

Validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe: research, policies, legitimacy and survival.

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Manuel Souto-Otero
Department of Education
University of Bath
manuelsoutootero@gmail.com
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Abstract: *This chapter analyses European research and policy-making in the area of validation of non-formal and informal learning. It explicates the importance of validation for EU-policy making and the consequences of validation systems in particular in terms of exclusion and inclusion. It argues that this needs to be done in a context sensitive –both politically and socially- manner. The chapter raises questions regarding the way in which the Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC) is presented as a purely neo-liberal agent in much of the education literature, and validation practices as radically exclusionary practices. It also argues that the EU's future actions in validation will need to take a more prescriptive dimension than they have done so far, and this in turn will require the generation of greater national reporting and evidence on those issues where the EU can have greater influence.*

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) had its own moment of discovery of education and educational practices, around 2000, with the Lisbon Agenda. To be sure, the EU had acted in the area of education before (Corbett 2005). But education had not traditionally played a major role in the EU due to Member States' hesitation to transfer any power in the area of education to the EU and its primary focus on economic issues (Fredriksson 2003). Today, while EU's competences in the area of education are limited, its activity is expanding (Walkenhorst 2008). Under the Open Method of Coordination, based on 'soft law', agreement on certain objectives, benchmarking and reporting and peer-review (Souto-Otero et al. 2008; Ertl 2006), education became one of the core areas of EU action, in order to achieve the Lisbon Goal to become the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. Also at that point, validation of non-formal and informal learning –hereafter also referred to as 'validation'- became, arguably, one of the highest priorities in the education and training policy agenda of the European Union (Colardyn and Bjørnavold 2004; Fredriksson 2003), together with educational mobility, quality improvement, the overarching theme of 'lifelong learning' and the 'Europeanisation' of education and research.

This chapter reviews recent EU policy and (mainly European) research on the validation learning since 2000. The article aims to explore, first, patterns of production and argumentation in research on validation. Second, it outlines major developments in EU policy on validation, interrogates their nature and asks how they can be understood, in light of the European Commissions' self-representation as an evidence-based bureaucracy (Souto-Otero 2013). This permits an analysis of the extent to which the main topics in the research literature and policy priorities are aligned -provided in the conclusions.

Many analyses of EU policy start from the assumption of rational member states with clear interests and policy positions, but these assumptions do not stand up to scrutiny in the area of validation. Validation was a 'policy area at the margins' in 2000, an area where the EU took the lead over many Member States, raising awareness of its importance for education systems and labour markets (Souto-Otero et al. 2008). The challenges validation aimed to address (geographical mobility, the need for transparency of qualifications; the need to better manage human resources and to increase opportunities for further learning in European 'knowledge-societies'; the need to value different forms of learning, regardless of the context in which they took

place, for individual fulfillment and professional development) were shared across countries, and seemed to demand also an international and coordinated response.

This enabled the EU's progress in 'capturing' the area and in presenting itself as a leader and orchestrator –and 'impresario' (Hine 1998). The EU's efforts in the area of validation have thus become a reference point in other parts of the world (Guo and Shan 2013). But this state of affairs also presents challenges for the EU in terms of future policy development. In particular, and given the eminent shift in the area of validation policy from an 'awareness raising' phase to a 'what works' phase, the chapter argues that the EU now is pressed to find a reference model –either empirical or, more problematic in political and practical terms, ideal- to provide to Member States –for inspiration and imitation. But this does not marry well with the approach based on exchange of good practices that has prevailed until now.

2. Defining validation of non-formal and informal learning

Validation of non-formal and informal learning aims to make “learning visible” (Bjørnavold 2000), regardless of the setting where learning has taken place. The Council of the European Union defines non-formal and informal learning as outlined on Table 1.

	Formal learning	Non-formal learning	Informal learning
Degree of organisation	Organised and structured environment	Planned activities (learning objectives and time)	Not organized (no learning objectives, time)
Is setting specifically dedicated to learning?	Yes	Not specified	No
Support for learners?	Yes	Yes	No
Leads to qualification?	Yes	Not specified	Not specified
Intention -from the learner's perspective	Yes	Yes	No (or not always)
Examples	Systems of general education, initial vocational training and higher education	In-company training, courses organized by civil society, OER	Daily activities (ICT outside work, language learning in stay in another country, etc.)

Source: Own elaboration, from Council of the European Union (2012:5).

'Validation', on the other hand, is defined as: “a process of confirmation by an authorized body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases:

1. Identification, through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual
2. Documentation, to make visible the individual's experiences
3. A formal Assessment of these experiences, and
4. Certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification” (Council of the European Union 2012:5)

And in this context qualification is defined as a “formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an

individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards” (Council of the European Union 2012:5).

