



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education and Culture



Summary report on Peer Learning Activity on Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Prague, 21 – 24 June 2009

Report to participants



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1 INTRODUCTION

A Peer Learning Activity (PLA) on the topic of the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning took place on 21 – 24 June 2009, in Prague, Czech Republic. The PLA was organised jointly by the European Commission and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in the Czech Republic. The PLA was set within the framework of the implementation of the Action Plan on adult learning *It is always a good time to learn*.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports hosted the meeting. In addition to the host country, fifteen people from the following twelve countries participated in the PLA: Austria (AT); Denmark (DK); Germany (DE); Greece (EL); Hungary (HU); Italy (IT); Latvia (LV); Liechtenstein (LI); the Netherlands (NL); Norway (NO); Portugal (PT) and Sweden (SE). Business Europe also participated in the PLA, along with European Commission staff. Participants were representatives of government, governmental bodies and non-governmental organisations and all have influence within their respective work contexts and, thus, are in a position to disseminate the outcomes of the PLA.

Prior to the PLA participating countries were asked by the European Commission to provide a brief national report addressing the following issues:

- Policies and strategies to encourage and support low-skilled people to seek validation of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning
- The biggest challenges faced in increasing the number of people participating in validation processes
- The ways in which the validation of non-formal and informal learning is linked to qualifications frameworks and
- National validation practices, including data on staff training, the main bodies involved in validation processes, types of beneficiaries and the benefits of validation for individuals and employers.

Reports were received from 13 countries: Austria (AT); Czech Republic (CZ); Denmark (DK); Germany (DE); Greece (EL); Hungary (HU); Italy (IT); Latvia (LV); Liechtenstein (LI); the Netherlands (NL); Norway (NO); Portugal (PT) and Sweden (SE). These country reports are appended in Annex 2. A Background Report (Annex 1) based on a synthesis of 12 of the 13 country reports was presented to participants before the PLA.

1.1 Purpose of the report

The aim of this summary report is to present the key issues raised and the discussions that took place during the PLA in order to support wider national and European discussions on validation. The report is intended to support the work of the European Commission and the Action Plan Working Group in the implementation of the Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn*.

The report is also intended to inform the European Commission's updating of the European Inventory of validation practices scheduled for late 2009. The inventory collects information on current validation practices in the Member States and other countries and makes this information, including best practice examples, available to a wide audience. Finally, the report will feed into the work of the Cluster on Learning Outcomes, which is the main forum for co-ordination of work on validation at EU level.

1.2 Structure of the report

The report comprises four sections.

Section 1 (Key issues in the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning) draws on the Background Report prepared for the PLA to provide an outline of the relevant European issues in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Section 2 (The Structure of the Peer Learning Activity) describes the structure, methodology and content of the PLA.

Section 3 (Key Issues Addressed in the Peer Learning Activity) outlines the key issues addressed by the presentations, the group activities and the discussions.

Section 4 (Overall Conclusions and Recommendations) presents the conclusions arrived at during the PLA and the recommendations arising for the European Commission within the context of the Action Plan.

NOTE: During the PLA a range of terms was used by participants in presentations and in discussion, including:

- 'recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning' [Czech Republic]
- 'recognition and assessment of prior learning' [Czech Republic]
- 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning' [Czech Republic]
- 'recognition and validation of learning outcomes' [Czech Republic]
- 'recognition of prior learning (RPL)' [Denmark and Netherlands]
- 'recognising, validating and certifying competences (RVCC)' [Portugal]
- 'accreditation of prior learning (APL)' [Netherlands]
- 'validation of prior learning (VPL)' [Norway].

While it is recognised that there are technical and other differences of scope and emphases between the above terms, for reasons of convenience the terms 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' and 'validation' are used throughout this summary report to cover them all. This is also in line with the Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/553/4054_en.pdf).

2 KEY ISSUES IN THE VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Recent years have seen increased emphasis on the relevance of learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions and on systems and strategies to validate such learning. Large numbers of employees will change their job, sector and even country of residence during their lifetime. This requires a parallel transfer of qualifications and competences from one setting to another, to a new job, sector or country. Validation of non-formal and informal learning supports such transfer¹.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning enables the achievement of qualifications independent of the context in which the learning takes place (formal, non-formal, informal). This is particularly relevant for adults who have gained a range of competences at work, through participation in non-formal training, in the community, in their everyday life and/or through hobbies, but do not have qualifications to certify these competences. Apart from leading typically to certification, validation also has an important formative role in motivating and leading to further learning. In addition, by enabling adults to gain qualifications, validation systems can promote equality of outcomes between different groups of individuals, including specific groups such as immigrants, older workers and unemployed persons.

Thus, it is important that opportunities for adults to have their non-formal and informal learning validated become an intrinsic feature of adult education and training systems, workplaces and the third sector at all levels, local, regional and national, particularly for individuals with low or no qualifications.

2.1 European context

In 2007 Europe had some 78 million low-skilled (and low-qualified) adults, representing almost one-third of the European working-age population. However, all the evidence points to the need for a highly qualified labour force to aid economic recovery and growth. Furthermore, by 2020 it is expected that many of the new jobs that will have emerged will require the highest qualifications levels, including those gained through vocational education and training (VET).

2.2 EU policy background and tools related to validation of non-formal and informal learning

The European Commission's White Paper *Teaching and Learning* (1995) proposed a common European approach to the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Since then, validation of non formal and informal learning has been identified as a European priority on many occasions.

The Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (2001) re-emphasised the need for a systematic exchange of experience on the topic and for the creation of an inventory of systems, standards and methodologies. To date, three complementary inventory reports on validation have been produced, European Inventory 2004, European Inventory 2005

¹Broadly speaking, non-formal learning may be defined as planned and explicit learning which usually takes place outside the formal education and training system and typically does not lead *directly* to qualifications. Informal learning may be defined as unplanned learning from daily life activities related to work, family, community, leisure.

(http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/ll/life/communication/com_en.pdf) or see Glossary in Directorate General Education and Culture and Cedefop (2009) *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*, p.73.

and European Inventory 2007². The 2007 report presents practice in public, private and voluntary sectors in 32 countries along with six case studies. An updating of the 2007 inventory will be undertaken in late 2009.

Common principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning were adopted in May 2004 with the aim of encouraging and guiding the development of high-quality, trustworthy approaches and systems for validation in the Member States.

In March 2006, the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes was established as one of a number of European-level clusters of countries for mutual learning within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

A significant development for the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been the emergence of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), a common reference framework based on learning outcomes and competences to enable and promote transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications and competences in Europe. This shift towards learning outcomes, regardless of where or how competence has been achieved, is critical to the growth of validation systems and practices.

2.3 Recent EU developments supporting the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The 2006 Communication from the European Commission *Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn*³ includes a key message in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The 2007 Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn*⁴ which seeks to implement the five key messages of the 2006 Communication emphasises that recognition of skills and social competences, regardless of where and how they are achieved, is especially important for those who lack basic qualifications. The Action Plan stresses the relevance of validation for all stakeholders (employers, governments, individuals etc.) on the grounds that there is evidence that recognizing skills gained non-formally and informally could lead to important savings in time and money. The Action Plan also prioritises the learning needs of low-skilled and low-qualified adults.

The Action Plan presents a set of specific actions to 'speed up the process of validation and recognition' including: the identification of good practice in relation to the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning with a special focus on social competences; the organisation of a European-level PLA for the exchange of good practice; the funding of cross-border exchanges of personnel through the Lifelong Learning Programme.

In 2008, as a support to the implementation of the Action Plan, the Commission established a Working Group of representatives of Member States, EFTA and EEA countries, the EU social partners, CEDEFOP, the European Training Foundation (ETF) and European associations. In addition, five focus groups were established, including a focus group on 'Validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning'.

²<http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>; http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/EuropeanInventory/

³ Communication from the European Commission (2006) *Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn*. European Commission, Brussels.

⁴ Communication from the European Commission (2007) *Action Plan on Adult Learning: It is always a good time to learn*. European Commission, Brussels.

The 2008 *Update of the strategic framework for European co-operation in education and training*⁵ highlights validation of non-formal and informal learning as a priority for 2009 and 2010.

In 2009 DG Education and Culture and Cedefop published *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*⁶ which are the result of more than two years' co-operation between European countries in the Cluster on Recognition of Learning Outcomes and the *Education and Training 2010* process. The guidelines provide expert advice to be used voluntarily by stakeholders at national, regional and local levels. The aim is to contribute to the development of diverse and high quality, cost-efficient validation approaches in Europe and to the strengthening of the comparability and transparency of validation processes and methods across national boundaries. The point is made that the guidelines are now possible because national positions have become stronger in the field and greater exchange of policy and practice is now feasible. It is stressed that the European Guidelines should be seen as an evaluation tool for validation stakeholders.

2.4 Validation in the EU 2010 countries

Validation of non-formal and informal learning forms a cornerstone of the lifelong learning strategy of many countries. Many have put a legal framework in place. In a number of countries validation is an integrated component of the existing formal education and training system and an accepted route to recognition of learning outcomes and to certification. In others the validation system is parallel to the formal qualifications system and uses some of its infrastructure such as benchmarks or standards. In yet others the validation system may be an entirely separate system with no standards or certification links to the formal system. However, the current development of National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) is providing overarching structures that bridge such separate systems.

The 2007 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning grouped the EU 2010 countries into three categories, namely, countries with high, medium and low levels of development at that time:

- Countries such as DK, FI, FR and NL have moved from validation policies to validation practices. In these countries the degree of acceptance of validation is frequently illustrated by relatively high levels of take-up.

It should be noted that among the countries participating in the PLA, Portugal and Norway also have high levels of development. During the PLA itself a number of the countries considered as having high take-up rates expressed concern about failure to reach anticipated levels of take-up in recent times and about the risks that this could pose for their overall validation systems.

- Countries such as CZ, IT, LX, RO and SI have either recently set up a legal or policy framework for validation and are starting implementation, or have piloted a variety of different methodologies on the basis of which they are currently developing a national approach.

⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2008) An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.

⁶ Directorate General Education and Culture and Cedefop (2009) European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.

- In countries such as LV, MT and SK the benefits of validation may be acknowledged by stakeholders but, as yet, there is little in terms of policy or practice to facilitate the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

It was against this overall backdrop of evolving Europe-wide validation policies and practices that participants from the Member States, Liechtenstein, Norway, Business Europe and the European Commission came together in Prague for the Peer Learning Activity on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

3 THE STRUCTURE OF THE PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY

The PLA on the validation of non-formal and informal learning is a key tool for the implementation of the European Commission's 2007 Action Plan on adult learning *It is always a good time to learn*. The objective of the PLA was to bring together validation stakeholders to share experience, to engage in discussion and to achieve mutual learning on policies and practices in relation to validation, particularly for low-skilled and low-qualified adults. The intention was/is to contribute to work already done or in progress to develop policies, systems and practices which enable, encourage and persuade adults to avail of validation of their non-formal and informal learning for a range of access, exemption, partial or full qualification purposes.

A Background Report summarising the national reports provided by participating countries was sent to participants before the PLA together with the Glossary of Terms from the recently published *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*⁷.

The PLA took place over three days and comprised five types of activities as follows:

- **Introductory session** on Sunday evening where participants indicated their expectations for the PLA
- **Formal presentations** on developments in policies and practice from key stakeholders in the **Czech Republic**, including policy-makers, researchers, employers, project leaders and guidance practitioners
- **Formal presentations** by other participants in the PLA. Presentations were made by:
 - **Denmark** on the evolution of validation from legislation to implementation
 - **Portugal** on the RVVC National System and the role of the New Opportunity Centres
 - **The Netherlands** on the 2009 measures to reach the low-skilled, the Quality Code and the role of the Knowledge Centre
- Brief **informal presentations** by other participants in the PLA
- **Participant discussion** and **small group work** on various aspects of validation, especially the engagement of stakeholders, and on what it would be feasible to take back to their home countries
- **End-of-day summary** of presentations and discussions followed by a discussion between the organisers on the focus, structure and organisation of the following day's activities.

English was the working language of the PLA.

On the evening of Sunday 21 June participants were welcomed to the PLA by Jakub Stárek on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Czech Republic and by Martina Ní Cheallaigh and Marijke Dashorst of the European Commission. On Monday 22 June the PLA was opened by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the European Commission. Over the

⁷ Directorate General Education and Culture and Cedefop (2009) European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.

three days the PLA was co-chaired by Jakub Stárek, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and Marijke Dashorst, European Commission.

At the opening session on Sunday evening participants were invited to present their individual expectations for the PLA which would form a checklist against which to evaluate overall PLA activities on the third day. Specific expectations included a wish to share and learn about:

1) Validation Policies

- Selling the idea to ministries and other key stakeholders so as to generate policies on validation

2) Validation Systems and Practices

- Building a bottom-up validation system
- Improving the existing validation system
- Being more concrete about the challenges of validating non-formal and informal learning

3) Engagement

- Getting arguments for validation so as to be able to sell the idea to stakeholders and engage them in validation policies and processes
- Increasing the number of adults availing of validation
- Reaching specific target groups, for example, prisoners
- Engaging low-skilled adults in the validation process
- The role of the state in encouraging the engagement of low-skilled adults with validation
- Encouraging and supporting work organisations to offer workers opportunities for validation of their non-formal and informal learning
- How to validate the learning outcomes of low-skilled people? What is there to validate?

4) Comparison and feedback

- Feedback from participants on the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning in (country)
- Comparing (country's) existing system of validation of non-formal and informal learning with systems in other countries
- Ensuring that (country) is on the right track with its validation policies and practices

5) General

- General information on validation
- Inspiration for work in home country
- One bright idea to take home.

4 KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THE PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY

The PLA sought to focus on policy and practice relating to validating non-formal and informal learning with specific reference to three key themes:

- 1) The **technical development** of the legal, policy and practical frameworks for validating non-formal and informal learning. How to build and operate a validation system which will be broadly accepted by society (employers, individuals, general population, state)?
- 2) The **role of stakeholders**. How to involve stakeholders and keep them involved? How to address the question 'What's in it for me' from the stakeholders' point-of-view?
- 3) **Motivation and guidance measures** for potential participants in validation activities. What can be done to inform individuals about validation and the opportunities open to them? How can individuals be encouraged to avail of validation? How to address the question 'What's in it for me' from the point-of-view of potential participants in validation?

In the consideration of these issues throughout the three days of the PLA particular emphasis was placed on low-skilled adults in the context of the Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn*. In fact, the term 'low-skilled' itself was discussed and many people indicated a preference for the term 'low-qualified' as being more relevant and, indeed, logical in the context of validating the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. By definition, individuals presenting for validation of their non-formal and informal learning are likely to possess learning and skills but lack the qualifications which recognise those learning and skills and, of course, may need additional learning to achieve a partial or full qualification. Accordingly, the term 'low qualified' is used in place of the term 'low skilled' throughout the rest of this summary report, except where reference is being made to individuals who actually have limited skills as opposed to lacking qualifications.

A number of key issues emerged for discussion and debate during the PLA including:

- 1) Establishing a system for validating non-formal and informal learning
- 2) The validation process
- 3) The role of guidance in validation
- 4) Validation of the competences of low-skilled individuals
- 5) The benefits of validation for stakeholders including the state, employers, and individuals
- 6) Quality assurance – how to ensure the quality of and trust in, the validation process?
- 7) Data on validation

These issues surfaced as explicit topics and transversal themes in the formal presentations from the host country and participating countries, in the feedback from the small group sessions, in the discussions and in the question and answer sessions.

4.1 Establishing a system for validating non-formal and informal learning

Various presentations dealt with the process of establishing a system for validating non-formal and informal learning. The following stages in the process were identified:

4.1.1 Development phase

4.1.2 Experimental phase

4.1.3 Consolidation phase

It is acknowledged that not all participating countries have followed/are following this model of development and, indeed, that such a linear model may not reflect the reality of practice, but during the PLA it served as a useful framework within which to consider the issue of putting in place a validation system.

4.1.1 Development phase

Legal Framework

A number of the participating countries have put a legal framework in place for the development of validation policy and practices, including Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Norway, Portugal and Sweden.

In the **Czech Republic** the 2006 Act on Verification and Recognition of Further Education Results sets out qualification and assessment standards; authorised personnel; the organisation of examinations; the recognition of learning outcomes from *praxis* and further study. In **Denmark** the development of policy on validating non-formal and informal learning began in 2004 and led to the law of June 2007 which covers: a partnership agreement; the national Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning; an information campaign; an online skills portfolio; a handbook on validation and a counselling service, including a web portal. An individual with qualifications at less than Level 3 of the EQF has a legal right to request the validation, free-of-charge, of his/her non-formal and informal learning.

In **Norway** there is a statutory right to upper secondary education for individuals who have not completed that level. Validation is often accompanied by tailored training. Employees may also be granted unpaid study leave to participate in further education.

In **Portugal**, a public centre administers the overall validation system and the New Opportunities Centres (456 throughout the country) offer validation of non-formal and informal learning processes. From July 1 2009 in **Sweden** a new national agency, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, has responsibility for the co-ordination of the further development of existing decentralised sectoral validation practices. Currently, all participants in municipal adult education work to an individual study plan which takes into account their individual circumstances, prior learning and learning goals as per the Municipal Adult Education Ordinance.

Involving stakeholders in policy development

In the **Netherlands**, the validation process is not governed by law but is supported by a covenant signed up to by all national stakeholders and is maintained by a code of practice. Validation began informally in schools/institutions in 1990s and by the end of 1990s the social partners asked for a more systematic approach. In 2006 all national stakeholders signed a covenant. The division of roles between public and private stakeholders was a major decision. Public responsibilities include: stimulating the market; infrastructure, including a quality code; funding

for certain groups and fiscal measures. Private sector responsibilities include: registering validation providers; collecting fees; expanding the infrastructure and the quality code.

In **Denmark** where the government has made an agreement with the social partners regarding validation within a general framework of social partnership, the social partners act as a bridge to companies and individuals. A new agreement is currently being prepared and possible elements include: a revision of the competence portfolio; a greater analysis of existing data to get information on when, why and for whom validation is relevant.

In **Italy** there is a range of regional approaches to validation within regional frameworks of qualifications. Currently the Ministry of Labour is overseeing a committee comprised of national ministries, social partners and institutes for technical support and charged with developing a system of national occupations which will lead to a national qualifications framework. A major aim of the work is to achieve mutual recognition between regional qualifications.

Who pays for validation?

The question of who pays for validation is critical to the long-term sustainability of validation systems. The level of support provided to the individual candidate and the assessment methods used are critical determinants of the cost of validation. Pilot projects may mask the true cost and results may not be sustainable after the funding period if it emerges that stakeholders consider the system of validation piloted to be too costly.

In **Denmark** there is a widespread debate on who should pay for validation. It is a time-consuming process, taking anything from five hours to five days, depending on individual circumstances. It is not considered a financial opportunity by education and training providers. Validation is free for the low-skilled. If they were to pay, the real cost would be about DKR 5000. In **Norway** the providing institution pays for the process and receives the funding as part of its overall budget if the candidate has a statutory right to upper secondary education. In **Portugal** the process is publicly funded and is free of charge to individuals.

In the **Netherlands** engaging in the actual validation process is commercial and self-financing for individuals. However, as of January 1 2007, the government gives employees or employers who buy validation from a certified supplier €300 for each procedure (the average price for validation is €1000 - €1500). In 2009 a packet of labour market measures have been introduced to counter the effects of the economic downturn. As part of this package, the government will pay 50%-100% of the validation procedure for an individual who is at risk of becoming unemployed and does not yet have a vocational qualification at Level 2 of the Dutch qualification structure for vocational education. €57 million is available for this purpose in the years 2009-2010. An additional amount of €75 million is available to provide education for people at risk of unemployment.

In the **Czech Republic** 63.7% of surveyed employers in the tourism sector said they would invest in supporting employees seeking validation. The breakdown is as follows: 42.1% of employers would provide up to €100; 35.9% would provide between €101 and €200; 15% would provide between €201 and €400 and 6.4% would be willing to invest more than €400.

