

Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Conference

*VALUING LEARNING:*

*European experiences in validating non-formal and informal learning*

Lisboa, Parque das Nações – Pavilhão Atlântico – Room Nónio  
26 and 27 November 2007



CONCLUDING POINTS

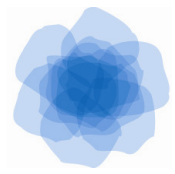
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Speakers from a variety of European countries addressed a broad range of issues relevant to the promotion of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The conference illustrated that significant progress has been made during recent years, underlining that validation increasingly is seen as an integrated part of national lifelong learning strategies. Validation must still, however, be described as a developing field and a European strategy on validation of non-formal and informal learning needs to take into account a number of critical factors. The following 10 factors were identified as being of particular relevance for future developments.

**1. The individual has to be at the centre of any strategy on validation**

When designing and implementing validation, the individual learner must be at the centre of the process. Validation can not be based on an imbalanced teacher-pupil relation but must actively involve the candidate in the different stages of the identification and assessment process. The frequently tacit character of the non-and informally acquired learning outcomes makes it necessary and possible to involve the candidate in an active process using a combination of dialogue, self assessment, systematic reflection and portfolio approaches to capture the experiences in question. Methods and systems must be set up and designed in such a way that they are able to take into account the complex and non-standardised character of non-formal and informal learning. The 2004 European principles on validation underlines, in line with this, that the results of validation should (normally) be the property of the individual.



## **2. A shift to learning outcomes in education and training policies and practises is crucial for validation**

The shift to learning outcomes is critical to allow for validation of non-formal and informal learning to become an integrated and normal part of qualifications systems and frameworks. The link between qualifications and formal education and training courses must be weakened/removed in order to allow for a 'mainstreaming' and normalisation of validation. This is exemplified by the French case where the opening up of qualifications to a broader range of learning experiences, including non-formal and informal learning at work, has dramatically increased the number of individuals in validation. The focus must be on what an individual knows, understands or is able to do at the end of a learning process, not on the inputs to or duration of the teaching process. Validation will be extremely difficult if it has to relate to input based standards; while the outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning may be equivalent, the processes leading to these outcomes will necessarily be different.

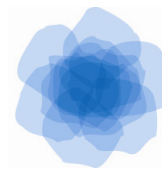
## **3. The role of standards is critical to validation**

Validation will always involve a reference to a standard. The character of these standards is crucial and will largely decide whether the results of validation are trusted or not. If a standard is too local it may have a negative impact on transferability (see also point 5). If a standard is too general and inflexible, it may prevent the validation from capturing the essence of the individual learning experiences.

To facilitate validation, standards have first and foremost to be (re) defined and described in the form of learning outcomes or competences. While this to a certain extent already is happening, substantial work remains to be done in this field, not least in general and higher education. We can sometimes observe that validation approaches are met with scepticism, reflecting a fear that the overall quality of qualifications may be reduced by opening up towards non-formal and informal learning. The only way to meet this concern is to be very clear that a qualification awarded on the basis of non-formal and informal learning have to meet the same rigid quality criteria as learning taking place in the formal system. The agreement on clear standards applicable to all forms of learning are critical elements in such strategy.

## **4. Validation must balance the formative and the summative functions**

The analysis of the validation process (see Figure 1) illustrates the important combination of formative and summative functions in validation. While the summative ('certifying') function is important, all experiences show that the formative ('promotion of learning') aspects need to be taken seriously into account. Firstly it is clear that the formative aspects of validation can be treated as a separate part; the identification of learning experiences is important in itself, reflecting the need to make learning outcomes visible to the individual him or herself and to other stakeholders. Secondly it is clear that the summative and formative aspects of validation are interlinked; entering into a formal certification process is frequently accompanied by a strong motivational effect and a wish to continue learning. Future developments of validation need to take into account both functions of validation and clarify how they can be separated and be combined.



## **5. Transferability is a ‘must’**

Validation must facilitate transfer of learning outcomes from one setting to another. If approaches are too local and restricted, they may fail in accomplishing this. While local solutions may be valuable for formative purposes, for example to identify the acquired competences in an enterprise development setting, their wider relevance will be restricted. If validation is to respond to the challenges of increased change and mobility, approaches must pay attention to transferability and be based on a broad involvement and commitment of relevant stakeholders. To be transferable, results from validation must be credible and be trusted.

## **6. Methodological convergence is necessary**

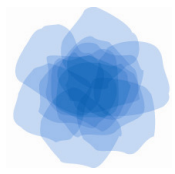
An important objective pursued by validation is to enable transfer of learning outcomes from one setting to another. This requires that the overall quality – validity and reliability – of the validation process is strengthened. As validation gradually is turning into a practical reality in European countries, an increasing amount of methodological experiences is being accumulated. This applies in particular to experiences related to the Portfolio methodology, self assessment and dialogue based approaches. These experiences need to be systematically shared and exploited in the coming period; this will make transfer and acceptance of the results of validation easier and strengthen overall credibility. The existing methodological convergence in Europe also reflects the character of non-formal and informal learning; identification and assessment of non-formal and informal learning requires that the candidate participates actively in the process and is encouraged to demonstrate his or her acquired competences.