Previous literature suggests that the EU’s definition of different ‘types’ of learning is far from unproblematic (Eraut 2000; Straka 2004; Colley et al. 2006), and points out to the complexities surrounding the achievement of agreement on what criteria to use to differentiate between different kinds of learning. While these complexities –and at points lack of clarity, consistency of criteria and specification- cannot be negated, the differentiation between these three types of learning has been a heuristic tool that has been widely accepted by European countries and has paved the way for policy agreements and compromises in the area of validation.

3. Education research on validation of non-formal and informal learning

3.1 Patterns of production

In spite of their political and practical importance validation practices are under-researched from a scientific point of view (Bohlinger and Münchhausen 2011). Indeed, the volume of education research works produced on ‘validation of non-formal and informal learning’ (as a distinct area from areas such as the recognition of prior learning) since the 2000s –when it ‘took off’-, has been relatively low.

To provide an illustration of this point –and accepting the fact that some works that cover validation will use different terminologies and that work on validation is published in languages other than English-, the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), which provides access to around 2 million records of education research, identifies less than 10 records for “validation of non-formal learning” and for “validation of non-formal and informal learning” during the period 2000-2015. Google Scholar returns around 1,000 works in the area of “validation of non-formal learning” or “validation of non-formal and informal learning” for that period, for all disciplines. While “validation of non-formal learning” is a fairly European term not all of this research will focus on Europe, and not for all of it validation will be the main focus. It should be noted that Scholar picks up works in languages other than English that provide citations that mention ‘validation of non-formal learning’ or ‘validation of non-formal and informal learning’ in English. To put this figure in context, a similar search for the same period for “knowledge economy” yields 270,000 results, for “educational achievement” 150,000, for “financing of higher education/ financing higher education” 8,500, for “international student mobility” 3,500.

The relatively low volume of research on validation is particularly visible if we consider the huge terrain that it aims to cover: identification, documentation, assessment and certification in formal education (primary, secondary general, VET, higher education), the labour market, the third sector and also at the individual level/ for individual purposes. It should also be noted that the assumption that each setting for validation will receive equal attention should be questioned. Certain settings benefit from a stronger research base than others. Based on an analysis of the returns produced by the ERIC database, within ‘education’ academic research, the production of research on validation is higher in the areas of higher education and in adult education. They are followed by validation in post-secondary education/ VET

research. Research on validation in general secondary or primary education is virtually non-existent –which is an aspect that deserves further exploration. This lack of attention to secondary education is surprising and contrasts with the political priorities in some European countries: for example, in Sweden there has been a strong focus on using validation as a mechanism to achieve secondary school certificates (Lundgren 2005). Validation outside the formal education system receives much lesser attention in the education literature. Validation in the labour market concentrates on a small number of sectors, in particular health and care, which resonates with the well-established research on the use of outcomes-based education in medicine related areas (Harden et al. 1999).

The quality of research on validation is also varied. While there are some examples of methodologically rigorous studies, a good share of research comes from practitioner-focused projects, which exhibit significant methodological and analytical shortcomings –although they may nevertheless be useful and inform practice. There are, moreover, significant patterns of geographical inequality in the production of research on this topic. The production patterns of academic education research on validation in Europe are skewed towards a relatively small set of countries, amongst which Sweden and the UK are the leaders. Amongst Southern European countries, researchers in Portugal, France and Spain have been particularly active. There are, thus, notorious geographical, ‘setting’ and sectoral gaps in the current knowledge-base, derived from the limited and unbalanced production of research on validation. This is important because ‘context’ has consequences for the effectiveness of policies and practices.

3.2 Patterns in argumentation: main themes and approaches

Five themes have dominated European research in the area of validation since 2000¹:

- Social justice and power relations in validation
- Improvement of access to validation
- Methodological aspects
- Experiences of the validation process
- The outputs and outcomes of validation

While the themes are not mutually exclusive, but often interrelated –for example, the connections between social justice and access and outcomes of validation should be clear- they also have distinct characteristics and foci.

3.2.1 Social justice

Social justice is often presented as one of the main aims of validation of non-formal and informal learning in policy documents (Sandberg 2011). Even though the definition of social justice is highly political, not always fully articulated, and far from straightforward, in the literature it is generally associated with the improvement of the position of those who come from a disadvantaged background. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is seen to have the potential to bring about social justice based on two aspects: one is the widening of participation in higher education, and

¹ This section is largely based on Souto-Otero (2014).

widening of access to higher education credentials; the second is the recognition of the knowledge, skills and competences of socially disadvantaged groups, in particular the low qualified.