Discussion

The development of policy in relation to validation gave rise to a wide ranging discussion and the following points were emphasised by individual participants and/or more generally.

The individual must be at the heart of the policy development triangle comprised of:

- government to establish the necessary framework and to regulate and monitor the system
- the demand side, including the social partners who are among the most important stakeholders
- the supply side, including: suppliers (education and training providers; employers; third sector organisations) and validation personnel.

A cross-government approach involving education and training, welfare and labour ministries is needed.

The initiators of the validation process are likely to be public authorities who have a responsibility to provide funding and regulate the system, fund promotion campaigns, fund guidance and information personnel and set targets for the engagement of individuals in the process.

Government action alone is not enough to shift attitudes and deliver on validation. The involvement of stakeholders - individuals themselves, employers (including MSMEs [micro, small and medium enterprises]), the third sector, qualifications bodies, education and training providers, validation practitioners - is a *sine qua non* for developing a validation system and for avoiding a perception that validation is a public sector responsibility.

A key role for the government is to put in place local/regional/national sustainable infrastructure as appropriate; involve key stakeholders; stimulate demand among individuals and employers through information campaigns and fiscal measures; fund low-skilled individuals; establish quality assurance systems and monitor the system.

A key role for employers and providers of education and training is to provide access to validation for individuals; hire and upskill appropriate validation practitioners; monitor the implementation of the system and assure its quality within local, regional and national quality codes.

The large number of MSMEs makes it difficult for any information campaign to reach them all. In this regard, a cascade model whereby large companies inform companies in their supply chain about validation and its benefits had been found useful in the **Netherlands**.

A national qualifications framework has a key role as a bridge between individuals and qualifications.

It is vital to develop specific initiatives aimed at low-skilled individuals.

A body such as the Knowledge Centres in **Denmark** and the **Netherlands** and the National Agency for Qualifications in **Portugal** has an important role to play in the development, management, regulation, monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance of the validation system. It could be useful if such bodies were to share their experience with countries where validation systems are emerging.

The development phase for validation may last a number of years and maintaining the involvement of stakeholders is a key challenge.

4.1.2 *Experimental phase*

The importance of the experimental phase of the establishment process was emphasised by participants. The experimental phase may be a planned phase in the establishment of a validation system, it may be a less formal stage in the establishment process or it may be a starting point where employers, sectors and/or institutions test validation approaches on a small scale, independently of any existing bigger scheme or plan.

In the **Czech Republic** the sector skills councils pioneered validation of non-formal and informal learning against occupation profiles. In addition, the UNIV project conducted a pilot validation in 78 schools at ISCED 3C level (level of apprenticeship) in 2005 – 2008. Standards developed by the sector skills councils were used and feedback on the standards was given to the councils. Upper secondary school teaching staff was trained in the legal basis of validation and the validation process, from the selection of the partial qualifications to be piloted to the assessment of candidates. The 47 partial qualifications to be awarded were selected in co-operation with employers and some employers put forward their employees for validation of their competences. Many lessons were learned from the pilot activities.

In **Norway** a three-year project on validation for a special target group, inmates within prison education, was launched in 2007. The objectives of the project are: to establish validation of non-formal and informal learning as a tool for competence mapping and adapted training within prison education; to establish co-operation fora of stakeholders; to develop validation models that safeguard individual adjustment/adapted training and to increase the validation competence of involved personnel.

Discussion

The following aspects of the experimental phase were identified as important by individuals and/or more generally.

The experimental phase should leave a legacy of lessons about validation. A major role of government during the experimental phase, where it is part of a planned establishment process, is a careful monitoring and evaluation to ensure that stakeholders learn lessons for the consolidation phase. As one participant put it 'If there is no learning the whole thing will die off.'

Low-skilled individuals should be involved in the experimental phase to ensure that key lessons are learned about how to involve them and what their information, support and actual validation needs are.

It is important that during the experimental phase evidence on the benefits of validation is gathered with a view to encouraging stakeholder involvement in validation.

Moving from the experimental to the consolidation phase is not a simple, linear process. Rather, it requires the active engagement of all stakeholders and is not a foregone conclusion.

4.1.3 *Consolidation phase*

The consolidation phase may be the 'make or break' stage of establishing a validation system. The involvement of stakeholders in the integration of validation processes into the provision of education and training institutions and into HR policies in enterprises is critical to consolidation. The issue of whether validation will be integrated into qualifications systems, legally, administratively and financially, is an issue that is particularly up for debate during the consolidation phase.

Discussion

A number of important points were made by participants in relation to the consolidation phase.

A key challenge at this stage is to maintain the active involvement of key stakeholders. The role of government is one of promotion, regulation and quality assurance. Public funding is necessary in this regard. It is vital to use 21st century media in information campaigns. Public funding is necessary in this regard as costs are high. Employers are the accelerators at this stage as they legitimise the whole system. Employers are also disseminators and can become key providers of validation as an integral part of HR policies. Education and training providers can be disseminators when they integrate validation into their provision and ensure that personnel are up-skilled to become competent validation practitioners. The third sector brings particular expertise and strengths to the validation process.

It is important to bring validation close to where people are. For example, in **Norway** it is a challenge to exercise one's individual right to validation because of long distances and scattered populations in some counties.

Sufficient financial resources are necessary to mainstream and consolidate validation and public funding will continue to be essential for the promotion of validation, for funding low-skilled groups and for monitoring and evaluation. Varying financial commitments will also continue to be required from other stakeholders, including employers, third sector organisations, providers and individuals.

Many countries are in the consolidation stage and, apart from **Portugal** where uptake is high, the big challenge is to attract individuals to validation. There is still a preference for the formal system which is a known quantity and trust and confidence building in the validation route still has way to go before achieving equal acceptance by potential users.

4.2 *The process of validation*

4.2.1 *The validation process itself*

While the detail of the validation process varies from participating country to country and within countries where the system is bottom-up, virtually all countries described a process which involves a range of stakeholders with the individual at the centre of the process.

As a first step, the individual looks for/is given information on validation and makes a decision to look for validation of his/her competences achieved outside of formal education and training; s/he seeks advice and guidance, generally from a guidance/HR practitioner within an enterprise, a labour office, an education and training provider or a third sector organisation. A second stage involves the individual reflecting on his/her competences and moving to gather and document evidence of the competences, generally with the support of the guidance practitioner and often within a portfolio, material or on-line. When appropriate and adequate evidence has been gathered it may be then submitted for assessment by a trained assessor against pre-determined standards. The standards may be occupational standards, education-training standards or NQF-related learning outcomes-based standards. In some systems the individual takes an examination or gives a demonstration to prove his/her competences. If the evidence of learning, however compiled/established, meets the required explicit standard the competences are then validated. To assure the quality, trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the overall process a range of process-based standards need to be in place along the way and, as a final stage, the overall process is generally externally audited.

Depending on the validation system and the process undergone, the outcome may include: access to a course; a certificate of experience; a partial qualification; a full qualification.

The actual validation processes in place were described by a number of the participating countries.

In the **Czech Republic** the manner in which the profile to identify learning outcomes is completed differs from person to person. The learning is assessed by examination and it can sometimes take 2 – 3 days for the candidate to show the assessor what s/he knows and can do. For the partial qualification the employers prepare the standard, the qualification and the examination. An individual could get employment with one partial qualification only. To gain the full qualification s/he must obtain all partial qualifications named in the qualification standard (necessary to gain a full qualification) and take a final examination in a formal education institution (mainly upper secondary vocational schools).

In **Denmark** the law sets down principles but not standards for the validation process which is decentralised. Educational institutions have to work out for themselves how to work with the principles. The Knowledge Centre supports validation practitioners in relation to standards, approaches and methods. The assessment process is by means of an online portfolio. A recent evaluation of the portfolio shows that it is not user-friendly for low-skilled individuals. In **Netherlands** the validation process comprises two parts, namely, a) gaining a certificate of experience (approved by the social partners and the Ministry of Education) and b) changing the certificate of experience into a formal certificate through an education and training institution. An individual may decide to step out of the validation process when the certificate of experience is achieved as it can be used for various labour market purposes.

In **Portugal** 456 local, institutionally diverse centres provide validation opportunities. There are two main validation instruments – a) key competence standards relating to lower and upper secondary standards and b) a national catalogue of qualifications comprising 240 qualifications. There are three steps in the overall process, namely: recognition; validation; certification. The process begins with the life history technique followed by the elaboration of a competence portfolio which is then matched against key competence standards. Next the matching is evaluated by a specialised team of adult educators/specific trainers. The evaluation may lead to short training actions followed by validation or directly to validation sessions with external evaluators.

If the individual's skills are below the standards for validation, s/he is referred to a specific training course based on the National Catalogue of Qualifications. If the individual has some skills, and their development needs more than 50 hours of training, s/he will be partially certificated, a personalised qualification plan will be devised with him/her, and s/he is referred to a specific training course. If the certification process does not lead to a full certificate or diploma, a special certificate will be issued identifying the validated qualification units. If the individual has recognized skills or needs only 50 hours of training, s/he can achieve full certification at the New Opportunities Centre.

Discussion

The discussion on the process of validation addressed the issue of whether the validation process should be linked to the formal education and training system or whether it should be a stand-alone system. The **Czech Republic** and **Portugal** argued strongly for linking validation to formal examinations and formal qualifications while **Denmark**, the **Netherlands** and **Norway** were more

of the opinion that validation should provide an alternative to 'school' and to formal examinations.

4.2.2 The role of Guidance

The key roles of guidance were identified as relating to: provision of information; motivation and stimulus; identification of existing learning outcomes; development of a portfolio of evidence; recommendation for further education and training. Participants were unanimous in their belief that guidance is critical to the validation process.

In **Czech Republic** in a survey by the Euroguidance Centre of 20 different agencies, the majority being Labour Offices, more than 50% of respondents said they inform clients about possibilities for validation; more than 50% encourage clients to avail of validation and more than 50% did not feel sufficiently informed about validation. In another survey of 24 guides working with the UNIV project, 62.5% stated that 'guidance is absolutely necessary' for validation to provide organisational, communication, motivational and portfolio development support. Three case studies from further Czech projects underline the key role of guidance – 'Without the (guidance) support I would not have got through the process'; 'The guide is the key person. He is the only one who really cares; assessors are only questioning'; 'We could never finish this without the guide's help.'

Discussion

In the discussion on the role of guidance in the validation process the following issues were raised by individuals and/or more generally.

In general, the lower the level of the qualification at stake, the greater the candidate's need for guidance.

Is a Master's degree as an entry qualification for a validation guidance practitioner setting the bar too high? In this regard it was pointed out that a Commission Communication of 2007 proposed a Master's degree for teachers and when discussed in the Council this level became optional. Whatever their qualification level, guidance practitioners need to be experienced and good at working with people. They need the ability to motivate and encourage the candidate through what can be a lengthy process, while always seeking to uncover hidden skills. Mentors who have been through a validation process themselves have a useful role to play in this regard.

How much does the guidance practitioner need to know about the curriculum/competences required for a specific qualification to be able to guide an individual through the validation process? Is there an argument for having specialist 'guides' who are familiar with certain areas of the curriculum? Would a teacher/trainer with guidance skills be a better guide to the validation process?

Is there a role for the Euroguidance Network in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning?

4.3 Validating the competences of low-skilled individuals

Low-skilled people are not a homogeneous group and there are many reasons why an individual may be low-skilled. The validation of non-formal and informal learning generally assumes the existence of competences that have not been recognised through a qualification. There was a wide-ranging discussion on whether it is possible to validate the competences of 'really low-skilled' people who have an apparent deficit of competences.

4.3.1 *Reaching low-skilled individuals*

A critical first step towards the validation of low-skilled individuals is engaging them in the validation process. Obstacles to validation are manifold. They operate for all potential candidates, but have particular force for low-skilled individuals.

Potential users frequently lack information about validation. In 2005 only 15% of the population in the **Netherlands** were familiar with validation. In **Denmark**, institutions do not consider validation a financial opportunity so they do not tell potential users - individuals or employers - about it. An extensive information campaign has so far had limited success in attracting those individuals. In general, in the majority of countries the relatively high cost may make validation unattractive to potential candidates, especially low-skilled individuals. Working hours, family life and other personal life projects reduce the time available to engage in validation in **Portugal**. In many countries validation of non-formal and informal learning may be seen as a 'top-down' project.

Governments in many of the participating countries fund initiatives to reach low-skilled people. In **Norway**, as already described, there is a specific project on validation in prison education. There is also an aspiration in **Norway** that the Competence Card will be a useful tool for low-skilled individuals to document their skills and competences achieved at work.

A project in the **Netherlands** works with young people who have left school four or five years earlier. The project tries to reach their parents and tries to persuade those who are employees to get qualifications in basic skills for work life. The employers of the young people get public finance to support their employees. In **Portugal** where there is a mission to bring validation close to the people, national authorities have protocols with large companies for the validation of the competences of low-skilled individuals.

Discussion

Discussions on how to engage low-skilled individuals in the validation process focused on policy and practice.

Participants identified essential steps that need to be taken to promote the engagement of low-skilled individuals at all stages of **policy development**. These include:

- Putting in place specific over-arching national/regional/local policies, targets and funding directed at attracting low-skilled individuals into validation processes
- Starting with a mapping exercise to identify low-skilled individuals. Local, regional and national statistics on national education levels and future skills needs can be useful in this regard.
- Involving all stakeholders in the planning stage – formal education/training providers at regional and local levels; public employers; large corporations; MSMEs; trade unions; social welfare systems; labour offices; churches; low-skilled individuals.
- Identifying sub-groups within what is a very heterogeneous group of low-skilled individuals – push/pull factors will be required to encourage each group to engage with the validation process.
- Considering a push factor like the requirement in **Netherlands** that every unemployed individual must have national qualifications by the age of 27 or s/he will lose public financial support

- Observing ethical and professional standards at all times in working with low-skilled individuals so as to safeguard their rights and ensure useful outcomes for them from the validation process.

A number of useful **practices** were highlighted in the discussion including:

- Putting in place a 'bottom up' approach which places the individual at the centre of the validation process
- Treating the workplace as a good place to reach low-skilled individuals as many are in employment
- Encouraging trade unions to act as brokers of validation in the workplace
- Reaching unemployed low-skilled individuals through labour/welfare offices as soon as possible after they have become unemployed
- Enabling third sector organisations with strong community links to play a key role in reaching low-skilled individuals
- Establishing specific projects to reach low-skilled individuals in collaboration with, for example, Probation Services
- Funding information campaigns but recognising that they will not work for all
- Using financial incentives. Access to the validation process free of charge or for a small fee is important for low-skilled individuals. A voucher system is useful in this regard
- Offering fiscal arrangements such as tax relief to individuals and employers who use the validation process
- Putting in place information and guidance services to support low-skilled individuals to engage with a validation process
- Establishing a user-friendly system of validation with user-friendly tools/processes.

4.3.2 Validation approaches

The vast majority of participants believed that it is possible to validate competences for low-skilled individuals, provided the process is enabling of the individual. The following points were emphasised in this regard.

It would be important for a low-skilled individual to have the same person to guide him/her through the entire validation process.

The main objective at the outset would be validation for self-confidence and motivation purposes. Validation should not be carried out until the individual is comfortable with the prospect.

Validation practitioners need specific skills to work effectively with low-skilled individuals.

'One size fits nobody' so validation needs tailored approaches to fit low-skilled individuals.

A range of approaches to validation was suggested, namely:

- Look for hidden skills – in the area of personal achievement perhaps, rather than for the labour market

- Support the individual to create a CV 'portfolio' of his/her competences
- Support the individual to set a qualification goal and to find the top-up education and training s/he may need to achieve that goal
- Demonstration and observation are useful approaches to the assessment of the competences of low-skilled individuals.

4.4 The benefits of validation for stakeholders

There was a wide-ranging discussion on the benefits of validation for stakeholders who were identified as:

- Individuals
- Social partners – employers and unions
- Public authorities – a range of ministries and levels
- Validation practitioners – counsellors/guides; assessors; teachers/trainers/tutors
- Education and training providers – public, commercial, third sector.

The discussion on the benefits of validation had as a main objective the identification of arguments and practices to convince stakeholders of the advantages of involvement in validation processes.

4.4.1 Making visible the benefits of validation

The validation of non-formal and informal learning faces challenges in many countries. Countries do not have a tradition of describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes; technical and professional support capacities are under pressure and the process can be cumbersome, time-consuming and costly. A critical response to these challenges is to make the benefits of validation more visible to all stakeholders.

Discussion

Suggestions made by participants as to how to raise the visibility of the benefits of validation included the following approaches.

Develop a platform of good practice and projects which work together to showcase best practice at national and local levels.

Use numbers and stories – use stories of individual success to support statistical information on validation outcomes.

Ensure that all stakeholders, including validation practitioners, understand the system and are, thus, in a position to present and promote it.

4.4.2 Benefits of validation for the individual

The individual was identified as the central stakeholder of validation of non-formal and informal learning. The benefits of validation for the individual are personal, learning-related and labour-market related. The following benefits for the individual were identified and discussed:

a) Personal 'soft' benefits

- increased self-esteem and self-confidence

- self-awareness of capabilities and consequent empowerment
- opportunity to embark on a professional and personal project.

b) Learning-related benefits

- possible tailor-made training to supplement existing identified competences
- formal recognition of learning outcomes not already certified
- a clear-cut path to lower and upper secondary qualifications in some systems
- a stimulus to engagement in formal learning and further non-formal learning
- access to a previously inaccessible level of study
- a reduction in opportunity costs through exemptions which eliminate or reduce the need to spend time and money relearning what has already been learned. In **Denmark** data show that adults aged 25+ in basic adult education who engage with a validation process are typically able to reduce the time they spend being taught in a school by at least 50%.

c) Labour market-related benefits

- brings an unemployed individual closer to the labour market by promoting his/her self-esteem and the definition of his/her vocational plans
- gives labour market added-value in terms of employability and mobility
- gives access to the qualifications needed to retain a job in highly regulated employment sectors
- leads to a possible higher salary, though this depends on individual situations and is not a right in any country
- is made available as part of redundancy planning
- supports the integration and employability of migrants
- gives a low-qualified individual something to show a prospective employer (e.g. a ProfilPASS; a Competence Card).

4.4.3 Benefits of validation for the social partners

A number of participants indicated that while social partners will, for example, attend national, regional and local meetings it is difficult to get them to participate in validation activities. The challenge is about how to generate joint ownership of the process. It was also pointed out that while in many cases employers want and need skilled employees, they do not necessarily need qualified employees.

Profits may go up after employees have engaged in a validation process, but the benefits of validation are not always immediately clear-cut for employers as upskilling is a cost. MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) are a particular challenge and to get them to engage with validation it is vital to be able to present a very clear picture of the benefits for them of such engagement. In contrast to many countries that emphasised the challenge of getting employers who might fear poaching or increased wage costs as a result of validation, experience in **Norway** has shown that it can be beneficial to the employer in terms of getting a better understanding of the skills available among staff members, as described in the amusing video on the VOX website.

The Competence Card is proving popular among employers and employees. The Card is being introduced currently to document the competences of all those working in the public service.

Research in the **Netherlands** shows that as a result of validation employees have increased ability to learn and are more flexible in work, more mobile and more loyal to employers. For example, the management of a 36-employee food factory facilitated the validation of employees' non-formal and informal learning and the following outcomes were identified: 'My employees now understand better what they are doing'; 'They are better at the QA procedures'; 'They can give better feedback'; 'Better quality assurance has led to better food and ultimately to better sales'; 'We're continuing with it' was the verdict of management

In the course of discussion, participants identified the benefits of validation for employers, big and small, as skill-related, productivity-related, human resources-related and education and training-related. They identified the following key employer benefits:

a) Skills-related benefits

- the improved skills of their employees and the discovery of their hidden talents
- ability to meet mandatory/statutory requirements for skills – for example, in health and banking
- increased ability to keep up with technological change
- a reduction in the time required away from the job to achieve a qualification.

b) Productivity-related benefits

- increased productivity
- increased satisfaction levels
- ability to tender for contracts that require a workforce with specific high qualifications.

c) Human resources-related benefits

- validation of non-formal and informal learning forms part of HR development strategies
- in **Denmark** the validation process is used as part of redundancy planning by employers, especially to help low-skilled workers find new employment.

d) Education and training-related benefits

- a voice in VET policy/practice and in qualifications standards.

