How to make learning visible

28 and 29 November 2016
Thessaloniki, Greece

Strategies for implementing validation
of non-formal and informal learning

CEDEFOP
European Centre
for the Development
of Vocational Training

DISCOVER
YOUR TALENT!

BACKGROUND PAPER

How to make learning visible
Strategies for implementing validation of non-formal and informal learning

Thessaloniki 28 and 29 November 2016

INTRODUCTION

We are presented with opportunities to learn every day of our life. We can acquire valuable knowledge, skills and competences beyond the classroom: through training courses, online learning, and in our daily lives at work, at home or in leisure activities. The results of this learning are unfortunately often ignored and undervalued.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning is about making visible and giving value to individuals' learning achievements, irrespective of their learning pathways. Cedefop (2015) defines validation of non-formal and informal learning as 'the process of assessment and confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard'.

Acknowledging the potentially important role to be played by validation across a range of areas (including supporting lifelong learning and employment policies), the 2012 Council recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning invites EU Member States to have appropriate arrangements in place no later than 2018. These arrangements should enable individuals to:

a) have knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated;

b) obtain a full qualification or, where applicable, part of a qualification, based on validated non-formal and informal learning experiences

More than 20 years after the first mention of validation in a European policy document (European Commission, 1995), we need to reflect on what has been achieved so far and how to build on this. The conference is designed to permit extensive discussion and exchange of views on the challenges related to effective implementation of validation arrangements in Europe and their relevance for individual citizens. We are looking to reflect on progress to date and engage Member State policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in a discussion on what needs to be done in the run-up to the 2018 target and beyond. The aim of the conference is to reflect on the past, the present and the future of validation of non-formal and informal learning in Europe.

THE PAST

The importance of validation has increased over the past three decades. Cedefop has worked systematically on validation of non-formal and informal learning since the late 1990s: its publication *Making learning visible* (2000) has become a reference in this area and points to two critical conditions for succeeding. First, methodologies have to be developed, making it possible to capture the diverse and contextually bound achievements of the individual learner. Second, these methodologies have to be applied in an institutional setting, ensuring the legitimacy and credibility of validation arrangements. This latter reflects the strong position of formal education and training, partly preventing appreciation of learning taking place outside the classroom.

Combining these two perspectives, Cedefop's 2000 publication warns against a too narrow understanding of validation, underlining that success can only be achieved by ensuring acceptance among key stakeholders and in society at large. In the period after 2000, a number of initiatives were taken at both national and European levels. While countries like France, Norway and Portugal introduced large-scale national arrangements, European-level developments focused on some of the basic conditions required for making progress:

(a) the conclusion on common European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2004) listed some of the key conditions for ensuring methodological quality and institutional acceptance;

(b) the 2004 joint report of the Council and the Commission (in the context of the 2010 Education and training strategy) introduces learning outcomes as an underpinning principle for European cooperation and national reform in education and training. This shift has proved crucial for better integrating validation in national qualifications systems;

(c) the introduction of learning-outcomes-based national qualifications frameworks, triggered by the 2008 adoption of the European qualifications framework (EQF), helps to clarify the role of validation in national systems.

While attracting much attention between 2000 and 2005, and triggering work on learning outcomes and qualifications frameworks, validation of non-formal and informal learning disappeared as an explicit focus in European policy strategies between 2005 and 2012. The 2012 recommendation, and lately the *New skills agenda for Europe*, have reinstated the importance of validation and brought European policies more in line with national strategies. The question still remains whether methodological quality and institutional credibility has been achieved during these years. The conference sessions will allow participants to learn more and discuss in what way these developments have influenced validation in Europe and how the new developments shaping Europass and EQF might affect validation.

THE PRESENT

The 2012 recommendation was a new phase in implementing validation arrangements in Europe. It provided a new impetus and political value to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning and the European guidelines for validation, as it asked the Commission, in collaboration with Member States, to update them regularly. Both instruments, the guidelines and the inventory, are tools to support the development and implementation of validation policies in Europe. The guidelines aim at assisting stakeholders by clarifying the different options and possible steps for establishing and operating validation arrangements. They acknowledge that any solution must be fit for purpose and that arrangements need to be designed according to the particular context in which they operate. The inventory is a regularly updated review of validation practices and arrangements across Europe. It is compiled in cooperation with the European Commission and provides information on current practices. It covers all countries taking part in the EU 2020 cooperation process. So far, the inventory has been updated five times: in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2014. A new update will be published in January 2017 on Cedefop's website.