Armsby (2012) notes that accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) can be a tool for development rather than for credentialism. APEL can give individuals a new perspective on their practice-based learning, the basis to plan their future as practitioners and to challenge their current practices. Fejes and Andersson (2009) study a validation experience in the elderly care sector that enables an exploration of the relationship between experience and learning, using an experiential constructivist perspective that allows participants' prior learning to be taken into account as the starting point of the validation process.

However, the bulk of the social justice literature questions the motivations behind validation processes, their scope, ethos, and foci. The criticism is threefold: (1) validation systems and projects aim to achieve their targets, not to benefit those in need –and both aims are presented as being often in contradiction-; and (2) credential achievement is the driver of validation, at the expense of de-valuing self-development and other forms of recognition; (3) validation will mainly increase inequalities in achievement, as it is those who have higher levels of formal education and greater opportunities for non-formal and informal learning who will make greater use of validation initiatives.

The first two points derive from a conceptualisation of validation as a mechanism for the atomistic, standardised, managerial certification of discrete competences (Diedrich 2013b; Guimarães 2012) that ignores the motivations, interests and broad range of experiences of those who use it. Validation is portrayed as a 'duty' -rather than a 'right' - to display one's technical capabilities and better one's chances of integration into the labour market (Barros 2009). This is seen as detrimental to self-development, the capacity to change one's own life and the valuing of learning for its own sake; a tool for exclusion, rather than inclusion. Thus, Barros (2013:430) argues that in Portugal, validation has become an "strategic device whose social purpose was more about constructing a new invisible form of exclusion than an innovative way of inclusion".

Berglund and Andersson (2012) explore the process of validation in two companies and two municipalities in Sweden. Their conclusions underline that companies and municipalities follow their own logics. Instead of focusing on the analysis of individuals' competences for 'transferability' they focus on selectively mapping competences, giving preference to those that can be 'utilised' –following a 'production logic'. Certain skills may also be 'unvisualised' when this is to the advantage of the employer. Gibbs and Armsby (2011) argue that while experience and success deserve recognition, these do not always have to come in the form of credentials. Instead, they advocate a more 'humanistic form of recognition where experience is valued as a superior contribution to the workplace, that does not need to be or stolen from its essence to satisfy the consumerist need through the power of credentialism' (Gibbs and Armsby 2011:390).

Part of literature has highlighted that differences between the settings within which validation takes place may be important. Diedrich (2013a:567) notes that the managerial workings, target achievement and focus on procedural efficiency of the process of validation in the labour market project that he analysed and which "create structures that cater for the needs of the project, not the needs of the persons targeted

by the project”, may be very different from the logics of validation in the higher education sector.

In relation to the third point Sanséau and Ansart (2013) cite Besson (2008) to stress that contrary to what policy-makers in France expected, the French VAE system benefits primarily people in managerial and intermediate labour market positions (who make up for around 80% of the users) and not the low-skilled. Many certifications resulting from VAE procedures are at the level of master, license and professional licence, in particular in the areas of economics, management and social, economic and administrative sciences (DEPP 2011).

Little research on social justice has looked at other factor than social class –for which level of education is used as a proxy- in access to validation. Research on validation and validation practices themselves tend to overlook cleavages based on gender and language proficiency (Diedrich 2013b). Research looking at race issues is also virtually non-existent, highlighting large gaps in the study of the relationship between social justice, inequalities and validation.

3.2.2 Improving access to validation

A second focus of research, which is related to social justice discussions, has been on the improvement of access to validation initiatives. These studies explore how to increase access to validation, what barriers prevent individuals from participation and attempt to measure the take-up of validation. Some of the work on access offers –at least implicitly- a contrasting (and more positive) view on the relationship between validation and social justice than the social justice literature itself.

Research measuring the actual levels of validation or exploring how to improve access to validation –for instance through marketing initiatives to effectively reach their desired target groups- has so far been very scarce. Data on access is patchy for most European countries, and is more robust only in relation to specific initiatives in specific countries –for example the New Opportunities Initiative in Portugal (Guimarães 2012). This is not altogether surprising given the breadth of the concept of validation: there are obvious challenges in measuring the degree of “identification” of knowledge, skills and competences. The measurement of results of validation initiatives in terms of formal qualifications awarded is more feasible, but is often hampered by the lack of an agency that collates data from education and training institutions at a regional or national level.