The discussion on the benefits of validation processes for trade unions was less extensive. It was acknowledged that trade unions have a strong role to play in convincing their members and employers of the benefits of validation and in supporting individuals through the process. Therefore, it is important that the benefits for unions themselves are visible. Participants identified the following benefits for unions:

- a voice in the setting of qualifications standards
- a voice in VET policy/practice
- an opportunity of working actively on behalf of their members.

4.4.4 Benefits of validation for public authorities

While EU policy developments have provided an impetus to developments in national validation practices, it is the outcomes of validation in relation to economic and social issues at all levels that provide a strong motivation for public authorities to support and promote validation.

Discussion

The discussion on the benefits of validation for public authorities at all levels emphasised that validation has economic, social and education and training system benefits as follows:

a) Economic benefits

- enhances overall productivity and thus increases competitiveness relative to other countries
- helps maintain regional prosperity
- provides a tool to manage labour market restructuring and its consequences
- addresses skills and qualifications needs in different sectors of the economy and responds to an increasing demand for higher qualifications
- helps maintain employment, supports the employability of workers at risk of unemployment and supports older workers who need upskilling
- saves public money in areas such as health care and social benefits
- helps the country achieve the Lisbon Agenda.

b) Social and education and training system benefits

- improves equality and supports social inclusion and social cohesion
- supports groups such as immigrants, unemployed individuals and older workers
- improves access to and efficiency in, the formal education and training system
- helps the country achieve the Lisbon Agenda in terms of raising lifelong learning participation rates.

4.4.5 Benefits of validation for validation practitioners

Key validation personnel were identified as counsellors; assessors and teachers/tutors/trainers. A range of benefits for validation personnel was identified in the course of discussion:

- employment opportunities
- competence and professional development
- networking opportunities
- professional satisfaction through addressing a real need
- possible increase in income.

4.4.6 Benefits of validation for education and training providers

Participants identified education and training providers as public, commercial and third sector providers. In a number of countries the involvement of formal public institutions in validation is

patchy as they do not necessarily see any advantages for them in validation and, in the majority of cases; they have not been to the forefront of innovation in the field. However, participants pointed to experience in a number of countries where the benefits for providers have become visible, including:

- new 'customers' at a time of a decline in the traditional school-going population
- the possibility of granting access to courses to individuals who have skills but did not have the qualifications to match the skills
- a new profile and an increased relevance in the local community
- additional or new links to the labour market in terms of upskilling and qualifying low-skilled and/or low-qualified individuals
- improved links with local employers
- an opportunity of upskilling personnel
- an opportunity to be part of a national and international movement
- increased profit, in the case of a commercial provider.

4.5 Quality assurance of validation

The quality of validation systems and processes is of critical importance for the development of the so-called 'zone of mutual trust'⁸ among public authorities, individuals, the social partners, education and training stakeholders and civil society to ensure that validation systems are credible, transparent and acceptable. There are diverse approaches to quality assurance, with some countries putting more emphasis on the state's role and other countries emphasising the role of other stakeholders in assuring the quality of validation systems, processes and outcomes.

Public authorities play a crucial role in assuring the quality of validation at systems and provider levels through, for example, establishing regulatory frameworks, setting quality standards, certifying adherence to these standards and making information on performance against explicit indicators available to stakeholders. Where validation systems are well-established concerns with quality and with monitoring and evaluation are translated into policies, structures and measures. Monitoring and evaluation may be more sporadic where validation systems are emerging. Participants noted a range of systems-level and process-related quality assurance approaches.

4.5.1 System-related quality assurance

In the **Netherlands**, a wide range of stakeholders/owners have signed up to the quality code for validation including: government; the social partners; employment agencies; HE and VET institutions; the Dutch Association of VET Centres and Adult Learning; the Council for Agricultural Education Centres; the Open University; the Platform of Business Organisations and the Platform of private educational enterprises. The government has decided that it will not regulate validation any further, in the belief that excessive government control will militate against the social partners' responsibility for the area.

⁸ Coles, M. and Oates, T. (2005) *European reference levels for education and training, promoting credit transfer and mutual trust. Study commissioned to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England*. Cedefop Panorama series: 109. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. Preface.

In **Denmark** the providers of validation are accredited every two to three years. Providers have to have a quality assurance procedure in place and report to the Ministry of Education. In some countries the validation of non-formal and informal learning is tied to formal qualifications in the NQF so quality assurance processes attached to the framework also attach to validation.

Discussion

While participants recognised that countries have very different approaches to assuring the quality of validation systems and processes, nevertheless the following common points were made by individuals and/or more generally.

The overall validation system and process should be quality assured with clear and measurable objectives and standards. Public authorities have an important role in setting the parameters for quality.

To build quality standards it is necessary to involve all the users of validation process, including public authorities, individuals, employers and education and training institutions. Standards need to be explicit and transparent to give legitimacy to validation outcomes.

4.5.2 *Process-related quality assurance*

In **Netherlands** the first model for the quality assurance (QA) of validation was presented in 2004 and in 2006 all national stakeholders signed the covenant which includes an agreement on QA. The quality code for the validation process stipulates that:

- any validation procedure starts with career counselling
- individual rights must be upheld
- instruments and procedures must be appropriate
- counsellors and assessors must be professional
- evaluation leads to permanent improvement (of all the procedures) – ‘learn from your customers all the time’.

The quality of practitioners is critical to the quality of the validation process. In **Denmark** the providers themselves are obliged to upskill validation practitioners. The state provides funding for up-skilling for a few years and supports a union of assessors. In a number of countries the profession of assessor is a self-regulating profession but in others a qualification for assessors, does not exist. In **Denmark**, for example, it is usually teachers and guidance personnel who assess competence; validation would comprise about a quarter of their workload.

In the **Czech Republic** the UNIV project, 2005 – 2008, organised workshops to train 94 teachers for the roles of validation assessors and guides. Candidates for the role of assessor were trained in areas such as: i) modularisation; ii) learning outcomes; iii) the National Qualifications Framework; iv) qualification and assessment standards; v) partial and complete qualifications. Guides were given training in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the framework of lifelong learning; the process of validation; the role of the guide and assessor; the guiding process – methods and techniques; the usage and implementation of validation in the institution/organisation.

Discussion

Participants recognised the critical importance of the quality assurance of validation processes to reassure users and build trust and acceptance and to prove that the outcomes of validation of non-formal and informal learning are valid and reliable. Everybody agreed that trust is closely related to quality assurance. The following points were emphasised by individuals and/or more generally.

To build standards for process-related quality it is necessary to involve all the users of the validation process, including public authorities, individuals, employers and education and training institutions.

Process-related standards should include standards for all stages of the validation process, including guidance, assessment, validation and certification. Such standards should be explicit and transparent to give legitimacy to validation. The providers of validation processes should be obliged to adhere to agreed standards.

A range of appropriate assessment options should be available to meet the needs of individual candidates for validation.

Validation practitioners need to be quality assured in terms of initial qualifications, continuing professional development and the methodologies and methods they use. The professional development of validation practitioners is a critical component of quality assurance. While the entry qualifications levels of guidance practitioners are open to debate, the personal and professional qualities and skills of validation guidance practitioners were said to include: good communication skills including empathetic listening; respect; guidance, coaching and mentoring skills; a clear knowledge of validation processes; knowledge of national/regional frameworks of qualifications; knowledge of the curriculum and the learning outcomes for various qualifications. Assessors need to be highly skilled in the assessment process, including having an excellent knowledge of the curriculum and the learning outcomes for various qualifications.

The providers of validation need capacity-building to enable them to implement internal quality assurance of validation processes.

4.6 Data on validation

Some of the participating countries considered that they do not collect adequate quantitative or qualitative information on the outcomes of the validation process. They lack adequate national performance indicators and arrangements to collect data, with the result that it is difficult to measure the overall impact and quality of validation activities. In addition, lack of cost-benefit analysis means that robust information on the benefits of validation are missing, with the result that the consolidation of validation activities into a sustainable and cost-efficient validation system with a strong demand side has a way to go in some countries.

5 OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of reviewing the Czech Republic's and other countries' policies and practices in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning the PLA stimulated a high level of discussion and a range of conclusions and recommendations was arrived at by participants.

In the final evaluation session participants were asked to what extent the PLA had met the expectations set out by them on Day 1. Responses included:

- 'I learned a lot about the importance of validation and I'm taking home some ideas.'
- 'I realised that there are many ways of introducing validation processes.'
- 'I've learned a lot about validation for myself. I'll now see how I can promote it in my own country and how I can make it important for individuals and other stakeholders.'
- 'Really fruitful. It was very useful to hear what is happening elsewhere. I take a lot home.'
- 'Very stimulating. I'm thinking about how to involve unemployed people in validation.'
- 'I've been to three or four PLAs. This is the first PLA where I got ideas to take home. I'll re-think the role of the third sector in validation.'
- 'Very pleased with the outcomes. I got to know other approaches to validation. I'm now reflecting on what we do well and I've got some inspiration as to what we can do better.'
- 'I've got a new perspective on the validation system in my country. I've seen how other countries address challenges. The EU context is important for what we do.'
- 'This is my third PLA. It was very fruitful to be able to get behind descriptions and get a clearer perspective on approaches and processes.'
- 'My country is at the right place at the right time. We're beginning the process of developing the system of validation. I realise now that it is very important to be less general and more specific in relation to the target groups. Validation will trigger other processes in the system.'
- 'Very well prepared. I realise that we are making good progress in my country.'
- 'Happy. I was pleased to hear about the different activities in the Member States in this field. The train is going in the right direction.'
- 'I liked the time in the programme for discussion.'
- 'The PLA was very well organised, very balanced. I liked the balance between presentations, discussion and small group work.'

5.1 Overall conclusions

The PLA showed that European countries are at different stages in the development of policies and practices for validating non-formal and informal learning. Countries are developing their own models of validation, at their own pace, which are very much influenced by their different education systems, traditions and needs. Accordingly, the extent to which any one of the overall conclusions that follow refers to individual countries depends on their education systems, traditions and needs and on the extent of the development of their validation systems, strategies and practices.

Conclusions arrived at by individuals and/or more generally over the three days of the PLA include:

- There is a need in many countries for **national/regional/local consensus** on validation principles; objectives; resources; target groups; status, standards and quality assurance.
- **Partnerships of stakeholders at all levels** are a key requirement for the development of an effective validation system and significant stakeholder commitment and resources are required. The involvement of **the social partners** is critical to the development of validation policies and practices.
- At ground level the importance of **active approaches to engage potential participants, especially low-skilled individuals**, in the validation process cannot be over-stated. This includes the role of employers and trade unions in promoting and supporting validation in the workplace. Within **trade unions** a sectoral or branch focus is helpful in promoting validation. The sectors and branches know their members and the levels of education and qualification required for various occupations. While financial considerations are to the forefront for **employers**, validation is not a contradiction but rather an asset in increasing productivity and meeting the need for more highly skilled and qualified employees.
- In order to achieve broad acceptance of validation as a *bona fide* pathway to qualifications, it is important to **engage the interest and participation of all sections of the population**, those who are already highly qualified as well as the low-qualified and the low-skilled who were a specific subject of discussion during this PLA. Effective promotion and raising awareness require that, first of all, specific groups are identified and that, secondly, diverse, targeted strategies are developed to reach them.
- **Guidance and support services** must be integral to any validation system, especially one seeking to engage low-skilled individuals.
- There is a need for **competence profiles** for validation practitioners. To enhance engagement with and achievement through, the validation process, validation practitioners need multiple skills. The role of **structured continuing professional development** in this regard is vital.
- **Quality assurance** is critical to the success of validation in that there are close links between the reliability and validity of validation systems and processes and their quality in the eyes of stakeholders. To this end, quality standards and processes need to be agreed by all stakeholders.
- There is a need for better **quantitative and qualitative information** on the entire validation process in the majority of participating countries.
- There is a need for **ongoing, systematic monitoring and measuring** of validation, including cost/benefit analyses.
- **Validation as a process is at a cross-roads** in some countries. Policies, systems and practices need to be consolidated so that validation reaches a critical mass and sustainable, cost-effective validation systems are put in place. Otherwise there is a danger that stakeholders will lose interest and validation of non-formal and informal learning may never become an intrinsic element of adult learning, human resources development or qualifications systems.

In this regard, two initiatives deserve close monitoring in the immediate future. In the **Netherlands**, the availability of an additional €25 million in 2010 hinges on success in spending the €20 million earmarked in 2009 for attracting and validating the competences of people without a "start qualification". Failure to use the funds will jeopardise the future of the validation process in the Netherlands. Validation also has an opportunity of making an impact in the **Czech Republic** in the form of an agreement to validate the competences of a potential 40,000 candidates in the security sector by the end of 2011.

5.2 **Recommendations to the European Commission in the context of the Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn***

The following recommendations to the European Commission in the context of the Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn* emerged *en passant* during the PLA. It should be noted that the recommendations arose organically and variously from the presentations and the discussions and that as a whole they do not necessarily represent the opinions of any one participating country.

The European Commission should:

- Bring together the results of this PLA with the results of the PLAs on adult learning monitoring (Bratislava, March 2009) and One Step Up (London, April 2009) to form a suite of reports on the key messages of the Action Plan *It is always a good time to learn*.
- Ensure that the forthcoming updated European Inventory of validation practices in Member States and other countries includes the good practice presented during this PLA.
- Work with the European social partners to encourage them and their counterparts at Member State-level to initiate and/or support validation initiatives for low-qualified and low-skilled workers.
- Act as a catalyst/provide a platform for exchanges between experts and practitioners in the field of validation so as to increase and improve opportunities for adults to achieve qualifications.
- Fund additional activities that will support national and European-level work in the area of the validation, including the development of competence profiles for validation personnel and the provision of support for the establishment of national centres for validation in countries interested in establishing such a centre.
- Ensure that there is feedback to stakeholders about initiatives/progress in relation to validation raised in the PLA and the conclusions and recommendations arising.

ANNEX 1 – BACKGROUND REPORT



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education and Culture



Background report: Peer Learning Activity

Validation of non-formal and
informal learning

Prague, 21 – 24 June 2009



1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is a Background Report for the Peer Learning Activity (PLA) in the Czech Republic on the validation of non-formal and informal learning. This event has been organised by the European Commission (DG EAC) and hosted by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The PLA to be held in Prague on 21st – 24th June 2009 aims to address two key themes:

1. How to build and operate a validation system which will be broadly accepted by society (employers, citizens, state). This includes discussion on the role of employers in the system of validating non-formal and informal learning.
2. Motivation and guidance measures for potential participants in validation of non-formal and informal learning activities. That is to say, what types of measures can be used to encourage people to avail of competence validation and to inform them of the validation process and the relevant opportunities open to them.

This Background Report is intended to provide PLA participants with information on theme of the PLA. It is a synthesis of the information provided by the countries participating in the PLA. Prior to the PLA participants were asked by the European Commission to submit a brief national report covering the following areas:

- Policies and strategies to encourage and support low-skilled people to have their competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated;
- The biggest challenges faced in increasing the number of people participating in validation processes;
- The ways in which the validation of non-formal and informal learning is linked to National Qualifications Frameworks; and
- Information on national practices, including data on staff training, main bodies involved in validation processes, types of beneficiaries and benefits of validation to individuals and employers.

Reports were received from 12 countries participating in the PLA; Austria (AT); Czech Republic (CZ); Denmark (DK); Greece (EL); Hungary (HU); Italy (IT); Latvia (LV); Liechtenstein (Li); the Netherlands (NL); Norway (NO); Portugal (PT); and Sweden (SE). The country reports can be found in Annex 1. Representatives from Germany and Poland will also attend the PLA.

2 BACKGROUND

Recent years have seen an increased emphasis on the relevance of learning outside formal education and training institutions and on the systems and strategies to validate such learning. Large numbers of employees will change their job, career, sector and even country of residence during their lifetime. This requires that they can transfer qualifications and competences from one setting to another, to a new job, sector or country. Validation of non-formal and informal learning is one way of supporting this transfer⁹.

In this background section we outline:

- The EU policy background and tools
- Recent EU-level developments
- Development of validation initiatives in the EU 2010 countries and
- National motivations for endorsing development of validation approaches.

2.1 EU policy background and tools

The issue of validation of non-formal and informal learning has gained increasing political importance at European and national level over the last decade. The European Commission's **White Paper Teaching and Learning** (1995) helped to define and emphasise the relevance of informal and non-formal learning and it presented the idea of a common European approach to the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Since 2000, there has been an active process at the EU policy level to affirm the importance of 'valuing learning'. Indeed, with the advent of the Lisbon Strategy for jobs, growth and social cohesion, there has been an attempt to redesign the provision of education and training within the EU, to develop a human capital more appropriate to the requirements of the knowledge-based society and the European Social Model. The resultant **Education and Training 2010** work programme highlighted the importance of both formal and non-formal/informal forms of learning within the concept of lifelong learning.

In the Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (2001), the European Commission re-emphasised the importance of systematic exchange of experience and of the creation of an inventory of methodologies, systems and standards for the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The aim of the inventory would be to support and stimulate the development of high quality assessment methodologies and standards at European, national and sectoral levels. The mandate of this Communication has culminated in the production of three versions of the **European Inventory** on validation of non-formal and informal learning¹⁰.

The Copenhagen Declaration (30 November 2002) and the Council Resolution (19 December 2002) on the promotion of enhanced European co-operation in vocational education and training

⁹ Broadly speaking, non-formal learning can be defined as planned and explicit learning which usually takes place outside the formal education and training system and typically does not lead *directly* to qualifications. Informal learning can be defined as unplanned learning from daily life activities related to work, family, community, leisure.
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lll/life/communication/com_en.pdf)

¹⁰ <http://www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/>

acknowledged that priority should be given to the development of a set of **common principles** regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between approaches in different countries and at different levels.

The Council and Commission Joint Interim Report (26 February 2004) to the Spring European Council, *Education and Training 2010*, specifically called for the development of such common European principles. It stated that the development of common European references and principles would support national policies, although such common principles were not meant to create obligations for Member States, but rather to contribute to developing mutual trust between the key players and encouraging reform.

Common principles were adopted in May 2004¹¹. They were considered necessary to encourage and guide the development of high-quality, trustworthy approaches and systems for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning and ensure the comparability and wide acceptance of different approaches and systems in the Member States.

A major development at European level in this area was the setting up of a cluster of countries for mutual learning, as part of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) under the Lisbon Strategy. Based on key areas of the *Education and Training 2010* work programme, clusters of countries and related peer learning activities (PLAs) were developed on a pilot basis during 2005. In March 2006, the **Cluster on “Recognition of learning outcomes”** was established.

A related development is the **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)**. The EQF stands as a common reference enabling and promoting transparency, transfer and recognition of qualifications and competences in Europe and it uses ‘learning outcomes and competences’ as references. The shift towards learning outcomes is vital to the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Hosted by Cedefop, the **Virtual Community** on validation of non-formal and informal learning, with over a 1000 members, is another tool for stakeholders in the field of validation of non-formal and informal learning to express their opinions, to network and to share experiences¹². It also provides a range of resources.

In addition to the European Commission and Cedefop, other actors such as **OECD** (with its project on recognition of non-formal and informal learning), the **Council of Europe**, and **European youth and social partner organisation** have been active in this field.

2.2 Recent EU developments

The recently published **Update of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training**¹³ highlighted validation of informal and non-formal learning as a priority for 2009 and 2010. It stated that the Member States and the Commission should give priority to achieving better implementation of:

- Lifelong learning strategies: Complete the process of implementation of national lifelong learning strategies, giving particular attention to the validation of non-formal and informal learning and to guidance.