## **7. Validation has to take into account ethical issues**

Following the increased use of validation, the ethical issues related to these practises are coming to the forefront. While partly addressed by the Common European principles in 2004, it is clear that validation in some cases may come in conflict with the need for protection of privacy. Sometimes validation touches upon domains of personal life where it can cause harm. This is illustrated by efforts, for example in some service sector occupations, to identify and assess personal attitudes and convictions. In these cases it is important to address the boundaries of validation and the right of the individual to control the process and the use of the results of validation.

## **8. Cost-benefit issues have to be addressed**

The challenges related to capturing the complexity of non-formal and informal learning may give rise to highly sophisticated methods and approaches for identification and assessment. While this can be defended from the perspective of validity and reliability, the costs of these approaches in terms of time and money may come into conflict with the overall returns for the individual candidate and for other stakeholders. It is therefore necessary to look carefully and systematically into the various experiences and the balance between costs and benefits. This requires looking carefully into the concepts of costs and benefit; the meaning of these concepts may be different for different stakeholders and can not exclusively be expressed in monetary terms.



## 9. The sustainability of validation approaches and systems is an issue

A significant part of the activity related to validation has been taken forward through projects and limited duration programmes. While this provides a good opportunity for testing and experimentation, it causes problems in terms of introducing permanent systems and approaches to validation. A too strong reliance on limited duration projects/programmes will also reduce the overall transparency of validation; individuals can not trust that these services will be taken forward on a permanent basis; they will also have to question whether the results of these approaches will be of any value on a longer term basis. It is therefore important to discuss how validation can be ‘mainstreamed’ and given a permanent and predictable role.

## 10. National qualifications frameworks and validation

The changing character of national qualifications systems, in particular through the setting up of National Qualifications Framework, is of high relevance to the development of approaches to validation of non-formal and informal learning. The emerging NQFs may be said to operate according to four main aims (Bjornavold and Coles, 2007, op.cit.):

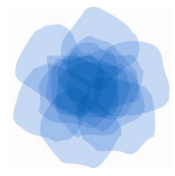
### Main functions of National Qualifications Frameworks

- To facilitate establishment of national standards for learning outcomes (competences);
- To relate qualifications to each other;
- To promote access to learning, transfer of learning and progression in learning;
- To promote the quality of education and training provision.

Each of these four aims may be directly related to the further development of methods and systems for validation. Frequently national qualifications levels will be closely related to education and learning standards, in many cases defined by input (subject, syllabus, teaching methods, character and duration of teaching process). Since educational standards normally are written as teaching specifications, they are not open to the non-standardised and individually specific learning taking place outside formal education and training. Recent comparative research (Cedefop, 2008, forthcoming) shows that a significant shift towards learning outcomes is taking place in education and training across Europe. The introduction of NQFs could contribute to this process and in particular open up towards the development of coherent, learning outcomes based standards for qualifications. This could facilitate the opening up to a broader set of outcomes, including those acquired through learning in non-formal and informal settings. An objective shared by most NQFs currently being set up is to reduce barriers between education, training and learning institutions and systems and to promote access, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. Many of the NQFs currently being developed may be described as working towards *integration*<sup>1</sup> of the different education and training sub-systems in their countries (Integrating frameworks). Methods and systems for validation can complement and contribute directly to this objective aiming at *permeable* education, training and learning systems. If introduced on a systematic basis, as a part of the overall qualifications system, validation will open up qualifications to a broader set of users, for example by certifying work experience and voluntary work. Validation can also

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<sup>1</sup> See for example summary report from Peer Learning Activity on National Qualifications frameworks, Budapest October 2007, (Education and Training 2010) ‘Cluster’ on Recognition of learning outcomes, European Commission, DG EAC, Unit A1.



## Education and Training

be seen as an important tool for opening up the qualifications systems to immigrants and making it possible for individuals with low formal qualifications to enter an education and training career. The key to success, however, is the mainstreaming of validation and the broad acceptance of non-formal and informal learning as a normal route to qualifications. The development of validation and NQFs thus refers to the same objectives, both trying to make it possible for individuals to make progress in their learning careers on the basis of their actual learning outcomes and competences; not on the basis of the duration and location of a particular learning process. The development of validation should therefore be directly linked to the ongoing developments of NQFs; emphasising this as an approach complementary to the NQF development. By establishing a stronger link to the outside world, in particular to the enterprises and organisations, validation of non-formal and informal learning may complement traditional, provider oriented quality assurance. In this sense a systematic approach to validation may be seen as providing feedback to the formal system, making it possible to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different routes to the same qualification.

### **Conclusion**

A successful lifelong learning strategy implies that individuals should be given increased access to learning, that they should be able to transfer and combine the outcomes of learning and that it should be possible for them to progress vertically as well as horizontally within systems. It is for these (individual) purposes validation of non-formal and informal learning is important. All the above 10 points to issues which have to be tackled if this is to become a reality.