More research has been undertaken in relation to the barriers to validation and how to overcome them. Stenlund (2010) notes the higher education staff perceptions and lack of familiarity with validation procedures is one major barrier. While less time is devoted to the assessment of non-formal and informal learning than to the assessment of formal learning, staff in HEIs considers the former to be time-consuming and complicated. Thus, there is a lack of commitment to use validation to widen participation within the current academic culture –a conclusion that is also relevant in relation to social justice debates.

Valk (2009) argues, in relation to the accreditation of prior experiential learning practices, that four barriers are in operation: the general focus of HE provision on input-oriented and process based education (rather than a focus on learning

outcomes), staff attitudes regarding the sources and value of knowledge ('knowledge not acquired in my classes is not good enough'), staff workloads (which direct the attention of staff to pressing issues that affect more students than validation) and financial considerations (validation may create significant 'non-traditional' work in exchange for not much additional income for HE institutions). The author advocates some courses of action to ease these barriers: greater regulation of validation at national level, the setting up of national qualifications frameworks, better dissemination of information to end-users, flexibilisation of curricula, a shift to learning outcomes and more staff training and development.

On the whole, Scott (2010) argued this field is over-theorised and under-practiced: we lack rigorous studies that establish the true reasons for low levels of uptake. He explains this with reference to epistemological difficulties, values of providers and employers and ambiguous financial benefits to institutions.

3.2.3 Experiences of the validation process

A third strand of validation research examines how those who take part in the validation process (candidates and assessors) experience it. This research reveals a high degree of student and staff confusion regarding the validation processes. The ways in which prior knowledge is 'translated' into credits operates as a blackbox for students, who do not understand well the particularities of 'knowledge claims' in different settings. This may be one of the causes for non-use of validation and for withdrawal during the validation process -the Besson (2008) report in France, for instance, documents an important volume of loss of candidates at different stages of the VAE process.

In line with such arguments, Sandberg (2011) advocates a communicative approach – following Habermasian perspective- to the improvement of the understanding of the validation processes by students. This can be particularly important when students are making a transition to a level of education of which they have no previous experience, and may mystify. Stenlund (2010) also advocates greater transparency and student involvement to enhance their understanding of validation processes and their outcomes. For instance, greater familiarity with assessment criteria is likely to improve performance in validation processes. Pokorny (2013) examines the preparation of claims for APEL through portfolios –“the dominant assessment tool for APEL in the UK” (Pokorny 2013:519). She documents how tutors adapt the APEL process to meet their needs and affect students' sense of agency and professional and personal identity in that process. She defends a dialogic approach to assessment to promote APEL and mutual understanding between students and tutors (Pokorny 2013:518). Communication is also a key theme for Diedrich (2013b), who focuses on the role of interpreters in validation processes for immigrants who have language difficulties in Sweden. The article directs attention to the importance of interpreters during validation processes as they transmit information but are also deeply implicated in the construction of the knowledge that is presented for and judged in the assessment process. Armsby (2012) contends that HE professionals, and not only students, are also unclear or have different views regarding how experiential learning and formal learning can be conceptualised, linked and assessed.

It should be noted that most studies on experiences of the validation process are limited by their focus on the perceptions of stakeholders (assessors, students), instead

of using observational approaches or digging out the actual results or consequences of those processes for individuals and institutions.

3.2.4 Methodological aspects

Much education research is conducted in the areas of assessment of knowledge, skills and competences that is of value for discussions on validation. The literature on the methodological challenges of validation methodologies is on the other hand scarce, in particular outside the area of higher education.

Stenlund (2010) provides a literature review on the assessment of prior learning in higher education, from a validity perspective. The study reveals the existence of inconsistencies in the way recognition procedures work amongst universities and amongst education programmes within universities. Thus, candidates may be advantaged or disadvantaged depending on the university or programme where they seek to have their prior knowledge recognised. Clear central guidelines to institutions could help in this respect, according to the author. She also suggests that validation practices are not sufficiently targeted to the purpose of the validation process. In higher education these purposes can be related to access (in this context, validation aims to predict whether the applicant will be successful in a programme of studies), gaining credit (in this context what validation is required to establish is the equivalence between a course or part of a programme and an applicant's prior learning) or –although Stenlund does not explore this purpose- gaining a full qualification. Different assessment designs may be required for these different purposes.

Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2010) explore the approaches to the assessment of “prior informal and non-formal leaning” of ten assessors from the Open University of the Netherlands, through the use portfolios. They report mixed assessors' perceptions regarding the fairness of the accreditation of prior learning of that University. Some assessors considered it unfair to make decisions based solely on a portfolio (candidates may fail to link their experience to the learning objectives of a course, or lack academic writing style); others took the opposite view, considering that this helped to avoid biases that can be generated when applicant and assessor meet. Assessors also reported that the criteria used can be difficult to judge or even interpret. They underlined the role of intuition in parts of the judgment of some assessment criteria. The article concludes that if we accept the role of interpretation and trust the competences of the assessors, portfolios will enjoy a positive future.

