a ministerial responsibility (most frequently involving ministries of Education and Employment, to a lesser degree Economy-industry, and others). Usually, this takes place with the support of social partners. In the Netherlands, the responsibility for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is shared between public authorities and social partners. In all countries, other stakeholders, such as the higher education or further education councils, Chambers of commerce and industry, regions, and local community authorities are mentioned to a lesser extent.



## Links to Formal Learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is often linked to formal education and training (as seen with the standards). Modules have acquired legitimacy and they facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning. In general, policies and practices can be characterised as links to formal education and training or as 'self-standing'.

First, validation of non-formal and informal learning is linked to the successful completion of an education or training programme (certificate, diploma). Most of the time, validation is the 'end-product' that attests outcomes achieved by an individual while completing a pre-defined learning process. A candidate obtains a diploma or certificate that is valid within a national, regional or sectoral area, the credibility and transferability of which will vary considerably. This type of validation includes processes of prior learning assessment: it links the assessment of any kind of learning to the validation proposed in the formal education and training system (Austria, Denmark, France, Ireland, Norway, UK). This policy allows individuals to have their prior and/or experiential learning assessed against national (or other) standards, without requiring the completion of an education or training programme.

Clearly, for public authorities, the link to formal education and training remains the first step in the development of a longer-term lifelong learning strategy. The relation is explicitly formulated (credit transfer and accumulation, or exemption), as shown in the example below.

### Example in Denmark

The new basic Adult Education Scheme offers a flexible opportunity for adults with low levels of formal education to access training and have their prior, non-formal learning recognised (and reducing training time accordingly). Basic Adult Education *is not a new educational programme but a new way of organising existing vocationally-oriented education programmes. It is a framework for recognising different courses and for assessing and recognising prior learning.* It aims to reduce institutional barriers to learning, allowing for combinations of different formal courses and practical experiences. The reform introduced 'Advanced levels in adult education and training': upper secondary plus two years; upper secondary plus three years (Diploma); and upper secondary plus five years (Master). The aim is to tailor the education and training to the practical and theoretical competences already held by the individual. Access to advanced adult education is based on a relevant occupational background, followed by at least two years' relevant work experience.

It is acknowledged that the issue of validation has been too often treated from the perspective of the formal education system and that the needs of individual citizens, enterprises and sectors have to be taken into account.

Second, learning, skills or competences are validated in an autonomous or self-contained way. The link to formal validation is not the 'end of the road'. There is no link to formal education and its certification system: other standards are used

and validation is independent. To be operational, a lifelong learning strategy requires ‘other forms of validation’ that are more closely related to work or employment, as well as to voluntary activities (as underlined by the debates in Sweden). Their priority is certification of learning regardless of (potential) relations and linkages with formal education, training and qualifications.

#### *‘Other’ Validation Practices*

Some validation or certification of non-formal and informal learning practices exist in their ‘own right’ and follow their own rules, procedures and quality assurance. They do not depend on public authorities: they do not seek a link to formal validation (or qualifications); they do not need it for their legitimacy. Their legitimacy is provided by another source: often, the European or the international Norms (EU or ISO on certification of competences of individuals). In that sense, they are not (directly) related to their national public authorities. Their legitimacy comes from the application of an international norm. These forms of quality assurance include an audit of the processes by an international team and specialised accreditation bodies. In that sense, the validations are ‘autonomous’. Examples of initiatives often seen as ‘isolated solutions’ should receive closer attention.

The Computer Driving Licence or the Information Technology (IT) proficiency test, the different certifications via BELCERT, the Association for Certification of Vocational Competences (ACVC) in France, the SWIT in Sweden follow European or international procedures ensuring the legitimacy of their validation (or certification).

#### **The Computer Driving Licence Test (Finland)**

Developed in Finland and used largely outside that country, the test is under the responsibility of a professional association (The Finnish Information Society Development Centre, TIEKE), the social partners and educational institutions. The tests have a particular status; they are not covered by the educational legislation in Finland.