¹¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/validation2004_en.pdf

¹² <http://communities.cedefop.europa.eu/nfl>

¹³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2008) An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training.

- European Qualifications Framework: Link all national qualifications systems to the EQF by 2010 and support the use of an approach based on learning outcomes for standards and qualifications, assessment and validation procedures, credit transfer, curricula and quality assurance.

Earlier this year DG Education and Culture and Cedefop published updated **European Guidelines for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning**. The guidelines aim to identify the main challenges facing policy-makers and practitioners and – to a certain degree – point to possible responses.

2.3 Development of validation initiatives in the EU 2010 countries

The 2007 European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning grouped the EU 2010 countries into three categories, namely, countries with a high, medium and low degree of development:

- Countries such as DK, FI, FR, IE, and NL have established arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning and have moved from the introduction of validation policies to the implementation of validation practices. In these countries the high degree of acceptance of validation methods is usually also illustrated by relatively high levels of take-up.
- Countries such as CZ, IT, LX, RO and SI have either recently set up a legal or policy framework for validation and are currently in the process of starting implementation, or have had experience of piloting a variety of different methodologies on the basis of which they are currently developing a national approach.
- Countries such as LV, MT and SK show a relatively low degree of acceptance of methods to validate non-formal and informal learning. In these countries the benefits of having a scheme to identify, assess and recognise learning gained outside formal education and training may be acknowledged by the stakeholders involved but, as yet, there is little in terms of policy or practice which actually facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

2.4 National reasons for endorsing the development of validation practices

While economic and social factors have traditionally been seen as the most important drivers of validation, the relevance of systemic factors has increased in more recent times¹⁴. In terms of economic factors, validation can, for instance, be used to address needs in different sectors of the economy, e.g. in relation to skills shortages or in order to comply with regulations regarding professional qualifications. With regards to social factors, validation can help the socially excluded in particular to re-integrate into the labour market and society as a whole. In relation to systematic factors, validation can help to improve access to and efficiency in, the formal education system.

In addition to the economic, social and systematic factors, countries have a number of other motivations for the development of validation of non-formal and informal learning. These include:

¹⁴ Souto, M. et al. (2007) European Inventory on Validation of Informal and Non-formal Learning 2007 Update; A final report to DG Education and Culture of the European Commission.

- Demographic factors (ageing of the population and increasing migration levels): validation can help these groups by improving access to and mobility within, the labour market, thus addressing unemployment linked to demographic change;
- Technological factors: the development of new technologies accentuates the importance and value of technical skills gained through non-formal and informal learning;
- EU policy developments have provided an impetus to developments in national validation practices;
- Growing awareness has led to greater use and greater involvement of stakeholders; and
- Increased use of qualifications frameworks: this generates increased focus on learning outcomes, regardless of where or how competence has been achieved.

3 NATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

This section is primarily based on the national responses to the European Commission questions sent out prior to the PLA, but is supplemented by information from other sources.

The section sets out the situation in participating countries in relation to:

- Policies and strategies to encourage and support low-skilled people to validate competences gained through non-formal and/or informal learning;
- The biggest challenges faced in endeavouring to increase the number of people participating in the validation process; and
- The way in which the validation of non-formal and informal learning is linked to the National Qualifications Framework.

3.1 Policies to encourage and support low-skilled people to participate in validation

Validation can assist the social and economic integration of disadvantaged groups by demonstrating to them and the outside world their abilities and achievements. Validation can therefore help to facilitate access to education, training and employment for groups of learners with limited formal education – groups such as early school leavers who tend to lack formal evidence of their competences.

Demographic factors, the current economic climate and the large numbers of young people leaving school without secondary level qualifications are accentuating the number of people at risk of exclusion who could benefit from validation. For example, as employees get older, they may wish to move to another position in an enterprise or to another part of the labour market. Similarly, the economic climate and rapid changes in employment and production patterns result in shifts in working patterns and skill requirements. Validation can help these groups by improving access to and mobility within, the labour market, thus helping to combat unemployment.

Formative validation mechanisms can act as a guidance tool for the low-skilled to help them manage their own careers. Indeed, for individuals, who may have experienced difficulties in taking tests and examinations in a formal school environment, less ‘formal’ approaches such as declarative methods or the use of a competence portfolio, can prove to be a suitable approach to identifying key skills and competences.

The review of national reports shows that validation is recognised in many countries as a tool to support disadvantaged groups, such as the low-skilled, early school leavers and the unemployed. In the PLA countries this is done, for example, by:

- Identifying disadvantaged people as a target group in national validation programmes;
- Providing financial incentives for the low-skilled to avail of validation processes;
- Introducing campaigns and projects that aim to increase participation of the low-skilled;
- Introducing validation as a way of facilitating access to formal education for learners with a low level of formal education;

- Applying validation to the acquisition of certificates to prove language competences; and
- Introducing legislative and strategic changes to improve the current system of validation in the country.

In addition, practically all countries which are yet to put in place a system for the validation of informal and non-formal learning, are taking steps towards developing such schemes.

3.1.1 *Disadvantaged groups as a target group in national validation programmes*

Disadvantaged groups have been identified as a target group for national validation schemes in the participating countries, which have a national system in place: Denmark, Norway and Portugal. A targeted approach is particularly evident in **Portugal**. The National System for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) is aimed at adults aged over 18 who have no basic or secondary school certificates. The RVCC recognises, validates and certifies the know-how and competences adults have gained through their various life experiences. The approach focuses on basic and secondary levels of education, and is organised into three fundamental components: acknowledgement of competences; validation of competences; certification of competences.

In **Norway**, the 1999 Competence Reform led to individuals having a statutory right to primary and secondary education, which must be adapted to their needs and situation. In addition, a national system for documenting and validating the non-formal and informal learning of adults was established. These developments mean that validation of prior learning is an individual right. It is the responsibility of county authorities to ensure that it is readily available and to ensure the quality of the process. Funding is delegated to the 19 counties, and regional 'assessment centres' have been established in each county for information and guidance. Many beneficiaries are individuals without qualification or with low-level qualifications.

In **Sweden**, validation/recognition of competences is decentralised and embedded in the mainstream municipal adult education system where all participants receive an individual study plan which takes into account their individual circumstances, prior learning and learning goals. Moreover, adult education is delivered in a flexible manner (e.g. evenings, via individual courses or parts of courses in a modularised system, via the internet etc.) to ensure that all can participate. **Italy** does not have a formal, national validation system but several regions (e.g. Basilicata, Emilia Romagna, Piemonte, Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Veneto, and Valle d'Aosta) have developed policies and operational strategies in this regard.

3.1.2 *Financial incentives for the low-skilled to avail of validation processes*

In some countries financial incentives are used to encourage low-skilled individuals to avail of validation processes. In the **Netherlands** this is linked to the economic crisis. The Knowledge Centre for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), which has been operational since 2000, introduced a new financial scheme at the start of 2009 to support those who are at risk of losing their job. As part of this package, the government will pay 50-100% of the APL procedure for a person who is at risk of becoming unemployed and does not hold a Level 2 vocational qualification within the Dutch qualification system for VET. Some EUR 57 million is being made available for the scheme in 2009 - 2010 and an additional EUR 75 million for education and training of people at risk of redundancy.

3.1.3 *Campaigns and projects to increase participation of the low-skilled*

The national reports highlight that several countries have specific initiatives and campaigns to promote validation of non-formal and informal learning, especially among the low-skilled. For example, the additional funding introduced in the **Netherlands** to encourage workers at risk of redundancy to go through the APL process (see above) will be coupled with a special publicity campaign targeted at low skilled, at-risk groups. The campaign will be launched in summer 2009 with the aim of getting 50-60,000 people to avail of the validation process and take part in relevant training, if necessary.

The **Danish** Ministry of Education has launched a number of initiatives which seek to improve the public's knowledge of prior learning assessment opportunities and to promote participation in skills validation activities. These include:

- a partnership agreement with social partners concerning the recognition of prior learning, which will be renewed in August 2009;
- an information and networking campaign focused on prior learning which includes the use of a 'tool box';
- an online skills portfolio which can be used to document skills when seeking prior learning assessments (www.minkompetencemappe.dk);
- a handbook of prior learning to be used by the adult participant and continuing education institutions;
- a counselling web portal which provides general information about prior learning (www.ug.dk); and
- a TV campaign, which was aired on Danish national TV, at conferences, and in seminars and meetings.

In **Italy**, a Training Booklet (*Libretto Formativo*) has been piloted in several regions. The booklet which promotes the concept of validation of non-certified learning has been designed to organise and document learning experiences and skills gained in education, training, employment and everyday life.

3.1.4 *Validation to facilitate access for low-skilled individuals*

Validation is frequently used to facilitate access to formal education for learners with a low level of formal education. Indeed, the country reports demonstrate that validation schemes can act as 'door openers' to education courses for early school leavers and other low-skilled individuals. For example, in Denmark and Norway, the validation system is one of the means that provides individuals with a 'second chance' to reach their full learning potential. As of the 1st August 2007, in **Denmark**, new rules relating to the development and recognition of prior learning in the adult and continuing education system became effective and legislation was expanded to cover additional educational fields¹⁵. The new regulations mean that adults have the right to ask an educational institution to assess their prior learning in order to have their competences recognised in the adult and continuing education system. In **Norway**, adults without prior upper

¹⁵ vocational training; single course subject in general adult education and general upper secondary education; basic adult education; VET; and VVU-degrees and diploma degrees

secondary education (VET included) have a statutory right to upper secondary education provided by the county authorities. Participating adults also have a statutory right to have their prior non-formal and informal learning assessed and their approved competences documented in a Competence Proof. The assessment process may result in a shorter training period towards a full examination. Furthermore, adults with more than five years of documented work experience may obtain a trade and journeyman's certificate by validation of their documents. If their documents are approved they may apply for the relevant final examinations (theoretical and practical elements) without going through a formal education and training process. Finally, adults aged 25+ without a general college and university admissions certification may apply for enrolment in higher education on the basis of documented prior learning.

The avoidance of repetition and inefficiencies within the education system is the key reason why Higher Technical Education and Training providers (IFTS) and Adult Education Institutes in **Italy** take into consideration skills acquired through work, traineeships and cultural and volunteer activities.

3.1.5 *Validation for the acquisition of certificates to prove language competences*

Validation is applied to the acquisition of certificates to prove language competences in **Hungary**. Although the country does not have a national validation system, learners have been able to access foreign language qualifications through proficiency examinations for many years. People may take the examinations without having attended a recognised course of instruction, and can use their experience abroad or (in the case of multi-lingual households) at home or through private language lessons to help them satisfy examination requirements. Higher education institutions also recognise language proficiency certificates gained through validation, though often as requirements for entering certain courses rather than as contributing specific credit towards them.

3.1.6 *Legislative, institutional and strategic changes to improve validation systems*

New national strategies, for example, in Denmark and Norway, actively support the expansion of current validation practices. Two policy papers published in 2004 and 2005 in **Denmark** (*Recognition of Prior Learning within the Education System*, 2004; *Your skills – finding Denmark's hidden competencies*, 2005) opened up the discussion of skills validation, identifying a number of new ideas on how the Danish population could achieve personal growth and learn new skills. The 2005 paper set a new agenda for the discussion of Danish competences and helped to launch a national skills improvement movement.

In **Norway**, the *Strategy for Lifelong Learning* published by the Ministry of Education and Research (2007) identifies the validation of non-formal and informal learning as one of the main priorities. Policy measures now include: strengthening information and guidance services; new methods of co-operation between education, working life and the NGO sector; new measures for uniform practice; new reporting and data collection procedures.

In **Sweden**, as of July 2009, the new National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Yrkeshögskolan) which will be in charge of validation will co-ordinate further development and act as a contact point.

3.1.7 *Countries in the process of developing validation practices*

In some countries the national systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning are only being developed. In **Liechtenstein**, the development process is being led by the Department

for Professional Training and Vocational Counselling. In **Austria**, whilst there is currently no overarching and comprehensive system of validation of non-formal and informal learning, prior learning is being recognised in certain fields of education and there are also a number of individual validation initiatives across the country. Policy-makers are in the process of compiling a 'concept paper' on non-formal learning to identify current practices and areas which need to be further developed. In addition, it is envisaged that the Austrian government will invest in the development and promotion of recognition procedures.

Similarly, although there is as yet no formal system of validation in **Hungary**, specific competence validation measures are in place in two distinct fields: ICT and foreign languages. The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) forms an important element of structured ICT training and certification in Hungary. Under this system, which is also available in most European countries, individuals can present for certification through standardised tests and use the results of those tests either to gain full certificates or to acquire units which contribute to a full qualification. ECDL has now been incorporated as a route towards formal Hungarian national qualifications, with a number of qualifications in the National Vocational Qualifications Register incorporating ECDL as a module. Thus, in principle at least, someone who gains an ECDL certificate through recognition of non-formal and informal learning may use it as a credit towards a recognised vocational qualification of which ICT skills are a part.

Even though there is little validation of non-formal and informal learning in **Greece**, the profile of validation has been rising on the national policy agenda over the past few years. However, the importance and benefits of validation of non-formal and, particularly, informal learning are not yet being promoted and there is still no legal framework for validation.

Latvia is currently in the process of developing a national process of validation of non-formal and informal learning, and it has a high priority in the latest LLL strategy. In 2008, a Ministry of Education and Science working group developed a proposal, which divided the validation process into three sub-groups: i) basic/secondary education; ii) equivalent VET qualifications and iii) higher education qualifications to minimise the likelihood of learners having to restudy topics they have already acquired through non-formal and informal learning. It has been decided to further develop the last two areas as basic and secondary education in Latvia have high completion levels and there is a greater need to emphasise skills for jobs during the recession and to promote flexible higher education.

In the **Czech Republic**, a new Act (No. 179/2006) which came into force in August 2007 creates a systemic framework for the recognition non-formal and informal learning which provides for a uniform, transparent and objective verification and recognition of the skills/knowledge of individuals, irrespective of whether they were obtained through formal education or in practice (i.e. through extensive work experience). Full qualifications are divided into 'partial qualifications' which can be used as qualifications in their own right in the labour market. For example, the full qualification of 'baker' is sub-divided into several 'partial qualifications' such as: being able to make bread and [other] pastry; being able to make short pastry; being able to make ginger bread, and so on.

3.2 **Challenges to increasing the numbers participating in the validation process**

The national reports identify obstacles to increasing the number of people participating in validation processes, including:

- Lack of effective promotion of the validation process;

- Lack of time and availability;
- Quality of validation processes;
- Financial constraints; and
- Lack of a comprehensive/formal system of validation.

3.2.1 *Lack of effective promotion of the validation process*

The lack of effective promotion of the validation process and of the opportunities it provides for participants is an important obstacle to increasing the number of people engaging in competence validation. In the **Netherlands**, in 2005 only 10% of the population knew what APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) was. Moreover, the Dutch unemployment agency has noted that the unemployed and people faced with unemployment are not sufficiently aware of the possible ways in which they can reintegrate back into the labour market. A nationwide publicity campaign has since been launched across radio, television and printed media which aims to significantly raise public awareness. In addition, a set of instruments will be used to ensure that when in contact with the unemployment agency, all unemployed persons/those at risk of unemployment will be informed of the possibility of competence validation. However, the national report states that it is likely to take a number of years to achieve extensive public awareness.

Similarly, **Norway** highlights that opportunities for validation are not widely known, particularly amongst people with low-level formal education. According to national studies, only 26% of employees are sufficiently informed about their rights and opportunities. In addition, co-operation between the Labour and Welfare Administration and the county offices responsible for the recognition of learning at the upper secondary level is underdeveloped with the result that relatively few unemployed people use the opportunities offered to have their learning validated.

The **Danish** report suggests that institutions may not consider assessments to be of financial benefit and therefore do not inform learners and employers about opportunities for validation of prior learning. Therefore, it is essential to make validation a 'bottom-up' process to ensure that learners and employers are adequately informed of their rights to validation and to maximise participation.

The **Czech** national report notes the need to expand and improve information and counselling services. The **Hungarian** national report indicates that there are questions about the social value of qualifications gained other than through accepted methods and that there are issues of acceptance within the teaching profession. This in turn may affect the number of people wishing to avail of competence validation and raises questions as to the sustainability of the validation process.

3.2.2 *Lack of time and availability*

It is clear that in order to be able to participate in validation activities participants must have the time and availability to do so. In **Portugal**, work, family life and other personal projects (such as sports) all increase skills but significantly reduce people's time and availability to enrol in a validation or learning process.

3.2.3 *Quality of validation processes*

The validation process must provide a high quality service to attract individuals and to ensure that the qualifications awarded are uniformly recognised across sectors as accurate representations of an individual's competences.

The biggest challenge in **Norway** is the need for better and more uniform procedures. Currently, municipalities meet their obligations in a variety of ways with the result that, depending on where they live, learners' opportunities vary. The national report stresses that it is vital to ensure equal treatment for all through a universal understanding and interpretation of legislation and regulations. There is also a need for more structured and reliable documentation of experiences gained in the voluntary sector, which is an important stakeholder in and provider of, adult learning in Norway.

3.2.4 *Financial constraints*

The level of funding allocated to validation processes affects both programme quality and the willingness of people to avail of validation. Unemployed people may not be able to afford lengthy competence validation processes. For example, in **Denmark**, user fees for higher education programmes may present a potential obstacle to the development of a sustainable system for validation. In **Hungary**, the costs associated with validation of non-formal and informal learning are higher than many people assume.

3.2.5 *Lack of a comprehensive/formal system of validation*

Unsurprisingly, several national reports note that the lack of a comprehensive/formal system of competence validation is the biggest obstacle. These countries include, for example, Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lichtenstein and Sweden.

3.3 **Links to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)**

The development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) is driving a shift towards learning outcomes in several countries across Europe. This is significant for the promotion of validation of non-formal learning, since a learning outcomes approach focuses on the results and outcomes of a learning process rather than the particular features of the process itself.

Countries with validation systems seem to be linking their systems to the NQF:

- For example, in **Denmark**, when established the NQF will be linked to lifelong learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning in two ways. Firstly, with the use of learning outcomes to describe qualifications strengthens the opportunity to validate and recognise if qualifications gained through non-formal and informal learning are corresponding to the demands of admission or to the education goals of a given qualification in the formal education system. Secondly, the Qualification Framework is a tool to increase the visibility of opportunities within validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as lifelong learning.
- The **Netherlands** is studying the implementation of the EQF/NQF at the national level. Meanwhile, the Dutch qualification structures for secondary and tertiary vocational education will continue to be used for APL, together with branch-qualifications recognised by social partners.

Similar links can be found, for example, in **Portugal** and the **Czech Republic**. In **Austria** and **Italy**, consultations on NQF contribute positively to the discussions surrounding the development of nationally recognised validation systems.

4 THE PRACTICE OF VALIDATING NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

This section discusses:

- Training of validation personnel;
- The main stakeholders involved in validation non-formal and informal learning;
- The main beneficiaries of validation;
- The benefits of validation for participants, with particular reference to employability and access to better job opportunities;
- The benefits of validation for employers; and
- How information on participants is gathered and recorded.

4.1 Training of validation personnel

The national reports show that the training of validation personnel varies significantly from country to country. Assessments are normally carried out by qualified teachers / trainers.

Formal training is available for validation personnel in the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal. For example, the **Dutch** Quality Code for APL stipulates that assessors should have received specific professional training. Awarding bodies check the quality of this training and recognition as a certified provider of APL is dependent on the quality of the assessors. The New Opportunities Centres in **Portugal** are supported by qualified and specialist staff who are trained to work in a number of different areas:

- **Attending** – access and enrolment; clarification concerning the mission of the New Opportunities Centre; the different working process stages; guidance for education and training paths or for the offers of qualification recognition, validation and certification;
- **Diagnosis** – profile analysis; curriculum analysis; individual and collective interviews; identification of the best paths available;
- **Guidance** – informing the adult to enable him/her to understand and be guided through the most appropriate pathway;
- **Competences Recognition** – identification by the adult of the know-how and qualifications gained during his/her life experience, through an activity based on the methodology of competence balance, and by the use of several assessment tools, by which the adult proves his know-how, starting with the construction of a learning reflexive portfolio;
- **Competences Validation** – qualification assessment of abilities acquired during life against the reference framework of key competences in adult education and training. The validation comprises the learning reflexive portfolio self-assessment in articulation with the multiple-assessment of the RVC professionals and of the trainers from each basic qualification area;

- Competences Certification - the adult comes before a certification jury to gain certification of the validated competences as stated in the National Qualification Framework.