Some studies have looked at how technology may re-shape methodological practices, for instance through the use of e-portfolios in the recognition of workplace learning (Cameron 2012). Recent survey work (CEDEFOP 2014) has also started to map the types of competences assessed and the use of validation tools in the private sector, at different points of the employment nexus (e.g. recruitment, human resources management, etc.), finding widespread use of interviews and talks and the screening of documentation such as CVs, certificates, qualifications and references. Many other studies provide descriptions of validation practices and their main steps (Guimarães 2012:72; Sandberg 2011:9-14) but the technical assessment of validation methodologies is not their core concern. Similarly, little attention has been given to self-assessment or peer assessment in validation processes.

3.2.5 The outputs and outcomes of validation

The assessment of the outputs and outcomes of validation is a final theme in the research literature on validation. This line of research has been more advanced in France than in most other European countries. Sanséau and Ansart's (2013) review of the French experience of validation in the HE sector concludes that validation produces a number of positive outcomes: it enables the adoption of individualized learning paths, personal empowerment, self-realisation and shorter training times – some of the aspects that have been under the close attention of critical studies in relation to social justice. Moreover, validation also allows a focus on experience that is in tune with today's societal changes and the aspirations/constraints of each individual. Similar analyses of the benefits of validation can be found in other studies (Sandberg and Kubiak 2013).

There is less evidence of the contribution of validation to widening participation and increasing the efficiency of the education system. The Besson (2008) and other French reports (DARES 2012) are amongst a handful of works that include quantitative information on the outcomes of validation initiatives at the national level. The results that they show are underwhelming, according to Sanséau and Ansart (2013): of the 60,000 candidates expected per year in the French VAE system, only 26,000 degrees and diplomas were accredited (Besson 2008:10).

There is little research that looks at the results of students who accessed a formal education course through the validation, but Stenlund (2010) reports on a number of studies that compared the educational performance of students who gain entry into a programme through a non-APL and an APL route. The majority of these studies conclude that there is no difference in academic achievement in higher education between APL and non-APL students (Marshall and Jones 2002; Rapley et al. 2008). Cantwell and Scevak's (2004) findings are against this trend, as they reported that students who enter HE with substantial prior work experience had a belief in simplicity and certainty of knowledge that persisted over time and found it more challenging to question or restructure their belief system. One cautionary note that should be given is that most of the above research comes from health-related subjects, and in particular nurse education.

An important finding is that the pay-off of validation in the labour market depends on the conditions of the labour market; it is not only about the quality of validation practices or the credibility of the qualifications. Andersson and Fejes (2010) explain how Sweden has had a relatively open policy towards refugees in the recent past, which has granted residence permits to a large number of immigrants. Given that these did not go to Sweden as a result of labour shortages and the demand for their knowledge has been moderate, their knowledge is often not recognised in the labour market.

4. What has been done? EU policy on validation

4.1 EU initiatives on validation

Validation was identified as a priority in the Commission Communication on Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a reality (European Commission 2001), in the 2002 Copenhagen Declaration and its subsequent reviews. It has also been a key theme for the Bologna process. EU work in the area of validation resulted in the 2004 Council Conclusion of Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union 2004). Since then, there have been a large number of sectoral initiatives that have featured discussions on validation, such as the 2006 Council resolution on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European Youth Field (Council of the European Union 2006), or the 2011 Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning (Council of the European Union 2011).

European tools and instruments, such as Europass, the 2007 Youthpass certificate for the recognition of youth work, the 2008 European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning, and EU-funded programmes aim to support validation processes (Souto-Otero 2011). One initiative that links to both research and policy is the 'European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning', a research project that the EU conceives as a central tool for the exchange of good practices and information about validation for policy-makers and practitioners, and could be used as a tool for benchmarking in the context of the 2012 Council recommendation on validation which calls on Member States to put validation arrangements in place by 2018 (Villalba-Garcia et al. 2014).

In recent times, the Council has taken initiatives in relation to validation on three occasions: the 2012 Council Conclusions towards a job-rich recovery and giving a better chance to Europe's youth and the 2013 Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee (Council of the European Union 2013) are two of those. But the most important has been the above-mentioned 2012 Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union 2012).