The conference will present the latest data from the 2016 inventory update. It will provide an overview of the current situation in Europe and analyse the areas where further progress is needed. Analysis will focus on both the methodological approaches and the institutional landscape for validation in Europe. Although political commitment is increasing, and more countries are working towards comprehensive strategies for validation, there is need for further coordination and involvement of all stakeholders. Cooperation between educational and active employment policies or third sector initiatives remains a challenge, limiting the potential of validation. At European level, it is important to learn from current practices and discuss similarities and differences in approaches to validation, along with the consequences, advantages and disadvantages of these choices. Output from the conference discussions will be integrated into the design and conceptualisation of future European guidelines and inventory updates.

THE FUTURE

Through a look at the past and the present, the conference seeks to understand the main challenges in the near and more distant future of validation. The 2018 deadline, established by the recommendation, is only the beginning of a journey to develop effective systems that make validation an effective and integral part, not only of education and training, but also of labour market and social policies. Validation systems need to be adapted to local realities and become part of existing structures, as an acceptable route for certification of skills and qualifications. The main question is how this can be realised.

The conference will look into the following questions:

   (a) what is the overall vision of validation in the different existing practices?

How do different systems at national, sectoral and regional levels differ and what is their overall vision? Are they designed to combat unemployment, to provide access to education and training, to create a system for making skills more transparent, or to combat social exclusion? Can all these objectives work together?

(b) which stakeholders will (have to) be involved to make validation a reality?
Is it realistic to believe that all stakeholders will want to be involved in designing and carrying out validation? How do we assure the best possible mix of stakeholders? In what way do we assure coordination between different initiatives, specifically between third sector organisations, labour market and education and training institutions?

(c) how can trust in validation be assured?
How do we ensure that validation of non-formal and informal learning has the same status as formal education? Is ensuring equivalent standards in both enough? How do we build trust in the validation system? What is the role of the national qualifications frameworks (NQFs)?

(d) how can validation be funded?
Where does the financing for validation come from? Is it embedded in education and training budgets or should it be in public employment or social policy budgets? What role do European funds play?

(e) who should benefit from validation?
Who are the main users of validation systems? Is validation a right for everyone or should we focus on people that can most benefit? How can we reach out to those that are further excluded?

KEY VALIDATION USERS

The answers to some of these questions will differ depending on the objective of the validation system and who it is designed for. Individuals, especially those with higher risk of social exclusion, need to be able to benefit fully from the opportunities validation offers. Identifying and valuing skills acquired outside formal systems is particularly relevant for disadvantaged groups such as those with low educational attainment, the unemployed, those at risk of unemployment or migrants. These groups need further support in making their complete skills available to their participation in the labour market or in education and training. They might have specific needs in terms of skills identification and development that validation can tackle more effectively than the formal system.

Validation can also play a role in improving labour market functioning. It has the potential to boost individuals' employability by making their skills visible to employers, helping reduce skills mismatch and labour market imbalances. It gives employers proof of skills, acquired while working or through everyday

activities that are useful and valuable in the labour market and can also be used to improve individuals' career opportunities.

The conference will focus on four specific target groups for validation:

(a) migrants;

(b) people unemployed or at risk of unemployment;

(c) low-qualified adults;

(d) people in employment.

The aim is to devise concrete proposals on how these diverse groups of individuals can be recruited and participate in validation. How can we create a system that is effective and efficient for different users: do we need to create different systems? What are the differences and similarities in validation arrangements for each target group?

The following questions will be presented to four parallel groups. Each group will discuss the same questions, focusing on a specific target group for their session:

(a) what must be in place to address specific user needs for validation?

(b) what are the laws, institutions, mechanisms and procedures needed to allow this target group to benefit from validation? At what level do these mechanisms and procedures operate and become more effective?

(c) how could coordination between services and stakeholders be achieved?

(d) how do we make sure that the individual from the target group does not get lost in the different possibilities s/he might have for validation? How can we address a diverse range of needs for the same target group?

(e) what type of methodology, including guidance and counselling, is most suitable for the specific user?

(f) in what way can we best guide and follow up the needs of the specific target group? How can we ensure that they understand the process and get optimum benefit from it? What assessment methods and tools meet their needs?