In **Norway**, county authorities are responsible for the quality and training of staff, which is carried out regionally at assessment centres. There are annual courses and seminars for assessors and inexperienced assessors receive mentoring. Generally assessors have a professional background in the relevant education and/or trade (for VET). Trained assessors are registered on regional lists in the assessment centres. However, recent surveys reveal that around 96% of supervisors and 85% of assessors/specialists believe they need further training, particularly in relation to quality assurance.

Like in Norway, assessments in **Sweden** are normally carried out by VET teachers and/or qualified assessors with either a degree from teacher training and/or long experience from working life. Standards are based on industry requirements or course goals in relation to standardised industry requirements or educational certification. In addition, Swedish guidance counsellors who hold a bachelor's degree which does not include specific elements of validation or assessment are trained to map an individual's competences in a general way. Furthermore, the Leonardo da Vinci project 'Euroguideval' developed a handbook for the professionalisation of APEL (Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning) practitioners¹⁶. Sweden, one of five partner countries, developed a 7 ECTS pilot course called 'Validation of competencies and skills'¹⁷, which targeted APEL professionals and career counsellors, ran three times and involved a total of 40 participants.

In **Denmark**, the legislation states that the government can decide which competences staff needs to validate non-formal and informal validation but, as the government has not yet decided, currently there are no special education/training or certification requirements for validation personnel. However, there is a demand among personnel for competence development and the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning offers conferences, seminars and courses. In addition, practitioners are involved in networking to promote the professionalization of prior learning validation.

While countries (such as the **Czech Republic**) that are in the process of designing validation systems do not have requirements for the education/training of validation personnel, nevertheless, this is an aspect that is receiving increasing attention. For example, in **Hungary**, training for VET personnel encompasses assessments, working with standards and guidance. In **Greece** there have been considerable efforts to expand teachers' training and professional development. The National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training (EKEPIS) has developed a Register of Trainers, which accredits vocational professionals based on specific criteria. More than 10,000 trainers have participated in 300-hour training where special attention was paid to assessment and validation. A similar Register involving more than 20,000 applicants is now being developed for initial vocational education and adult basic education

¹⁶ Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess.

¹⁷ ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) makes teaching and learning more transparent and facilitates the recognition of studies (formal, non-formal and informal). The system is used across Europe for credit transfer (student mobility) and credit accumulation (learning paths towards a degree). It also informs curriculum design and quality assurance.

4.2 Main stakeholders involved and the role played by employer bodies

According to the national reports, a number of different bodies and agencies are involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning, including: national ministries, regional authorities, national agencies, social partners and other stakeholders. While countries vary as to which bodies are principally responsible for the validation process and with regards to the participation of stakeholders, generally, public bodies play a key steering role in the development of policy and practice in this area.

In many countries the **national ministries** in charge of education are the key lead partner in this field. For example, in the **Czech Republic** the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is responsible for coordinating validation activities with support from the National Institution of Technical and Vocational Education (NUOV).

A number of countries, including Denmark and Portugal, have established **national agencies** to oversee the development of validation and often also with a view to involving more public stakeholders during the implementation of national validation frameworks. In **Denmark** the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning is heavily involved in the validation of non-formal and informal learning, but other organisations also have interests in the field, in particular with regards to the quality, validity and credibility of systems. The National Agency for Qualifications (ANQ) coordinates the network of New Opportunities Centres in **Portugal**. The ANQ is a public institute supervised by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. In **Sweden**, validation work was under the auspices of the National Commission for Validation during 2004-2007. As earlier mentioned, as of July 2009, the new National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Yrkeshögskolan) will be operational and will in charge of validation. The EVC Knowledge Centre in the **Netherlands** aims to collect and share knowledge and good practices on validation of prior learning and stimulate the use of validation practices.

In **Norway** county authorities are responsible for the validation of non-formal and informal learning at upper secondary level. In practice this is usually carried out within the regional education system and many upper secondary schools are also assessment centres. In order to give the same opportunity to job-seekers who want their competence validated, a number of projects have been launched, which aim to improve cooperation between the education system and the Labour and Welfare Administration. Moreover, the opportunities, rights and benefits related to the validation process are promoted by various stakeholders locally and nationally, including Vox (the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning), the county authorities and the trade unions.

Other bodies also play a part in validation. In the **Netherlands** there are five awarding bodies that check the quality of the APL suppliers and advise the partners of the Quality Code whether a supplier of APL should be recognised and certified as such. In **Hungary**, a consortium of various different agencies is leading development work in this field. The team encompasses the Regional Training Centres, the National Institute of Audit Education and the Social and Employment Agency.

While the national reports make few references to **third sector** organisations, other studies have demonstrated that they can play an important role in the development of validation initiatives. They may participate in the development of national validation initiatives by representing a sub-sector or group of organisations with a common message. They can also ensure consistency and transferability by supporting the sharing of learning and good practice among their member organisations. Third sector organisations are also engaged in developing methods to validate soft

skills (such as social skills or management competencies) and achievements gained in informal environments. These validation approaches play an important role in work with disadvantaged groups as some people who do not perform well at school academically can excel in other settings. For example, validation tools created by youth organisations, for example, can help to demonstrate and validate qualities and competencies of young people such as independence, team work, putting their ideas into words, ICT skills, social skills, organisational skills and problem-solving skills.

In addition to operating within some of these stakeholders, **validation experts** play a key role in the continuous development of validation practices. These are counsellors, assessors and external observers. The **Swedish** report, for example, states that guidance counsellors and teachers in VET/qualified assessors play an important role in the future implementation and quality assurance work.

In many European countries, the **social partners**, employers in particular, are involved to some degree in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. They may participate in the development of methods, in order to make sure that the 'voice' of the private sector is heard and that the needs of the sector are taken into account. In the **Czech Republic**, sector councils are becoming an important platform for a broader and more systematic involvement of employers in the lifelong learning process and play a significant role in the processes of verification and recognition of qualifications. Member organisations of the Confederation of **Swedish** Enterprises have developed various models to support validation.

The private sector is also very active in delivering its own validation initiatives in a number of European countries. Employers may also support the provision of funding for validation initiatives, for example through Collective Labour Agreements. A number of social partners are also involved in the delivery of their own validation initiatives. In **Hungary**, employer bodies play a significant role in defining qualification requirements and standards and operate independent examination committees.

4.3 Main beneficiaries

According to the national reports, the main direct beneficiaries are:

- The low-skilled (unemployment and employed individuals)
- Immigrants
- Early school leavers

The low-skilled are most often highlighted as an important target group, for example, in the national report from the **Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Norway** and **Sweden**. In **Hungary**, validation is aimed at adults who wish to enrol in a higher level of formal education or training but do not have the necessary formal qualifications. Through validation they are able to 'bypass' the normal progression routes within the formal system and use competences obtained through non-formal and informal learning to access further training for which they would otherwise be ineligible.

Several national reports also mentioned the need to focus on socially excluded groups in general, on early school leavers and on immigrants. For example, in **Sweden** particular attention is paid to newly arrived immigrants who do not hold a certificate or other document of their knowledge

and competences and unemployed individuals and young adults who lack formal learning experiences.

In **Norway** validation has not only positive impact on economic development, the development of a better skilled workforce and the improvement of individual personal development, it also has positive side-effects for marginalised groups. For immigrants and refugees, identifying and validating competence from prior education and/or work experience can speed up inclusion and integration into society and prevent racism and discrimination. For senior workers, validation of non-formal and informal learning can contribute to enhancing their career, both in content and in duration. There may also be health benefits arising from getting a job better suited to the individual's situation. Young school drop-outs can get back into education or into employment through validation combined with tailored training schemes.

Moreover, a recently published survey shows that a considerable number of people in **Norway** have used the opportunity to have their skills validated in connection with an upper secondary education. The survey estimates that a total of 62% of all adults completing their upper secondary education (including VET) in 2006 and 2007 had undergone a validation process, and 81% of these got formal recognition of their learning. However, there are significant variations between the different fields of study.

Workers with few official qualifications are another target group. In **Latvia** the two validation processes under development target adults with working experience. In a similar manner, in the **Netherlands**, the system of APL is primarily aimed at employees with work experience. Both unemployed and employed adults in **Portugal** can benefit from the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences system.

In **Norway** applicants to higher education are another target group. Following a legislative amendment in 2001, adults aged 25+ without a general college and university admissions certification can apply for enrolment in higher education on the basis of documented prior learning. Annually, 5 % of all new students in higher education are adults admitted on the basis of recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning.

4.4 **Benefits of validation for participants**

According to the national reports validation can have a number of positive outcomes for individuals, including:

- Enhanced employability through gaining formal qualifications;
- Enhanced career management skills and improved self-esteem;
- Shorter study times and access to formal education and training.

4.4.1 *Enhanced employability through gaining formal qualifications*

Validation can enable individuals to enhance their employability, to move more easily from inactivity into work and to stay employable for longer. It also promotes mobility as the low-skilled have a wider choice of possible employment and education / training routes. For example, in **Norway**, although there are no direct results on the number of participants who have found 'better' employment after the validation process, there are many individual success stories. Moreover, as an upper secondary education is almost a minimum requirement for employment in Norway, it could be argued that since validation of prior learning gives more adults the chance

to obtain an upper secondary education and the relevant certificate, this enables them to improve their employability and improve their flexibility in the labour market.

In addition, participants and employers who have been interviewed in Norwegian surveys reported back that the effects of validation are overwhelmingly positive. For example, during the years 2000–2005, around 60,000 people underwent validation at upper secondary level (80 % in vocational subjects). On the whole, candidates found that the assessment of non-formal and informal learning was a positive experience, around 80 % finding the experience useful or very useful.

In the **Netherlands**, APL leads to a certificate of experience which gives a complete and exhaustive description of an individual's competences in relation to a given standard. Therefore, the certificate can be used as a comprehensive résumé when applying for work.

Sweden identifies a number of benefits arising from validation of non-formal and informal learning as follows:

- The matching process between pre-defined job standards and the individual's competence profile is facilitated;
- The individual is considered more "employable" as a result of receiving a formal document of his/her non-formal and informal competences;
- Individual job mobility and access to job opportunities are improved;
- The country is in tune with international developments where validation is receiving more attention and is growing in importance.

Some reports highlight that validation is particularly invaluable in times of economic slowdown and/or industry restructuring. **Italy** states that validation offers the possibility of increasing the "transferability" of competences from one employment context to another one. **Denmark** reports that there is strong political support for competence validation because many feel that validation plays an important role in employability and mobility on the labour market.

Finally, in **Latvia**, it is envisaged the competence validation will facilitate more flexible career paths and will encourage participants to engage in further education/training to improve areas where they may be low-skilled.

4.4.2 Enhanced career management skills and improved self-esteem

Validation can enhance the career management skills of individuals and raise self-esteem. For example, in **Portugal** the RVCC National System fosters participants' personal, social and professional accomplishment, as well as encouraging them to pursue education and training. In addition, all participants have reported improved self-esteem. Career development is also an important factor, with greater opportunities for increased remuneration and 'career adjustment' (i.e. in times of restructuring or redundancy).

4.4.3 Shorter study times and access to formal education and training

Validation can lead to shorter study periods for many individuals. This was emphasised by the national reports from **Italy**, the **Netherlands** and **Sweden** which stated that validation can lead to adaptation of course contents and/or a shortening of the study period, thus helping individuals to

avoid unnecessary investment of time and/or money. Validation can also lead to access to formal education and training programmes at a higher level.

4.5 **Benefits of validation for employers**

According to the national reports, validation benefits not only participants, but also employers in a number of different ways, including:

- Enhancing workforce motivation and productivity;
- Improving workforce skills level; and
- Improving company competitiveness and adaptability.

Validation is also increasingly used to facilitate staff development and to ensure the most effective allocation of resources within an enterprise. Indeed, according to the national report, benefits for employers in **Italy** include the possibility of:

- creating HR management systems where the value of experience is not confused with 'seniority';
- constructing "tailored career paths", and real "observatories" of workers' competences that go beyond a mere consideration of degrees and certificates;
- enjoying a more effective communication with education and training systems and employment services through the adoption of a common language;
- improving self-evaluation and the development of skills; and
- promoting and encouraging the development and certification of competences among workers.

In **Poland**, the validation of non-formal and informal learning benefits employers through the enhanced skills of their workforce. Moreover, in the case of restructuring, workers can be repositioned within the company rather than be made redundant.

In **Denmark** analyses and case studies show that three types of effects are differentiated as benefits for employers:

- Welfare effects: employee satisfaction, motivation, work environment.
- Strategic effects: workforce mobility, quality, improved basis for upskilling.
- Economic effects: specific economic benefits to employees and enterprises as a result of increased productivity, and benefits to society at large.

In a recent survey in the **Netherlands**, a representative group of employers stated that about 30% of the APL they bought had the ultimate goal of a diploma from secondary or tertiary vocational education; whilst the other 70% was distributed evenly among the other purposes (such as, shortening higher education courses; receiving further diplomas; acting as comprehensive résumés and providing employers with information on worker competences).

4.6 Gathering and recording information on participants

Only the reports for Norway and Portugal provide details on how information on participants in validation processes is gathered and recorded. It is the responsibility of the county authorities in **Norway** to register all adult candidates who have gone through a validation process at upper secondary level into a national, digital registration system. In **Portugal** information on participants is gathered and recorded in a national database monitored by the National Agency for Qualifications. The system records data related to each adult, from his/her registration at a New Opportunities Centre until s/he is certified/receives a diploma.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

Concluding remarks from the national reports include the following:

- The reasons for the slow implementation of validation practices in a number of EU countries vary from cultural and institutional to historic factors.
- In many cases slow implementation is also linked to the perceived higher value of qualifications gained through formal education and training and there are also issues of acceptance within the formal teaching profession.
- Adoption of quality standards has helped countries to improve the credibility of their validation methods.
- Information and publicity campaigns are necessary to encourage employers, employees and the unemployed to use validation systems.
- The involvement of social partners in development and delivery is essential to ensure the legitimacy of validation results and their buy-in to the system. Countries in which social partners are already closely involved report positive outcomes from this co-operation.
- To avoid a host of projects that lack national legitimacy, it is vital to have national co-ordination of regional/local validation projects.
- Discussions on validation should not be restricted to academic circles but should reach the general public.
- It is important to focus on gathering quantitative information on results.

ANNEX 2: COUNTRY REPORTS

The country reports were prepared by participants in the PLA for their respective countries. These include: Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden.

Austria

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is an integrative part of the Austrian national LLL strategy. It is also a central pillar in the work related to the development and implementation of the national qualifications framework (NQF).

From January to June 2008 a consultation process on the development and implementation of a NQF has been carried. As main results came out:

- Building up trust between the different educational sectors;
- Improving communication between the educational sectors;
- Clarification of terminology regarding equivalent, qualification;
- Development of an explanation note for the descriptors;
- Shift to a learning outcomes orientation;
- Classification into NQF/EQF levels;
- Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning

The whole process has been supported by several working groups.

One of the most relevant working groups related to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning assembles experts in the field of non-formal and informal learning. At the moment a concept paper is being produced. In June 2009 a draft version of the concept paper shall be brought to a decision. The experts worked on a clear definition of key terminology like formal, non-formal and informal (departing from the definition given by CEDFEOP), qualification, modularisation. Furthermore examples of already acknowledged practice have been gathered and analysed. Finally the awarding bodies and the processes of recognition and validation have been examined.

First pilot projects in several fields of vocational education and training and adult education have been launched. Through these projects a better understanding of the system of classification is enabled. They also show what institutions will have to provide if they want to have their learning offers to be linked to the NQF/EQF.

The practice of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Acknowledgement is a reality in certain fields of education. It is true e.g. in vocational education and training and in adult education when it comes to the field of adult educators or the possibilities for individuals to catch up basic competences/skills.

Skills, knowledge and competences acquired outside formal learning are seen as a potential that should be appreciated and taken into account. But still a lot of work has to be done to succeed and to lead to a shift to learning outcome orientation.

Austria will definitely invest in the development and promotion of recognition procedures.

Austria does not dispose of an overarching and comprehensive system of validation of non-formal and informal learning. There are several individual initiatives spread throughout Austria that consist of validating non-formal and informal learning. The whole process of research and writing down a concept paper on non-formal learning is important to sort out what is already there and what has to be developed on the basis of the already stated.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

Dealing with a federal structure can be very challenging indeed.

From the Austrian point of view we are looking forward to get more information on systems that have already been installed and that are working and even more that are being further developed.

Czech Republic

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

Act No. 179/2006 Coll., on verification and recognition of further education results.

Since 1.8.2007 the Act No. 179/2006 Coll., on verification and recognition of further education results and on the amendment of certain other laws, (hereinafter the “Act 179/2006 Coll.”) has been in operation. This new legal norm introduces a uniform, transparent and objective method of verification and recognition of skills and knowledge of individual applicants without regard where such were obtained – whether by studying or in practice. This possibility had not existed under the applicable legislation in the Czech Republic before although this is one of the key elements of further education.

The Act 179/2006 Coll. provides a wholly new perspective on individual professions (full qualification) which are divided into the so-called “partial qualifications.” Any partial qualification is a part of a full qualification which can be utilized independently on the job market. The full qualification of a “baker” is further divided into the partial qualifications such as “making bread and [other] pastry”, partial qualification “making short pastry,” partial qualification “making gingerbread” and similar.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavoring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

Retraining of unemployed is less extensively implemented in the CZ compared to developed EU countries. Of the total number of unemployed only less than 10% undergo retraining, while in most countries it is two to four times as many. The causes of this low proportion are linked to a large degree to the negative attitudes of the job seekers, but there are also financial, organisational and legislative difficulties in the implementation of an active employment policy.

To improve the low participation of adults in continuing education, it is necessary to create an environment that would stimulate both the demand for continuing education and the supply of suitable programmes. Important also is the expansion and enhancement of information and counselling services. On the supply side the challenge is the quality of the programmes which is not, with the exception of school education and retraining, subject to systematic evaluation. It is necessary to inter-link the existing activities concerned with accreditation and certification into a coherent system.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

All qualifications are maintained in the National Qualifications System. National Qualifications System is a database of all full and partial qualifications. For each of the partial qualifications there were created certain qualification and evaluation standards by the National Institute for Professional Training in cooperation with its social partners and departments of state. The qualification standard is a document which defines what the holder of a particular qualification should be familiar with, and the evaluation standard defines, in the form of professional skills, how the applicant seeking recognition must prove these skills to obtain any of the partial qualifications.

The verification and recognition is carried out by the so-called “authorized persons.” An authorized person is a person who has the authority to verify, by the method defined in the relevant evaluation standard, the accomplishment of the professional competence of the applicant – this means the authority to administer examinations and issue certificates on the recognition of a partial qualification. The authorized person may be any physical or legal person who complies with the conditions set forth by the law.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

There are no special requirements for education or training of the staff that carry out validation of non-formal and informal learning.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

Main body is Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic whose coordinate all the activities regarding Act 179/2006 Coll., with the support of National Institution of Technical and Vocational Education (NUOV).

The activities related to the establishment of the National System of Professions and the National Qualification System should constitute and verify the possibilities of cooperation between the educational sector and its social partners in the form of the so-called sector councils. Sector councils are becoming an important platform for a broader and more systematic involvement of the employers into the lifelong learning and play a significant role in the processes of verification and recognition of the qualifications as discussed above.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated?