4.2 Making sense of EU initiatives in validation: criticisms and counter arguments

The main criticisms of EU policies on validation can be grouped into three main categories. These criticisms are that:

- The EU, and by extension DG EAC, is a neo-liberal organisation, and validation is a neo-liberal manifestation as it is focused on the link between skills and the economy at the expense of personal development and social justice aspects;
- Validation does not work as a tool for inclusion: it tends to exclude from participation and achievement those groups who have the greatest risk of social exclusion, such as low-qualified or immigrants; and
- The EU ignores issues of pedagogy and assessment to benefit managerialist approaches in validation.

4.2.1 Validation as a neo-liberal practice: the links between skills and the economy, and personal development

EU's education policy is frequently portrayed as neo-liberal. Its emphasis, it is argued, is not on democratic participation, pluralist views of Europe, the improvement of the quality of personal and collective life, civic awareness or personal fulfilment, but on employment and growth (Mitchell 2006). Validation is seen as a particular example of this, because of its connections with human resources management for competitiveness and economic growth. Yet the association between investment in skills and economic growth, and the economic role of education is not the exclusive property of neo-liberals or conservatives. Carles Boix (1998:3) distinguishes between two strategies to manage the economy, a conservative and a neo-liberal strategy, arguing: "the first strategy consists in reducing taxes to encourage private savings, boost private investment, and accelerate the rate of growth. Lower taxes, however, may imply at least in the short run, less social spending and more inequality. Accordingly, policymakers who do not want to reduce social spending will have to run to the second strategy. In this case, the state increases public spending in human and fixed capital to raise the productivity rate of labour and capital: this should encourage private agents to keep investing even in the face of high taxation (needed to pay for social transfers and public investment programmes)". Both the neo-liberal and social-democratic projects could be called into question for sustaining relations of exploitation (Gough 2004), but the link between education, employment and competitiveness is not a distinctive feature of neo-liberalism.

The EU's focus on 'non-formal and informal learning' instead of UNESCO's 'non-formal education', is also seen as a neo-liberal trait, a concession to individualisation in education and economic instrumentalism. The 'totalisation' of learning makes it penetrate all spheres of life (including private and leisure experiences), and validation asks us to reinterpret those experiences in terms of their value in the labour market, and represent them in front of employers as signifiers of employability (Colley et al. 2003:17). Colley et al. (2006:65) dispute any association between non-formal and informal learning and progressive authors such as Paulo Freire, and see it as opposite to the forms of non-formal education discussed by him: as an alternative that individualizes and de-politicizes learning, "while laying blame at the feet of those who are unable to access opportunities to learn". More generally, DG EAC's programmes are seen to have shifted their focus accordingly since the early 2000s in favour of labour market rather than personal development (Mitchell 2006). EU Education Commissioners have had, since E. Cresson gave way to Viviane Reding in the late 1990s and to this day, a conservative profile –except for the Liberal Democrat Vassiliou in the early 2000s. The surge in the interest of the EU in education around 2000 –when Europe declared its objective to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (European Council 2000)- provides fuel to the argument that the EU has an instrumentalist view of education.

Lange and Alexiadou (2007) note that various initiatives taken by DG EAC, such as its networks of academic experts, may support a social justice agenda. It is also difficult to see a univocal link between actions such as student mobility –including that of children and young people-, cooperation between institutions and cross-national programmes of study on the one hand and neo-liberalism on the other. Much of the investment of the EU in education and training, for instance, goes to the Erasmus programme of mobility in higher education, which has elements that go

beyond economic instrumentalism to expand to notions of citizenship, identity and attitudinal changes about Europe (Mitchell 2012; CHE Consult 2014).

The ‘totalisation of learning’, or the blurring of boundaries between education, employment and leisure, Tuschling and Engemann (2006:456) note, ‘is not a perversion of the humanistic roots of lifelong learning by Eurocrats, but a development that is consistent with the original demands’ of lifelong learning. Non-formal learning is seen as emancipatory by Freire and others because it gives control to individuals, outside of institutional mandates. Non-formal learning does not conceive learners as passive subjects but as agents, it does not focus on education but on individual and collective learning: curriculum loses its central stage in favour of the interests of the learner. Validation is a tool to make at least part of that learning valued: “To designate events as learning anywhere and anytime presupposes tools at the disposal of the individual that allow him/her to label them as such” (Tuschling and Engemann 2006:465).

Responses to EU consultations in the area of lifelong learning –from a range of stakeholders including providers, social partners, educationalists, NGOs, and not mainly from private companies- stress how validation is a crucial step towards making the concept of citizenship more concrete. Some groups have put forward social justice demands on the bases on validation. Examples of these would be trade unions (on issues of fair pay for skills, regardless of the context in which they have been acquired), or feminist groups that have demanded the recognition of skills acquired in the household or through care experiences (Straka 2004). This suggests that validation is not a neoliberal tool per se. Its character is ambivalent, and depends on the way that it is designed and used.