#### **BELCERT (Belgium)**

BELCERT depends on the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and is responsible for the accreditation of certification bodies for the certification of personnel (EN 45013). BELCERT has been a full member of the European Co-operation for Accreditation. Representatives of the organisations are involved: different federal ministries (army, environment, economic affairs), regional departments in the Flemish-, French-, German-speaking Communities, and the Brussels Region (education, labour, public transport); social partners; the users/consumers. There are regular consultations.

**Association for Certification of Vocational Competences  
(ACVC) (France)**

In accordance with the European Norm 45013 (now ISO/IEC 17024), the association created a procedure to ensure the representation of all interested parties (employers and employees or individuals) in their Certification Committee. That Committee reviews the occupational and assessment standards; it establishes rules and procedures to manage Assessment Centres, to train assessors and to enable appeals.

**The Industrial Abattoir case (Ireland)**

In the Industrial Abattoir Worker, Beef Sector, the partners involved are the representatives of industrial abattoirs in the beef sector and the National Training Agency. The sector provides access to accreditation of prior learning certification as well as training of workers. Eleven centres have been approved: all are in the process of training employees; no learners have been certified yet. The certification is linked to the validation provision of the National Training Agency: it is worth noting that formal, non-formal and informal learning have a 'parity of status' within this national framework (under the responsibility of the National Training Agency).

**SWIT — Information Technology (IT) programme (Sweden)**

The Swedish IT programme (SWIT) has a large number of applicants, more than 80,000. The purpose is to identify persons capable of completing training and persons who are suitable for the various information technology functions. The methodology combines interviews and highly formalised tests (individual numerical/logical/language skills as well as social/relational skills). SWIT assessment was tailored to the specific needs of Swedish IT enterprises and developed in close cooperation with them. Unlike many of the national approaches, SWIT was able to work according to a rather limited set of criteria according to standards established in a working situation and environment. The number of applicants means that the methodology must have a large capacity for assessment and selection.

**Assessment and Validation Methodologies**

This section summarises the main information available in Member States on assessment methodologies. It constitutes one essential part of the European Inventory. Once a country has developed national standards and organised modules, the assessment practices can still be diverse. The assessment has two functions: formative and summative. Formative assessment is input-driven, centred on the education and training procedure and linked to educational standards. Summative assessment is outcome-driven, centred on results achieved and linked to occupational standards (non-formal and informal learning) or to educational standards

(formal learning). Each function has its own objectives and is, therefore, better designed to serve certain purposes. The two functions of assessments can co-exist; this will probably expand in the future to the benefit of individuals.

### *Collecting Evidence*

This section deals firstly with 'collecting evidence' which is about drawing evidence on outcomes of learning and secondly with 'documentating evidence which is a technical step to assemble evidence and relevant information (e.g. curriculum vitae, information on the objectives pursued, links between the types of evidence to argue a case, etc.).

There are many methods and a variety of techniques to collect evidence to provide a basis for judgements about whether learning (skills and competences) has been acquired. They fulfil different aims and are complementary. In general, the nature of the evidence is of great importance; it is even more the case with non-formal and informal learning (answering a written test differs from finding evidence of a competence in a work situation). The methods to collect evidence of learning, skills or competences can be divided into five categories: examination, declarative, observation, simulation and evidence extracted from work (or other) activities. Each category is based on different assumptions and techniques that require proper training to be used. In an assessment, several of these techniques can be combined. Methods are rigorous, as are the techniques involved. Professionals in charge have to be well-trained (in theory and practice).

### *Examination*

Candidates answer questions (oral or written) on a domain of study. They can focus on a domain or be interdisciplinary in nature. Questions can be open or closed (essay, multiple-choice). The assessor is a teacher: it can be a third party (not the teacher who taught the person being assessed). Apart from the classical regular (written and or oral) examination (which can take various forms, from tests to essays), there are cases in which non-formal and informal learning are taken into consideration.

#### The *Externenprüfung* (Germany)

The *externenprüfung* test provides experienced workers with the right to take part in the final craft examination (*Abschussprüfung*) together with those who followed the ordinary route through the dual system. Although important, the *externenprüfung* provides access to a test, it does not provide independent or particular methodology aimed at the identification and assessment of the specific experiences. In this respect, it is designed according to the content, principles and structure of the formal pathway. In other words, the competences acquired outside the formal system, irrespective of how different they are from those produced in the formal system, have to be presented and restructured (by the candidate) according to the principles of the formal system.