Low skilled people.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities?

There are no data or outcomes concerning this question.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

There are difficulties to get from the system level to users level. Crucial point in a process of developing the system for the Czech Republic is to get involved social partners into a process of recognition and validation. There is a lack of data and outcomes due to the youth of the system.

Denmark

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

RPL is a broadly founded political project in DK and has a long tradition of individual competency evaluation. In the past it has resulted in a focus on individual skills identification for:

- Vocational training (1997);
- Basic adult education (2001);
- Vocational education and training programmes (2003).

Starting in 2004, an increased focus was placed on RPL, and in August 2007 the educational fields covered by the legislation were expanded to include following educational fields:

- Vocational training;
- Single course subject in general adult education and general upper secondary education;
- Basic adult education;
- VET – Vocational education and training programmes;
- VVU-degrees and diploma degrees.

The current legislation builds upon a thorough political foundation. Since 2004, a broad political majority has supported expanding recognition of prior learning. Prior to the changes, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry for Science, Technology and Development, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs presented the policy paper Recognition of Prior Learning Within the Education System to parliament. The paper, which was well received, presented new ideas for how Danes could achieve personal growth and learn new skills – in the liberal adult educational system, on the job, through liberal adult education, and by volunteering. The main idea of the report was to present ways to develop hidden competencies, and how to bring them out into the light. The message was: “Whatever you can do counts”.

In 2005, as a follow up to the policy paper, the Ministry of Education published a discussion paper about RPL titled “Your skills – finding Denmark’s hidden competencies”. The goal of the paper was to set a new agenda for the discussion of Danes’ competencies, as well as to launch a national skill improvement movement that would help make the political vision a reality. The discussion paper describes why RPL is necessary for Denmark, and identifies the challenges and questions Denmark faces in recognising prior learning. All this preparation resulted in the passing of new rules relating to the development and recognition of prior learning in the adult and continuing education system, which became effective on the 1st. of August 2007.

From legislation to implementation:

With new opportunities available to it, the Ministry of Education launched a number of initiatives that seek to improve the knowledge of prior learning assessment and to promote it’s use. In short, the initiatives include:

- A partnership agreement with the social partners regarding recognition of prior learning running in the period 1.st of August 2007 until 1.st. of August 2009;
- An information and networking campaign focusing on prior learning. Includes a “tool box” to help accomplish the goal;
- An on-line skills portfolio www.minkompetencemappe.dk that can be used to document skills when seeking prior learning assessments;
- A handbook of prior learning to be used by the adult and continuing education institutions;
- Establishment of a National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR);
- Establishment of a counselling web portal that provides general information about prior learning (www.ug.dk);
- A TV campaign aired on Danish National TV, conferences, seminars and meetings etc.

Low-skilled people have been in special focus.

What do the new regulations mean?

The new regulations mean that adults have the right to ask an educational institution to assess their prior learning in order to obtain a recognition of their competencies in the adult and continuing education system. Assessment of prior learning gives the individual the opportunity to:

- Qualify for educational programmes;
- Tailor educational programmes or receive credit for certain classes;
- Obtain a “skills certificate”, if the skills are the same as those obtained by completing part of an educational programme;
- Obtain a “programme certificate” if the skills are the same as those obtained by completing an entire educational programme.

Moreover, the individual can appeal against certain prior learning recognition decisions to an appeals board, the Qualifications Board.

What’s next?

In DK we’re just now preparing to renew the partnership agreement with the social partners because it’s running out. The purpose is to make a new commitment with the social partners in order to increase knowledge and promoting the use of RPL.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

In DK it’s too early to verify about obstacles regarding a sustainable system for validation related to funding. But user fees within higher education programmes may be a problem. The institutions maybe also not see assessments as an opportunity to provide a reasonable economic and therefore they don’t inform the learners and employers about the possibility they have to get recognition for their prior learning. It may be a problem that learners and employers are not well informed about the right they have to get validation of their non-formal and informal learning. The system of validation can seem like a “top down” project made by the system without a need from the learners and employers. To overcome some obstacles it’s necessary to make it a “bottom-up” project.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

The National Qualifications Framework in DK is not yet established but it will be linked to lifelong learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning in two ways:

- 1) With the use of learning outcome to describe qualifications the opportunity to validate and recognise if qualifications gained through non-formal and informal learning is corresponding to the demands of admission or to the education goals of a given qualification in an education programme in the formal education system, is strengthened.
- 2) With the general view of qualifications, learning outcome and admissions through the system of education the Qualification Framework is a tool to make the opportunities within validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as lifelong learning visible.

The Qualifications Framework description of education levels is not a tool in itself to validate. It’s the qualifications and not the individuals which are validated against the levels.

In The Qualifications Framework of lifelong learning - learning outcome is used to describe levels and qualifications instead of using curriculum or the length of an education. When qualifications is described as learning outcome it is more qualifying to validate if the learning outcome gained through non-formal or informal learning can be recognised according to admission or education goals in an education programme.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

In general there are no special requirements for education or training for the staff that carry out validation of non-formal and informal learning. The staff consists of teachers, advisors or guiders. The Danish legislation says that the government has a possibility to decide which competencies the staff needs to have when validation of non-formal and informal learning

is carried out. At this moment the government has not made a decision. So there are no demands for certification or education for managing this job. But competence development is in demand and different initiatives have been taken: The National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning offers conferences, seminars and courses, and some practitioners are networking in a wish to professionalize this task. Staff that carry out validation of non-formal and informal learning often call attention to needs of education or training.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

At present the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning has activities. Organisations do have interests in this field with regard to the quality of the systems, the validity and credibility.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated?

RPL and individual skills assessment tools are primarily used for unskilled employees or for those with vocational qualifications that focus on practical skills. Given that employees in these groups are particularly vulnerable to outsourcing and automatisisation, there are from a political point of view a potential employment and employability benefits to be gained.

How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

We do not know. But we hear both negative but primarily positive stories from the field.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities?

DK has no systematically quantitative or qualitative analyses on data on outcomes and impact on RPL when it comes to employability or better job opportunities. It means that our knowledge about effects is based on small analyses and case studies. But some analyses indicates that RPL give the learners admission or shortening in their education.

In DK we have the political point of view that RPL in general plays an important role for the job opportunities and for the employability and the mobility on the labour market.

What benefits does validation bring to employers?

In DK our knowledge about benefits for the employers is based on small analyses and case studies. It shows that in work life, identification and clarification of “real” competences, and making competencies visible, plays an important role for the job and competence development of the employees as well as for the competitiveness of the enterprise. Many enterprises already work systematically with identification, clarification and assessment of the employees’ competences as part of the enterprise’s competence development. Through the enterprise’s PL assessment, the employee may be assessed in reference to certain job functions. As a rule, an enterprise chooses to use its own yardstick or reference points for it’s employees’ competence assessment and development. Clarification and documentation of competencies in relation to the enterprise’s job functions may be used actively by the employee or by the enterprise itself to obtain recognition in relation to a state approved education or training programme. In the following 3 types of effects are differentiated as benefits for employers:

- Welfare effects: employee satisfaction, motivation, work environment, etc;
- Strategic effects: workforce mobility, quality, improved basis for upskilling, etc;
- Economic effects: specific economic benefits to employees and enterprises as a result of increased productivity, and benefits to society at large.

How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

In DK we have so far demonstrated the expected benefits to the users through political speeches, general handbooks and leaflets to the social partners and training providers.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

One conclusion might be that it’s very difficult to get from system level to users level. In some aspects it’s difficult to convince particular the training providers that it’s a good idea. As mentioned before it can seem like a political “top-down” project rather than it’s a special need or a “bottom up” project coming from the learners and the employers etc. But we

have got positive experiences in the way that we have involved the social partners and the way we enrolled our campaign coordinated and together with the social partners. But again DK doesn't have any general systematically quantitative or qualitative analyses saying anything specific about outcome or impact concerning RPL.

Germany

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

a. What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Germany is described in details in the country background report 2008 (http://www.bmbf.de/pub/non-formal_and_informal_learning_in_germany.pdf).

Germany has a series of recognition procedures in which work experience is the condition for admission to an examination and which aim to improve transfer opportunities in the education system, to increase educational levels and to break down social selectivity. The scope of these procedures has to date been relatively limited and they have been almost exclusively related to the area of the informal acquisition of vocational competences. Informal learning in contexts other than vocational is generally disregarded in these procedures. In this respect, if existing potential is to be utilised, the existing approaches must be made transparent, further developed and opened up to learning outcomes from non-vocational contexts or those dissociated from the area of learning. Further development of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a particular challenge since mature institutional foundations for credit and certification procedures are only just evolving; however, if an innovative harmonised system of recognition is to be developed, the many players and responsible institutions must reconcile their interests and processes.

In principle, the recognition of skills, knowledge and abilities acquired outside formal routes is becoming increasingly significant. The qualification of the working population and the motivation to undertake lifelong learning – as everywhere in the OECD member states – are regarded as critical resources for social and economic development.

In case of low qualified young adults, the so called “Qualifizierungsbausteine” (**qualification modules**) offer some support:

Qualification modules are part of the preparation for vocational training, which has been anchored in the Vocational Training Act as an autonomous sector of vocational training since January 2003. They serve as an example of the push to gain recognition for partial qualifications as part of a modular approach to educational pathways, which will be increasingly important in future.

The aim of qualification modules is to teach basic, training-related knowledge and proficiency and prepare participants for training. In principle, participants have the opportunity to credit competences acquired in this way against later vocational training periods.

Crediting by companies, one of the goals of which is to accelerate training periods, is not a binding provision of the Vocational Training Act and, according to the DGB, takeup is very slow. However, the statutory option of crediting competences acquired as part of vocational preparation is an important foundation for better integration of vocational preparation and vocational training and for increasing recognition of learning outcomes.

Qualification modules are mainly geared to young people with learning difficulties or social disadvantages whose level of development makes it unlikely that they will succeed in training for a recognised apprenticeship trade. The qualification modules have distinct and time-based learning units developed from the content of recognised apprenticeships (BBiG § 69) which accordingly qualify the holder for an activity that is part of a recognised apprenticeship. In addition to teaching skills for everyday working life, the young people are given additional mentoring and support in social education (BBiG § 68). The learning locations or providers of training are responsible for implementing the qualification modules. The competent bodies in the skilled trades, in industry and the professional associations confirm that the modules are in keeping with the relevant training regulations.

The introduction of qualification modules is intended to improve integration of vocational preparation and training. The aim is to improve young people’s opportunities to participate in working life and to increase companies’ chances of having more

applicants for training and thus more skilled staff.

The qualification modules are also intended to improve the quality of training preparation, to increase the differentiation of the providers' qualification potential and to improve the efficiency of training preparation. According to the originally defined objectives, the certified training-related qualification modules should furthermore increase young people's chances of getting a job or apprenticeship position, reduce dropout figures and increase young people's motivation to learn and achieve – not least because they can be credited to subsequent training.

The fact that the modules are geared towards forward-looking employment sectors, practical and relevant learning, and the certification of acquired competences, should motivate young people who fail to cope with vocational training despite special assistance, and people who have passed the usual training age without gaining a qualification. Migrants and young women are a particular target group for crafts. Work experience, combined with a certificate of competence, provides them with endorsement.

The ProfilPASS system is used to ascertain and document your own abilities and competences in a systematic way. The concomitant preparation of an individual competences record raises individual self-awareness and enables users to enter into a dialogue with themselves and others. Insofar as it is motivating to take steps to get to grips with the competences used and to foster awareness of personal strengths, it is also an incentive and stimulus for lifelong learning, for example with a view to preparing for (re-)entry into working life, a professional or personal (change of) direction or planning future learning projects.

The ProfilPASS system comprises the "Profil-PASS" tool and a guidance concept geared to it, based on the humanist concept of mankind, the learning ideas of constructivism and the biographical approach. It aids consideration, recording and design of the individual's training, learning and work biography. The central element for users is the struggle with their own biography and it is recommended that they should obtain support in this process in the form of qualified guidance/advice. The advisers are trained in the guidance work in a two-day preparatory seminar, of which the main thrust is the methodology of recording competences. These seminars are run by specially-qualified disseminators who are generally based in "dialogue centres" for the dissemination of the ProfilPASS system. The activities are co-ordinated by a national ProfilPASS service centre.

To date over 3000 advisers have qualified under the project and nationwide have deployed over 50,000 ProfilPASSes/ "ProfilPASS für junge Menschen".

b. What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

Main obstacles are:

- The lack of appropriate methods, standards and processes (development of these methods could be described as "work in progress")
- A certain "culture" in Germany, which prefers formal graduation and certificates. But: a careful cultural change can be observed.

c. How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

In October 2006, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) agreed to work together on the development of a German Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (known by its German abbreviation of DQR).

The DQR represents the first comprehensive matrix for the alignment of qualifications. It extends across educational areas and acts as a considerable aid to navigation within the German educational system. For this purpose the DQR describes on eight reference levels professional and personal competences which direct the alignment of qualifications obtained in general education, higher education and vocational education and training.

The eight reference levels contained within the draft DQR each describe the competences required to obtain a qualification. The term competence constituting the heart of the DQR depicts the ability and readiness to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and methodological competences in work or study situations and for occupational and personal development. Competence is understood in this sense as action skills.

All formal qualifications within the German educational system, including general, and higher education and vocational education and training, are included in the alignment of qualifications to the DQR. A further objective is to accord due consideration to the results of informal learning. The Federal Government-Federal State Coordination Group and the DQR Working Group are in agreement that the alignment of the qualifications within the German educational system to the reference levels of the DQR should not replace the existing system of access qualifications. Alignment takes place in accordance with the principle that each qualifications level may be accessible via various educational and training pathways. Achieving a certain reference level of the DQR does not provide automatic entitlement to access the next level. The achievement of a reference level has also not been considered in conjunction with the implications for collective wage agreements and laws relating to remuneration. Legal aspects will be investigated within the scope of the next phase of development.

The practice of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

a. How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

The staff appraisal is of indirect significance for the processes to recognise informal and non-formal learning since, when documented in the personnel file, it is used as the basis for the employer's reference. In large companies the institutionalised staff appraisal between employees, especially at middle management level and their boss, has pushed through a dialogue process of formalised documentation of skills, sometimes accompanied by written gradings in lists of competences. In this meeting, the employee and his/her superior can decide on a whole series of informal and nonformal learning processes to build on specialist and social competences such as attending internal training, job enlargement, job enrichment, job rotation, coaching etc.

A pre-structured staff appraisal generally comprises discussion of the past work period and the setting of new objectives. Qualification and supporting measures are included on the agenda as well as professional and personal development.

The company gives HR managers "preparation, implementation and documentation forms" as preparation and guidance. The focus is on the proving of the employees in the workplace and the strengths and weaknesses demonstrated thereby. Apart from competences acquired in organised form, specialist and transferable competences acquired informally on the job are taken into account here.

These appraisals are predominantly used in large organisations; in small and medium-sized enterprises evaluation, assessment and recognition is usually carried out casually by their superiors.

In addition to employer's references and staff appraisals, examinations in assessment centres Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks: Entry qualifications with Chamber of Crafts certificate. Berlin. The information booklet sets out specimen forms which, in addition to the "Company reference" and the "Chamber of Crafts certificate", facilitate a pre-defined "differentiated assessment of skills taught" and an "evaluation of interdisciplinary qualifications".

Domain-specific qualifications are graded as "independent", "with assistance" and "fail". The employer can use a prescribed scale of 1 to 4 to assess interdisciplinary abilities, behaviour and qualities such as "following the rules", "care, sense of order", "assessment of own performance", "co-operation" etc. geared to recording potential and competences have an independent weighting for the recognition of competences acquired non-formally and informally in the employment system. In assessment procedures, the focus is not on subject knowledge; personal, job-related and social competences (often called soft skills) such as the ability to work in a team, communication skills, persistence, ability to work under pressure, initiative, motivation, creativity, goal-orientation, management potential or decisiveness are tested. They are assessed not as knowledge but in the form of situational exercises. The assessment procedure therefore appraises and then evaluates whether, and to what extent, a person can analyse situations, tasks and problems in work-like situations, identify the particular demands of these, and respond with an appropriate strategy. In this way, the assessment centre takes on the aspect of a first work sample in which candidates must prove themselves. Since the primary focus here is on the ability to work independently, applicants and employees with comparatively poor qualifications also have opportunities for informal learning to be recognised, provided that barriers to recognition do not first prevent this. The fundamental objective of

assessment centres, therefore, is to record, appraise and develop people's ability to work independently, i.e. their competences. The Arbeitskreis Assessment-Center eV (assessment centre working group), in conjunction with Berlin Technical University, has carried out a representative survey of 1,600 companies in the German-speaking area with a response rate of 18 % and discovered that the frequency with which companies work with assessment procedures varies widely: 47 % of companies perform assessment procedures 1 to 4 times a year, 26 % of companies perform them 5 to 15 times a year and 27 % of companies perform them more than 15 times a year. The number of participants in each procedure performed was mostly between eight and ten. Although this does not allow the total number of participants at assessment centres in Germany to be calculated, these figures do give some idea. The interim results of a comparative study run in 2007 of DAX-100 companies showed that ACs are evidently far more widespread in these companies and there is a close correlation to the company size.

b. What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

The identification of the stakeholder has to differ from the specifications of the OECD framework, as the relationships between players and providers of non-formal and informal learning, their impacts on acknowledgement and recognition in relation to the changes in the education system and the effect on its users has to date had little empirical investigation. Understanding of the stakeholder's impact with respect to the acknowledgement of equivalents and the recognised integration of informal, non-formal and formal learning is only at the outset, as society consensus to date has been that the German education, training and lifelong learning system is highly formalised in curriculum and structure and is compatible with the requirements of the employment system.

For these reasons, presentation of the education policy positions on "non-formal learning" and "informal learning" will be reduced to central players, and the picture leans more on their accompanying open discussion process and the presentation of their structures and co-determination options in this field of educational policy.

In Germany, the stakeholders involved in education policy are concentrated in key central players: representatives of the executive (Federal and Länder governments) and legislative (parliaments) as well as both parties to the collective agreement (employers' and employees' organisations), the institutions of higher education and other institutions in which the various levels of political

decision-making collaborate. These players take part in all the decision-making processes for the acknowledgement and recognition of non-formal and informal learning in various roles.

The parties to the collective agreement above all have a great deal of impact on questions of recognition in the areas of vocational training. Their significance can be shown, for example, in the examination entitlement for the outcome-oriented vocational examination, which lies with the "competent bodies" as public law institutions (chambers). They certify the vocational school certificate and employer's reference and set definitively the intentionally-organised vocational education and training on behalf of the state. The institutions of higher education are largely autonomous in the provision of training and they provide for the crediting of competences acquired outside universities towards higher education studies by adopting relevant statutes under Land law.

c. Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

The federal government set a national goal to improve the participation rate in further education (non-formal) from 43% to 50% in 2015. As a part of this, the participation of "hard-to-reach"-groups shall improve from 28% to 40%. This is a crucial part of the national education and training monitoring process, that adopted to AES-approach last year. The topic of low-level educated adults is also an important question for the annual "Berufsbildungsbericht" and the annual "Bildungsbericht von Bund und Ländern".

Most important the federal government started an important research project, the Educational panel: In long-term studies the educational biography of certain target groups is monitored. We hope to find out more about positive and negative factors for success in education and training.

d. What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

Main benefits brought to employers are:

- Getting aware of their competences, abilities and skills while participating in a validation process (e.g. ProfilPASS)
- To get a more self-confident appearance and

Mein benefits for employers are:

- To comprehend competences, abilities and skills of potential employers in a comparable way

See also in detail Case Studies in benefits in Chapter B.5 of the country background report 2008 (http://www.bmbf.de/pub/non-formal_and_informal_learning_in_germany.pdf)

Greece

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Lifelong education and training in Greece are regulated by national legislation. Two major Educational Acts distinguish lifelong training from lifelong education allowing for separate organizational support structures under the auspices of two ministries (Labor and Education). Lifelong training is regulated by both OEEK (initial vocational training) and EKEPIS (continuing vocational training). The Organisation responsible to foresee Lifelong and Adult Education (basic and general adult education) is the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education). In 2005 was established by Law the National Committee of Lifelong Learning, which aims to ascertain the needs of lifelong education and training, to evaluate the overall quality of delivery and to co-ordinate lifelong education and training providers as well as to oversee their interconnection with the National System of Connecting Vocational Education and Training with Employment (ESSEEKA). The target group of both systems (vocational and adult education) is all citizens (age of 15 years and after). Particular focus is given to socially excluded groups, low-skill workers, and school leavers.