New technology raises new questions on the link between validation and neo-liberalism. MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) (an increasingly popular ‘source’ of non-formal learning which attracts millions of learners) are designed, planned and delivered by education institutions and typically do not lead to a qualification. Individuals are in principle able to take a role in balancing personal and employment interests in MOOC taking, given the wide range of MOOC options currently available. Validation of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired through these courses is being discussed in general terms, and not only with reference to courses with greater labour market relevance.

To be sure, DG EAC documents underline the importance of economic and labour market rationales when discussing education policies, and more so in recent years. But this ignores the political context in which DG EAC operates, and EAC’s need to bargain for funds with other DGs in budget negotiations. In that context, Member States –rightly or wrongly- will not accept high spending in education because this leads to self-development, or to greater development of European citizenship. But in spite of the instrumentalization of its discourse the EU has been fairly constant in their actions and fairly lenient in its relationship with educational institutions. The Commission plays a “two level game” with regards to how it presents what it does externally and what it does, which is affected by its previous legacy in terms of programmes and actions. This is a central point, but also one that analyses of EU policy discourses have ignored. There has been much more emphasis on what the EU

says than on what it does in education, and this practical dimension needs to be included in the analysis.

4.2.2 Validation as an exclusionary practice

A well-established strand of the literature presents a ‘deficit’ view of validation, emphasising not what those undergoing validation may gain, but what validation processes ‘miss out’: the devaluation of the prior learning of individuals during validation processes, in particular in the case of less favoured groups. Anderson and Guo (2009) and Diedrich (2013a), for instance, document experiences of devaluation of the prior learning of immigrants in Canada and Sweden, derived from ontological and epistemological misperceptions. Immigrants’ knowledge is considered inferior and invalid, and skills difficult to map to the host country system are lumped under unspecified categories. The recognition of knowledge, moreover, is highly racialised and gendered: particular occupations and countries are favoured in most immigration regimes (Williams 2007). Under these lenses, validation is based on ‘excluding, normalizing and dividing practices’ (Anderson and Guo 2009).

This view is not undisputed, as part of the literature presents validation as ‘inclusive’, underlining its potential as a tool for social and labour market integration. For example, outside of the EU context, Lerner and Menahem (2003:23) find, based on interviews of over 900 immigrants from the Soviet Union to Israel, that governmentled “recredentialisation” and retraining were “beneficial in terms of the levels of the occupations achieved by the immigrants”. The inclusive view of validation focuses on its potential, acknowledges that there are different validation systems, not all of which produce the same outcomes in terms of inclusion and social justice (Harris 1999), but looks at the ‘gains’ that validation can produce.

The deficit view compares current practices with an ideal scenario where validation practices would recognise and value all types of knowledge. This is a useful counterbalance to what can be a too enthusiastic view of validation in the ‘inclusion’ literature. However, both views run the risk of ‘essentialising’ validation without sufficiently exploring the connections between validation practices and the social contexts in which they are embedded. Harris (1999) rightly noted the propensity of recognition of prior learning to reproduce the characteristics of the context of its implementation. Validation is a tool, and there is scope to use that tool with different purposes and outcomes –depending on prevalent social views and priorities, regulations and public actions. France has a highly developed validation system, which is chiefly used by already highly qualified individuals (Duchemin 2014). In Portugal much emphasis has been put in recent years in the development of systems of validation directed to the low-skilled (Oliveira Pires 2014).

4.2.3 Validation, pedagogy and assessment

References to the link between validation and neo-liberalism underline the absence of detailed pedagogical and assessment discussions, inequalities or the wider benefits of learning in EU validation policy documents, which tend to be more concerned with the *management* of the results of learning processes (Colardyn 2002; Colley et al. 2006). However, the absence of references to pedagogy and assessment has now been partly addressed, as the EU has funded at least some research in these areas in recent

times. It should nevertheless be noted that the evidence-base regarding pedagogy and assessment in validation remains limited. In this context, what the EU can say in these areas is also limited. It is worth noting that central governments did not engage on those issues for formal education until recently. Atkin has argued that while education has always been in the political spotlight in countries such as the USA and the UK, political debates have historically tended to focus on funding levels, matters of infrastructure and key administrative appointments, rather than “on the details of professional practice” (Atkin 1980:7). Matters of practice and curriculum gathered importance only since the Second World War, when the relevance of science and technology for national security and development came to the fore. University professors like Einstein became ‘cultural heroes’ (Atkin 1980:8). From that point to the 1960s a new view developed regarding the involvement of the government in the practice of education. Central government had penetrated the classroom, but even so central governments did not have a lot to say about pedagogy and assessment in the post-war years. Those were issues for teachers, specialists and local authorities. The EU does not have the purchase that central governments had in education, so the association between lack of discussion on pedagogy and assessment and neo-liberalism seems too hasty. Some of the governments that discuss those issues more strongly today are precisely those who are more interested in standardised assessments, which are considered central elements of the neo-liberal agenda in education.