*Declarative*

Candidates declare and justify (orally and in writing) that what they can do corresponds to certain parts of the curriculum taught in the education or training programme for which they would like to obtain credit. A panel (third party) gives the final judgement. Examples are to be found in initiatives in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway.

Example of **declarative methods** for assessment (France)

In the French prior learning assessment, or VAE (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience*), the assessment concerns candidates with at least 3 years of occupational or professional experience. The panel is composed of 4 to 5 teachers and professionals of the occupational domain concerned. The panel bases its decision to validate learning from experience (gives credit for a course containing these competences) on the individuals' description of their occupational activity. Candidates explain the competences acquired and ask that they be validated. Time by candidate varies from 30 minutes to 4 hours. The successful candidate does not have to follow the course or to present an examination in the area where experience has been validated. The validation remains valid for 5 years. The process is complex and local specialised professionals of the Ministry of Education usually help the candidate (if asked for).

*Observation*

Following certain rules and strict methods, an assessor (third party) observes candidates *in situ* and judges whether they have the competence described in a standard. Observation is a more demanding exercise than one can imagine. Methodology and training are required for the assessor to properly collect relevant and reliable observations. Direct observation of competences is used for the assessment in practical work situation. So, the observation of activities can take place in real work settings, or it can be based on past experience with the candidate or on a simulated work situation.

Example: **recruitment of teachers** (Netherlands)

The candidates do not study at a teacher training college: they develop competences in related occupations. Observations are collected to assess the candidate's competences. The assessment helps to plan a tailor-made training course directed to the competences that have not yet been acquired. After presenting a portfolio, the candidate and the counsellor decide which competences should be recognised and lead to exemptions from the curriculum. Candidates prepare and deliver a learning activity at a school for primary or secondary general education. They choose their favourite working situation because the procedure focuses on recognising achievement. The assessors (an experienced teacher and a teacher of the teacher training college) observe the candidates' work activities, they do not ask questions.

Source: Klarus, R., Schuler, Y. & Wee, E. ter (2000) *Bewezen geschikt — Competent Proved* — Wageningen: STOAS Research.

*Simulations*

Some examples are well-known, since aircraft pilots are partly trained that way. Candidates are placed in a context that present all the characteristics of the real work (or other) situation and are then able to demonstrate their competences. Simulation requires a large amount of studies and job analysis to be prepared properly. Often judgement is by a third party. The major difficulty is the job analyses and studies needed before a simulation can actually be valid and reliable.

**Example: test by simulation to assess competence (AFPA<sup>7</sup>, France)**

The situation consists of a two-hour test at the end of a module on 'Control and maintenance of enterprises local networks'. Consultation of documents is authorised. The test is composed of two parts. The first, with a weight of 12 out of 20 points, is on 'organisation'; it contains four questions (on three points per question). The second is on 'Maintenance' and contains four questions with a weight of eight out of twenty points.

In the first part, the local network of an enterprise is described in its technical dimensions and organisation (departments, number of users, software). The four questions concern the hardware disk organisation to be represented by a diagram; users (how are they distributed; who has access to which parts); a specific question on relation between software; how is the safeguard organised (when, what, how, frequency). The second part of the test, on maintenance, presents an error message on a screen; students are asked its meaning to identify possible hypotheses to explain the dysfunction; to indicate the order in which to test the hypotheses and indicate the means used to verify each step.

*Evidence Extracted from Work (or other) Situations*

Based on the descriptions in the occupational and assessment standards, candidates collect evidence of skills and competences in the real work situation (or social, family or cultural setting).

**Example in Italy**

The 'Educazione Continua in Medicina' programme and its validation process support updating of competences for the medical staff. It is structured in a validation system that permits recognition of at least 150 points (training credits) in three years. Training credits estimate diligence and time spent by medical staff on continuing updating and improving the qualitative level of their activities. Training events that provide credits are: congresses, seminars, meeting, vocational courses, distance-learning activities. The National Commission recognises the training that can be included in the programme.

