The 2014 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

Prospects and trends on validation in Europe

The European Inventory is a tool produced under the auspices of the European Commission and has been in place since 2004. It presents an overview of the situation regarding validation in European countries. The 2014 Inventory investigates 33 countries through 36 country reports. After describing the political context for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe, namely the European Council Recommendation of December 2012, the article explains the main features of the European Inventory and presents selected findings.

The 2012 Recommendation on validation

The importance of validation of non-formal and informal learning has been strongly emphasised within the context of the development of lifelong learning policies in Europe over the last decade. Validation has acquired an increasingly central part in most of the educational discourse of the EU: general education, vocational education and training (VET), higher education and adult education. The Recommendation of the European Council on validation of non-formal an informal learning of December 2012 can be regarded as the beginning of a new stage for validation in Europe.

It signals an enhanced level of political commitment, calling all Member States to establish by 2018 arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation is significant in that it sets a date and introduces a coordinating body that is responsible for its follow up: the EQF Advisory Group (EQF AG). It also identifies the systems that will be used for the reporting and monitoring of the situation concerning validation and allows for the continuous development of supporting tools, notably the European Inventory and the European Guidelines.

The Recommendation states that national arrangements should enable individuals to make visible the knowledge, skills and competences they have acquired through non-formal or informal means. EU countries should, moreover, provide opportunities to obtain qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes achieved through non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation also establishes that validation encompasses four stages: Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification of learning outcomes (for a full or part qualification). This differentiation of stages and possibilities for validation is important since it makes clear that validation can meet different individual needs and objectives.

It also establishes principles for the validation arrangements. It indicates the importance of linking validation arrangements to national qualifications frameworks – and thus be aligned to the EQF. In addition, the qualifications obtained on the basis of non-formal or informal learning should refer to the same standards as traditional qualifications, or equivalent standards. It also calls Member States to ensure that skills audits are offered to all individuals within six months of an identified need – for instance, to help overcome unemployment. The Recommendation also indicates the importance of having transparent quality assurance measures. To this end, the Recommendation calls for the adequate provision of professional development opportunities of staff involved in validation.

¹ The current article does not constitute policy and might not necessarily present the views of the European Commission, Cedefop or the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group.
² Jo Hawley from ICF International contributed also to the article with valuable comments and input to the analysis.
The European Inventory on validation –

Objectives, Scope and Data Collection

The Inventory consists of a series of country reports that present the situation in each of the countries it covers, as well as a range of other specific outcomes (for instance in-depth case studies and thematic reports) that differ from edition to edition. The first Inventory was undertaken in 2004 and was updated in 2005, 2008 and 2010. The 2014 Inventory is its fifth update. The 2014 Inventory maintains, to the extent possible, a similar structure to the 2010 reports in order to assure continuity and the possibility to measure «progress made». But at the same time, it has also introduced variations to take into account new political priorities outlined in the 2012 Recommendation. The objective of the 2014 update of the European Inventory on validation is to provide an accurate picture of the situation regarding validation arrangements across Europe. It aims at consolidating the Inventory as a reference source of information on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe.

The 2014 Inventory consists of a total of 36 country updates (two reports were prepared for Belgium and three for the UK) for 33 countries (all Member States, Switzerland, Turkey, Iceland, Norway, and Lichtenstein). There are also eight in-depth thematic reports that further explore specific aspects of validation such as the quality assurance or the governance of validation arrangements, and two case studies of specific validation projects of special interest. The inventory outputs are completed with a synthesis report and an executive summary (all can be found at www.cedefop.europa.eu/validation). The 2014 update has also produced country fiches which use a common template to summarise main aspects of validation in each country covered, as assessed by a country expert.

First insights of the 2014 inventory

The comprehensive definition on validation and its four distinct phases (Identification, Documentation, Assessment and Certification) makes validation a complex phenomenon to study. It involves many different levels, institutions and sectors. Because of this, it is possible to say that in all countries some aspects of validation have been developed in different sectors (public, private and voluntary), and that validation of non-formal and informal learning is possible to a certain extent in all European countries. However, when looking more closely at the level of development, the picture is very heterogeneous across and within European countries.