Widening participation in lifelong education and training is an important consideration for Greece as the country has not managed to reach the European benchmark of 12% by 2010. The national rate for participation in lifelong education does not exceed 4% of the population.

Certification and validation processes differ in both non-formal and informal providers as there is no formal consultation processes in defining a national accreditation framework. In addition, there is little or no provision of recognizing prior learning. Also, there are structural barriers, which hinder both the development of flexible learning pathways into a nationally agreed scheme as interconnection and credit transfer between sectors is minimal as well as the implementation of concrete consultation processes amongst providers, stakeholders and decision makers.

However both vocational and adult education system award their graduates with certificates, but without a clear linkage with the national qualification system or with little credit transfer provision. For example there are certificates of compulsory education (via SCS) equivalent to level 2 of European Qualifications Framework and (ISCED level 2) and Lifelong Learning Certificates for 250 hour programs equivalent to level 4 of European Qualifications Framework (ISCED level 4).

Finally, the lack of both a National Qualifications Framework and a credit transfer system in lifelong education and training hinders access participation of low-skilled citizens. The improvement of quality of the adult education system has emerged as a fundamental objective of vocational and adult education in recent years in the frame of the National Committee of Lifelong Learning, but little progress has been made. For example a National System of Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Adult Education was piloted in 2006. The system constitutes a text of common evaluation specifications and criteria for all adult education providers & programs. The main objective of the system is the evaluation and the continuous improvement of educational provision through self-evaluation processes. In addition, provision has been made of assessing learning outcomes. More specifically the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning is now developing a National Competency Framework (NCF) to assess learner achievements and performance (mainly in the School of 2nd Chance and the Centres for Adult Education). Overall six key competencies (i.e. organizational, technical, cultural, personal, civic, communicative) have been developed to capture the Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes adult learners acquire after their training in each individual program. Finally, the proposed NCF assesses and recognizes prior learning.

The practice of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

During the last years considerable effort has been made with respect to teachers' training and professional development. More specifically EKEPIS (continuing training) has already developed a Register of Trainers which accredits vocational professionals based on specific criteria. More than 10.000 trainers have gone through a 300 hour vigorous training process with special attention to assessment and validation. A parallel Register is being now developing for initial vocational education and adult basic education with more than 20.000 applicants. This new register is regulated by the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning and OEEK.

The lack of a national training framework has enabled a diverse response in addressing issues such as assessment and validation. The discussion on credit transfer is under way. For example, the General Secretariat of Lifelong Education

discusses an assessment framework (initial, formative and summative assessment procedures) for the Hellenic adult education program, which is based on a hybrid skills/competency framework. Skills/Competency standards reflect the specification of, knowledge, skill and attitudes and the application of that knowledge, skill and attitudes to the standard of performance required in particular contexts.

The importance and benefits of validation of non-formal and particularly informal learning is not being promoted as it should be in the Greek society. In addition, little research evidence exist to support the connection between employability and validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Hungary

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

Despite positive policy pronouncements in recent years, there was little experience of this in Hungary. There is nothing approaching a general system, even in principle. However, there are two large exceptions where this type of recognition of non/informal learning has taken hold, interestingly both reflecting priorities set by the government for expansion of learning. First there is the practice of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) which, as we have seen, is the predominant facility in Hungary for structured ICT training and certification. Under this system individuals can put themselves forward for certification, through standardised tests, and use the results of those tests either to gain full certificates or to acquire units which contribute to a full qualification. Though an international and proprietary qualification, it has now been incorporated as a route towards formal Hungarian national qualifications, with a number of qualifications in the National Vocational Qualifications Register incorporating ECDL as a module. Thus, in principle at least, someone who gains an ECDL certificate through its RNFIL facility may use it as a credit towards a recognised vocational qualification of which ICT skills are a part. Similarly a number of higher education institutions recognise ECDL as an exemption from part of their requirements for an award. A recent reciprocal arrangement allows people with good passes for ICT in the secondary school examination to gain an equivalent ECDL certificate, at a discount to normal costs. The second, and longer-standing, example is that of foreign languages qualifications, which have been accessible through proficiency examinations for many years. People may take the examinations without having attended a recognised course of instruction, and can use their experience abroad or (in the case of multi-lingual households) at home, private language lessons, etc. to help them satisfy the exam's requirements. Higher education institutions also recognise language proficiency examinations gained through RNFIL, though often these are requirements for entering certain courses rather than contributing specific credit towards them.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

In the 'classic' senses of giving partial or whole qualifications, RNFIL is clearly limited in Hungary.

The obstacles – as an OECD study pointed out – appear to be similar to those reported in other countries, namely:

- costs of RNFIL are higher than many assume;
- demand is in practice lower than it is thought to be in theory;
- the structure of the 'target' qualification which is supposed to admit RNFIL is not conducive to absorbing partial attainment achieved in this way;
- there are questions about the social value of qualifications gained other than through accepted methods;
- there are problems of acceptance within the teaching profession.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

The National Qualifications Framework is under construction in Hungary. The existing National Vocational Qualifications Register contains twenty some qualifications (especially low level ones) where the "individually prepared" trainee can be qualified, the usual rule is that trainee can be enter the final exam for qualification if having some certification of participation in a course, or successful module closing exams.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

The training of VET teachers and trainers targets each the assessment, the work with standards, and providing guidance. For those who are graduated earlier, the compulsory further training offers opportunity to learn these (new or renewed)

elements of their work.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

The Regional Training Centres and the National Institute of Adult Education together with the Social and Employment Agency forming a consortium carried out a development project under the Human Resource Development Operational Program for disseminating newly developed PLA methods among training providers.

Employers' bodies play significant role in defining requirements/standards of qualification, and in operation of independent examination committees (The chairs of these committees are delegated by the ministries-government side, and co-chairs by the chambers – employers' side).

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

In Hungary non- and in-formal learning is recognised not by directly certifying it, but by treating it as meeting eligibility criteria for levels of formal learning which themselves lead to certificates. Here achievement in non-formal and informal spheres does not lead directly to certification but rather allows individuals who have not completed lower levels of formal education to 'bypass' the normal progression routes within the formal system and to use their achievements outside it to enter a higher level of formal education or training than they would otherwise be eligible for. In the diagram the diagonal dotted arrows depict these 'alternative' entry routes, achieved through the recognition of previous non/informal learning. For vocational qualifications there is a complex schedule of acceptable prior qualifications.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

There is a general requirement for training providers to 'take account' of previous experience in admitting individuals to programmes and – as has been done in some trades for many years – this has been interpreted in places as allowing institutions to waive entrance requirements on the establishment of relevant non/informal learning – in other words 'recognising' it in the sense indicated above. This has particularly occurred with those lower level qualifications which demand only primary school level qualifications for entry; remedial programmes and in some cases this type of RNFIL have been used for applicants who did not complete primary education.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

Taken narrowly, to include only the award of national qualifications on the basis of non/informal learning, there is little practice to report in Hungary outside the (rather indirect) examples of language proficiency tests and the ECDL. Such initiatives as there have been outside these spheres seem as much prompted by opportunities for EU development funding, and somewhat sporadic attempts to import perceived foreign examples of RNFIL good practice. Hungary has made some legal provisions to permit and encourage RNFIL. Though such provisions obviously help in indicating a new climate, they are not enough. Overcoming cultural and attitudinal obstacles to RNFIL (in its 'classic' sense of awarding qualifications for wholly non-formal and informal learning) also needs a high level demand for such qualifications, coupled with a qualifications structure which can easily accept RNFIL. First step toward this structure has been done, but further development in methods also has to be done.

Italy

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

a. What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

In Italy there is not yet a formalized or regulated national validation system. Our national context has been, however, characterised, for many years, by a rich socio-institutional debate and by many experiences at regional or local contexts: some Regions (Basilicata, Emilia Romagna, Piemonte, Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Veneto, Valle d'Aosta) have developed policies and operational strategies for validation of non-formal and informal learning and recognition of training credits in specific pathways (formal learning) or for the acquisition of certificates;

Also within the context of the most innovative and relevant pathways in terms of lifelong learning – Higher Technical Education and Training pathway (IFTTS) and Adult Education – have been defined national guidelines for validation of non formal learning, and even in university courses the recognition of skills acquired at work, during stage experiences or in cultural and volunteer activities, is allowed.

The institutional actors involved in these issues:

- the national level: Ministry of Education, University and Research and Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies, Social partners, employers representatives and representatives of the Regions;
- the regional and local level, which has dealt with the issue both from the strategic point of view and from the technical and operational point of view.

Particularly important on the road to a national system for validation of non formal and informal learning is the National Committee (Tavolo nazionale) - promoted by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies – aimed at building the national standards system, with particular reference to the evaluation and value-allocation of competences held and acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts. At the moment is being giving attention to the professional standards issue through an analysis of the labour process and through a classification of the informative data of such an analysis which is focussed on the definition of “broadband vocational profiles” able to represent a wide number of profiles coherent one another. The “broadband vocational profiles” and their single unites of competences are linked to the EQF levels. Recently the testing phase carried out on the Tourism and Mechanic and Electronic sector has come to an end.

This work, still on-going, will make possible the development of an homogeneous system at national level, aimed at making individuals anable, along the course of life, to capitalize non-formal and informal experience through the validation of skills. The system being developed should in particular support low-skilled people and in general promote the development of processes of social inclusion with reference to persons not provided with “regular relations” to the labour market.

This national strategy is also linked to the citizen’s Libretto Formativo (Training Booklet) - (Interministerial Decree 10 October 2005), an instrument designed to organize and document the various learning experiences made in education, training, employment and daily life (formal - non formal and informal learning) and the outcomes of these experiences in terms of skills acquired. This instrument is not a tool for certification of skills but it supports and promotes the perspective of validation of non-certified learning. The Libretto was piloted in a number of Regions through an agreed process and methodology.

b. What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

The first and biggest obstacle towards the setting up of an efficient national validation system is connected to the national institutional configuration. The law that reformed Title V of the Constitution (2001) made the achievement of a more complex national agreement on a number of issues and among these the system of credit recognition and certification. This reform, combined with the autonomy of several stakeholders (autonomy of the Regional Authorities in regulating

certification devices; autonomy of Universities and Schools; “contractual” autonomy of enterprises in offering “qualifications” in the workplace) created a difficult situation to manage.

However, the stakeholders involved are aware of the fundamental importance of a national system that should constitute the ‘real infrastructure’ for different policies. These policies include for example the national system of analysis of the labour market needs in terms of new job profiles; this is now on-going within the National Committee - promoted by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies - for the building of national professional standards system.

c. How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

The Italian NQF is being established. This includes the definition of a structure to be coherent with the EQF system as to place the different elements of the National system and link them to the 8 EQF levels.

For some levels of the national system the referencing to the EQF levels is already established, i.e. three levels of Higher Education are linked to 6-7-8 of the EQF levels (Bologna Process).

The establishment of the NQF is, however, still very complex. The difficulty is also due to the fact that the Regions have worked for the establishment of their own regional qualifications systems with different modalities and timing.

Within the process for the establishment of the NQF an important role played the National Committee for the definition of the national standard system, (it includes Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies, Ministry of Education, University and Research, Regions, Autonomous Provinces and Social Partners).

The national standard system, as coherent with the LO approach, can be considered as the basis for the integration of the different “part” of the NQF, improving a common language, a national methodology based on Learning outcomes, linking together needs of individuals and labour market.

The practice of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

Benefits for adults, in general, and for people do not provide with formal certificates, in particular:

- the possibility of reducing the time required to achieve formal certificates (greater efficiency) and increase effective opportunities to complete those certificates (greater effectiveness);
- the possibility to increase the opportunities for the recognition and certification of experience acquired through non-formal or informal learning;
- the possibility “to translate” the certifications achieved and the outputs of processes of recognition into economic gain, as a result of wage adjustments;
- the possibility to unify fragmented experiences bringing together a beneficiary’s personal and professional history;
- the possibility to stimulate individual training and career design among workers;
- the possibility to increase “transferability” of competences from one context to another one through these practices and devices;

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

Benefits for employers:

- the possibility to gain a better understanding of the skills of job candidates;
- the possibility to enjoy a more effective communication with education and training systems and employment services

through to the adoption of a same language;

- the possibility to improve self-evaluation and development of skills;
- the possibility to promote and encourage development and certification of competences among workers;
- the possibility to construct “tailor career paths”, and real “observatories” of workers’ competences that go beyond a mere consideration of degrees and certificates.
- the possibility to create HR management systems where value of experience is not confused with ‘seniority’.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

In Italy, even if there is not yet a structured national learning recognition and validation system, there is an important process on-going, sustained by a large political consensus. The motivation for such slow progress in the years in transforming the rich debate on these issues into concrete actions is due to cultural and historical factors linked to the legal value of the diploma and certificates but also to several difficulties of integration between national and regional policies.

In Italy the national government has surely a central role in the process of defining of a non formal and informal learning recognition system, seen as a fundamental right for all the citizens. From this point of view the Italian government aims to fix common national criteria and procedures to guarantee citizens, workers, enterprises, VET agencies and education providers. The national level has to find a strong balance with the regional level.

Latvia

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The process of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Latvia is not yet implemented by offering the product to the end-user. However, this issue has been discussed among partners and in 2008 working group under supervision of the Ministry of Education and Science has developed and state secretary has accepted proposal by which validation is divided into three subgroups:

1. Validation of non-formal and informal learning for adults in order to be able to receive basic education diploma or secondary education diploma after the validation process (Portuguese example).
2. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in the frame of VET system for adults with working experience and skills to receive professional qualification, equivalent to one, that is issued after completion VET programme, thus, facilitating more flexible job career paths and promotion further education, when recognised of incomplete skills in some areas, which should be improved to receive an award.
3. Validation of non-formal and informal learning in higher education institution in order to void double learning competences that are already in place in order to receive higher education diploma and therefore possibly shorten period of studies and expenses for studies in higher education institution.

At this stage is has been decided to start with promotion of proposals No2 and No3 and to postpone proposal No1 as there is still high completion rate for those in basic education and secondary education on the one hand, and need to emphasise skills for jobs during recession and promotion of higher education in more flexible way on the other hand.

In order to implement proposal No2 amendments of regulation (Professional Education Law) has been introduced to government for decision in order to be able to proceed legally. The idea behind the proposal is to let VET system with special requirements to examine and provide with professional qualification those adults, who need state professional qualification. At the same time VET system is being reorganised and learning outcomes and conformity with the requirements of market needs in cooperation with social partners are put on the frontline.

In order to implement proposal No3 the new regulation has been prepared for higher education as well (Higher Education Law) which is already accepted by the government and is on the agenda of the Parliament to accept it in 2009. The idea behind the proposal is to turn higher education system into programme modules' system. In case person already has number of modules acquired in or outside of school, studies get shorter and therefore cheaper. Higher education institutions are to be responsible for evaluation knowledge, skills and competences of the students.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is now being given also higher priority in updated proposal for LLL strategy for Latvia.

The practice of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

There is no validation practice in place yet.

Liechtenstein

National policy developments in relation to the validation of non-formal and informal learning

The national Department for Professional Training and Vocational Counseling is in preparation of a detailed concept for a “portal of entrance” for all interested people. This portal is scheduled for information and consultation.

The further development is planned to be done in close cooperation with the Swiss Conference for the Federal Offices for Professional Training (Schweizerische Berufsbildungsämter-Konferenz SBBK). Liechtenstein is member of this Conference.

The project provides five parts:

1. Information and consultation;
2. Balancing;
3. Assessment;
4. Validation and part certification;
5. Full certification.

The implementation of the process of validation is still in preparation. In Liechtenstein we have not yet practical experience in this field.

The Netherlands

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

A knowledge centre for Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is in existence since 2000. Funding of this centre is supplied by the Dutch government.

In 2005 a special interdepartmental project directorate Learning and Working started as a joint project of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

In 2006 a Quality Code for APL was agreed upon by the government, the social partners and the suppliers of APL. A system of accreditation of suppliers of APL was introduced as a consequence of this code. As of January 1st 2007 a fiscal measure was introduced: the government gives employees or employers who buy APL from a certified supplier € 300 for each procedure (the average price for APL in the Netherlands is € 1000 - € 1500).

In 2009 a packet of labour market measures was introduced to counter the effects of the economic recession. As a part of this package, the government will pay 50%-100% of the APL procedure for a person who is at risk of becoming unemployed and does not yet have a vocational qualification at level 2 of the Dutch qualification structure for vocational education. An amount of € 57 million is available for this purpose in the years 2009-20210. An additional amount of € 75 million is available for education for people at risk of unemployment.

A special publicity campaign for these low skilled workers threatened with unemployment and not in possession of a level 2 qualification (a basic qualification for the labour market) will start this summer. The aim is to get some 50-60.000 people to do APL and if necessary additional schooling.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

In 2005, only 10% of the Dutch population knew what APL was. A nationwide publicity campaign on radio, television and printed media aims at raising this number significantly. It will take a couple of years to achieve the goal of a 100% knowledge.

The unemployment agency in the Netherlands, a nationwide operating government agency, employs some 5000 so called work-coaches, who are responsible for all the contacts with workers who are either unemployed or are threatened with unemployment. Their knowledge of APL as one of the possible instruments of re-integration in the labour market is insufficient, and will be targeted in the previously mentioned publicity campaign. A set of instruments will be used to inform them, and should lead to a situation where in every contact they have, the possibility of APL is discussed.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

The Netherlands is studying the implementation of the EQF/NQF at the national level. Until then, the Dutch qualification structures for secondary and tertiary vocational education will be used for APL, together with branch-qualifications recognised as used by social partners.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

The Quality Code for APL stipulates that assessors should have received specific professional training. Awarding bodies check if this is done satisfactory, and recognition as a certified supplier of APL is for a large part dependent on the quality of the assessors.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

The 5 awarding bodies that check the quality of the APL-suppliers and advise the partners of the Quality Code whether a supplier of APL should be recognised and certified as such.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

The Dutch system of APL is primarily aimed at employees with some years of working experience. The standards that are being used are those of vocational education and branch-standards. That leaves a problem for unemployed without recent working experience or without any working experience at all. Where there has been no learning, there can hardly be any accreditation of prior learning. Non formal learning should have a relationship with a particular profession before accreditation can be done in the Dutch approach of APL.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

In the Dutch approach, APL leads to a certificate of experience, which gives a complete and exhaustive description of individual's competencies in relation to a given standard. Such a certificate can be used for various purposes, the most important being:

- It can be used to receive certificates or diplomas from a school that has received the right to issue diplomas from the Minister of Education;
- It can be used upon entrance in formal education to shorten the study period;
- It can be used as a very complete resume when applying for functions;
- It can be used by the employer to have a better knowledge of the competencies of his/her personnel, or for placing personnel internally.

In a recent survey, a representative group of employers stated that about 30% of the APL they bought had the ultimate goal of receiving a diploma from secondary or tertiary vocational education, the other 70% was distributed rather evenly among the other abovementioned purposes.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this APL that may have application in other European countries?

It is important that discussions about the use of APL should not be restricted to academic circles, but should involve politics and should try to reach the general public

The quality code and its system of accreditation of APL-suppliers has helped enormously to make APL into a clear-cut product.

The nationwide publicity campaign on radio and television is essential to stimulate employees and employers to use the system that was created.