*To Conclude on Methods*

The examples underline that assessment of non-formal and informal learning relies strongly on the standards. Not only do standards, modules and assessments tools



need to be specified, but also, the requirement for the assessment tools such as reliability, validity and quality procedures needs to be defined. Assessment uses various tools, but the robustness of the process has to be ensured. The examples illustrate that assessment methods to collect evidence can function for formal, non-formal and informal learning: some are better adapted to certain circumstances than others. The ideal would be to call on several methods to collect evidence. This may be possible and even indispensable through the process of documenting evidence.

### Documenting Evidence

Once evidence is collected, it needs to be documented. Examples have been examined for non-formal and informal learning and have been classified into three categories: the check-up (*Bilan de compétences*) of competence; the portfolio and the certification of competences.

#### 'Check-up of Competences'

The French check-up of competences (*Bilans de compétences*, Law of 1991) is a tool for guidance and counselling, not validation. In principle, there are no standards to assess against. The check-up takes place in an assessment centre. It helps the candidate to carry out a 'self-assessment' (*auto-évaluation*) to build up a new occupational or training plan. Kept broad, this self-exploration is intended to open new career or training possibilities. The check-up of competences permits an individual to take stock of occupational and personal experience; to identify acquired knowledge, competences, attitudes related to work, training, social life; to disclose unexploited potentialities; to collect and arrange elements to define a personal or occupational project; to manage personal resources; organise occupational priorities and to improve the use of qualities in job negotiations or in career choice.

#### **The check-up of competences (France)**

The check-up follows a procedure that is prescribed by law and organised in three stages: the preliminary phase to inform, the investigation to identify competences and the conclusion to establish the synthesis. This synthesis document established under the responsibility of the assessment centre restricts the information to what could be useful for the candidates' plan. The candidate owns the Synthesis document. The check up of competences contains elements which have had a decisive impact (at least in France) on the 'portfolio' concept. (A voluntary act, candidates *own* the results and are their only recipients; results can only be communicated with the express agreement of the candidate).

#### *Portfolio*

The portfolio presents a synthesis of the personal, social and occupational experiences to highlight competences. It contains elements from the *Curriculum Vitae*, relevant information on the career, education, training and other experience. It is judged by an assessor, a jury or a teacher who decide if the evidence provided by the candidate proves that the standard was achieved.

It is the approach taken in Ireland under the new Act (1999): the assessment recognised the performance of competences in work or in daily life regardless of any education or training. This approach also prevails in Portugal.

#### Example in **Portugal**

The ANEFA<sup>8</sup> provides a procedure to achieve formal certification by validation of non-formal and informal learning. It follows three separate stages. First is the '*identification of competences*'. At this stage, guidance is an important element, both for the expectations of the individual and to clarify what can be offered through the process. Assessment is organised (variety of methodologies and instruments). So far, no harmonised methodological approach has been developed. Secondly, a *stage of validation* aims at the official acknowledgement of the individual's competences. When the result is positive, the third stage which focuses on the *formal certification* is launched.

In other experiments, an examination remains necessary after a prior learning assessment procedure to obtain a complete qualification (usually in higher education).

The Portfolio approach is also used by the NVQs in the UK. The 'addition' of certificates (regardless of the way learning took place) can lead to a fully recognised qualification: each module is certified and the addition of these certificates leads to new and specific qualifications.

#### Example: **documenting a portfolio** (UK)

National Qualification Framework in the UK, NVQs and GNVQs are organised by 'modules'. For the assessment, many types of evidence must be collected from work (or elsewhere) to document the ability to use a competence in real situations. Based on that documentation, a portfolio is established by the candidate to be presented and assessed by the assessor. Then, the portfolio follows a quality procedure and is for example controlled by a verifier. In parallel, the NVQs and the centres that deliver the certificate follow an accreditation procedure. Assessments follow a set of distinct steps, concentrating on collection of evidence (of prior learning) and requiring that the candidate is able to demonstrate mastery of practical tasks in authentic work situations. A *first step* will normally consist of guidance. The candidate will be informed about the process, which forms it will take, which requirements exist and what eventually may be the result. *Secondly*, a period of evidence collection will be started where the candidate will have to document previous achievements eventually to be presented in a portfolio format. When the portfolio is considered complete, *assessment* takes place with the help of an expert assessor. This assessment can involve written tests but will in most cases consist of direct observation of actual competences in a practical work situation. This process will eventually lead to the award of a unit or units, given that an independent assessor verifies the process. Detailed manuals have been developed to guide assessors and verifiers, training of assessors is also provided and required (leading to a NVQ assessor qualification).