There are not only differences in the level of implementation, countries also differ in the way they are approaching validation. The country fiches explore the extent to which validation strategies have been developed. Having a national strategy was understood for the purpose of the Inventory as having comprehensive arrangements covering all education sectors and establishing strong connections between them. It also includes strong connections between validation in the public, private and third sector and having concrete measures in place to favour take-up as well as ensuring the quality of validation procedures. In 2010 and 2014 three countries where considered within this category (Spain, Finland and France). At the time of writing the Inventory, Portugal, that had a comprehensive strategy in 2010, was redesigning their system, so it was difficult to say if their new approach would comply with all the requirements, but it is likely to do so. In 2014, eleven countries had a national strategy, but some of the elements...
described above were missing (cf. figure 1). In most cases, countries have developed validation in one specific sector of education and connection between different sectors had not been well established. In addition, most countries lacked the connection to private or third sector validation arrangements. The number of countries that reported not having a national strategy decreased from 17 countries in 2010 to nine countries in 2014. Countries that did not have a strategy in 2010 are now moving towards a more strategic approach to validation: 13 countries reported being in the process of developing a strategy in 2014, versus five in 2010. This is likely to be a result of the European Recommendation on validation and the deadline of 2018 it contained. It should also be noted that given the stringent definition of »national strategy« adopted for this project, a country that is deemed not to have a national strategy might have comprehensive sectoral strategies in place, or considerable activity taking place at ground level, but this may simply not be brought together into a single strategy. National strategies are still fragmented. This relates, in many cases, to the existence of multiple legal frameworks for validation. In 2014, only three countries reported having a single framework covering validation (cf. figure 2). 20 countries reported having multiple frameworks: eight countries with clear links between the different frameworks and twelve having multiple frameworks with not clear links. Seven countries have legal frameworks for specific sectors, and are planning to develop them further, creating a more comprehensive framework. In Belgium–Flanders, for example, there are separate measures in place for validation in most of the sectors but connections between the different parts of the system are not yet well-established. The legal framework for validation might also be connected to other initiatives, and not be exclusively for validation. This is the case in six countries.

The 2012 Recommendation calls Member States to ensure that »validation arrangements are linked to national qualifications frameworks and are in line with the EQF« (Council of the European Union 2012, C398/3). Validation is normally one of the topics of discussion in the development of NQF. Often, in the majority of EU countries, the documents outlining the national qualification frameworks (e.g. referencing reports) explicitly indicate as one of their objectives the improvement of validation arrangements. Of the 36 country reports of the 2014 inventory 16 mentioned that discussions had taken place around the connection between the national qualifications framework and validation arrangements. 20 reports suggest that the countries they cover have established this link, at least partially or in relation to some specific qualifications. The link in some cases may only be implicit and in draft form, pending further developments of the qualification framework or is related to only few qualifications. It is important to note that the reported linkages may be of different nature, and may imply rather different levels of integration. Most countries have started the development of NQFs focusing on formal education qualifications. This means that their qualification frameworks only include qualifications obtained through the formal education system, whereas other qualifications are not considered (for example those granted by private bodies, or regulated by the labour market agencies). In several countries, some of

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**Figure 1**

Does the country have a national (or where relevant, regional) strategy or policy for validation?

![Bar chart showing the distribution of national strategies](chart-link)
these (which could be considered non-formally acquired) qualifications are in fact the ones with clearer procedures for validation. In addition, the validation procedures for the acquisition of all NQF qualifications may not necessarily be well established; these procedures may pertain only to a small number of qualifications within the framework. Thus, the linkage between validation and NQF needs to be further developed.

Conclusions

What can be concluded from our review? Since the 2010 Inventory there has been definite progress, albeit at a relatively steady pace. The European Council Recommendation on validation seems to be pushing Member States further in terms of thinking and designing coherent strategies for their validation arrangements. Although there are possibilities for validation of non-formal and informal learning, these are still rather fragmented and connection between its different components and different sectors is still in progress. Involvement of private organisations and the third sector is still a challenge. To this end, it seems that the development of NQFs can provide a forum for discussion that facilitates the inclusion of a wider set of stakeholders, including private and voluntary sector stakeholders, in validation. However, more needs to be done in this respect.

On the whole, validation is more common in VET and in relation to those qualifications that are closer to the labour market than in relation to general education qualifications. Having said this, higher education institutions seem to be allowing increasingly large exemptions of credits or parts of formal education HE programmes. Qualifications granted by the public employment offices (for example the VET certificates in the Czech Republic or certificados de profesionalidad in Spain, or the HRDA qualifications in Cyprus) or related to the performance of a specific profession are normally the ones that make more use of validation. Although there is a burgeoning debate on how to connect those to formal qualifications and how to integrate them into the NQF, few countries have arrived to that position of having a clearly defined link. In the coming years, with further implementation of NQFs it is likely that countries will work towards that end.

Literature


EUROPEAN COMMISSION; Cedefop; ICF International: European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014