Norway

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

The aim of the Norwegian Competence Reform of 1999 was to help meet the needs of individuals, society and the workplace in terms of skills and knowledge, and to give adults more opportunity to acquire education and training to improve their qualifications. As a result of the reform adults were given a statutory right to primary and secondary education, which must be adapted to their needs and situation. Another principal objective was establishing a national system for documenting and validating the non-formal and informal learning of adults, regardless of where these competencies were acquired, with legitimacy both in the workplace and in the education system. These principles are now anchored in legislation.

Legislation

- Adults without prior upper secondary education (VET included) have a statutory right to upper secondary education provided by the county authorities. The education should be adapted to the individual's needs and life situation. These adults also have a statutory right to have their prior informal and non-formal learning assessed towards the national curricula and their approved competences documented in a Competence Proof submitted by the county authorities. The assessment process may result in an exemption from parts of the training schedule and a shorter training period towards a full exam.
- Adults with more than five years of documented work experience may obtain a trade and journeyman's certificate by validation of their documents. If their documents are approved; representing the right kind of practise and for the demanded period of time, they may apply for the final exams. These candidates are not required to go through a formal education and training process, but they take the same final examination as apprentices, including both theoretical and practical elements.
- Adults without a general college and university admissions certification can apply for enrolment in higher education on the basis of documented prior learning. The applicant must be over 25 years of age.

Practical organisation

A regional approach to implementing a national validation system was chosen. Validation of prior learning is an individual right, and it is the responsibility of the county authorities to realise this right and assure the quality of the process. Funding is delegated to the 19 counties, and regional "assessment centres" are established in each county for information and guidance. They are also responsible for the quality of the validation process and for training assessors.

Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2007

In a strategy document published by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2007, validation of informal and non-formal learning is one of the main priorities. Major policy measures now include:

- Strengthening information and guidance services;
- New methods of cooperation between education, working life and the NGO sector;
- New measures for uniform practice;
- New reporting and data collection routines.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

There are still challenges, both when it comes to increasing the number of participants and as for improving the system to the benefit of the adult individual and society.

Awareness – making the opportunities better known – is perhaps the main challenge. Opportunities for validation are not widely known, particularly amongst people with low formal education. Only 26 % of employees are sufficiently informed about their rights and opportunities. There is a need for a more targeted information strategy

Also, the cooperation between the Labour and Welfare Administration and the county offices responsible for the

recognition of learning at the upper secondary level is underdeveloped – relatively few unemployed people use the opportunities offered to have their learning validated.

Especially for the voluntary sector, there is a need for more structured and reliable documentation. The attitude to validation is no problem, but the documentation in this sector is weak and gives too little description of content. (The third sector is a major stakeholder and an important provider of adult learning in Norway.)

For the education sector, the main challenge is better and more uniform procedures. Local authorities in municipalities and counties meet the obligations in different ways. This means your opportunities as a learner can vary depending on where you live. It is vital to ensure equal treatment for everybody and a universal understanding and interpretation of legislation and regulations.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

In most cases, validation of prior learning is linked to the formal education system, i.e. validation is geared to the requirements of the national curriculum, aimed at granting access to or a shortening of existing education/courses.

Since adults have a statutory right to primary and secondary education, and this education must be adapted to their needs and situation, a validation process is often recommended to make sure the applicant gets provision tailored to his needs.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

During the development of the national system, the foundation was laid for a varied set of methods and tools for documentation and validation of competence and skills. These methods and tools were piloted widely. The county authorities are responsible for the quality and training of staff, carried out regionally at the assessment centres. There are annual courses and seminars for assessors, and also mentoring of inexperienced assessors. Normally, assessors have a job background from education or the trade in question (for VET), or both. Trained assessors are registered on regional lists in the assessment centres.

Methods

One of the most common areas where VPL is put to use with good results is the upper secondary school level. The assessment is related to the requirements of the national curricula, both in theoretical and vocational subjects, and results in documentation of the approved competences in a certificate called a Competence Proof.

These methods are widely used:

- Dialogue-based method:
 - discussions between an assessor and the learner (one-to-one);
 - computerised or manual tool can be used;
 - can be combined with portfolio assessment, self-assessment and testing.
- Portfolio assessment:
 - based on written documentation, photos etc;
 - discussion after admission - to tailor the course to the individual according to the individual's actual knowledge and skills.

In vocational subjects, a combination of interviews and practice is used, both to chart the learner's background, training, work experience, language skills and objectives, and to see his skills in practice. In this way both the theoretical and the practical side of the trade is assessed. Vocational 'testing' provides adults with every opportunity to show what they can actually do in their own fields.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

The county authorities are responsible for this work at upper secondary level, and it is usually carried out in practice within the regional education system. (Often upper secondary schools are also assessment centres.)

In order to give the same opportunity to job-seekers who want their competence validated, projects are initiated to improve cooperation between the education system and the Labour and Welfare Administration.

The employer bodies and also trade unions are important stakeholders nationally and regionally, both in a strong drive to

realise policy goals and in practice, e.g. by offering apprenticeships and other training schemes in enterprises locally, thus supporting adults in VET schemes.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

The benefits of validation have been recognised in a wide range of policy documents. Many adults have worked in a trade for years without much schooling and with no certificate. Experience so far shows that validation is often geared at obtaining a trade certificate.

In addition to issues relating to economic development and a better-skilled workforce, and the personal development factor for the individual, it is interesting to focus on positive side-effects for marginalised groups. For immigrants and refugees, identifying and validating competence from prior education and/or work experience can speed up inclusion and integration into society, and prevent racism and discrimination. For senior workers, validation of non-formal and informal learning can contribute to enhancing their careers, both in content and in duration. Senior workers often possess long-term work experience but lack formal qualifications. There may also be health benefits from getting a job better suited to the individual's situation. Young school drop-outs can get back into education or into employment through validation combined with tailored training schemes.

A recently published survey shows that a fair number of people use the opportunity to have their skills validated in connection with an upper secondary education. The survey estimates that a total of 62 % of all adults completing their upper secondary education (including VET) in 2006 and 2007 had undergone validation of their prior learning, and 81 % of these got formal recognition of their learning.

There are significant variations between the different fields of study. As for vocational training, by far the largest group of adults chooses health and social studies. Within this field, 62 % of candidates had undergone validation, and between 84 and 92 % (depending on the level of study) got formal recognition of their learning, resulting in an exemption from parts of the training schedule.

In order to build an information record, it is the responsibility of the county authorities to register all adult candidates who have gone through a validation process at upper secondary level into a national, digital registration system.

Higher education

Following an amendment to the Act relating to Universities and University Colleges in 2001, adults without a general college and university admissions certification can apply for enrolment in higher education on the basis of documented prior learning. The applicant must be over 25 years of age. Annually, 5 % of all new students in higher education are adults admitted on the basis of recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning. In 2007, 67 % of adults applying for enrolment on the basis of prior learning were admitted. This proportion varies significantly between the different fields of study.

The Act also allows for exemption from parts of a study programme on the basis of a validation of prior learning, but a very small number of students apply. This would indicate that sufficient information has not yet reached the target group.

Applications for enrolment and exemption based on validation of prior learning are assessed by the individual university or college.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

So far, there are no statistics on direct results in the form of (better) employment after a validation process, but there are a lot of individual success stories. Also, seeing that an upper secondary education is almost a minimum requirement for employment in Norway, one could claim that VPL gives more adults the chance to obtain an upper secondary education and a certificate that is the key to employability and more flexibility for the individual in the labour market.

Participants and employers who are interviewed in surveys report back that effects are overwhelmingly positive. During the years 2000–2005, around 60,000 people underwent VPL at upper secondary level (80 % in vocational subjects). On the whole, candidates found that the assessment of non-formal and informal learning was a positive experience – around 80 % found the experience useful or very useful. Supervisors and assessors find that the documentation of non-formal and informal learning has a positive effect on candidates (as it gives the candidates more self-respect for example.) However, the surveys also identified a major need for training – around 96 % of supervisors and 85 % of the assessors/specialists felt that they needed training in the future, particularly in relation to quality assurance.

Stating that employers have to map the competence of their employees, the Basic Agreement negotiated between the social partners puts VPL firmly on the agenda and strengthens the focus on prior learning in working life. In the municipalities, work is being done to map the competence of municipal staff with direct effects for staff wages. This emphasises the importance of prior learning in working life and gives it status and value. For employers it is an obvious advantage to get a better overview of staff competence.

The opportunities, rights and benefits related to the validation process are promoted by various stakeholders locally and nationally. Vox (the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning), the county authorities and the trade unions are important bodies in this work.

Portugal

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

The National System for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) uses a lifelong learning perspective in order to improve and validate standard certification levels for adults aged over 18 who have no basic or secondary school certificates.

The RVCC National System allows the recognising, validating and certifying of know-how and competences resulting from experiences in different contexts of the adult's life. The certification achieved through this system not only fosters the adult's personal, social and professional accomplishment, but also allows for the pursuing of his/her studies/training.

The National System for the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences is developed as a process that is guided by a New Opportunities Centre, with the support of specialised and duly prepared professionals.

These processes include basic and secondary levels of education, and are based on, respectively, (1) the Key Competencies in Adult Education and Training Reference Framework (basic level); and (2) the Key Competencies in Adult Education and Training Reference Framework (secondary level). It is organized into three fundamental components:

- Acknowledgement of competences;
- Validation of competences;
- Certification of competences.

The Frameworks mentioned above are part of the National Catalogue of Qualifications, one of the main tools of the National Qualifications System.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

Working hours, family life and other personal life projects (participation in associations, etc.) which increase skills, but reduce the time and availability to join the learning process.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

Validation of learning is always done through the adult's life story.

- If the adult's skills are not up to the standards for validation, he/she is referred to a specific training course. The training path is based on the National Catalogue of Qualifications that comprehends educational and training areas and defines the standards for each qualification: occupational profile, training standards, standards for recognition, validation, and certification of competences.

- If the adult shows some skills, and their development needs more than 50 hours of training, he/she will be partially certificated and a personalized qualification plan is devised for him/her, and the adult is referred to a specific training course. If the certification process does not lead to the issuance of a full certificate or diploma, regarding the qualification of a competence, a special certificate will be issued identifying the validated qualification units.

- If the adult has recognized skills or needs only 50 hours of training, he/she will conclude a full certification at the New Opportunities Centre.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

The New Opportunities Centres constitute a chartered tool to answer the adult population's qualification needs, and have qualified and specialised staffs who develop their team-work in the following stages:

- Attending– Adults' attending and enrolment, clarification concerning the mission of the New Opportunities Centres, the different working process stages, guidance for education and training paths, or for the offers of qualification

recognition, validation and certification.

- Diagnosis – Adult profile analysis, curriculum analysis, individual and collective interviews; identification of the best paths available.
- Guidance – Informing the adult in order to allow him/her to understand and be guided through the most appropriate path.
- RVCC Process:
 - Competences Recognition – Identification by the adult of the obtained know-how and qualifications during his/her life experience, through an activity based on the methodology of competence balance, and by the use of several assessment tools, by which the adult proves his know-how, starting with the construction of a learning reflexive portfolio.
 - Competences Validation – Qualification assessment of abilities acquired during life by the confrontation with the Framework (key competences in adult education and training reference framework). The validation comprises the learning reflexive portfolio self-assessment in articulation with the hetero-assessment of the RVC professionals and of the trainers from each basic qualification area.
 - Competences Certification – The adult is presented before a certification jury, aiming at the certification of the validated competences as stated in the National Qualification Framework.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

Portuguese government recognizes the importance of non-formal learning experiences, and has implemented the New Opportunities Initiative.

To respond to that programme four hundred and fifty six centres called "New Opportunities Centres" were created all over the country.

The New Opportunities Centres are an "open door" to provide guidance, counselling and information about formal education, training institutions or to identify and validate non-formal and informal learning.

The New Opportunities Centres can operate in:

- any basic or secondary state schools;
- Vocational Training Centres of the Institute for Employment and Professional Training;
- Local authorities, companies, associations;
- Other accredited training establishments.

The National Agency for Qualifications (ANQ) is the organization that coordinates the network of New Opportunities Centres. The Agency is a public institute within the State Administration, supervised by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

Both employed and unemployed adults benefit by the Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences System.

The information about the adults is gathered and recorded in a national database, which is monitored by the ANQ.

The system records the data related to each adult, since his/her registration at a New Opportunities Centre until his/her certification and diploma.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

The process of recognition, validation and certification of skills is very reflective, which provides a self-knowledge by the adults, enhancing their autonomy.

Self esteem development is reported by all the users. The career development is an important factor also, as an increase of remuneration and career readjustment are possible for the adult. Another benefit is that many adults continue their studies

to a higher level of qualification.

Employers benefit from increased skills of their workers.

The investment in recognition of skills significantly decreases the risk of unemployment, as it enables a repositioning of the workers and increases the return ratio to the labour market.

There is an improvement in the personal, social and professional life of users. Also, a higher qualification ensures positive, direct results for the workers and the employers.

The Portuguese Catholic University is now developing a nation-wide study aiming at measuring these benefits.

Sweden

What national/regional policies and/or strategies are in place in your country to encourage and support low-skilled people to have the competence(s) they have achieved through non-formal and/or informal learning recognized and validated?

At the moment there is no formal system where an individual can apply for the validation/recognition of competences. Instead, Sweden has a decentralised system where the individual needs to address each sector organisation or, if from a foreign country and in possession of a formal qualification, turn to the National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket). The National Agency for Services to Universities and University Colleges (Verket för högskoleservice, VHS) evaluates foreign upper-secondary education.

As from July 1 2009, a new national agency, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Yrkeshögskolan), will be operational. The areas of responsibility of this NA will be:

- All post-secondary VET: reviewing and approving applications from education and training providers/organizers, granting allowances, responsible for quality, inspection etc;
- National reference point for the EQF;
- Validation: coordinating further development, contact point.

Also, there are national agencies responsible for specialist qualification certificates, e.g. the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) is responsible for examining whether persons with medical training in another country satisfy the conditions for pursuing their profession in Sweden and being granted Swedish authorisation.

All participants in municipal adult education receive an individual study plan which takes into account their individual circumstances, prior learning and learning goals. Moreover, adult education is delivered in as flexible a manner (e.g. evenings, via individual courses or parts of courses in a modularised system, via the internet, etc.) to ensure that all can participate. In fact, the Municipal Adult Education Ordinance states that the content of municipal adult education should be based on the needs and abilities of the individual, who also receive an individual study plan based on their abilities and personal circumstances.

What are the biggest obstacles you face in endeavouring to increase the numbers of people who participate in the process of validation?

Structural obstacles with a legal system that does not promote validation as opposed to "prövning" (i.e. assessment; a possibility for the individual to obtain a grade in a course by passing a test which will be arranged by the municipality and is regulated in the Municipal Adult Education Ordinance. The test is based on syllabi goals at the upper-secondary level and the municipality has the right to charge a maximum fee of 500 SEK (approx. 46 euros) per individual.

How is the validation of non-formal and informal learning linked to the National Qualifications Framework in your country, in particular for those with no or low-level qualifications?

Sweden has not yet finalised how the EQF/NQF will be implemented at the national level. As stated earlier, there will be a new national agency for higher vocational education in place from July 1, which will be in charge of implementing the NQF in Sweden.

How is staff trained to carry out validation? In particular how is staff trained to do assessments, work with standards, provide appropriate guidance?

Assessments: Teachers in VET and/or qualified assessors with either a degree from teacher training and/or a long experience from working life.

Standards: Industry requirements or course goals in relation to standardised industry requirements or educational certification.

Guidance: Swedish guidance counsellors obtain a bachelor's degree after finalising a three-year university programme, but the programme does not currently include specific elements of validation or assessment. Nevertheless, guidance counsellors are trained to map an individual's competences in a more general way.

The outcome of a the LdV-project, Euroguideval, resulted in a handbook for the professionalisation of APEL practitioners.

Sweden, which was one of five partner countries, developed a 7 ECTS course called “Validation of competencies and skills”. Target group for this pilot course was APL professionals and career counsellors. The course started three times and had about 40 participants in total.

What are the main bodies/agencies involved in this work? What role is played by which employer bodies?

Close cooperation with the social partners and sector organizations on issues related to validation on the labour market.

Member organizations of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprises have developed various models (approx. 19) to support validation, i.e. construction, plumbing, electricity, welding, casting/foundry, manufacturing, services etc. This was done under the auspices of the National Commission for Validation, a government agency which was operational during 2004-2007. The National Commission for Validation granted the industry organizations financial support.

Guidance counsellors and teachers in VET/qualified assessors play an important role in the future implementation and quality assurance work.

+ See above – The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education from July 1 2009.

Which adults benefit most from the possibility of having their competences validated? How is information on those who avail of validation of their competence(s) gathered and recorded?

Newly arrived immigrants who do not hold a certificate, or other document of their knowledge and competences. Those unemployed and young adults lacking formal experiences.

Municipalities are required to offer adult education to those who do not have knowledge and skills equivalent to compulsory schooling. This also means that the municipalities are required to make special efforts to reach those target groups/individuals.

What benefits does validation bring to users in terms of employability and better job opportunities? What benefits does validation bring to employers? How does your country demonstrate the benefits of the validation process to prospective users?

- Adapting contents and/or shortening the study period, thus avoiding unnecessary investment in time or money for the individual;
- Facilitating the matching process between predefined job standards and the individual’s competence profile;
- Broader base for recruitment for the employer;
- The individual is considered more “employable” by receiving a formal document of his/her non-formal and informal competences;
- Adaptation to international developments where validation is receiving more attention and is growing in importance. Also, contributing to mobility and more job opportunities for the individual.

What lessons have been learned in your country in the context of this PLA that may have application in other European countries?

Any initiative should be based upon the individual’s particular situation and needs, and be characterised by equal parameters irrespective of wherever in the country the validation is carried out.

It is important that a thorough competence mapping precede an actual assessment in order to establish the individual’s aptitude for participating in a competence assessment. In some instances, it might be enough for the individual to receive an action plan/mapping report, or a list of qualifications.

Validation within the labour market area should be based on frameworks developed by the social partners and industry organizations in order to ensure legitimacy of the results.

The main focus in Sweden has been to develop methods of validation regarding non academic jobs. The validation of each individual should result in a certificate issued by the industry organizations in question representing the national partners in each main sector of the labour market. This maximizes the possibilities for recognition of the certificates and of the validation methods among the local employers. And consequently that increases the chances for employment of the individuals validated.

Cooperation with the social partners (i.e. with employers and with trade unions) ensures better outreach to some hard to reach groups with short educational background. Also, engaging not only those whose skills would be validated, but also

stakeholders in VET (employers, sectoral organizations, VET teachers, guidance counsellors, etc.).

It is important to have a national coordination of regional validation projects, so as not to end up with a host of local/regional projects that lack national legitimacy.

ANNEX 3 - LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. | Mr Peter Schlögl | Austria |
| 2. | Mr Jan Bruha | Czech Republic |
| 3. | Mrs Tereza Listová | Czech Republic |
| 4. | Mrs Monika Pokorná | Czech Republic |
| 5. | Mr Martin Poboril | Czech Republic |
| 6. | Mr Jakub Stárek | Czech Republic |
| 7. | Mrs Kirsten Aagaard | Denmark |
| 8. | Mrs Benedikte Maul Andersen | Denmark |
| 9. | Mr Niels Mayer | Germany |
| 10. | Dr Eugenia Arvanitis | Greece |
| 11. | Mr Istvan Kiszter | Hungary |
| 12. | Mrs Marta Santanicchia | Italy |
| 13. | Mr Dmitrijs Kulss | Latvia |
| 14. | Mrs Renate Haas-Beck | Liechtenstein |
| 15. | Mr Justus de Hooge | Netherlands |
| 16. | Mr Erik Kaemingk | Netherlands |
| 17. | Mrs Sissel Lyngvaer Ramstad | Norway |
| 18. | Mrs Michèle Fernandes | Portugal |
| 19. | Mr Dan Fagerlund | Sweden |
| 20. | Mrs Sara Petersson | Sweden |
| 21. | Mr Heikki Suomalainen | Business Europe |

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