Portfolio based on self-assessment is issued by sectors (welding, construction, food-catering and others) in Belgium. The *bildungspass-qualifizierungspass* developed in 1974 in Germany was a portfolio approach.

#### *Certification of Competences (per se)*

This approach applies three major principles: independence of training and certification; assessment carried out by a third party; and involvement of the interested actors or stakeholders. Examples can be found with BELCERT (Belgium), the Computer Driving Licence (Tieke, Finland) and the ACVC (France).

#### Example: **the computer driving licence** (Finland)

The **Computer Driving Licence® test** was created by TIEKE, the Information Society Development Centre in Finland. It is not covered by the educational legislation: tests are not national tests or examinations. The tests are used in certain vocational qualifications and in working life. The candidates who pass the Computer Driving Licence® test receive a certificate of IT proficiency. There are three levels, which measure the candidate's skills, ranging from beginner to advanced user. The examination takes the form of a skills test. By the end of 2001, 100,000 people had acquired an A certificate. In addition, several thousand people have taken part or parts of the test.

#### **Related Considerations**

First, some legal elements attached to documentation of evidence may be important to consider for potential European developments. For example, the legal right for assessment, the individual own the results, the confidentiality is ensured. In France, the legislation stipulates that these rules must be followed by the 'check-up of competences'. These legal aspects are also taken into consideration for the other practices of documenting evidences.

Second, the 'assessment standards' include the definition of methodologies for assessment (examinations, duration, frequency, grading scale, evidence and proofs to be collected) and the procedures for validation (see: documenting evidence). These 'assessment standards' are important elements, especially for non-formal and informal learning. They describe objectives against which the learning or, more generally, the outcomes, are tested. They provide information on the methodologies. For example, a competence such as 'organising meetings' could be part of a traditional examination. With non-formal and informal learning, documentation of evidence will differ. Evidence can be taken from the work situation or other settings. What exactly will be required from the candidate must be explicitly described in the 'assessment standards'. Probably more than any of the other standards (occupational, educational), the assessment standards will require additional work and exchanges in Member States and between them.

Third, the robustness of assessments methodologies has to be ensured. To reasonably consider that the learning, skills and competences assessed are transfer-

able over time and locations, it is necessary to ensure that the assessment method is both 'reliable' and 'valid'. Reliability means that the same (or relatively identical) results are obtained from one assessment to another and from one assessor to another. This implies that a candidate from a given region will be asked to produce evidence that is equivalent to that asked of a candidate from another region, and that the assessor reaches the same conclusion based on the same evidence. Valid means that evidence collected effectively measures what the assessment is supposed to measure. Validation procedures must also respect a pre-established criteria for quality assurance.

### **Comprehensive National Validation and Common European Principles?**

Without a comprehensive validation system at national level, lifelong learning remains theoretical. In a country with a comprehensive validation system, learning pathways connect; bridges between formal, non-formal and informal exit. Based on policies and experiences in Member States, 'Common principles' can be proposed at the European level. The aim is to identify a few Common Principles which would be accepted at European level and would have specific applications in Member States.

### **In Member States, Could 'Bridges' between Validations Lead to a National Comprehensive Validation System?**

Today, debates emerge on coordination of validation and especially on the 'isolated' or 'free-standing' form of validation.

- Should they remain 'isolated' or should there be a link with other validation procedures such as the formal ones?
- Should all forms of validation (formal, non-formal and informal) be included in a comprehensive system?
- Could a comprehensive system take the form of 'bridges' between validations rather than integrated validation of all learning into the formal qualification system? How could validations be 'compatible'? Could that 'compatibility' be defined in a public and transparent way?

The 'legitimacy' of validation in a national framework raises issues to be debated in Member States. When the State is the only power to grant 'legitimacy' to a form of certification (even if social partners are involved in the design and implementation), then, all validation 'fits' into the 'national and formal qualification framework'. At the European Union level, the issue is the transparency of national qualification systems.