5. Conclusion and future directions

This chapter has analysed European research and policy-making in the area of validation of non-formal learning. It has sought to explicate its importance for the EU and its consequences. It has argued that this needs to be done in a context sensitive matter, which has led me to raise questions regarding the way in which the DG EAC is presented as a purely neo-liberal agent, and validation practices as radically exclusionary practices, in much of the education literature. Rather, this article has problematized the notion that a close relation between education and employment is an exclusive prerogative of neo-liberal thinking. Contrary to mainstream views, this chapter has also argued that the EU plays a two-level game in the area of validation, where work-oriented discourse and practice are not necessarily aligned, and that validation is not a tool associated to a specific political ideology.

The Commission and CEDEFOP have been two of the main beneficiaries of the validation discourse, having played a central role in shaping policy debates in this area at least since the 2000s. The EU has moved from the exchange of good practices to a more defined call for the establishment of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in its 2012 Council Recommendation. The Recommendation is more prescriptive than previous documents and outlines certain features that validation arrangements should have, for example in relation to quality assurance, the provision of skills audits, and their linkages to national qualifications frameworks and the European Qualifications Framework. However, the Recommendation does not define a single model of validation and clarifies that the implementation of validation arrangements should be “in accordance with national circumstances and specificities”. Member States should implement validation arrangements “as they deem appropriate” (Council of the European Union 2012).

In general the Commission lacks the legal bases to generate change in Member States through ‘coercive isomorphism’ –whereby external forces impose change. Instead, Radaelli (2000) notes, EU institutions’ legitimacy is derived largely from their capacity to stimulate policy transfer and find general solutions to collective problems. This creates a central tension: in spite of the European Union’s commitment to “lesson drawing” (Rose 1993), “policy transfer” (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) and the “dissemination of good practices” European validation systems are still very different, and the EU has not committed to a model of validation, maybe acknowledging what works in one country or context may not work in another (James and Lodge 2003).

The Commission acts as a broker rather than as a solutions generator. In other words, the Commission facilitates mimetic isomorphism, through the development of certain tools or instruments, rather than suggesting a preferred model of action for Member States. Policy transfer is facilitated by the existence of a model of ‘good practice’. However, when the structural precondition for mimetic isomorphism is not present, and there are no leading national example(s) to be imitated, this leaves EU institutions in a difficult situation and can lead to a policy stalemate. When this is the case, EU institutions –in particular the Commission- can try to overcome the obstacles to policy-development ‘inseminating solutions into national policy systems’ (Radaelli 2000). In the area of validation the EU has valued diversity, and has not formulated a definitive vision of an effective validation system; it has not ‘inseminated solutions’. It has lacked an “anchor” to imitate and trigger isomorphic processes. Instead, it has resorted to inter-governmentalism asking Member States to work in the area of validation, choosing from a wide range of possible systems. But in this situation the EU lacks the means and legitimacy to ask States to choose the ‘right model for them’. In order to bring further progress the EU has accentuated reporting in the area of validation –in the context of the 2012 Recommendation-, in a step that could enable it to identify more concrete examples of successful approaches or ‘models’, rather than rely in the dissemination of good practices.

Greater reporting would benefit from coupling with a more developed evidence-base. Connections between academia and EU policy-makers on validation have been established on a number of levels –conference organisation, publications, use of knowledge produced in policy documents. This has raised a number of important issues, such as the lack of understanding of validation processes amongst stakeholders, inequalities in access or insufficient attention to individual needs, knowledge, skills and competences. However, in spite of these efforts, the volume of research in this area is not comparable to more established areas: validation has many links with other areas of reach, but is also a niche research area itself. Moreover the focus of the literature and that of policy-makers is often different, as can be seen in discussions about validation and social justice, where the literature tends to lack defined proposals for change, aiming -instead- to ‘make sense of what is going on’. Some of the main themes in the literature, such as assessment, pedagogy and methodology, are not central to EU policy documents while at the same time research on validation has largely excluded topics that are of major interest to the EU, such as governance, cost-effectiveness analysis or the measurement of access to validation in Member States. Experimental research, systematic reviews and, of particular importance for the EU, comparative research have also been limited. This presents gaps for researchers to address, and a challenge for European policy-makers.

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