When different stakeholders (State, region, local, social partners, professional organisations, unions, voluntary organisations) develop their own validation, there should be coordination on agreed principles. At European Union level, the issue becomes the recognition of the agreed (common) principles. Accepted at national and European Union level, these principles would permit a wider range of validation to be incorporated into a lifelong learning strategy.

For individuals, the co-existence of several systems may make it easier to find the kind of validation or certification that suit them. Validation of non-formal and

informal learning can help work-related upgrading, just as recognition of learning can act as a 'building block strategy'.

Currently, at the level of Member States, there seems to be a wider acceptance of the co-existence of diverse methodologies (e.g. Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Sweden). Norway offers an example of the first step towards a search for a national comprehensive validation system. It underlines the need for diversity of assessment methodologies. It must be mentioned that diversity goes hand in hand with the rigour of the methodologies. The ambition of the experimental project in Norway is to develop an integrated national system where documentation from different institutional settings (education, work, voluntary work) can be linked together. It has not been achieved so far. Arrangements in the different areas covered by the project have been developed in isolation and it is at present difficult to see how they can interact. Closely linked to the ambition of setting up an integrated national system for validation is the discussion on *equivalent competences* (mentioned previously).

### **At European Union Level: Search for Common Principles**

When (and if) Member States develop 'comprehensive validation systems', they make explicit some simple principles, as well as the methodologies for assessment and the procedures for validation on which the system rests. For example: the conditions for individuals to access and to benefit from validation of learning systems should be described and publicly known; which outcomes are assessed and with which methods; how is information more clearly available to individuals, enterprises or other groups of interest; procedures to ensure proper validation should be more carefully specified and interested stakeholders better represented.

At the European level, 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 level*'. These Common principles should also increase the coherence and help to support lifelong and life-wide strategies in Europe. 'Common principles' at European level could be based on and rely on the national 'Comprehensive systems'. In a bottom up approach, the set of Common Principles is an abstraction of principles at work in countries. The level of generality has to be such (meta-principles) that each Member State could still find its own national values.

'Common principles' agreed upon at EU level would become the frame in which Member States and any validation body (sectorial, non-profit) could place their fundamental principles. Such an agreement at European level could eventually raise the level of the quality of certain experiments. For example, it could establish that standards have to be defined and publicly available: it cannot define the content of the standards. These 'Common principles' cannot be negative restrictions, but they could be a way to open lifelong learning within and between countries.

Quality is the main line of any set of Common Principles. Credibility, trust and impartiality are needed and, for some aspects of validation systems, such as the methodologies (collect evidence), exchanges between countries will still be needed. Nevertheless, based on the information already available through the

European Inventory, a few general principles could be proposed. A preliminary aspect concerns the individual 'rights': validation is a voluntary act, the results are the individual's property and privacy must be respected. Appeals are also part of the individual rights.

A set of principles concerning quality of validation (formal, non-formal and informal learning) would have to ensure:

- Confidence (transparency of procedure; transparency of standards and assessment criteria; availability of information);
- Impartiality (role and responsibility of the trained and certified 'assessors');
- Credibility (inclusion of the relevant stakeholders at the appropriate levels).

### **Could these fundamental principles constitute the foundation for a life-long learning strategy at the European level?**

#### **NOTES**

1. The views expressed are those of the authors, they do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission or the Member States.
2. The Memorandum proposed six key messages characterising a lifelong learning strategy. Following a broad consultation process of Member States, social partners, relevant stakeholders and the civil society, the Communication was elaborated. It sets priorities to achieve the implementation of a lifelong learning strategy.
3. For more information on declarations and recommendations, see: [www.europa.int.eu](http://www.europa.int.eu)
4. It was initiated by the European Forum on transparency of vocational qualifications which was established by the European Commission and the Cedefop in 1999 and ends in 2002.
5. The report covers Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and the UK. The European Training Foundation (ETF) provided an overview of initiatives in the Candidate Countries.
6. VAE: *Validation des acquis de l'expérience*.
7. AFPA: *Association pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes*.
8. The ANEFA is the National agency for adult education and training.

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